Organizing Partnerships for Sustainable Community Economic Development: Lessons Learned from the University of Illinois–Chicago Neighborhoods Initiative

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Abstract

Urban universities are often characterized as economic engines—directly and indirectly serving the needs of the communities within which they are situated. However, the relationship between urban universities and their neighbors is often strained. Reflecting on the University of Illinois at Chicago's Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI) and its historical work in Chicago's Pilsen and West Side communities, this article outlines how UICNI works with neighborhood groups by incorporating established principles of community organizing and building trust through innovative partnerships and projects that are mutually beneficial. The design of individual projects as well as the development of different techniques to encourage community involvement in planning is central to UICNI's success. It is proposed that UICNI partnerships are beneficial to the university community (faculty, scholars, and research assistants) as well as for the external community.

Introduction

Urban universities are often characterized as economic engines, directly and indirectly serving the needs of the communities where they are located. University development activities have contributed significantly to the economy of many low-income communities throughout the United States. Urban universities and the student populations they serve bring new resources into neighborhoods immediately surrounding the university.

Near any urban university, there is a plethora of small business enterprises ranging from fast food franchises to dry-cleaning establishments that cater to the needs of the university community. Likewise, the demand for affordable and accessible student housing creates and sustains a thriving rental market and spurs new residential development. In its relationship with its neighbors, however, the urban university is more often far from the peaceful refuge envisioned by the original architect of the modern research university

(Perry, forthcoming). While town-gown tensions exist in most university-community interactions, neighborhoods, particularly in low-income communities and in communities of color, are more likely to view the university as a burden and a threat than as a benevolent resource.

One of the most common sources of conflict between universities and the community relates to campus expansion. As universities grow and expand, they often focus on their own development agenda, seeking to retain control of the process and schedule of development. University real estate development often places the university at odds with the surrounding community *(Mayfield, Hellwig, and Banks 1998)*. However, university development is not self-contained *(Shils 1969)*. Action and decisions made by the university affect the university campus, as well as the neighboring community. Community concerns may be cast aside unanswered or ignored as the university moves forward with the goals of its development work. Although community members and researchers may sometimes believe that university activities can take place as wholly self-contained initiatives, Perry and Wiewel argue that such assumptions are unrealistic and wrong—that university activities must involve reflection, contemplation, and engagement of scholars with the community *(forthcoming)*.

Although universities with an expansionist agenda often feel that their development activities "trickle down" to benefit the community; the community often views such development activities with suspicion. Luther, a newsstand attendant in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, describes the tension felt between the University of Chicago and community residents in Mitchell Duneier's 1992 ethnography, *Slim's Table*.

> Those people sit in those Ivory Towers like Levi and Klienbard [a university vice president]. They think we don't know. I read you, Klienbard. I read you in the University of Chicago papers. I look at that crime map they throw up there. [He is chuckling.] You think people aren't observing. You think that people don't know what is going on. *(Ozzie, as quoted, 78)*

These quotes communicate the discontent of people who live around the university. They raise a range of issues related to race and class bias, and police harassment. In general, however, most community residents react strongly to patronizing attitudes of university representatives. The consequences of university activities

may range from subtle rumblings about the university's presence, as seen in *Slim's Table*, to strong oppositions demonstrated by picketing and community attempts to thwart development efforts.

Similar tensions between university and community can be experienced in other areas—hiring and purchasing, as well as in the development of community capacity. In this area, the university's neighbors often feel that the university is simply not doing enough and is not a "good neighbor." However, there is great potential for the university to incorporate a community perspective in its day-to-day work. If such a perspective is institutionalized, it can benefit the university's own development as well as the community at large *(Marcuse, forthcoming)*. By choosing to actively engage with the community, universities can make real and sustainable contributions to the development of community capacity.

