

Economic Engine

University of Memphis Works with Nearby Neighborhoods on Revitalization

By Kathy Moore Cowan

Not too long ago, some colleges and universities had reputations of being bad neighbors, venturing into the neighborhoods only to gobble up available property for campus expansions. But times change, and across the country, academic institutions have redefined their relationships with surrounding communities, becoming valuable assets to community and economic development.

Since 1995, the number of college and university presidents who are members of Campus Compact, a national coalition seeking to advance civic engagement, has grown from 400 to 1,100, representing a quarter of all American higher education institutions. This past spring, 27 Tennessee college and university presidents formed the Tennessee Campus Compact, becoming the 33rd state Campus Compact.

It is no surprise that University of Memphis President Shirley Raines serves on the executive board of the Tennessee Campus Compact. Since her tenure at the University of Memphis, the university has formed partnerships with neighborhood and business groups and embarked on a strategy to engage the community in a new and refreshing way. The university's efforts recently were recognized by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, receiving the foundation's highest classification for community engagement.



Members of the University Neighborhoods Development Corp. (UNDC) discuss construction on Highland Avenue in Memphis, Tenn. Shown are, from left: Ann Coulter; Steve Barlow, UNDC executive director; Charles Lee; and Peter Moon. UNDC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the University District.

Most of the university's work in communities falls under its "Engaged Scholarship" initiative, an ongoing effort to link faculty members and students with urban, regional, state, national and global communities. The goal is to provide real-world applications in the urban environment, integrating academic, economic development and community-building efforts with a focus on interdisciplinary applied research.

Many of the university's Engaged Scholarship efforts have been in surrounding neighborhoods, known collectively as the University District. For example, students in the graduate program in city and regional planning partnered with neighborhood organizations, the City of Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development (HCD) and the Memphis and Shelby County Office of Planning and Development to prepare a comprehensive plan to guide the growth of the University District.

In another example, university students worked with the Mason YMCA to give the 1950s -building a much

needed face-lift. Independent graduate student research helped determine what additional activities and facilities members wanted. Architectural students prepared the designs for the revamped facility. Public relations students developed marketing materials for a \$12 million fund-raising campaign.

Yet another example is the University District Initiative, a partnership formed to address social, urban design and safety issues in the area. The partnership includes faculty and students from every college, senior staff from the university administration, city planners, developers, business owners, neighborhood groups and local government representatives from the city of Memphis and Shelby County.

Two of the more ambitious efforts the university has undertaken are the University Neighborhoods Development Corp. and the Center for Community Building and Neighborhood Action.

University Neighborhoods Development Corp.

In 2003, the University of Memphis partnered with neighborhood leadership to create the University Neighborhoods Development Corp. (UNDC), a 501(c)3 nonprofit, neighborhood-based corporation. An independent entity, the UNDC's role is to redevelop and promote the University District as a great place to live, learn and do business. The UNDC would accomplish this by reinforcing existing strengths, stimulating new public and private investment, and bringing new tools for development to the market.

One of the first tasks was to develop a community and economic development strategy, closely coordinated with community and university leadership. In 2006, the UNDC hired a local architectural and planning firm to develop a planned growth strategy. In the summer of 2007, Steve Barlow became the UNDC's first executive director and was charged with overseeing the strategy, now called the Highland Street Master Plan.

In the past year, the UNDC, in collaboration with the University of Memphis, helped a local developer obtain a tax increment finance (TIF) district designation, worth in excess of \$10 million. Without the TIF, the developer said, he could not have completed a planned \$65-million, mixed-use project in the University District.

Other accomplishments include development of a neighborhood-based comprehensive plan, a public art project and a series of neighborhood beautification efforts. Plans are under way to develop a public-private land acquisition fund and to implement a National Trust for Historic Preservation Main Street Program.

The university is a much valued resource to the UNDC, providing significant technical resources. Barlow estimates the dollar value of services provided by the university in the past year alone at approximately \$200,000.

Center for Community Building and Neighborhood Action

Not all of the university's Engaged Scholarship efforts are focused on the University District. Many neighborhoods have benefited from the work of the Center for Community Building and Neighborhood Action (CBANA). CBANA links university research with community action. A part of the School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy, CBANA was created in 2000 as an outgrowth of individual projects university professors and staff were working on in housing, neighborhoods and workforce development.

