

Mending Town & Gown

Evan Dobbelle—former mayor of Pittsfield, state official, White House aide, and community-college president—knows how to get things done on campus and off. Now at Hartford's Trinity College, he's showing the world of higher education what it means to be a good neighbor.

By Lisa Prevost
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Evan Dobbelle knew that Trinity College had an image problem when he took over as president in 1995—that's why he was hired. But the perspective of a hotel doorman helped bring the college's local reputation into sharp relief.

Having just arrived in Hartford, Dobbelle was checking into the downtown Sheraton when the doorman stopped him.

"You're the new president of Trinity College," he said, explaining that he'd seen Dobbelle's photo in the newspaper. Dobbelle soon learned that the man lived near the campus. Dobbelle asked, what did he think of the college?

"Well," the doorman replied, considering his words, "the sidewalks there kinda run uphill."

It was a particularly gentle expression of the community's sense of alienation from one of the oldest and most powerful institutions in its midst. Trinity College, a Hartford landmark since 1823, was popularly viewed by its predominantly Latino and black neighbors as an island of elitism, oblivious or indifferent to the urban decay outside its wrought-iron fences. When viewed from the poverty-stricken streets below, the soaring tower of Trinity's Gothic limestone chapel suggested medieval associations extending well beyond the realm of architecture.

But far from standing above the community, Trinity was sinking along with it. Hartford's failing economic fortunes had hit the neighborhoods surrounding the college particularly hard. The streets adjoining the lush, rolling lawns of Trinity's campus had become plagued by gang violence, drugs, and prostitution. The college's initial response was to close off roads and direct visiting parents to enter the city via a circuitous route through the suburbs. But compared to its competitors among liberal arts colleges—many of them situated in bucolic settings in Massachusetts or Maine—Trinity came to seem like a good school in a very bad neighborhood. As the trend lines in applications, alumni donations, and every other indicator of collegiate health plummeted, it became increasingly clear that Trinity could no longer deny its surroundings and survive.

So it was that Trinity's trustees recruited Dobbelle, a '60s-bred idealist who'd lately been busy blurring the border between college and community in stints as president of Middlesex Community College in Lowell and of the City College of San Francisco. In just five years, Dobbelle has carved out a vibrant new identity for Trinity that wholeheartedly embraces, rather than rejects, its urban surroundings. While risky in many respects, this very deliberate repositioning of Trinity as an institution dedicated to community service has so far been a public relations boon to the college. Through his efforts to uplift the downtrodden neighborhoods that surround the campus, Dobbelle has catapulted Trinity--and himself--to the forefront of the movement to make institutions of higher education proactive instruments of social change in their communities.

Covenant between campus and community

The notion that private colleges and universities should practice what they teach has been percolating since the late 1980s, according to Joann Weeks, associate director of the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. Funding for community partnerships from the Corporation for National Service and the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of University Partnerships has helped nudge the trend along.

Today, many colleges are going far beyond sending student volunteers to local soup kitchens and nursing homes. Penn, Marquette, and Brown universities are among the institutions that are forging new links with public schools, backing affordable housing initiatives, and revitalizing crime-ridden neighborhoods. However, no institution has engaged its community as deeply as Trinity has, Weeks says.

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Committing \$6 million of the college's \$334 million endowment, Dobelle managed to leverage more than \$175 million for the revitalization of the neighborhoods of Frog Hollow, Barry Square and Behind the Rocks, which border the campus. The initiative includes three new public schools, the nation's first college-affiliated Boys and Girls Club, a community-run job training center, and a home-ownership initiative.

A Trinity-led alliance with three nearby hospitals—which put up \$10 million—and Connecticut Public Television oversees the projects. Neighborhood committees organized under an umbrella group called HART (Hartford Areas Rally Together), as well as community housing organizations and small-business owners, regularly meet with alliance members to pitch their own ideas and to offer their input on pending projects.

This community-service activity has not only improved Trinity's environs. It has also raised the national profile of this largely regional institution—and its charismatic president. Dobelle now travels the country, spreading the word about Trinity's neighborhood works. With all the passion of a preacher, Dobelle, 54, goes so far as to call community revitalization a moral obligation of higher education. Speaking at the National Press Club last year, Dobelle recalled the words of a Jesuit scholar in advising institutions of higher learning to remember that "salvation in the next world is found in the active engagement of this world."

Revival-tent rhetoric aside, Dobelle admits that universities have a strong self-interest in community partnerships. These tax-exempt institutions—many of them sitting on large endowments—take large tracts of land off the tax rolls of their host communities. If colleges and universities don't invest more of their considerable wealth in these communities, says Dobelle, they may someday find themselves defending their inaction before a congressional subcommittee.