> *"[U]niversity activities must involve reflection, contemplation, and engagement of scholars with the community."*

This article highlights the University of Illinois at Chicago's Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI), an innovative university-community program. Drawing on Chicago's rich history of community organizing, UICNI approaches its work with communities as an opportunity to build partnerships. UICNI's work with neighborhood groups incorporates established principles of community organizing and relationship building; UICNI creates innovative partnerships and projects that are beneficial for the university community (faculty, scholars, and research assistants) as well as for the external community. It is proposed that the design of individual projects, as well as the development of different techniques to encourage community involvement in planning, is central to UICNI's success.

Chicago Neighborhoods, Settlement Houses, and Community Organizing

Chicago is unique in its history of social movements and community organizing. As the home of the twentieth-century settlement house movement led by social worker and activist Jane Addams, Chicago has a long tradition of organizing for social, economic, and political change. The Hull House mission was initiated in the late nineteenth century to bring together people in the

surrounding community, mostly recent immigrants from Italy, Ireland, Germany, Greece, Russia, and Poland, to join the social clubs and educational activities of the organization. Hull House became a community hub, providing kindergarten and day care for children of working mothers, employment information, an art gallery, libraries, and English and citizenship classes, as well as theater, music, and art classes *(Brown 2001)*. Two of the original Hull House buildings are located on the UIC campus and serve as a testament to Addams's life and work.

Since the Hull House movement, Chicago has continued to be a leader in the field of community organizing and social action. Organizing institutions that are rooted in the traditions of the labor, civil rights, and women's movements—the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), United Power for Action and Justice, the Gamaliel Foundation, the National Training and Information Center, the Midwest Academy, and more— all have their roots in Chicago. Chicago is characterized by neighborhood-based identities such as those institutionalized by Hull House, and by the revolutionary organizing that Saul Alinsky and the IAF led in the stockyard neighborhoods of Chicago over sixty years ago. Today Chicago has an abundance of community-based organizations that address diverse issues seeking to create socioeconomic and political transformation that benefits all citizens.

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UICNI has pioneered a model in Chicago that is based on the previous work of UIC's Center on Urban Economic Development (CUED). CUED, one of seven affiliated research centers housed within the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs, was created in 1978 to provide technical assistance and support community economic development through applied research. The focus of CUED's research is community driven, based on the needs expressed by community-based organizations to help them institute policies that benefit their communities. In 1993, when Wim Wiewel, executive director of CUED, became the director of the UIC Great Cities Institute, which houses UICNI, this successful organizing model gradually established itself as the standard for all UICNI projects.

The UICNI Model

The UICNI model creates a place where community organizations and university faculty can come together to design and implement projects that are of direct benefit to the community and can benefit from faculty expertise. Projects typically include technical assistance in program development and implementation, applied research, and formal evaluations of ongoing community programs. UICNI is multidisciplinary, embodying a comprehensive approach to community development. Specifically, the UICNI model

1. builds partnerships with UIC units, faculty, and graduate students to carry out projects;
2. brings UICNI staff together with university faculty and community representatives to design and develop projects that are meaningful to both parties;
3. utilizes state funding to fund staff and overhead costs;
4. seeds projects and turns them over to university and community partners to be sustained;
5. combines resources of the numerous units and colleges (housing and economic development, education, transportation, and health);
6. supports demand-driven projects.

UICNI has created two advisory boards (collectively the Partners Council), one for its Community Health Division and one to advise on community and economic development programs. For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the community and economic development programs of UICNI. Through the Partners Council, university and community representatives provide advice, identify funding streams, and help shape UICNI's agenda. The Partners Council also provides a practical way to disseminate information about the university's research initiatives to a wide audience and is a forum for community organizations to air concerns and grievances about university activities in the community before differences of opinion become insurmountable obstacles to communication *(UICNI 1997)*.

Community participation and extensive consultation helped shape UICNI's mission, program, and organizational structure. UICNI has a small staff that operates in a multidisciplinary way at a campuswide level, working to create new partnerships between community organizations and UIC faculty, units, and colleges. UICNI staff does not provide research or technical

assistance or conduct evaluations, but it is actively involved in advising faculty and representatives of community organizations in the design and development of projects and in implementation.

