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Penn, Drexel, Rutgers tops for helping community

By Susan Snyder

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Two Philadelphia schools - the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel - are among the top universities in the country in improving the economic, cultural and social life of their urban communities, according to a new national report released today.

"Saviors of Our Cities" ranked Penn number one, along with the University of Southern California. Drexel finished 10th, Rutgers University's Newark Campus was 23rd.

Temple University and Widener University in Chester were among 75 additional schools that made the "honor roll" in the report by Evan S. Dobbelle, who has served as president of six higher education institutions, including Trinity College in Connecticut and now Westfield State College in Massachusetts.

The report was released in Philadelphia this morning at the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities conference.

"You can't teach the liberal arts and across the street is an impoverished neighborhood. You can't just rezone out of reality," Dobbelle said during an interview after his presentation at the Loew's Hotel where the conference was being held. "And I think colleges and universities are beginning to understand there are enormous benefits in this, particularly in partnerships.

Schools were assessed in 11 areas, including money invested, faculty and student involvement in community service, access to students from diverse economic backgrounds, application increases and alumni giving.

They also were assessed on how well they established a "collaborative vision"

with their community. Those at the top have "long-standing cooperative efforts" on a large scale, Dobelle said.

Dobelle and a colleague conducted on-site and phone interviews and reviewed data and survey responses.

"There is a degree of subjectivity in this," acknowledged Dobelle, who noted that he has visited over 300 schools and has been researching in this area for more than 20 years.

Penn was the only Ivy League University in the top 25 and was recognized largely for its work through the Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships. The center partners with local public schools, a collaboration which has begun to be replicated on a national level.

Its service learning curriculum and neighborhood expansion also were cited.

Some Ivy League schools and others in the upper echelon try to "transcend" their communities rather than embrace them, Dobelle said.

Penn "made a decision not to transcend, but to make a difference in West Philadelphia."

Drexel was selected for its work in rejuvenating a four-mile corridor on Lancaster Avenue and its partnership with Penn to revitalize University City. It also extended its presence in the city with the acquisition and expansion of the center city campus of Hahnemann Medical school (now Drexel Medical School.)

Its entrepreneurship and technology commercialization offices that help start-up and existing companies, faculty and inventors also helped the school garner recognition.

Dobelle described Drexel through the late President Constantine Papadakis as one of the "boldest" universities he has seen.

Also in Pennsylvania, the University of Pittsburgh was tied for second place and Carnegie Mellon placed 19th.

Other Pennsylvania schools on the honor roll include: Allegheny, Franklin & Marshall and Kings colleges, Bucknell, and Slippery Rock universities and the University of Scranton. In New Jersey, Raritan Valley Community College also was on the list.

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