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More than an anchor: a case study of one higher-education institution's commitment to community sustainability and upward mobility through institutional engagement, community partnerships, and student services

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In the modern era of higher education in the United States, core universities—particularly those located in urban centers—have increasingly assumed the role of anchor institutions. While examples of anchor institution activities vary across the country, they are often concentrated in direct and indirect capital investments aimed at enhancing the surrounding built environment. Beyond these large universities, thousands of smaller and regional institutions have also taken on the responsibility of addressing urban human settlement challenges and promoting social and upward mobility. Despite lacking extensive capital resources, foundations, and endowments, these institutions contribute through more holistic approaches. This study examines the local impact of higher education institutions on urban human settlements beyond their traditional academic functions. Using a case analysis approach, the study demonstrates that intentional resource coordination and sustained commitment can generate meaningful long-term effects on social and upward mobility within underserved urban communities.

KEYWORDS

anchor institutions, community engagement (CE), community sustainability, higher education, upward mobility

Introduction

Today's higher education in the United States, which involves the complete spectrum of post-secondary education, is facing numerous challenges. One of the more prominent challenges involves a cultural shift in the questioning of the value of higher education. As the cost of college degrees has exponentially increased in recent decades, along with changing economic dynamics, for example the “gig” economy, questions of need and value proposition rise to the forefront (Burke et al., 2018; Abel and Deitz, 2014; Rose, 2013). What this ongoing debate and literature often overlooks or minimized, is the secondary and indirect benefits that institution of higher education provide to both the individual and the community. Through a case analysis approach, using the bounded nature of a single

institution, this study provides a comprehensive examining of the complex interactions between the school, student, and community partnerships that characterize an institution's mission-driven community approach to higher education.

Recent literature increasingly emphasizes the critical role of anchor institutions in urban development, with the opportunity for universities to play a pivotal role in fostering community development, revitalization, and institutional stability for a region or area. This study examines a local urban university's recognition of its geographical positioning and current social context, in embracing its transformative impact on the surrounding community by focusing on an innovative approach to engagement and services designed to support its student population and in turn, the greater community at large. Often when we think of higher education institutions, we center on the educational foundations of higher learning, and we focus on admission hurdles, degree requirements, assessments, and components of matriculation. All of these are key aspects of the higher education experience, however for many students around the country with goals and aspirations of pursuing higher education with the aims of providing a better life for themselves and their families, these characteristics take a back seat to the more pressing challenges of life's circumstances (Ma et al., 2016).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2024), there are over 5,000 degree-granting educational institutions in the U.S. (nces.ed.gov). Although there remains a large number of highly competitive institutions across the U.S. focused on admission rates and standardized test scores, a large percentage of these institutions of higher-learning are smaller and regional institutions focusing on job readiness, workforce and professional development, and the social-mobility of its students. Many of the larger institutions constitute our traditional thinking of the "Anchor Institution"—larger populations and footprints, substantial endowments and foundations, community investments and capital programs. These institutions are truly anchors and often pillars of the communities in which they serve. In this research, we look beyond the traditional anchor institution and explore a case study example of a small regional university with a multiplier effect on the community it serves. We examine how with limited resources and size, a small regional institution of higher-learning can develop innovative ways to provide essential life-changing educational experiences that not only transforms its students' lives but makes the institution *More Than An Anchor!*

Higher Education

There is no shortage of research in the literature supporting the findings that the social, economic, health, and financial benefits, higher education has on an individual's life and their community. A plethora of scholarship has been created that illustrates how higher education improves knowledge and directly leads to economic development, higher wages, skills, productivity, exposure, and expands the freedoms of individuals (Hout, 2012; Lawrence, 2017; Chankseliani and McCowan, 2020; Twang, 2022).

Research conducted by Arizona State University (2005) shows how college graduates say higher education experiences have had a positive impact on their personal and professional development.

"Roughly six-in-ten (62%) college graduates with two- or four-year degrees think their degree was very useful for helping them grow personally and intellectually, while roughly half think it was very useful for opening up job opportunities (53%) or for providing them with useful job-related skills and knowledge (49%)." (Arizona State University, 2005).

Research out of the Brookings Institutes highlights how documented wages, as a result of a college degree, has continued to increase in recent decades, doubling since 1980, stating that

"When compared to simply graduating from high school, a bachelor's degree produces an increase in earnings over one's career of nearly \$600,000." (Sawhill, 2013).

In addition to personal benefits, increased levels of higher education have also been found to produce direct societal benefits like lower crime rates, increased civic engagement, reduction in poverty, and better health outcomes—including increased life expectancy (Clarke, 2007; Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015; McMahan, 2021). This is in addition to the documented economic benefits of lower unemployment rates, greater job opportunities, career advancement and upward mobility (Pew Research Center, 2016). The literature consistently supports the notion that higher education produces personal and societal benefits that from a macro standpoint, lead to stronger communal indicators that create healthier and sustainable communities.