UICNI works with established research centers on campus such as CUED and the Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement (Voorhees). These centers provide technical assi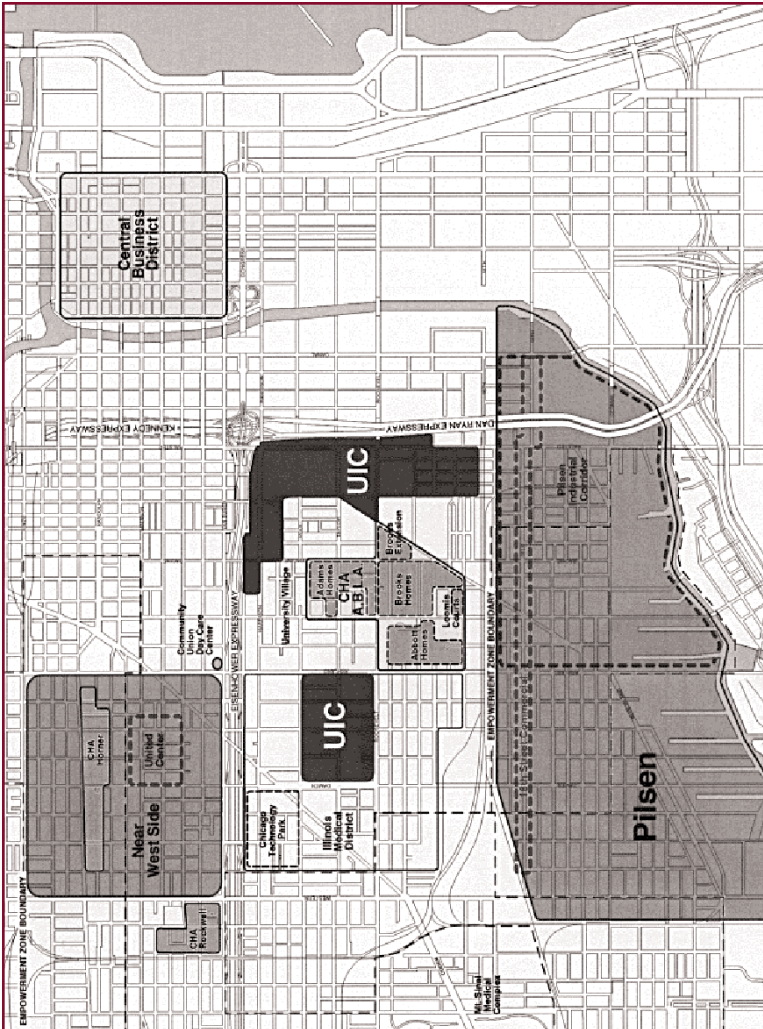stance and conduct research for the community partners. Since UICNI takes an incremental approach to its partnerships, it is flexible in its project capacity, depending on the availability of partners to do the work *(Wiewel and Lieber 1998)*. Partnerships that prove successful continue after the initial project between the UIC faculty and community partners is completed. UICNI plays the key role of seeding projects. Therefore, UICNI's capacity for programs is much larger than is indicated by the size of its staff: two full-time academic professionals and two or three part-time graduate students.

> *". . . UICNI's mission is to improve and enhance the quality of life primarily in Pilsen and the Near West Side."*

Social Context of UICNI's Community Outreach Program

The UIC Great Cities Institute (GCI), where the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative is housed, is a practical example of UIC's commitment to metropolitan communities. Great Cities fulfills its mission through civic engagement. Creating, disseminating, and applying interdisciplinary knowledge in community development, metropolitan sustainability, workforce development, and professional education, GCI works to improve the quality of life in metropolitan Chicago and other urban areas.

