

Rockefeller Foundation Attempts to Stimulate City Planning and Urban Research in American Universities before World War II

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One of the most fruitful collections in the items I planned to look at was the material related to the establishment of the School of City Planning at Harvard University in 1929, which was the first foray into city planning by a Rockefeller organization. The Rockefeller context for this move was the phasing out of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM) and the transfer of its social science programs to the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), effective January 3, 1928. Edmund Day, a Harvard Ph.D. in economics who had founded the University of Michigan's business school, had joined LRSM a few years earlier and became the first director of the RF's new Social Science Division and the point person for the city planning grant.

Some of the impetus for RF and university involvement in city planning appears to have come from a Conference on a Project for Research and Instruction in City & Regional Planning, held at Columbia University, May 3, 1928, and sponsored by the Committee on a Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs. The Committee's chair was Frederic Delano, FDR's uncle, who would go on to become an influential member of the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB). The Committee released its much-lauded regional plan in 1929 and many considered its work to be the first great regional planning endeavor in the United States and a stimulant for others. Conference attendees included Charles Merriam of the University of Chicago, who would later join Delano on the NRPB; Thomas Adams, General Director of Plans and Surveys,

Regional Plan of New York and professor in the Department of Architecture at MIT; William A. Boring, Director of the School of Architecture and Professor of Design, Columbia; Henry V. Hubbard, a Harvard professor and pioneer in landscape architecture; and Frederick Keppel, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The regional planning advocates hoped to mobilize universities to develop formal programs of research and teaching on city and regional planning. This aspiration was a typical input for the instrumental university: an elite group concerned with a specific social problem or approach to social engineering, attempting to use universities to advance its agenda.

The LRSM apparently issued a call for proposals for university-based city planning programs in the wake of the Columbia conference. Hubbard wrote to Day in late 1928 proposing a city planning program and implying that he was responding to such a call.¹ Harvard hoped to create a Graduate School of City Planning. Many of the courses envisioned for it had been taught in the School of Landscape Architecture for over fifteen years, but Harvard officials believed “that a separation of the two groups would make it possible to concentrate and greatly strengthen the instruction in both fields of landscape architecture and city planning.”² Columbia submitted a request for a School of Civic Design, which the RF did not fund.³ A figure of interest in this movement was Henry James of New York City, president and chairman of the Teachers’ Insurance and Annuity Association (TIAA) and a leading member of the Committee on a Regional Plan. James appears to have discussed both the Harvard and Columbia proposals with RF officials, and he eventually served on the visiting committee for Harvard’s School of City Planning.

The RF awarded Harvard a seven-year grant. Though the School published a number of research reports, it never enrolled many students. Day criticized “the difficulty of effecting full

integration of the work of the School with other units of the University” and “the apparent failure to broaden the financial base of the School adequately.”⁴ Day made the latter judgment despite the fact that shortly after receiving the RF grant in 1929, Harvard accepted a \$150,000 gift to create the Charles Dyer Norton Chair of Regional Planning.⁵ Day made the former judgment despite Hubbard’s insistence that the school was progressing toward greater integration with the university. He wrote to Day in late 1935 that “the kind of cooperation by the whole University, including the field of physical city planning, to the end of public service and social betterment which you and I had in mind at the beginning and which up to now I have felt has been slow in development, is now on the road.”⁶ He specifically mentioned Harvard’s new commitment to public administration as contributing to this integration.

Nevertheless, the RF was sufficiently dissatisfied with the School of City Planning that it denied a request for extension in 1936 despite much pleading from Harvard, even from President James Conant. Day remarked that “the attitude which the University has taken toward current support of the work in city and regional planning which we have been assisting for the past seven years suggests to my way of thinking that a flat rejection is in order. However, such action doubtless has to be somewhat tactfully couched.”⁷ The RF’s shifting priorities also contributed to this rejection. Stacy May, Day’s assistant in the Social Science Division, wrote that “in the view of the Officers of the Foundation this project is marginal at best to any of the Foundation’s new fields of concentration for the social sciences.”⁸ Indeed, in 1937 the RF eliminated the category of grants under which it had classified the Harvard School of City Planning, “Community Organization and Planning.” Most of the grant money in the last years of this category went to the Welfare Council of New York City.⁹

