Think Local

Why don't Boston's great professors study Boston?

Top academics and city officials dig into a mystery

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What can you learn from looking closely at a city? Get down to street level, and you can see how people conduct business, how they raise their children, how they fall on hard times and what helps pull them out. When Robert Sampson was an urban sociologist at the University of Chicago, he spent 12 years learning about the city's residents and institutions—analyzing the work of its police officers, politicians, religious leaders, real estate agents, and school principals, and writing papers that helped make sense of city problems from violent crime to teen pregnancy.

Then, in 2003, Sampson got a job at Harvard.

Christopher Winship, the sociology professor who recruited him, had warned Sampson that his kind of research was in short supply in the Boston area. Nevertheless, Sampson was somewhat taken aback. "I was frankly surprised at how disconnected the university was from the city," he said recently. "It seemed to be in, but not of, the community." Most of his new colleagues—the decorated professors who populated Harvard and Boston's other elite schools—were primarily interested in issues of global, or at least national, import. Sampson got the sense that many of them considered local issues parochial.

That disconnect hasn't changed dramatically in the years since he arrived, and Sampson and Winship regard it as a lost opportunity: Greater Boston is home to some of the best research institutions on earth, as well as some of the world's leading experts on urban issues like crime, education, public health, and poverty. Why aren't more of them doing work on Boston?

This year, with funding from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard and an endorsement from City Hall, Sampson and Winship are joining forces with a group of like-minded colleagues in a public campaign to close the gap they see between Boston and the legions of researchers who call it home. On Oct. 21, the group will host an all-day meeting at Radcliffe entitled "Reimagining the City-University Connection," pulling together top academics from the Boston area and around the country with high-level city officials like the mayor's chief of staff, the superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, and the superintendent-in-chief of the Boston Police Department. The goal is to figure out a way for academics and city officials here to work together—to focus more professors' attention on the city, and to urge the city to take more advantage of the world-class researchers in their backyard.

Both sides would profit, the argument goes: Policymakers could make better decisions about how to deal with violence, failing schools, and economic development if they had access to cutting-edge research about what was going wrong. And scholars at the city's universities, in turn, would get access to troves of valuable urban data, Boston's records on school performance, housing, transportation, and health care: exactly the raw material they need to generate new ideas.

In trying to bring the two sides together, Sampson and Winship are up against a long history of cautious distance and mistrust: an academic culture that is not always comfortable navigating urban politics, and city officials understandably guarded about throwing open their doors to curious outsiders. They are also fighting something fundamental within academia itself: namely, that success for professors at the top levels—receiving tenure, getting papers published in prominent academic journals—often requires doing research that's relevant to a broad, international audience of colleagues in their field, but not necessarily the residents of the medium-sized city where they live.

IN BOSTON, the long and fraught relationship between university and community tends to revolve around money and land: How much MIT should pay the city of Cambridge instead of taxes; what Harvard should be allowed to build along the river. But for Sampson and Winship, that misses an important point: The universities in Boston are first and foremost knowledge factories, they say, and their responsibility to the people who live beyond their gates is scholarly as much as it is economic.

It's important to note that not every professor in Boston is in their sights. For one thing, there are plenty of academics—Renaissance historians, say, or AIDS researchers focused on Africa—for whom it would simply make no sense to take a local focus. For another, there are several schools in the area—especially Northeastern University, Suffolk University, and UMass-Boston—with a long tradition of working shoulder-to-shoulder with city leaders to design and test social programs and policies. The crucial thing to realize is that most of the people providing that kind of help are not producing research that is also considered groundbreaking in the academic world. Winship and Sampson are trying to recruit the people who are: intellectual leaders asking new and important questions about how cities work and how people live, but who may be looking right past the world outside their windows.

The most-studied American cities, said Winship, are New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago; he'd like to see Boston appear on the list. That involves making a case that Boston is "sufficiently important" and "sufficiently like other cities," Winship said, that studying it can "give us important insights into how cities work in general, and how they might work better."

Collaboration between leading scholars and city officials has historically been rare. This is in part because they work on such different timelines—academic research can take years to bear results—but it's also cultural. Professors who work on social issues admit that academics can come off as high-handed and overly technical in their dealings with people

from the public sector. When they do make contact with the city — say, to gather data on students' grades, or patterns of robberies — their findings can easily vanish into the realm of expert academic journals, rather than being shared directly with the city officials who could use them.

