PITTSBURGH Quarterly
Winter 2010
A CITY-CENTRIC Provost

PATRICIA BESON BRINGS AN URBAN ECONOMIST'S EYE TO THE HELM OF PITT'S ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

To hear Patricia Beeson describe it, driving into Pittsburgh through the Fort Pitt tunnel is like stumbling upon some kind of hidden Brigadoon. When she arrived in the city in 1983 after driving across the country from her native Oregon, Beeson had Simon and Garfunkel's on-the-road anthem "America"—complete with reference to Pittsburgh—cued up for that first view of Downtown.

Now, 27 years later, the 55-year-old Squirrel Hill resident still challenges anyone who has entered via the tunnel "to say that's not the most spectacular city they've seen." And Beeson has traveled nearly as far within the Pittsburgh community as she did on that cross-country haul. Initially appointed as an urban economics professor at the University of Pittsburgh, she was promoted in August to senior vice chancellor and provost, the venerable institution's top academic administrator. In her new position, Beeson is at once one of the university's most powerful figures and one of the region's most powerful women.

Looking at downtown Pittsburgh from above, an urban economist sees what amounts to an island: an outcropping of tall buildings and concentrated economic activity surrounded by a sea of drifting dwellings and smaller economic nodes. It's called the monocentric city model, and when Beeson first arrived here, she had never seen this academic model so bluntly illustrated in real life.

Urban economists look at why cities come to exist and why they do so in certain structures such as Pittsburgh's island-like model. They also look at issues not unique to, but often apparent in, urban areas: poverty, transportation systems, housing markets and labor markets. And in Pittsburgh, Beeson found both an institution and a city perfect for her work.

"For one thing, there's a long tradition at the University of Pittsburgh of being one of the real leaders in urban and regional economics," says Beeson.

But more specifically, "the research I've done as a graduate student was on why some regions grow and others don't. Pittsburgh in the '80s was really a classic example of a city that was not growing, and a region that had been in decline for some time. So it was of interest. Some of the early papers I did were looking at the sources of decline, instead of sources of growth [a more common subject], for the region."

At the time of her appointment to Pitt's Economics Department in the 1980s, Beeson's research and lecturing seemed to have little to do with the administrative side of university life. But insight into why cities grow was something that both Pitt and Pittsburgh would come to need.

Beeson's research looked at theories that understood urban growth to be partially location and luck—being at the confluence of two major waterways, for example, provides the transport necessary for heavy industry such as steelmaking. But new theories emerging in the 1980s also saw means of growth that were generated from within the city itself.

"The city's location really fueled growth in a lot of ways—people come here and start making steel, and then the people in the steel mills need grocers, and you start getting a city like that. But another idea is that, once you get together all these people who are making steel, they actually learn to be better steelmakers, and that causes growth in and of itself. And the banking sector begins to be better geared than other places because they have this diverse economy. And maybe you're a steel technician and I work in aluminum, but we meet over a beer, and I get a great idea from you.

"Something about being close together causes information to flow better, technologies to improve, and that causes growth."

written by JUSTIN HOPPER photographs by JIM JUDKIS

These theories of self-generated economic growth were at the heart of Pittsburgh's new renaissance, designed to cope with >>
the loss of the steel industry and embrace educational and medical institutions such as Carnegie Mellon University, UPMC and Pitt.

"I did some work, looking just at what role colleges and universities have in this process of urban and regional growth," says Beeson. "We educate people. Their human capital increases, they're more productive, and firms might want to come here to take advantage of that educated workforce. Another is that we're just a big employer ourselves, so we employ more people, and more grocers need to be here for the people we employ, that sort of thing.

"But then there's the research we do—and the research, like the workforce, can make the whole region more employable. We develop new technologies, and that creates little companies and can help the big companies to advance. The culture of innovation that cities are the incubators of—that's accelerated by having universities, because they're incubators of innovation as well."