"We're going to get regulated or taxed because of this arrogant presumption that we don't have any responsibility in this society," Dobelle says. "Do we really want to go that way, or are we going to do the right thing? Government only intrudes, generally, when people aren't doing the right thing."

Dobelle has crafted a "creative interpretation" of this not-so-new idea that exemption from taxes obligates universities to contribute to their communities in other ways, says Jack Hoy, president of the New England Board of Higher Education. Many Massachusetts institutions of higher education make voluntary contributions to town and city coffers (often referred to as "payment in lieu of taxes") as compensation for police and fire services. Others, including Clark University in Worcester (see "Urban Studies" story), have concluded that the health of the community is crucial to their own institutional well-being, and chosen to get more actively involved in community planning and investment. But there is no one standard all institutions ought to be held to, Hoy insists.

"I think there is a social obligation there," says Hoy. "The degree to which it is a monetary obligation—I think you would find a number of campuses would resist that, and some might have to resist it because they are not well-heeled." Those that are well-heeled—and particularly those that have grand ambitions—have come under special scrutiny, however. Perhaps the most scrutinized of all is Harvard University, whose relationship to its host communities of Cambridge and Boston has long been testy.

In densely developed cities, colleges and universities looking to expand are bound to collide with the communities they would encroach upon. Boston University's battles with its neighbors for space are legendary. And Northeastern University was threatened with demonstrations before president Richard Freeland negotiated a landmark deal combining student and community housing in a Lower Roxbury development (see "Freeland: 'Communities have a legitimate claim on us'" story). But the revelation in 1997 that Harvard was secretly buying up property in Allston gave powerful ammunition to critics who claim that the university will stop at nothing to further its own interests.

The intensity of the public reaction seemed to trigger an awakening of sorts in Harvard president Neil Rudenstine, who last year released an extensive report outlining the university's civic contributions in employment, spending, research, and community service. Taking a leaf from Dobelle's book, Rudenstine vowed to make Harvard an even more active participant in the community, prompting Boston Mayor Thomas Menino to declare, in a Washington Post interview, that the 364-year-old university had finally "come of age." (For his part, Dobelle calls it "regrettable" that Harvard, the flagship university of America and possibly the world, had to be "pushed along by someone like me.")

"Colleges got in the habit of dealing with their cities only when they had to," says Paul Grogan, Harvard's vice president for government, community, and public affairs. "Evan Dobelle is really helping to change that, and it's long overdue." Harvard recently committed \$21 million to building affordable housing in its host cities, and other local initiatives are in the works, Grogan says.

Grogan's appointment has added currency to Rudenstine's talk about Harvard's new community commitment. A Boston City Hall operative under mayors Kevin White and Raymond Flynn, Grogan also spent 12 years running the Local Initiatives Support Corp., a nonprofit community development intermediary. His job now is to help build enough good will within the community to ensure Harvard's future ability to expand and maintain its competitive edge.

But for an institution renowned for its deep pockets, good will doesn't come cheap. Harvard recently beat back a campaign for a "living wage" of \$10 an hour for its employees, fought by student activists and sympathetic Cambridge city councilors who threatened to withhold university building permits. Rudenstine countered with a plan to boost employees' job skills on university time and extend health insurance to employees who work at least 16 hours a week, rather than the current 20 hours; contractors who do not offer such benefits would be phased out. "The university is making a commitment that we think is unprecedented," says Grogan.

But this kind of battle is all the more reason for the university to be a consistent presence in community affairs, not just a handy target, Grogan says. "Harvard's in a different situation [than Trinity], but our interests are no less real. We should proactively be investing in our communities."

Not quite a life of the mind

Grogan admires Dobelle, but he also jokes that the Trinity College president's true genius lies in making a high-profile virtue of necessity. And so he has—to both the school's and Hartford's great benefit.

"I never encountered anyone like Dobelle before," says Hartford Mayor Mike Peters. "He's a can-do type of guy. He'll question you if you say no. Some people just go away when they hear no, but he wants to know the reason why."

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More politician than academician, Dobelle does defy easy categorization. As a young man growing up in Pittsfield, Dobelle considered himself Citadel material, but he dropped out of the South Carolina military school in his sophomore year. Soon thereafter, he ran successfully for mayor of his hometown. Dobelle served two terms before becoming, while still in his 20s, commissioner of environmental management under then-Gov. Michael Dukakis. At age 31, Dobelle rode Jimmy Carter's campaign into the White House, where he was made chief of protocol. He also raised money for Carter's re-election campaign at the Democratic National Committee.