Following the Great Cities commitment, UICNI's mission is to improve and enhance the quality of life primarily in Pilsen and the Near West Side. In addition to being the university's immediate neighbors, these communities exemplify the promise and the pains associated with Chicago's dramatic transformation. Chicago has moved from being the industrial, financial, and transportation hub of the Midwest to a financial, commodities exchange, service, and high-tech center *(Sassen 2004)*. The new service-oriented economy calls for a new type of workforce: high-paid knowledge workers and low-paid service workers. The predominantly blue-collar and low-income Chicago neighborhoods that surround the

Map 1: UIC, Pilsen, and Chicago's Near West Side

central business district are struggling to cope with this transformation. This is especially true of the Near West Side and Pilsen (map 1).

While the demographics and economies of these two communities are similar in many ways, there are also significant differences. In table 1, some of the key descriptors of the Near West Side, Pilsen (i.e., Lower West Side), and the City of Chicago are detailed. The Pilsen neighborhood is part of the "Lower West Side" in the Chicago Community Area designation in the U.S. Census.

**Table 1. Selected characteristics of Pilsen (Lower West Side),
the Near West Side, and City of Chicago**

	Pilsen (Lower West Side)	Near West Side	City of Chicago
Median Age (years)	26.0	28.0	31.5
% over 18 yrs.	66.9	76.1	73.8
Race			
% White	39.2	29.1	42.0
% Black/African American	2.2	53.2	36.8
% Other races	58.6	17.7	21.2
Ethnicity			
% Hispanic/Latino	88.9	9.5	26.0
% Not Hispanic/Latino	11.1	90.5	74.0
Total Number of Housing Units	14,410	21,408	1,152,868
% Occupied	88.8	84.9	92.1
Economic Indicators, Population 16 years and over			
% Unemployed	5.5	11.4	6.2
Median Household Income	$28,724	$34,538	$38,625
% Families in Poverty	24.6	30.1	16.6
% Individuals in Poverty	27.0	37.5	19.6

Source: (Metro Chicago Facts On-Line, 2004)

The Near West Side is predominantly African American and
has a greater percentage of families and individuals in poverty
than the Lower West Side (Pilsen). In addition, gentrification has
led to an increase in commercial activity, and high-end residen-
tial development has increased in the Near West Side. Pilsen, in
comparison, is mainly Latino working poor, but it has thriving
commercial corridors. Both communities are experiencing a
physical transformation in the midst of a national crisis related to
the undersupply of affordable housing. For the Near West Side,
the dominant force is public housing transformation and the rede-
velopment of these communities into mixed-income and possibly
mixed-race private-market developments. Pilsen is also experi-
encing increased gentrification as the community is affected by

market forces and their attendant consequences, including displacement, rezoned neighborhoods, and loss of housing that is affordable to low- and moderate-income families.

In the early 1990s, local institutions and organizations in these communities were fighting for their survival in the midst of this transformation. They did not have time to research, reflect, and adjust to these changes. They were reacting as best they could to the changing environment and pressures from funders, government, residents, their constituencies, and developers. It is within this context that the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative began its community outreach work. Since 1994, UICNI has functioned as a university partner, an information clearinghouse, and a provider of technical assistance and research, responding to critical community needs.

Because of UIC's central location in one of the largest urban areas in the country, it has attracted faculty that want to engage with the community. The UICNI partnership model relies on developing deep relationships between UICNI staff and faculty and individuals in community-based organizations and institutions *(Wiewel and Guerrero 1997)*. The visible, active presence of community residents in UIC staff positions has provided UIC with a perspective and sensitivity to com-

> *"The visible, active presence of community residents in UIC staff positions has provided UIC with a perspective and sensitivity to community concerns."*

munity concerns. The presence of UIC alumni in many of the community organizations and institutions has fostered these relationships. These alumni know the complexity of a large public institution like UIC and have deep relationships with the staff and faculty in the various UIC colleges and units, as many of them are former graduate student employees. Therefore, when UICNI engages in partnerships, it is viewed as a long-term relationship. Many UICNI, Voorhees, and CUED staff have community organizing backgrounds and utilize traditional organizing techniques like relationship building through one-on-one meetings, developing trust and mutual respect, and the sharing of common values based on a social justice perspective. The partnerships that UICNI is involved with are with the organizations and institutions that anchor the community, including neighborhood schools, libraries, community development corporations, economic development and workforce centers, and faith-based institutions.

