Town and gown relations through the lens of transportation: A background document for Corvallis and Oregon State University

Ivan Kuletz

Introduction

This document examines the historical and cultural implications of Town and Gown relations as they relate to solving issues of transportation. The paper begins with a bullet-point background summary and moves into a discussion of comparative cases both in the U.S. and Germany. It concludes by examining the situation in Corvallis and OSU.

My argument is that solutions to both transportation issues and Town and Gown tensions must spring from and speak to the culture and history of both communities in order to succeed. While cultural relevance is a necessary condition for success, it is not sufficient; success is only possible through sustained cooperation between both communities.

Background

Town and Gown:
- “Town”: The non-academic population of a university town.
- “Gown”: The academic population of a university town.
- “Town and Gown” is a reference to the dialogue or tension between the two populations, and is a phrase with a history going back to the Middle Ages.
- Universities in the Middle Ages were an extension of the clergy, and so the universities, students, and faculty were often exempt from civil jurisdiction.
- These civil exemptions and their fallout provided historical precedent for some of the benefits and conditions of modern universities as well as Town and Gown tensions.

Modern Era in the United States:
- Beginning with the post-WWII influx of new students with families thanks to the G.I. Bill, college students across the nation began living off campus in greater and greater numbers. Currently, around 85% or more of U.S. students live off-campus, many in neighborhoods near campuses.
- This exodus/community integration of Gown has led to more strain on Town thanks to increased social, infrastructure, housing, and transportation pressure.
Police jurisdiction on campuses is another point of negotiation between municipalities and universities, with many universities and colleges maintaining their own police forces.

- Tax revenue is a point of contention: the more land a university owns/operates/controls, the less tax revenue that typically goes to the community. While universities have no legal obligation to pay taxes to their communities, they do often contribute in some way to the coffers of the Town.

**Corvallis/OSU:**

- OSU has its own police force of 10 officers who have primary jurisdiction on campus and all OSU-owned properties in the State of Oregon. They conduct criminal investigations, have the power to arrest for traffic and criminal violations, and are proactive in campus safety operations. Cooperation with CPD is unclear.

- Because of OSU's tax-exempt status (including proposed entertainment taxes), it avoided having to pay almost $1.4 million in property taxes to Benton County in 2013. That's just the main campus in Benton County; it owns other property outside the county as well. However, it still benefits from many services offered by the county.

- OSU did contribute financially to the community, however (note that the title is somewhat misleading and is designed to grab attention): [http://www.corvallisadvocate.com/2014/is-osu-benton-countys-biggest-property-tax-cheat/](http://www.corvallisadvocate.com/2014/is-osu-benton-countys-biggest-property-tax-cheat/)

- Transportation issues at OSU due to student traffic has been on the rise in the last few years, due largely to an increase in the size of the university enrollment of almost 9,000 students between 2003 and 2013, with 7,600 of them coming between 2009 and 2013.

- Students numbers have increased dramatically in the last ten years, and particularly in the last 4-5 years, as shown in the two tables on this page:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Student enrollment (Fall)</th>
<th>Pop. change from previous year</th>
<th>% Increase from previous year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>27,925</td>
<td>1,532</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>26,393</td>
<td>1,416</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>24,977</td>
<td>1,216</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>23,761</td>
<td>1,792</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>21,969</td>
<td>1,649</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>20,320</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>19,753</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>19,362</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>19,236</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>19,162</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>18,979</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total Student Pop. Growth | 8,946 |
| Total % Increase | 47 |
| Avg. % Increase Per Year | 3.7 |
| Avg. % Increase 09-13 | 6.58 |
As outlined above, Town & Gown (TG) relations have been complex and strained since academies moved into towns and cities. Transportation has become a particularly pervasive problem in the modern era, with less and less of the student body comprised of car-less, freshly graduated 18-year-olds living on campus. Roads near campus are often congested and the TG neighborhood/street interface for many universities and their host towns is often sloppy, poorly planned, and highly contentious. Academic articles and PR publications on the subject (there are very few of either, and positive PR outnumber academic analysis by a wide margin) are typically highly congratulatory of Gown efforts without much elaboration on how Town perceives the state of affairs. Meanwhile, Town does not publish counter-PR in journals or online. Instead, their resentment is expressed through legislative referendums, local newspaper articles, and letters to the editor. Rigorous synthesis of this mass of gray literature is beyond the scope of this document, but would make for interesting applied and academic research.