An attempt at all-university coordination on a social issue appeared again in a similar project the RF funded a few years later, Princeton's Bureau of Urban Research (BUR). During the mid-twentieth century, foundations such as the RF and the Ford Foundation helped push universities to create units that coordinated researchers from various disciplines to attack specific social problems. This trend made universities more instrumental in orientation. Even the language of the official RF grant action for the BUR reflected the notion of the university as an instrument: "Object: To provide a mechanism at Princeton University for the coordination and integration of information and research in the field of urban problems."¹⁰

The New Deal state joined foundations in promoting an instrumental orientation for universities. In this case, the National Resources Committee (later the National Resources Planning Board) attempted to mobilize universities as instruments for solving urban problems. Its Urbanism Committee published a 1937 report entitled *Our Cities, Their Role in the National Economy*. Among its recommendations was the establishment of "a central agency for urban research . . . in the proposed National Resources Board" that would among other duties "include the stimulation of urban research in universities."¹¹ Princeton cited this recommendation in its BUR proposal to the RF.¹² One of the RF proposal reviewers wondered whether Princeton was the right university for such a bureau: "Are the associations of the sponsors such as to permit them to launch the kind of university Bureau proposed by the Federal Government . . . in its 1937 report?" Another reviewer questioned the location: "I must confess I do not see the need for an organization at Princeton. If we were going into this field why not at Chicago?" A third reviewer thought Princeton proposed to do too much: "Why shake a waste-basket? Why not identify the one or two things that Princeton can do well?"¹³ Joseph Willits, who had replaced Day as director of the Social Science Division in 1939, emphasized the last criticism and wrote

in a memo that negotiations ended in late January because the project was not ripe for RF support in its present preliminary stage of development.¹⁴

Despite these misgivings, the RF mysteriously approved a one-year planning grant of \$7,500 on April 1, 1941. In May 1942, the RF made an additional two-year grant of \$15,000, even in the wake of a review by RF staffer Roger F. Evans that cited “lack of effective purpose or direction,” “lack of depth and ‘bite,’” “lack of anything approaching real research or synthesis. Even the contemplated study of war impact on twelve New Jersey cities seems more like a Chamber of Commerce service job.” The provision of funding in the wake of negative reviews suggests the need for further research on the RF actions, perhaps in the papers of other officers.

Princeton hired Melville C. Branch, Jr. in May 1941 to direct the BUR. Just twenty-eight years old, Branch held a BA and an MFA in architecture from Princeton and was working for the NRPB. Willits’ comments about Branch reflected his continuing hesitancy about the BUR: “He is a ‘planner,’—or rather, he is out of the ‘planning’ tradition. Ordinarily I have my fingers crossed on them. They seem to me to consist, so often, of muddy verbalisms, an unlimited desire to extend indiscriminately the regimentation of life and people, an affection for deficits, and a fondness for control as a substitute for thinking through problems.”¹⁵

Princeton’s hiring of such a young person with no Ph.D. or faculty experience to direct a research bureau was a curious move. Of course, there were no Ph.D. holders in urban studies or similar fields at the time; Branch would receive the first U.S. Ph.D. in regional planning, from Harvard in 1949.¹⁶ Most likely, he was a known quantity to the Princeton faculty and they coveted his connections to the federal government, which they thought might provide funding. Princeton Vice President and Treasurer George Brakeley proclaimed that Branch “seems to me

pretty hot stuff.”¹⁷ Whatever the case, the hire was probably a recipe for instability for the BUR, which came quickly and in a different way when the U.S. government unexpectedly called Branch to military service in early 1943.