UN Sustainability Goals

During the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro as an extension of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and continuing in 2015, the international community developed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These goals were developed under the premise that countries around the world would collectively pledge to eradicate poverty, find sustainable inclusive development solutions, and ensure everyone's human rights. The aim of the SDGs was that through the execution of these goals, countries would make sure that no one was left behind by 2030. In total there are 17 goals created with Goal #4 being "Quality Education," (United Nations, n.d.).

The SDGs were adopted by 193 countries in 2015, including the United States (United Nations Foundation, n.d.). The United States also developed the USA Sustainable Cities Initiative (USA-SCI), committing to achieve the UN's SDGs by 2030 (Iyer et al., 2017). The USA-SCI carries out the SDGs by promoting economic development, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability across the United States (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2025). New York, Baltimore, and San Jose were the first U.S. cities to develop SDG-based development strategies which served as models for cities across the globe (SDSN United States of America, n.d.).

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) reviews worldwide progress made toward the achievement of

the UN's SDGs and releases an annual Sustainable Development Report to share this data. Recent Sustainable Development Report (Sachs et al., 2023), revealed that progress toward the SDGs has stalled, and in some cases, even reversed since 2020. The report urges all countries who have adopted the SDGs to review their progress, or lack thereof, and revise their strategies. The SDSN has pledged to work diligently to support each country in implementing the SDGs by 2030 through research, educational innovation and partnerships, convening power, and outreach to the public. Understanding that the United Nations, United States, and USA-SCI all recognize the interconnectedness of education (SDG-4), economic growth (SDG-8), industry and innovation (SDG-9), and their impact on sustainable cities and communities (SDG-11), places institutions of higher education, especially those that focus on the local and regional level, such as the one highlighted in this case study, at the core objectives for the UN and essential to their success.

Anchor Institutions

Anchor institutions are typically large, place-based organizations like universities, hospitals, and local government agencies. These key institutions use their size, resources, and leverage along with economic power and network to impact the communities they work with. They are rooted in their communities and cannot easily relocate. Their substantial economic power and community influence position them as key stakeholders in regional development. Typically, an anchor institution is characterized by its commitment to a specific region through its mission and significantly impacts the local area through hiring practices, purchasing, investment, and community programs. An anchor institution is described as an entity that uses its economic strength and human resources to improve community health and social outcomes. This often includes focusing on economic security, job creation, development, and supporting underserved populations (Sladek, 2019; UCSF Faculty Affairs Staff, 2020).

With substantial size and resources, anchor institutions are able to serve as a catalyst for local development and address broader societal challenges through their community-rooted missions. They act as stabilizers and contributors to regional economic and social wellbeing, leveraging their influence to uplift local communities. In many central areas around the country, anchor institutions are often critical to regional stability and economic growth due to their local focus and investment, making them influential in community revitalization and social equity efforts. The roles they play can range from creating jobs and fostering education to improving access to healthcare and housing (Newberger and Toussaint-Comeau, 2013; Findler et al., 2019; The Democracy Collaborative, n.d.; Healthcare Anchor Network, n.d.).

Although anchor institutions are represented from different industries such as hospitals and other cultural institutions, higher education anchors possess two characteristics that differentiate them from other anchor institutions. One, even though higher education anchors share the place-based infrastructure and mission driven aspect of its peer anchors, the customer (students) for

higher education are drawn from a larger catchment area—regional, national, or even international. Secondly, the higher education customer continuously turnover, requiring recruitment annually. These two distinctions shape an institution's approach and strategy toward its investment and engagement with the broader community beyond its campus (Ehlenz, 2018).

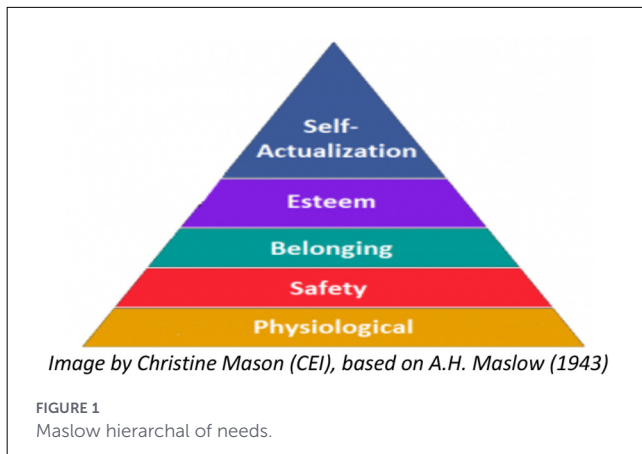
Higher education anchor institutions also have a history of contributing to regional regeneration and neighborhood renewal adding to a region's capacity to build new ideas, enhance social cohesion and address societal issues through outreach activities (Findler et al., 2019; Cortese, 2003; Lazić et al., 2021). Anchor institutions can also be defined in various ways, with a common emphasis on their role in community support and local engagement. Ehlenz (2018) research looks at a typology of university anchors and strategies. In her work, Ehlenz explores a contemporary framework of identifying higher education anchor institutions based on their strategies, approaches, and community initiatives.