Table 2. Economic and Community Development Projects

Program	Objective	Funder/ Year
UIC Hiring and Purchasing Community Linkage Program	Explore how job, procurement, and contract opportunities at UIC can be better linked to workers and businesses in target area. Increase contracts with businesses in target communities.	HUD COPC 1994-1996
Industrial and Commercial Design Workshop	Designs and plans to make physical improvements in Pilsen industrial and commercial areas ready for implementation & identify sources of financing to implement physical improvements.	HUD COPC 1994-1996
Great Cities/Great Careers	Develop a career training program for neighborhood youth, including work-study and jobs-skills training.	HUD JCD 1996-2001
Affordable Housing Fund	Provides resources for structural repairs for low-income residents in Pilsen & Near West Side.	HUD JCD 1996-2001
CDC Urban Fellow Program	Program for executive directors & board presidents to share experiences, broaden their vision, network, & develop new programs & policies.	HUD JCD 1996-2001
CitiLab	A studio project that provides designs & feasibility studies for community organizations in four communities.	HUD JCD 1996-2001
Community Development Curriculum	Series of classes & studios where students learn development finance & then apply what they learn through feasibility studies & development projects.	HUD JCD 1996-2001
Near West Side & Pilsen Commercial Development	To develop development project that will enhance and revitalize the Madison Street Corridor on the Near West Side & the Pilsen commercial area.	HUD JCD 1996-2001
West Side Consortium Day Care	To train qualified low-income residents to become home-based child care business operators and owners.	HUD JCD 1996-2001
Community Technology Centers	To buy computers and software and provide tech support and software classes in five community technology centers.	Illinois DCEO* 2002-present

Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity

Examples of Partnerships

Shortly after UICNI was founded, it received a Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) grant from the HUD Office of University Partnerships (OUP) and began working with numerous partners on economic, commercial, and community development on the Near West Side and Pilsen communities. In 1996, UICNI received a Joint Community Development (JCD) grant. The JCD grant allowed UICNI to provide solid funding toward structural repairs for residents on fixed incomes and development dollars toward building or buying buildings for commercial development. For an overview of the most important economic development projects, see table 2.

There are several notable projects in table 2. The COPC-funded Hiring and Purchasing project sought to take advantage of UIC as a traditional economic engine to provide jobs for neighborhood residents and increase contracts with neighborhood businesses. Unfortunately, budget cutbacks at UIC and its affiliated hospital did not allow for total project success. However, this project did merit the attention of the Chancellor's Committee on External Affairs. As we write this article, UIC has developed the Lerner Program, which will circumvent the civil service process and employ local residents. UICNI continues to facilitate the partnership by introducing the staff responsible for this program to the community partners.

UICNI also worked with the UIC Department of Purchasing and several community partners in the adjacent neighborhoods over a two-year period to increase the number of contracts between local businesses and the university. Even though the Department of Purchasing conducted several workshops through UICNI community partners, the number of contracts procured by community businesses was minimal. There were several reasons for this. Most small businesses do not have the time or capacity to fill out the paperwork required to obtain state funds, and their cash flow limitations do not allow them to wait ninety days before being reimbursed by the university. In addition, the community partners did not have the capacity to organize the merchants, conduct ongoing technical assistance, and do the one-on-one organizing that a project like this requires.

The HUD/OUP Joint Community Development grant provided the Near West Side Community Development Corporation (NWSCDC) predevelopment funds to assist in the development of a commercial development project for the area. As a result,

NWSCDC was able to attract Walgreens as an anchor of a new commercial strip that had been vacant for thirty years, having lost almost all of its retail shopping during the 1968 riots. There is space for at least three small local retailers.

In Pilsen, UICNI partnered with the Eighteenth Street Development Corporation (ESDC) to promote further development of the 18th Street retail strip. UIC faculty conducted numerous structural reviews and preliminary cost estimates of local properties identified by ESDC and a market analysis of a high-end restaurant. Unfortunately, this project was unsuccessful due to board and staff attrition, lack of capacity, and change of strategic direction on the part of the board and staff at ESDC. They were never able to develop a project within the guidelines and timeline of the grant. Project funds are being returned to HUD.