Princeton’s Bureau of Urban Research is instructive despite its short existence and ultimate failure. It shows us the peril of putting an untenured, inexperienced faculty member in charge of a research unit. It also shows that by 1940 many top leaders of at least one elite private research university believed that such an institution should engage in organized urban research and had some affinity for prescriptions to that effect coming from the New Deal state. Several top leaders of the university were actively involved in pushing the BUR. President Harold Dodds chaired the organizing committee and lobbied Willits in person for the original grant.¹⁸ Vice president and treasurer George Brakeley frequently communicated with Willits, an old friend from when both were administrators at the University of Pennsylvania. At one point, Brakeley told Willits that if Branch went to war, “Doug Brown, Jean Labatut and I are so much interested in this work that we believe we could keep it going until Branch’s return.”¹⁹ Dean of the Faculty J. Douglas Brown had founded the Industrial Relations Section of the Department of Economics in 1922 with funding from the Rockefeller family. The section operated something like an organized research unit even while based in a department. The organizing materials for the BUR analogized it to the IR Section. Despite all this support, the university declined to finance the BUR when the RF grants ended and instead closed the unit. Additional research in the Princeton University Archives might help to explain this situation.

I received a bonus when the RAC added the Ford Foundation Archives between the time of my grant application and the time of my visit. This expansion of RAC collections allowed me to conduct research in the Ford Foundation (FF) grant file for the American Council on

Education's Committee on Institutional Projects Abroad (CIPA), an important umbrella organization for American universities' overseas institution building that features prominently in another chapter of my book. The Ford Foundation made an initial grant of \$87,000 over three years in July 1954, and an additional terminal grant of \$88,000 for three years in November 1957. The initial grant came jointly from two FF programs, Overseas Development and International Training and Research, but the terminal grant came only from the latter.²⁰ CIPA emerged from a broader effort by ACE to create institutional structures to support the accelerating international impulse in American higher education. The proposals and correspondence in the grant file illuminate the contours of this effort over about a year from mid-1953 to mid-1954, although there is mention that ACE had been seeking FF funding for international exchange-of-persons since 1951.²¹ The key event that changed the situation in 1953 was the dramatic ramping up of the U.S. government's university contracts abroad program, under the leadership of Harold Stassen, who left the presidency of the University of Pennsylvania to join the Eisenhower administration. The contract program was under the auspices of a new agency directed by Stassen, the Foreign Operations Administration (FOA), which consolidated two others in August 1953 and oversaw all U.S. foreign assistance.

Stassen was hands-on with the university contract program, and he asked the ACE to submit a project proposal with a budget for government funding of a new ACE unit to act as liaison between the government and American universities it contracted with for overseas work. After initial enthusiasm from ACE, the momentum for this plan waned. By June 1954, ACE rejected the proposed government funding because FOA insisted on clearing the personnel, which was unacceptable to ACE.²²

As FOA increased the scope of the university contract program, the FF came to the conviction that it should support the proposed CIPA. John B. Howard, director of the International Training and Research program, wrote that “present plans call for the number of these university contracts to be increased to one hundred fifty within the next year. In light of these facts, it is our conviction that there is an urgent need for the establishment of an advisory-staff operation designed to study the problems related to exchange and sister-university activities, to provide consultation services for universities engaged in these activities, to serve as a liaison between American universities and government agencies, and to undertake a general clearing-house operation.”²³ Don K. Price, FF vice president, noted that “I telephoned Governor Stassen, the Administrator of FOA. He said that he would be very glad indeed if the FF would make a grant for this Committee and authorized me (at his initiative) to use his support in any way that might seem desirable in recommending favorable action on this application.”²⁴

ACE used the funding for both the committee and an Office of International Programs Abroad, directed from early 1955 by Richard A. Humphrey, who had been deputy director and acting director of the Information Center Service of the Department of State.²⁵ The committee generally had just fewer than ten members, mainly university presidents and professors who had directed international projects. It held an annual conference in November, which brought together representatives of government, academia, and foundations concerned with institution building abroad and generated several important ideas and programs.

The FF was pleased with what it paid for. At the time of the 1957 grant renewal, FF executive committee minutes recorded that

“the Foundation staff views the Office’s achievement as considerable . . . In short, its work has laid the basis for improved operations in the future of an enterprise that has major long-term importance for American education and national policy . . . The staff has maintained close contact with this project since its inception and has been impressed by

the persistence and effectiveness of the director of the Office, Richard Humphrey, and by the concern and active participation that have characterized the advisory committee.”²⁶

Even so, the FF scuttled the ACE request for a larger budget, with which the ACE had hoped to organize periodic workshop conferences, establish a consulting service for American university contractors, and undertake pilot studies to ascertain long-term educational requirements of certain countries or regions. The motivation for the latter project was a widespread frustration among universities concerning the federal government’s refusal to make long-term plans for university work around the globe, which prompted universities to try to take the matter into their own hands.²⁷