Where significant attention in the research of higher education anchor institutions, like Ehlenz (2018), focuses on the classification and identification based on neighborhood revitalization broken into categories such as housing revitalization, economic revitalization, and public amenities, this study focuses on the aspects beyond the built environment and explores a case study of an anchor institution's impact on the people. The university by serving as a partner and anchor institution, allows the community to leverage its resources, expertise, and social networks to facilitate sustainable and inclusive growth. By integrating local knowledge with institutional capacity, these partnerships contribute to the long-term vitality of the neighborhood, addressing challenges such as housing affordability, economic development, workforce, and social equity.

Community Schools

Community Schools were started in the twentieth Century as a response to increasing economic inequality triggered by residential segregation and underserved communities (Maier et al., 2025). At the time community leaders developed a comprehensive and holistic approach in response to communities experiencing increased poverty and racial isolation. The theory developed around 'social centers' which could serve the growing needs of the community, beyond the siloed academic purpose of the place-based infrastructure of schools (Rogers, 2011). The concept built on and expanded around a set of pillars and characteristics of what was determined to make a great school combined with the immediate needs of the students and the community (Maier et al., 2025; National Education Association, n.d.).

Community Schools closely align with the work of American psychologist Abraham Harold Maslow who in his seminal publication titled *A Theory of Human Motivation* Maslow (1943), articulated his theory in what is commonly referred to as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (illustrated below in Figure 1). In his article, Maslow outlines the hierarchy of human needs, understanding that one level must be satisfied before an individual could sufficiently progress to the next level. Applying this concept in connection



to the development of community schools, as urban communities experience higher levels of poverty and inequality, addressing the human psychological needs of students becomes essential in a holistic approach to successful education at any level. Moreover, the school/institution therefore becomes the place (center facility), time (open for the majority of the day), and resources (institutional funding) for the logical infrastructure in the implementation (Dryfoos, 2002; Weiss et al., 2010).

Community is an important aspect in educational development as it builds and fosters trust, connections, and support systems to address different needs within them. Having community also builds resilience as individuals are able to lean on each other while experiencing changes within their life. Community Schools is an initiative to provide a variety of wraparound services for kids (K-12) in underprivileged neighborhoods. Depending on the needs and priorities of the community, services can be offered both inside and outside of the school setting. In the K-12 environment, services offered in schools can include free breakfast/lunch, safe transportation, and extended learning times. Beyond the classroom, Community Schools can address other needs such as providing healthcare, food security, and housing stability. Addressing the holistic needs outside of the classroom allows students to focus on learning more and worrying less about outside obstacles.

Community Schools also can improve and promote the emotional and social development of the student by providing counselors, mentors, and programs to develop life-skills. Some skills include rational decision making, collaborative leadership, and community engagement. Data shows that Community Schools in addition create social capital by building networks and relationships, while providing critical non-academic competencies (Blank et al., 2003). In addition to Community Schools helping students, some programs offered – benefit the broader community. Community schools can provide programs in professional development workshops/job training, language services, and vision/dental services. Communities and neighborhoods that have Community Schools have seen a drop in chronic absenteeism and an increase in family engagement. Community Schools have a positive impact on students and community members by creating opportunities through partnerships and relationships for them to thrive (Warren et al., 2009; Sable and Plotts, 2019).

The National Education Association (NEA) provides six pillars of Community Schools; 1) Strong and Proven Curriculum, 2) High-Quality Teaching, 3) Inclusive Leadership, 4) Positive Behavior Practices, 5) Family and Community Partnerships, and 6) Community Support Services. These six pillars are in addition to the four values of Community Schools in Equity, Collaboration, Personal Development, and Learning. In addition, NEA identifies further, institutions as Community Schools when evidence of integrating student support, expanding and enriching learning, engaging communities, and leading collaboration are present (National Education Association, n.d.). Both the pillars and values identified here by the National Education Association, although designed for K-12 schools are directly applicable to the wellbeing of all learners in general and contribute to the overall improvement of society and in turn the sustainability of the community.

Social and Upward Mobility

The term social mobility was initially introduced by sociologist Pitirim Sorokin in which he classified as the “shifting of individuals from position to position” (Sorokin, 1927). The concept of social mobility and later upward mobility, in the context of higher education is a perception well understood by those who pursue the credentials, degrees, and certifications. The idea of moving up the ‘social ladder’ or increasing one’s social status in society go hand and hand with professional development, skills training, and career opportunities, especially for those who come from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities. Even though various means exist in society to access social and upward mobility, higher education historically has been one of the more common and proven pathways to success (Thropay, 2024).

Research has shown that higher education produces upward mobility for lower income individuals and improves overall income and wealth. It has also been shown to create a higher quality of life and improved health outcomes for degree holders, and that college graduates face lower unemployment rates, and greater stability in retirement (Pew Research Center, 2012; Ma and Pender, 2023; Thropay, 2024; Throstel, 2025). In today’s economy, nearly two-thirds of the jobs are in the local service economy and growing and current data indicates that upward mobility is in structural decline in the United States (Klein and Thompson, 2025). In 1940, a child born into an American household had a 92% chance of making more money than their parents. By 1980 that number had dropped to 50%, indicating that upward mobility had become a coin toss in less than two generations (Klein and Thompson, 2025).