**Case Studies and Analysis**

*Germany:*

Germany was selected as a candidate for comparative study because of its unique history, particularly during and after World War II (coinciding with the effects of the G.I. Bill), and because of Germany’s roughly equivalent standard and method of living with the United States in the modern era. During WWII, multiple German cities were utterly destroyed, and reconstruction efforts were often focused on the convenience or necessity of car traffic rather than the foot-traffic that characterizes many European cities and towns. This allowed for public transportation options like buses, rail lines, trams, and any number of other solutions without the burden (or advantage) of historical city planning.

German cases were somewhat difficult to narrow down, as the larger cities tend to have multiple universities within city or metropolitan limits. Two cities and universities stood out as being somewhat equivalent with the Corvallis Metropolitan Area in terms of population size, geographic area, and student population: Göttingen and Kassel.

Göttingen was selected because it wasn’t destroyed during WWII. It exited the war almost completely unscathed, with only 1% of its town damaged and its historic downtown completely intact. Thus, it provides a good idea of what public transportation in a college town would look like if the city were designed to be walkable, with high-density, multi-use construction and given a great deal of funding (in Germany’s case, with reconstruction bonds).

Göttingen is in almost the exact geographic center of Germany, less than 4 hours from virtually any major city in the country by light rail. It has one of the older and more accomplished histories of any German university, whose former faculty notably includes key members of the Manhattan Project (run out of Germany during the Third Reich, which didn’t want “Jewish Physics”).
In Göttingen, public transportation relies on two things: bicycles and buses. Since the city is only a few miles in diameter and is quite flat, it makes a great deal of sense to have a bike. Nearly everyone owns and uses a bike. Göttingen also has a large number of buses, with 19 regular bus routes that run from 4am to 1am, Sunday to Friday. Fifty thousand people ride the bus every day, taking advantage of the more than 500 bus stops served within the metropolitan area and the short wait times (only a few minutes, according to the Göttingen transportation authority). The area includes two nearby “towns,” one about five miles to the north and the other about four miles to the south. Students ride for free, which helps to increase ridership. Buses are used because of the difficulty of installing tram lines and overhead electric wires on narrow winding streets.

The city of Kassel in the western region of Germany serves as a sharp contrast to Göttingen. Kassel experienced some of the most devastating, sustained bombings in WWII, followed by firestorms and house-to-house fighting. Ninety percent of the greater downtown area was reduced to rubble and craters along with most of the rest of the city. In terms of infrastructure, it was a horrifically clean slate. After the war, Kassel was rebuilt in the modern style of the American 1950’s, with wide, straight streets and other multiple transportation types. The complete elimination of centuries-old infrastructure offered the city an opportunity to “leapfrog” intermediate transportation technology needs such as those of the horse, cart, and coal- or steam-powered engines.

The University of Kassel was founded in 1971, and has quickly become a “model” example of European urban development and transportation. It has multiple bus routes and, perhaps more importantly, tram lines that go directly from the main train station to the university. There are seven tram lines that are constructed to be able to run on both tram rails and the standard light rail system. Wait time is about 15 minutes. The key feature of these trams is their ability to use multiple rail lines when available in order to facilitate greater traffic flow.

**United States:**
Overall, colleges in the U.S. have relied on larger public transportation works when located in dense urban centers, and cars with some bus service in smaller college towns. This latter situation is where we typically find TG transportation conflict. Two U.S. “small college town” examples came up repeatedly in the literature: Kent State University (KSU) in Ohio, and West Virginia University.

KSU had a severe traffic connectivity problem, with a no-bike, no-pedestrian freeway physically separating the town from the university. This physical division was accompanied by decades of “chilly” relations following Vietnam War protests that resulted in multiple deaths and injuries.