Carter's defeat in 1980 brought Dobelle back to Massachusetts, where he set out to compensate, if not overcompensate, for his youthful aversion to study. Although he'd already earned a master's degree in education at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst a decade before, he'd never gotten a bachelor's. So, although he was not required to, he completed his undergraduate degree before earning a doctorate. He also picked up a master's in public administration at Harvard.

"He's very driven," says Trinity political science professor Diana Evans. "If he sets a goal, he wants it accomplished yesterday. That's just the way he is. But he's also a very political guy. He's very smooth in dealing with people, and that's helped him a lot in negotiations and so forth to get things accomplished."

No question, Dobelle knows how to talk to people, agrees Jose Martinez, a Frog Hollow resident who is active in many community organizations. "Boy, I do feel good every time he says hello to me," he says. "I believe he does have a great respect for our community and for all people."

Dobelle is not the first Trinity president to reach out to the college's Hartford neighbors. His predecessor, Thomas Gerety, first opened up the campus to residents. "Before that, people in the neighborhood couldn't use the facilities, the tennis courts, anything," says Mayor Peters. "It was ridiculous."

Gerety also sent out an emissary, a former community organizer named Eddie Perez, to develop relationships with neighborhood groups. At the time, the community's most pressing concern was how to "get the people who were shooting each other off the streets," says Perez.

"Gangs had set up franchises on the streets because, as more good people moved out, landlords, out of desperation, rented to these people," Perez recalls. "It made it difficult for [homeowners] to take care of their property. Would you go out and paint your porch or cut your hedges if that was happening in your neighborhood? The feeling was that we were losing control."

Just as the community was starting to regain that control, with the help of a city-state task force, Gerety left Trinity to become president of Amherst College. Dobelle arrived with his wife, Kit, who is former chief of staff to Rosalynn Carter, and son Harry, 12, ready to make something big happen. To Dobelle, the biggest thing the college had to do was recognize "that the city of Hartford was the strength of Trinity, not the debit of Trinity," he says. "That in every way, strategically and as a business of higher education, as well as just the appropriate thing to do, you don't allow a neighborhood to turn down like that while you're teaching in a privileged setting across the street." Dobelle had preached a similar line in Lowell after Wang Laboratories hit the skids in the mini-computer crash of the late 1980s. He got Middlesex Community College, then in Bedford, to buy and renovate the former Wang building downtown, infusing the area with the energy of 7,000 students. "Evan pushed the idea of creating an urban campus because that's where a lot of the college's population comes from," says Thomas Galligani, Lowell's director of economic development. "Our city was in rough shape at the time, and they were great in being a solid presence downtown. They came at just the right time."

At Trinity, Dobelle knew that his rough plans for bringing back some of Hartford's poorest neighborhoods would be seen as more empty chatter unless he could make a mark early on. Eddie Perez knew exactly what his new boss should do. He took Dobelle to the corner of Broad and Brownell streets, on the campus's eastern border, and pointed to four dilapidated buildings. Ever since a gang assassination at the site a year before, these havens for drugs and prostitution had come to symbolize the cancer that was eating away at the neighborhood.

"I said to Evan, 'If you buy these buildings, demolish them, and do it pronto, you'll get recognition here, both from the Trinity board and the neighborhood,'" Perez recalls. That was all Dobelle needed to hear. He went to the board, made his case, and came away with the \$600,000 he needed to bulldoze the blight off that notorious corner.

At the same time, he began to personally solicit input on neighborhood problems from any resident who would talk to him. "When Mr. Dobelle came on board, he took a walking tour of the neighborhood, and I liked him right away," says Jacqueline Fongemie, a longtime resident who chairs a Behind the Rocks neighborhood committee. "He saw a vacant building that was an eyesore and said, 'We need to do something about that.' He worked with us, and we got that demolished. He's a go-getter, and I like that."

What Dobelle was building up, in terms of community involvement, was as important as what he was tearing down. "We brought people in on a level playing field," he says. "And we sat there as a neighbor and we said, 'We want to do this.' And they said, 'We would prefer that you do that.' And we said, 'How about this?' And they said, 'How about that?' We came to a middle ground, and we did it."

Rocky road to acceptance

Within months of his arrival, Dobelle announced a \$175 million initiative to revitalize a 15-square-block area around the campus. The cornerstone of the plan is the \$107 million, 16-acre Learning Corridor, located on the former site of an abandoned bus garage. The public school campus will include a Montessori elementary school, a middle school, and a high school resource center offering specialty programming in math, science, and the arts for students from around the city. The schools, which Trinity will help raise money for but not run, are scheduled to open this fall.