The principle of social and upward mobility should be even more evident in public institutions of higher education where there is an expectation by society of advancing the public good (Washington Monthly, n.d.). However, scholars Haveman and Smeeding (2006) in their work “The Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility” show that the gap is increasing in both success and access to higher education. At top-tier competitive colleges and universities nearly three-quarters of incoming students come from the top quartile in terms of socioeconomic status. Additionally, the cost of higher education in the United States continues to soar and financial aid for need based students has not

kept pace, only adding additional barriers for disadvantaged and low-income students (Haveman and Smeeding, 2006).

Social mobility has gained greater popularity in recent decades in higher education literature. Methodologies have been created, published, and included in institutional rankings, such as U.S. News & World Report, CollegeNet, and Washington Monthly. Most of these rankings and methodologies focus on student outcomes and placement, although there is little or no discussion on selection biases in terms of where students come from (socially and economically), as well as if social and upward mobility is embedded in the mission of the institution or just a byproduct of tracking outcomes, in other words—intentionality. Although social and upward mobility is an important concept and measurement, and the recognition and acknowledgment of institutions who are doing the work is important, it should be noted that lower rates are not always a direct indicator of lack of success taking place. For example, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2010) found retention rates were higher for Whites and Asian students, than for other racial and ethnic groups. Therefore, data of institutions working predominantly within these demographics needs to be analyzed accordingly.

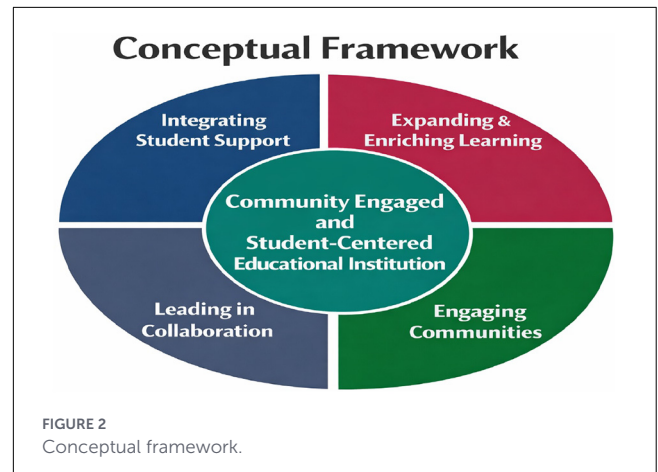
This case study examines how intentional resource coordination and sustained commitment can generate meaningful long-term effects on social and upward mobility within the underserved urban community in which the institution is located.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative single case study design (Yin, 2018) in its approach to examining the conceptual framework outlined below. The central research theme of the study it focused on the organizational construction and operational service of local and regional institutions of higher education in meeting the needs of their students and the communities they serve. The case study methodology is an appropriate method for this study, as it allows for in-dept and contextualized exploration of the contemporary environment in which higher education institutions operate, particularly in central cities across the United States. The study applies a broader interpretive component of case study design drawn from foundational pillars of the Community School theory, applied to the real-world setting of higher education (Stake, 1995). Through a single case study as the basis, the bounded nature of a single institution enables the comprehensive examining of the complex interactions between the school, student, and community partnerships that characterize the institution's mission driven community approach (Yazan, 2015).

Figure 2 below provides the conceptual framework used in the study to analyze the case, its components and findings. The framework is derived from the National Education Association's development of core pillars and values that constitute a Community School (National Education Association, n.d.)

Integrating Student Support—Coordinated services addressing academic, health, mental health, and social needs of the student. This component deals with the overall holistic approach to the student and takes on the interaction with the student beyond the



traditional academic setting. Examples of this could include clinics, counselors, and other services to ensure that each and every student is ready to learn.

Expanding and Enriching Learning—By understanding who the student is as well the external pressures and obligations that exist on the student, expanding and enriching learning includes flexibility in access, hours, and modality in both the academic component and resources/service availability.

Engaging Communities—Authentic partnerships that honor the voice of the community and welcomes its engagement. Engaging communities expands the physical borders of the school and establishes the institutions itself as a resource and service to the community.

Leading in Collaboration—A shared approach in the development of partnerships, programs, and strategic decision making designed to building trust, with the best interest of the greater community central to operational and programmatic planning.

These four pillars developed by the National Education Association in connection with their established values of Equity, Collaboration, Personal Development, and Learning are the foundation in the identification of Community Schools and the basis for the analysis provided in this study. As previously stated, although the concept of Community Schools was developed for k-12 schools, its purpose to the holistic wellbeing of the learner and the immediate community, resonates with many smaller local and regional institutions of higher education, which makes it applicable in the conceptual framework of the case study provided.

The data, documentation, and records for the study are all secondary information accessed through the University of Baltimore's public website (www.UBalt.edu), along with demographic data provided by the United States Census Bureau (www.census.gov), among other public sources cited accordingly. Third party rankings in terms of social mobility are also provided and cited accordingly (ie. Washington Monthly, CollegeNet, U.S. World News and Report). In addition, firsthand observations are also included and stated via the authors personal accounts.