To research a university as an incubator of innovation is one thing. To help it become one is quite another. And at the beginning of the 21st century, Patricia Beeson had little intent of moving from one realm to the other.

Her research certainly had practical implications. In addition to publishing papers and teaching at Pitt, she was working for the Federal Reserve Bank in Cleveland, studying data on loaning practices in the greater region.

When the possibility of administrative work appeared for the first time, Beeson dismissed it.

"As I reflect back on that, how did it happen?" she asks with a laugh. Dean of Arts and Sciences N. John Cooper called and said he'd like to discuss the possibility of her becoming the associate dean for undergraduate studies. Beeson and her husband, fellow Pitt economic historian Werner Troesken, discussed and quickly dismissed the opportunity. Beeson was happy and successful as an academic, rising in her field, and, with a three-year-old son, there seemed to be no reason to change a career and home life that was working nicely.

She met with Cooper with every intention of turning the position down, "but he and I really connected on a vision of what we thought a great university is and what undergraduate studies could contribute to that."

One aspect of that vision is the importance of bringing in research faculty, such as Beeson herself, to contribute to the momentum of the institution. It's a notion, perhaps, that clicked with Beeson's personal research on "incubators of innovation." She accepted the job, and three years later found herself vice provost of graduate studies, administering all of the university's graduate programs. When the vice provost of undergraduate studies departed, her job expanded. And when Provost James V. Maher retired this year, Beeson was Chancellor Mark Nordenberg's recommendation for the institution's top academic administrator.

This past summer, after Pitt's board of trustees elected her to that position, Beeson became Pitt's first female provost. As chief academic officer for the university and its regional campuses, she has dozens of directors, deans and campus presidents reporting directly to her. But her operations today are based on the same vision she and her colleagues shared a decade ago.

"It means having great undergraduate programs," says Beeson, "and strong research across a broad scope of disciplines. It means strengthening our international component—something that's important to undergraduate, graduate, and research programs."

A great university has numerous measures of success. What kinds of academic students are choosing Pitt for college? Where are graduates working or attending graduate school? What impact are the faculty's publications having on their academic field? Beeson, however, understands that there are other factors in institutional success, some of which can't be judged in the classroom.

"There's a real, conscious recognition that the university's success depends on the city, and vice-versa. That we're all in this together. And one of the best things that we did, probably 15 years ago, was recognize and embrace the University of Pittsburgh as an urban campus. 'The city is our campus' is one of our themes, that part of students' experience is being part of the city. It's beyond just wanting Pittsburgh to be a livable city because we're residents of it. We think we have something to offer that most other universities can't—an education that really is enriched by being in an urban area."

Beeson's vision includes continuing projects such as the website CoolPgh.pitt.edu and successful efforts to collaborate with the other Oakland institutions—CMU, for example—to improve the vitality of urban campus life as well as furthering the "incubator of innovation" model. These projects have helped make the University of Pittsburgh one of the top two campuses in "Quality of Life" and "Happiest Students" in this fall's Princeton Review school rankings.

Challenges, however, lie on the horizon. State budget cuts could threaten Pitt's mission to remain affordable to in-state students. Arguably more challenging is Beeson's task as the voice of academia at the university. At a time when academic research is becoming politicized, Beeson must position the university publicly on academic issues.

"Nationally there's a challenge to all of us in higher education to help people understand what we do at public research institutions and what the value of it is. If we're not going to carry that message forward, we're all lost—not just the universities."

Beeson's research and administrative work likely will combine to make her a particularly effective voice for Pitt. If anyone can inject research and real-world impact into the public dialogue, it's the urban economics professor turned university provost.

Justin Hopper, an award-winning journalist and author, has written about the arts and community in Pittsburgh for over a decade.
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TAKING THE LEAD
Now at the helm of the University of Pittsburgh's academic programs, Provost Patricia Breeze has become one of the region's most influential women.