Nearby, a new Boys and Girls Club is already serving some 80 neighborhood kids a day on the corner where Dobelle made his demolition debut. The club is staffed primarily by Trinity College student volunteers, who act as mentors to the local youth.

The initiative's \$75 million housing component, backed by a commitment from Fannie Mae, the government-sponsored secondary-mortgage market company, has targeted 81 sites in the neighborhood for rehab or demolition. But unlike traditional urban renewal programs, this one is structured to encourage local families to stay in the neighborhood and become homeowners. The houses are offered to qualified buyers at about half what it costs to build or renovate them. The difference is recorded as a second mortgage on the property, then reduced by one-tenth each year the buyer remains in the house. City and state subsidies cover the gap.

Hartford Hospital donated the use of a building for a job center run by HART. More than 500 clients have been placed in jobs so far. An agreement with Trinity and other institutions in the alliance to give neighbors the first crack at job openings has resulted in about 180 neighborhood residents getting new jobs over the last two years. Other projects in the early stages are a neighborhood technology center, and a family resource center funded by Aetna, the Hartford-based insurance giant.

This multi-faceted (Dobelle calls it "holistic") approach to rebuilding neighborhoods "is more expensive, it's more time-consuming," Dobelle acknowledges. "But in the end, it's the right thing to do to build community—which I don't suggest is easy."

Indeed, Trinity still has a ways to go to undo the psychological effects of decades of indifference, local activists say. As the president of HART, Hyacinth Yennie hears from so many people on so many issues that she barely has time to tend to her Barry Square rug-cleaning business between phone calls. Though she personally supports Dobelle, she acknowledges that many of her neighbors feel differently. "Some people have this thing about Trinity taking over the neighborhood," Yennie says. "There's still this distrust." Yennie usually reminds the doubters that Trinity can only enforce its will on the neighborhood if residents don't get involved at community meetings with the college. "We have to make sure we are at the table [for] everything," she says.

But one of Dobelle's latest brainstormings has left some residents feeling left out of a discussion that could forever alter the Behind the Rocks neighborhood. In a major coup for the city of Hartford, Dobelle announced early this year that he'd convinced architect Frank O. Gehry to design a new museum for the Connecticut Historical Society, which has outgrown its quarters in the city's West End. Dobelle went courting Gehry after visiting the new Guggenheim Museum the architect designed in Bilbao, Spain. As envisioned by Dobelle and the society's planners, the \$75 million, 115,000-square-foot museum would be located to the west of the campus on Zion Street, an area the college has targeted for commercial development.

The project is controversial, however, because the proposed building site includes open space fondly known by residents as "Rocky," short for Rocky Ridge Park. State Rep. Art Feltman, a lawyer who has lived in the Zion Street area for 20 years, says he is opposed to taking park land from the neighborhood simply because it makes a "prettier" site for a museum. And he is annoyed that Trinity and the historical society did not discuss site selection with public officials prior to the surprise announcement.

"My frustration stems from the fact that there are lots of sites that Trinity College owns already which are crying out for development, that are vacant and neglected," Feltman says. "The president did not express interest in those sites."

Dobelle says the college intends to work with the community to find consensus, and will try to replace the open space with greenspace elsewhere. "It's certainly legitimate to be concerned," he says. "And it's perfectly appropriate to have the conversation."

If Dobelle's belief in the value of conversation remains unshaken even in the face of controversy, perhaps it's because, so far, conversation with the community has served the institution so well. Trinity is fast becoming an example of what the late Ernest Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, several years ago termed the "New American College," a community-linked institution committed to improving the human condition. And it's finding that the institutional payoff for such a social commitment can be substantial.

Applications for early admission are up 144 percent over five years ago, regular admissions up 77 percent; 53 percent of the college's living alumni now contribute on an annual basis, making Trinity one of just 12 colleges in the country where more than half of graduates make yearly donations, according to Dobelle. On campus, initial faculty concerns about how much of the college's financial resources were going to flow into the community have subsided, according to political science professor Evans, as have worries that the administration might pressure faculty members to get involved in its pet projects.

But the biggest payoff can be counted in the acceptance and support of neighbors once estranged from the institution. That change can be felt most strongly not in ceremonial ground-breakings and ribbon-cuttings, but in tragedy. In March, the death of a student from a drug overdose wracked the Trinity campus and put the college under an unwelcome national spotlight. But from Trinity's Hartford neighbors came an outpouring of cards and sympathy calls.

"They didn't view it as some isolated incident. It was, 'I feel for your loss,' 'I'm sorry for your loss,'" Dobelle says. "And that to me, in some tangible way, is an important statement: We are part of this community."

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