Case study: University of Baltimore

The City of Baltimore

The history of the City of Baltimore is one of prominence, dating back to the early 1700/s. Ideally geographically position in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, Baltimore's port, waterways, and eventual harbor at one time made Baltimore the fastest growing city in the country and the largest flour market in the world. Baltimore was also home to the county's largest Black community (enslaved or free) and accounted for one out of every five free Black persons in the nation [City of Baltimore \(n.d.\)](#). This historical significance, coastal positioning and its importance to the country's economy garnered Baltimore the moniker "Charm City."

Today, according to the U.S. Census, the total population in Baltimore sits shy of 600,000 (down from a high of nearly 950,000 in the 1960's), with a Black person population of approximately 60% ([U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.](#)). However, Charm City hasn't always resulted as a foundation of success for its historically large Black person population. Looking back over the past 150 years post reconstruction, the Black people of Baltimore have experienced some of the worse inequities in the country. Not only were Black people excluded from the greatest wealth transfer in the United States history during the first half of the twentieth Century, but Baltimore was also the origin of many of the financial injustices perpetuated on Black people across the country. Programs such as Redlining, Blockbusting, and Contract Sales were all stated in Baltimore, Maryland ([Nix et al., 2011](#); [Brown, 2021](#); [Gourrier, 2021](#)). Decades and decades of discrimination, disinvestment, and systematic oppression have resulted in Baltimore being a hyper-segregated community, faced with economic challenges, elevated crime, poverty, and a substandard education system ([Brown, 2021](#)). Although public sector leaders have attempted to address the challenges of the city, without addressing the root causes, the systematic complexities of the problems have continued ([Forrester, 2007](#)). However, for many, higher education still remains a key to success.

The University of Baltimore

Located in the heart of Baltimore, the University of Baltimore (UBalt) is a public institution initially founded in 1925 as a night School of Law, and College of Business Administration. Over the majority of its history, the university has been focused on educational opportunities for working men and women and has been dedicated to providing high-quality education to students at various stages of their careers ever since. The structure of the institution has changed over its 100 year history, initially private and then became a public institution in 1975. At that time, it also shifted to only offering upper-division undergraduate courses, along with its graduate and law programs. In 1988 the university joined the University of Maryland System and in 2007, UBalt also returned to offering lower-division undergraduate programs as it continued to evolve to meet the needs of the community it serves.

The current mission statement of the university states

"The University of Baltimore offers career-focused education for aspiring and current professionals, providing the region with highly

educated leaders who make distinctive contributions to the broader community."

This statement reinforces the university's commitment to career-focused professionals of the greater Baltimore community, something the university has been consistent at for over one-hundred year now.

As for the most recent enrollment period (2025), the small urban campus located in the Mount Vernon community of Baltimore at the foot of Baltimore's Penn Station has approximately 3,200 students, including nearly a third undergraduates, a third graduates, and a third law and dual enrollment high school students. The downtown urban campus does not provide student housing, or many of the other traditional college campus experiences and amenities, therefore would be considered a commuter school in popular literature ([Martin and Karmel, 2002](#); [Gianoutsos, 2011](#)). UBalt's average undergraduate student age is over 30 years old and average graduate student age is over 35 years. The student body is currently 62% female and 38% male ([IPEDS—National Center for Education Statistics, 2024](#)). The University of Baltimore is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a Predominantly Black Institution (PBI), one of only 69 institutions of the higher education in the United States that carry that designation [[Postsecondary National Policy Institute \(PNPI\), 2024](#)]. PBIs are important as they provide culturally responsive support and help provide higher education opportunities to Black students. They promote diversity in the workforce and are symbols of resilience as Black people have traditionally been underserved and underrepresented in higher education.

Understanding who the University of Baltimore is, the market in which it operates, and the unique demographic student population they serve, the structure of the institution is constructed differently from many traditional higher education institutions. The university draws the majority of the students from the region, and has a larger than average first-generation population, as well as a larger than average student population dependent on financial aid. The unique mix of the student population requires a unique mix of services and recourse need to ensure the highest level of student success possible. This includes expanded student services, promoting flexible schedules by having classes and events throughout the week and evenings for students who are employed full-time (many with families and children). In institution offers a range of opportunities for extra curriculums such as student organizations, peer mentors, global field studies, and conferences that enhance the professional development of its students and internships/apprenticeships that are both paid and virtual. In addition to FASFA, UBalt offers scholarships and grants to help students who have limited financial resources.