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The Westside Consortium Day Care project initially planned to buy a building to establish a day care training institute. After UICNI tried unsuccessfully to buy a building, the partnership decided to approach a local community college and the City of Chicago Depart-ment of Human Services to establish a training institute at the community college and use the development dollars to pay for project expenses. This proved highly successful and highlighted the need for flexibility in order to complete project goals.

The UICNI approach to working with community technology centers (CTCs) has followed the philosophy of seeding projects by partnering with community organizations and institutions. When UICNI was considering applying for a state-funded Eliminating the Digital Divide grant, UICNI staff discussed the possibility of developing a CTC in the community. After much discussion, UICNI staff decided to partner with existing CTCs instead. This proved highly successful because UICNI does not have to sustain the CTCs once the funding has ended. UICNI partners with existing CTCs and leverages funding to provide much-needed technical skills for the CTCs. As a result of this strategy, UICNI works with a network of six CTCs and is

expanding at the rate of two a year. However, UICNI does not have to worry about sustainability of the CTCs since they are independent of UICNI.

Conclusion

The push to develop university-community partnerships comes from different sources. Some drivers are ideological and others pragmatic. At UIC, the university administration has made a serious and sustained commitment to engaged scholarship through its research centers and the Great Cities commitment. UICNI's work helps institutionalize and formalize the university's community outreach efforts. At the same time, UICNI does not rely solely on community partnerships or traditional methods of community outreach such as developing service-learning programs or focusing exclusively on service delivery to the community.

UICNI's community partnership model recognizes that university faculty and students and community residents collaborate on projects for different reasons. From a community's perspective, the focus of the partnership is often concerned with solving a particular community problem. However, from an academic (faculty or student) perspective, the specific project is often a piece of a larger intellectual inquiry. In working on a community partnership project, faculty or students may develop their research agenda, define a line of inquiry, and unearth a new way of understanding or conceptualizing a particular problem. Within UICNI's partnership model, the academic community and the external community can work collaboratively, and each partner can reap the benefits of the collaboration.

The UICNI model works with communities to participate as true collaborators. By working directly with community organizations, UICNI avoids building relationships with individuals who may not represent the community's issues appropriately. Negotiations and agreements are made with partner organizations, and organizational relationships are developed and sustained over time. UICNI assists both university faculty and representatives of community groups by providing mediators. The UICNI Partners Council provides the formal structure to offer advice to the university and to help manage information sharing and community participation.

UICNI has learned several important lessons through this unique approach to community-university partnerships.

1. In order to have successful long-term projects, relationships must be established at various levels of the participating partners. Because staff attrition cannot be prevented, relationships should be deep and wide.

2. Brokering partnerships and seeding projects allows a small staff to involve a large number of faculty and academic professionals with numerous community partners. In addition, this model provides an infrastructure to sustain long-term projects.

3. Long-term projects need flexibility in program implementation so that objectives can be adjusted as circumstances change. This necessitates strong relationships between university staff, funders, and community partners.

4. Trust is the key ingredient to successful partnerships. However, trust is not built overnight and takes time and hard work. Projects can be done without it, but such undertakings are difficult, slow, challenging, and very frustrating.

One of the major outcomes of UICNI's work over the past decade is the development of a repository of knowledge concerning the dynamic nature of social transformation in two Chicago neighborhoods, Pilsen and the Near West Side. This knowledge is disseminated through publications and research reports that are accessible to UICNI's community partners. In the final analysis, UICNI's work reinforces the university's and Great Cities' commitment that the future of UIC and the future of Pilsen and the Near West Side are intrinsically linked. In addition, UICNI activities and their outcomes demonstrate that it is possible to create genuine collaborations and sustainable partnerships between universities and communities based on trust, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to a better future for all community and university residents.

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