The Committee on an Office of International Projects Abroad catalyzed an important discussion about the purpose of American universities and the independence of their government-funded activities. This file was so rich that I could not get through it all in the time I had, and I hope to return to it on a future visit to the RAC.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Henry V. Hubbard to Edmund E. Day, November 30, 1928, Rockefeller Foundation Archives (RF), RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 346, Folder 4114, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).
- ² Bremer W. Pond to Edmund E. Day, December 12, 1928, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 346, Folder 4115, RAC.
- ³ Cross-reference sheet, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 346, Folder 4115, RAC.
- ⁴ Edmund E. Day to Henry V. Hubbard, September 20, 1935, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 346, Folder 4119, RAC.
- ⁵ Henry V. Hubbard to Edmund E. Day, August 20, 1929, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 346, Folder 4115, RAC.
- ⁶ Henry V. Hubbard to Edmund E. Day, December 30, 1935, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 346, Folder 4119, RAC.
- ⁷ Edmund E. Day to Stacy F. May, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 346, Folder 4120, RAC.
- ⁸ Stacy May, Memorandum upon Harvard Application for Support of Regional Planning Project, May 6, 1936, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 346, Folder 4120, RAC.
- ⁹ Social Sciences Appropriations Classified 1929-1938, RF, RG 3 Program and Policy, Series 910, Box 2, Folder 14, RAC.
- ¹⁰ Social Sciences Grant in Aid No RA SS 4119 Princeton University – Bureau of Urban Research, April 3, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 388, Folder 4600, RAC.
- ¹¹ National Resources Committee, *Our Cities: Their Role in the National Economy*. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1937, pp. 83-84.
- ¹² “A Proposal for the Establishment of the Bureau of Urban Research within Princeton University, Princeton N.J.” 1940, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 388, Folder 4603, RAC.
- ¹³ Reviewer comments attached to Sherley W. Morgan to Joseph H. Willits, November 27, 1940, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 388, Folder 4600, RAC.
- ¹⁴ Joseph H. Willits memo, February 5, 1941, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 388, Folder 4600, RAC.
- ¹⁵ Joseph H. Willits to Walter W. Stewart, March 24, 1942, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 388, Folder 4601, RAC.
- ¹⁶ A Guide to the Papers of Melville C. Branch, Jr., 1914-2004, <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=vcu-cab/vircu00111.xml>, accessed August 15, 2012.
- ¹⁷ George Brakeley to Joseph H. Willits, June 25, 1941, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 388, Folder 4600, RAC.
- ¹⁸ Sherley W. Morgan to Joseph H. Willits, October 14, 1940, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 388, Folder 4600, RAC.
- ¹⁹ George Brakeley to Joseph H. Willits, March 30, 1942, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 388, Folder 4601, RAC.
- ²⁰ Ford Foundation (FF), Request and Authorization for Program Action, July 21, 1954; FF Program Action, November 22, 1957; Melvin J. Fox to John B. Howard, April 26, 1957; FF, Grant PA, pp. 54-118, Reel 364, RAC.
- ²¹ John B. Howard to Don K. Price, Jr., November 13, 1953, FF, Grant PA, pp. 54-118, Reel 364, RAC.
- ²² M.L. Wilson to John B. Howard, June 11, 1954, FF, Grant PA, pp. 54-118, Reel 364, RAC.
- ²³ John B. Howard to Don K. Price, Jr., June 7, 1954, FF, Grant PA, pp. 54-118, Reel 364, RAC.
- ²⁴ Don K. Price, Memo to File, July 2, 1954, FF, Grant PA, pp. 54-118, Reel 364, RAC.
- ²⁵ Excerpt from *Higher Education and National Affairs* 4: 2 (January 27, 1955), FF, Grant PA, pp. 54-118, Reel 364, RAC.
- ²⁶ Docket Excerpt, Meeting of the Executive Committee, November 15, 1957, FF, Grant PA, pp. 54-118, Reel 364, RAC.
- ²⁷ Fox to Howard, April 26, 1957.