Moreover, a university wide council focused on student success was created. This council known as the Student Success Council is made up of administrators and faculty, along with other stakeholders including student representatives. One of the key coordinated resources the University deploys to support the success of its students is the Student Success and Support Services or what the institution calls "SSSS" (pronounced "Quad S"). Many of these resources, services, and departments are made available at other institutions as literature exists in terms of the best practices in higher education, however the coordination, consolidation,

compassion, and intent are key elements that translates into the successful outcomes for the University of Baltimore. Recent experiences in government services, led the State of Maryland nearly a decade ago to study and analyze the state's delivery of social services. What Maryland found was that the coordination, access, and distribution of services were a critical element in working with underserved communities. As a result, the State of Maryland created a philosophy called 2Gen and initially piloted the holistic tool MD THINK, now "Maryland Benefits One Application," based on the principle of support as the building block for sustainable success (Gourrier and Ficeneq, 2020; Ascend, n.d.; Maryland Department of Human Services, n.d.).

The University of Baltimore's SSSS works off of a similar philosophy understanding the importance of integrated services, information and data sharing, industry best-practices, and a student-centered design. Even though the institution from a size comparative to many of its peer colleges and universities in the region is small, the University of Baltimore allocates a large percentage of its resources in what could be classified as "wrap around services" to support its student success. Figure 3 below highlights some of the coordinated services and departments that work together under the creation of the Student Success and Support Services.

With the multitude of services and resources coordinate by the University through the SSSS initiative, students are able to access academic accommodation and support, clothing support and services, food support and services, health and wellness (including mental and emotional), technology support, transportation services, financial support, and veteran services to identify a few. This comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting student success is an essential component of the student experience at the University of Baltimore. The University's small size, geographical location, and demographic mix allow the institution through data analysis, to constantly re-evaluate the status and needs of its student population and their outcomes. Although these changes are often resource driven, that is not always the case. Flexibility, accommodation, and coordination are also often a solution to many of the common challenges students experience. Creating a student-centered environment, from a holistic and compassionate infrastructure that embraces innovation and is nimble enough to shift with the changing needs of its students and the market can be an accelerant for sustained success.

The University for Baltimore

The University of Baltimore is currently led by a native Baltimorean, Kurt Schmoke. President Schmoke attended public school in the City of Baltimore and went on to receive his undergraduate degree from Yale University, was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, and earned his Juris Doctor degree from Harvard Law School. After his formal education, President Schmoke returned to the area and eventually entered public life, where he served three terms as Mayor for the City of Baltimore. After serving a stint as Dean of Howard Law School in Washington D.C., President Schmoke took over the leadership as President of the University of Baltimore in 2014.

President Schmoke is a thought leader in higher-education and often publishes op-eds in the local newspaper on the structure and design of higher-education. One of President Schmoke's common reframes is that the institution is not just the University "of" Baltimore, it's the University "For" Baltimore. This mantra has been a common theme of his leadership at the university. In addition to being student-centered as previously indicated, UBalt's focus on leadership development, community engagement, and career readiness, has allowed its students to excel in their careers and played an important role in the development of student's leadership and professional skills. This work is done through a number of different points of contact. One example is the number of different centers and clinics the university has that services the community. These are in addition to the student facing services and centers previously referenced and often provide students the opportunity for valuable networking and professional experiences, contributing to another mantra of the university in "Knowledge That Works."

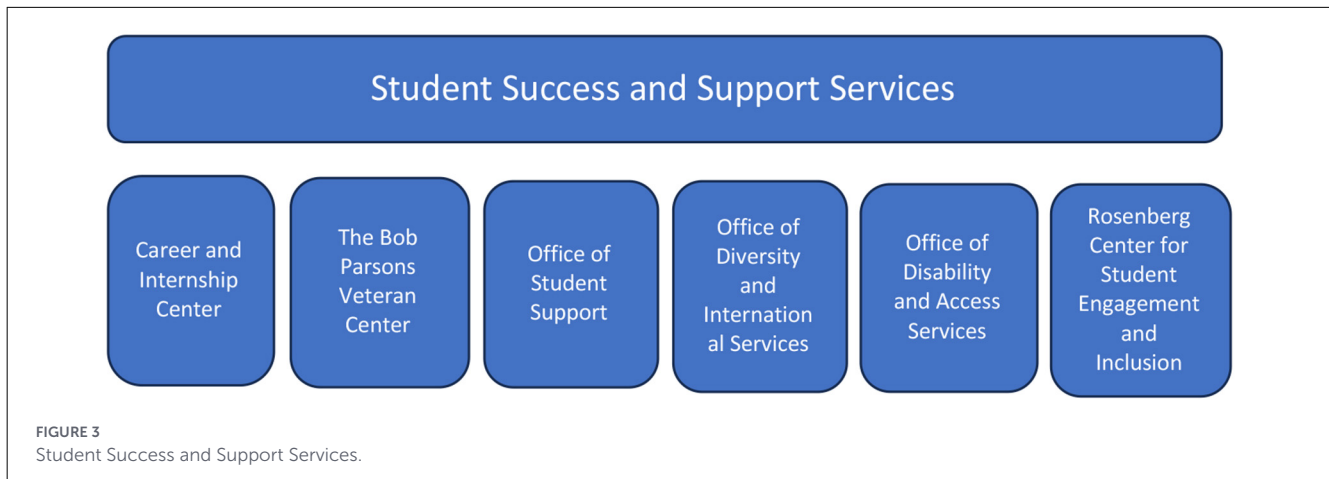
The university is home to a number of centers providing's resources and services directly to the community:

- The Schafer Center for Public Policy
- Center for Advancing Prevention Excellence (CAPE)
- Center of Public Safety Innovation
- Center on Applied Feminism
- Center for Criminal Justice reform
- Center for Digital Communication, Commerce, and Culture
- Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation
- Hofferger Center for Ethical Engagement
- Center for the Law of intellectual Property and Technology
- Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Course
- The Bob Parsons Veterans Center
- Center for Sports and the Law
- Center for Justice Impacted Students.