This disconnect is by no means a one-way street. According to David Luberoff, the executive director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard and a close collaborator with Sampson and Winship on the Radcliffe project, discussions between academics and city officials often devolve into one side saying, "We're from Harvard, we know better than you," and the other responding, "We do this for a living; you're in the ivory tower and you don't understand it." Harvard economist Edward Glaeser, who is also with the Rappaport Institute and who has worked closely with local officials throughout Greater Boston to study zoning and housing issues, notes that there's often an instinct on the part of public agencies to guard their records closely because they don't want to make themselves vulnerable to an unflattering analysis.

Despite the hurdles, there have been success stories. Economists Thomas Kane from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Joshua Angrist from MIT led a team of researchers in an analysis of state education data and showed clearly that some charter schools in the Boston area were outperforming traditional public schools and pilot schools. Nancy Krieger, a Harvard public health professor, used city and state data to illustrate the connection between people's race and income and their health. Rutgers criminologist Anthony Braga has worked closely with the Boston Police Department to figure out where and why violence breaks out among Boston youth, helping the police figure out how best to deploy their limited resources.

According to Winship, a cousin of former Boston Globe editor Thomas Winship, one key reason there aren't more examples of such work in Boston is that there's no clear front door for researchers who want to work with the city's data. When a researcher does want to initiate some kind of partnership, the process of building trust with a city department has to begin from scratch every time.

The remedy he and Sampson hope to explore at the Radcliffe symposium involves creating an entity that would serve as a permanent liaison between academics and the city. In conversation, they've been calling it the Boston Data Warehouse, and the idea is that it'll be a shared resource for academics and policymakers that is stocked with troves of clean, ready-to-analyze city data as well as all the academic research that's been done on it. This central hub would make it easier for researchers to access public information, and help city officials who are working on a particular problem find out what Boston's leading minds have had to say about it.

Of course, any such effort would require the support of City Hall and Boston's various agencies. Broadly speaking, Mayor Thomas M. Menino's administration has been enthusiastic about making local government more transparent by opening up data on various city services to the public. The Police Department, for instance, has recently started posting detailed crime data on its website, complete with type of offense, where and when it took place, and what weapons were involved. And, over at the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics, an effort is underway to gather and share information on potholes, broken streetlights, graffiti, and other neighborhood complaints that Boston residents have submitted to the city with smartphones.

In an interview last week, Menino signaled support for the Radcliffe initiative. "Knowledge shouldn't just stay in the classroom," the mayor said. "We need to help [academics] put it into practice in our city.... That brain power we have here, no other city has it." But it's not clear that means the city would be open to the idea of a centralized "data warehouse" like the one Winship, Sampson, and their allies have in mind. On that issue, Menino's chief of staff, Mitch Weiss, said City Hall wasn't particularly interested in forming more bureaucratic organizations, and was more focused on building "personal relationships" with individual researchers.

For the time being, the organizers of the Radcliffe initiative say they're just trying to get people to start thinking about what a more formal partnership between academics and city officials might look like in Boston. Inevitably, the conversation will come down to data-sharing — how much of it the city is willing to do, and under what conditions. "There are certainly people within government who believe in this," said Glaeser, "and I think it's the job of academics to forcefully but gently continue asking for it."

FROM THE ACADEMIC perspective, this new effort has a another, perhaps more daunting, hurdle to overcome: capturing the attention of ambitious top-level scholars. The professors who populate the ranks of Boston's elite universities must "publish or perish," as the saying goes, and there's a fear, particularly among rising academics, that focusing their work on local problems — as opposed to working on a national, global, or theoretical level — will limit its importance in their field.

"We have a set of rules and regulations about how you rise up in academia," said Barry Bluestone, who is the director of the Dukakis Center at Northeastern, a "think and do tank" whose mission is to work with local leaders on crafting policy. "The kind of work that we do at the Center is high quality, but it's not the kind of work that goes into those [big] journals.... The work we've done on Greater Boston has a limited audience outside of Boston."

The argument that will be made at the Radcliffe symposium later this month is that it doesn't have to be that way — that working on Boston can yield intellectually pioneering findings in addition to making a difference locally. Krieger's research on the link between premature mortality and class in Boston has inspired public health work around the world. And the work by Kane and Angrist on public education in the Boston area has been cited frequently in the national debate over the effectiveness of charter schools.

Though they might be facing an uphill battle, the professors who have rallied around Sampson and Winship's call for more local research are hopeful that their argument will work on enough people to make a difference. "If you had 2 to 3 percent of the Harvard faculty being involved in Boston," said Winship, "that would be a sea change."