In the early 2000’s, leadership from KSU and the City of Kent decided to bridge the gap by using a mix of public and private funds (Town and Gown funds) to extend KSU’s “Esplanade” (a pedestrian-focused showcase zone on campus) into the city’s downtown
area. The result was a mixed-use area that included a 5,000 square foot convention center, retail and restaurant space, high-end apartments, and a multi-level parking area and bus transit center. The extension also allowed KSU and Kent residents easier access to and from the highway.

In order to make this happen, multiple plots of land in residential use had to be purchased and repurposed. KSU and Kent were able to do this by bringing a large number of people, literally, to the table on an almost weekly basis for three years: administration from a small college town, administration from their medium-sized research and liberal arts university, a university-based nonprofit organization, a rural area regional transit authority, and three developers of different sizes and specialties. The point here is that it takes a concerted, sustained effort between multiple decision-makers and contractors to make something like this happen.

The single most often-referenced case of transportation innovation in college towns in the U.S. is West Virginia University (WVU) and its Personal Rapid Transit system. The city of Morgantown, WV, used to rely on shuttle buses for its public transportation needs. However, between the shuttle buses, the large number of cars from both students and residents, and Morgantown’s very narrow streets, the university had to enact a policy of scheduling classes up to two hours apart in order to make sure students were able to make it to class on-time.

Seeing an opportunity, WVU and Morgantown administrators partnered with the federal government (which wanted a public transportation laboratory) and Boeing to design and build the PRT in 1975 for $120 million. The group came up with an elevated, dedicated railway that operated on an express system where riders would go directly from one stop to their desired stop without making stops between. The PRT has been a rousing success: more than 15,000 people use the PRT every day during the academic year, and tighter class schedules have allowed WVU to grow from 10,000 students in 1975 to 30,000 students in 2012.

The PRT system includes 71 self-propelled driverless vehicles running at 30mph through five stations that link different parts of campus with downtown Morgantown. The PRT is monitored constantly via closed circuit TV during operational hours, which has helped maintain a safety record of zero major injuries or fatalities since it began operations. Wait time is about 5 minutes, each car can fit 20 people, and the cars are electric and run on rubber wheels – two considerations that reduce carbon footprint, local pollution, and noise pollution. Students ride for free while the public pays $0.50 per ride.
Conclusion

OSU and Corvallis have a great deal to learn from other college towns that could help them move forward together productively. OSU has the benefits of being able to raise large amounts of money for infrastructure projects, and having diverse world-class research facilities and talent at its disposal. What is in doubt is whether the university has a set of clear long-range strategies that explicitly takes community resources, community desires, and changing demographics into account. Does the university want to focus on partnering with city planners to change the density structure of Corvallis, or on increasing public transportation options and infrastructure? Does it want to plan locally or regionally? On the other side of the table, the City of Corvallis has a fairly cohesive resident community that truly believes in public transportation, carbon footprint reduction, and city planning. Their challenges are bound up in how individuals and groups interpret those goals, their ability to both raise and stretch funds, and their persistent desire for the Corvallis of ten years ago.

What can we learn from the case studies? For one, it is necessary to adapt to what is, rather than what should have happened. Looking forward rather than back has the dual benefit of reducing the size of the pills Town and Gown have to swallow, and also removes some of the subjectivity from the process. Secondly, multi-use transit systems that are punctual, convenient, and very frequent are the most user-friendly systems. Third, any major effort will require a sustained and consistent coordination effort at both high and middling levels. Fourth, offering the dual community up as a public transportation lab-rat to large funding sources could have significant advantages under committed collaboration.

Finally, no solution can be seriously considered if it is not socially relevant and able to meld with the local context. WVU’s PRT provides an example. While local acceptance for the PRT might seem to be entirely due to external funding and traffic congestion relief, the social context of the system should also be considered. In the region, coal mining is an accepted way of life. The PRT, with its enclosed driverless boxes on dedicated rails, is vaguely reminiscent of mining carts on their tracks. They give the sense of both innovation and tradition within that specific cultural context, rather than in a one-size-fits-all fashion. It seems clear that any system that hopes to succeed must be culturally relevant. Therefore, a critical question for Corvallis and OSU is: what would cultural relevance look like not only for OSU, but also for the City of Corvallis?