In addition to the volume of active centers the university has, the School of Law also operates a number of nationally recognized law clinics. These programs integrate legal education with direct community impact, allowing law students to work on real cases while supporting local needs:

- Saul Ewing Civil Advocacy Clinic
- Community Development clinic
- Criminal Defense and Advocacy
- Bronfein Family Law Clinic
- Immigrant Rights Clinic
- Innocence Project Clinic
- Legal Data and Design Clinic
- Low Income Taxpayer Clinic
- Mediation Clinic for Families
- Mental Health Law clinic
- The Bob Parsons Veteran Advocacy Clinic

A point of emphasis for the university is its connection with the community and focus on students' engagement and experiential learning. An example of this is the Schaefer Center for Public Policy's NextGen Leaders Public Service Program that pays for interested UBalt students to gain valuable career experience that often times students are not able to take advantage of when



uncompensated, or don't have the network and connections to facilitate. Another example is across the university a variety of special programs and initiatives designed to augment the classroom experience and foster civic engagement, supported by university funding and innovation grants. Students connect with neighborhoods and communities in the Baltimore area through experiential learning and community partnerships focused on applied research and urban revitalization. The city is the university's "built-in" laboratory, abundant with opportunities for students to put theory into practice and create change right outside the doors. This focus on engagement and learning is consistent with the university's recognition by the distinguished Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, under the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as a Community Engaged Institution. This classification puts the University of Baltimore in a small class of institutions (277) recognized across the county for its high level of community engagement and partnerships in strengthening civil responsibility, addressing critical societal issues, and contributing to the public good.

The university operates the Second Chance Program in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education's Second Chance Pell Grant Experimental Sites Initiative and the Jessup Correctional Institution (a maximum-security prison for men), offering coursework for inmates to work toward a Bachelor of Arts in Human Services Administration. These men complete coursework while incarcerated and then continue their studies on campus once release and are supported through the university's comprehensive wrap-around services and support, both while incarcerated and on campus. The highly successful program is another example of the university's commitment to building a better community and improving the lives of citizens.

The university further fosters its University For Baltimore mantra through support of other community institutions and organizations. In 2019, UBalt opened its doors to the Baltimore City Police Academy, which allowed the city to relocate its police academy to UBalt's prime downtown campus location. Satisfied with its partnership, the Baltimore City Police Academy just recently renewed its lease for another 5 years. In 2024, the university once again opened its doors to another key community institution, in the Baltimore City College High School (BCC). BCC is a college preparatory school and one of the oldest active public high schools in the country. Its school location in Northeast Baltimore

is designated a National Historic Landmark and constructed of granite and limestone in a Collegiate Gothic architecture style. The facility built in 1928 is in the process undergoing a much-needed 3 year renovation, therefore the University of Baltimore invited BCC to use the university's facilities until the renovations are completed. The downtown urban campus now housing the University of Baltimore, the Baltimore City Police Academy, and Baltimore City College High School, is a prime example of collaboration and partnership, along with the institution recognizing its role and importance to the community it serves.

As previously referenced, social and upward mobility measurements are not a perfect gage, as institutions associated with higher risk populations are often at a disadvantage in these types of metrics. However, the University of Baltimore is known for having success in social and upward mobility. The university was named a Top Performer for Social Mobility in the 2024 Best Regional Universities rankings by U.S. News and World Report, ranked #2 among Maryland public master's universities and in the top 10% nationally for advancing students' social mobility by the Washington Monthly (2024), recognized in CollegeNET's 2021 Social Mobility Index, ranking in the top 10% nationally and #4 in Maryland for promoting economic and social mobility. These results shouldn't be the panacea of the institution's work, but it does highlight the level of success the university is having with the population it serves and its continued commitment to the community of Baltimore.

Discussion

Analyzing the case through the lens of the conceptual framework, we see that the University of Baltimore clearly demonstrates an integration of student support in its business model. The coordination of Student Success and Support Services shows a dedication to providing efficient and effective services for students. The oversight of the Student Success Council demonstrates a degree of focus and input from various stakeholders, including the all-important student voice in the process. These efforts have led to a multitude of adaptable resources, including mental health resources, virtual assistance, and 24 hr

access, among others. This approach to student services is a clear example of a student-centered institution.