"CBANA is a critical resource and partner to Memphis CDCs," says Emily Trenholm, executive director of the Community Development Council of Greater Memphis (CDCouncil), a trade organization for CDCs. "Its staff works with organizations on a variety of projects, such as asset mapping, problem property surveys, and analyses of neighborhood demographics and real estate market indicators." CBANA's efforts help CDCs develop data-driven strategies and interventions for change.

Phyllis Betts, associate professor, School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy and founder of CBANA, serves as its director. She is the only University of Memphis employee assigned to CBANA. Salaries for all other staff

persons are funded through grants. In addition to the University of Memphis, HCD is a major supporter of CBANA.

The following are some of the programs CBANA offers.

Neighborhood-by-Neighbor

In March 2008, CBANA, along with HCD, implemented the Neighborhood-by-Neighbor program, the first citywide problem property audit initiated in Memphis. The goal of the program is to document blight and vacancy in the housing market through an organized inventory of all properties in violation of the city's Anti-Blight Housing Code.

Data collection and volunteer recruitment is coordinated by CBANA and the Problem Properties Collaborative, a grassroots organization of community-based associations.

"The neighbors' knowledge of the properties, neighborhoods and neighborhood resources is important," says Tk Buchanan, program coordinator. "Their participation is crucial to our success."

CBANA staff train volunteers on common housing code violations and the use of portable tablet PCs with built-in cameras running GIS software.

Volunteer teams drive down each street and conduct a "windshield survey" of their neighborhoods, documenting blighted properties. A preloaded neighborhood map with satellite photos allows volunteers to document where the troubled structures are and to take a picture.

CBANA analyzes and distributes the data to participating organizations, including a copy of the database and a comprehensive map of rehabilitation opportunities in the neighborhood. CBANA also provides the neighborhood with technical support in achieving code compliance through grant applications, redevelopment planning, beautification project planning, environmental court and other creative ways.

Community-Based Research

For cash-strapped nonprofits, money for research is an item that often gets cut from the budget, no matter how tremendous the need. Steve Lockwood, executive director of Frayser Community Development Corp. (CDC), says, "The data generated at CBANA, particularly that involving foreclosures and housing conditions, has been invaluable in crafting our strategies to counter epidemic foreclosure rates in the community."

Sutton Mora Hayes also has used CBANA research and resources in her work as executive director of the Cooper Young Development Corp. (CYDC). "They have helped me analyze foreclosure rates, code enforcement problems, and other social issues that have directly impacted our programming."

Some of the signature community-based research programs of CBANA include community/neighborhood indicators, neighborhood inventory, asset mapping, community profiles and comprehensive community initiatives.

Student Internships

CBANA coordinates internships for graduate and undergraduate students who are interested in community development. Students are placed for the academic year with nonprofit CDCs, where they provide technical and research assistance, 20 hours a week. In return, interns receive community development experience, a monthly stipend, course credit and a tuition fee waiver. In addition to the University of Memphis, the program is supported by HCD through use of Community Development Block Grant funds.

Curtis Thomas, deputy executive director for The Works, a nonprofit community development corporation, was a CBANA intern with the CDCouncil. He researched and mapped patterns of government infrastructure spending for the CDCouncil's Coalition for Livable Communities, a group of community associations seeking to create healthy communities in the Memphis region.

Reflecting on his experience, Thomas says, "I was exposed to a range of organizations and programs in the Memphis area, which helped me to develop a better understanding of the state of our community and what efforts currently exist. These experiences were instrumental in shaping my career path and have been an invaluable resource in my role as deputy executive director for The Works."

Hayes remembers her days as a CBANA intern with New Pathways. "I received first-hand knowledge and hands-on experience while connecting with key leaders in the community development industry in Memphis. It was, in part, due to those connections that I was hired as the executive director of CYDC after I graduated."

Trenholm says interns have performed a variety of assignments for Memphis CDCs, from writing policy manuals and marketing plans to helping organize and engage neighborhood residents.

And Lockwood says Frayser CDC has been fortunate to have had CBANA interns for the last six years. They have been critical in helping the CDC implement its work plan, he says. After receiving her undergraduate degree in August of this year, Frayser CDC's CBANA intern immediately began working full time with them as a homeownership and foreclosure counselor.

For more information:

Campus Compact

www.compact.org

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications

University of Memphis Engaged Scholarship

<http://cas.memphis.edu/suapp/>

University Neighborhood District Corp.

<http://cas.memphis.edu/community/undc.htm>

University of Memphis Center for Community Building and Neighborhood Action

<http://cbana.memphis.edu>

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