Expanding and enriching learning deals largely with understanding who your students are. “Meeting your students where they are” is a common phrase often used, but it frequently doesn’t provide much context or action. The University of Baltimore has always served a unique sector of the population, and as a result, its academic structure is also different. However, post-COVID, like many institutions, the university has adopted a virtual component in its academic delivery. Understanding the University of Baltimore’s students, the university has gone a step further in developing a host of variations in course delivery to meet the needs of working professionals—from flexible class times such as evening and weekend hours to a complete mix of asynchronous, synchronous, in-person, hybrid, and dual instruction formats. Advancements in technology and tools have only expedited the university’s ability to expand and enrich its learning environment.

Engaging communities is clearly evident, as the University of Baltimore has been recognized by the prestigious American Council on Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching with the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. In 2026, only 230 colleges and universities were awarded this designation. This designation highlights the continuous commitment the university has made to the community it serves through its work and academics. The university provides a number of nationally recognized services through its award-winning law clinics and multiple centers previously identified above, providing research and services directly to the community that complement an academic structure incorporating community engagement and service-learning embedded throughout its curriculum. Programs such as the NextGen Program and the Second Chance Program described above highlight a couple of examples of the character and commitment the university consistently delivers to the community of Baltimore.

Much like engaging communities, the University of Baltimore has also received recognition for its leadership and collaboration in the market. As an institution, the university has been a flagship anchor and community partner for decades. Located in central Baltimore and one of only two schools of law in the State of Maryland, the university, as indicated in the case, has long positioned itself as the “University For Baltimore.” Opening its doors and facilities to other key Baltimore anchors such as the Baltimore City Police Academy and Baltimore City High Schools are just a couple of examples that illustrate the level of leadership and collaboration the institution has with the city and partners throughout the market. The University of Baltimore, which just recently celebrated its 100th anniversary, prides itself on its sustainability, uniqueness, and innovative approach that only accentuates its leadership and collaboration throughout the community.

Conclusion

The Baltimore market has a full range for colleges and universities from small institutions to large nationally and

internationally recognize institutions of the higher education. In addition, the landscape of higher education has changed over the years and has become even more competitive. Through a combination of financial constraints, enrollment cliffs, and public perception in the value proposition of higher education, institutions have to compete now more than ever for customers/students ([Inside Higher Ed, 2024](#)). As a result, students who use to find their way to schools like the University of Baltimore and are now recruited to larger institutions who have expanded their catchment to recruit a broader prospective student.

Technological advances and conveniences since the COVID pandemic have only added to the complexities of higher education. This shift in demand for students, however, hasn’t changed the fundamental structure in terms of the mission, services, and experiences at these institutions. The University of Baltimore classifies itself as “Different by Design.” The institution recognizes that it can’t be all things to everyone and is not designed to compete for the student looking for the traditional college experience. But for the professional, career minded, adult learners, the University of Baltimore has designed a unique experience to maximize the student’s success. All colleges are transformative, but the University of Baltimore is unique in terms of the role it embraces in the City and the greater region of Baltimore. UBalt’s unique combination of work and external funding for active and applied research through it centers, clinics and faculty in addition to its community engagement, social services and support, engaged courses and service-learning models are all core to who the University of Baltimore is. Its work in the community and other characteristics described in the case are truly what set UBalt apart from its traditional peers.

Most professionals understand that a college degree is not a guarantee for success, even though the data supports increase probabilities ([Hout, 2012](#); [Lawrence, 2017](#); [Chankseliani and McCowan, 2020](#); [Twang, 2022](#)). College graduation rates are often times more a function of personal and financial resource available than any other obstacle. Most students can graduate from college in terms of academic capacity, but it’s usually social and financial issues that come in to play with retention ([Cornwall, 2023](#)). As illustrated in the in the Community Schools model, understanding your student, communicating with your students, and identifying the needs of your particular students are as important as curricular development and assessment. The University of Baltimore through mission and commitment to its community has developed an approach focused on creating community sustainability through improving the lives and wellbeing of its students. The challenge is complex, and as a result it is also dynamic, which creates the need for a constant loop of innovation, assessment, reflection, and implementation.

Much like the University of Baltimore has embraced the needs of the local community it serves and has centered its focus on “hyper-local,” which is comparable to the k-12 Community School model. The primary recommendation of this study is for institutions of higher education, particularly small local and regional colleges and universities, in order to differentiate themselves in the market, address the changing demands and cultural shifts toward and higher education, and serve the community. That they should position their institution as more

than an anchor and more than an just an academic institution, to aim to be an embedded integral part of the larger environment. By doing this, we create institutions that are a resource, a hub of services, and are truly instrumental in the transformation of the lives of its students and the long-term health and sustainability of communities.

In a time when college education and credentials are being devalued and questioned—the need for learning, growth and development is as great as ever. Financial challenges associated with this model of institution is expensive and typically lack the critical mass of economies of scale. However, the University of Baltimore celebrated its hundredth anniversary this year has demonstrated that there is sustainability to committing to a mission rooted in public good. This case study highlights the importance of aligning an academic institutions' mission with community needs to create holistic and mutually beneficial outcomes. This model presents a pathway for other urban universities seeking to engage in a student focused and community-centric development approach that strengthens local communities and broadens the institution's reach and impact on the communities they serve.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

AG: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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