

Center for Neighborhood Affairs

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Harris-Stowe State University (HSSU) is a public institution in the state of Missouri. It is located in Midtown St. Louis and has approximately 1,500 students. The primary mission of HSSU is to prepare students for careers that address the challenges of underserved populations throughout the metropolitan St. Louis area. HSSU created the Center for Neighborhood Affairs (CNA) in 2000 to provide technical support to community-based organizations throughout the St. Louis region. Faculty and students in the HSSU Urban Affairs program, as well as associated practitioners, provide assistance in neighborhood and strategic planning, grant writing, program design/evaluation, and entrepreneurial support. Using a service-learning approach, faculty tie community projects to student learning outcomes that meet the unfulfilled needs of struggling St. Louis neighborhoods. As the only historically black college or university (HBCU) in the St. Louis region, the faculty, staff, and students of HSSU feel that the CNA has a particular imperative to address the challenges of minority communities in St. Louis.

History of CNA

Faculty in the Department of Urban Specializations (now the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences) formed CNA in the fall of 1999. The original intent of the department was to take advantage of the expertise of the faculty in addressing the problems of distressed communities in the area. The underlying concept of the program was to pull together individual faculty members with their respective skills in Urban Planning, Criminal Justice, and the Social Sciences to work together as a consulting team in the communities surrounding the university. While HSSU faculty generally have 4/4 course loads, the assumption was that the work of the Center could be financed through governmental and foundation funding to provide release time for work on Center projects.

Initial Projects

The work of the Center for Neighborhood Affairs began with various grants and contracts throughout the St. Louis area which focused on both redevelopment and services. The initial projects were as follows:

HBCU/HUD Grant

The first substantial project that CNA undertook was the creation of a university-community partnership with the Lucas Heights neighborhood, a community adjacent to HSSU. The partnership was supported by a \$224,000 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development's HBCU program received in 2001 to develop a neighborhood strategic plan, a pre-teen entrepreneurship program, and a Forgivable Loan program for low-income neighborhood home owners.

HOPE VI Evaluation

In 2003, CNA executed a contract with the St. Louis Housing Authority for a \$100,000 grant to perform an evaluation of the social services component of the Blumeyer Hope VI Redevelopment Project located one mile north of HSSU. CNA's task was to monitor 1) the impact of the project on the surrounding neighborhood, 2) the effectiveness of the social programs, and 3) where public housing residents who were not relocated in the new community found housing.

Jefferson County CHDO

Harris-Stowe faculty associated with CNA received a contract in 2008 from HUD to facilitate the formation of a Community Housing Development Organization (CHDO) in Jefferson County, the county immediately south of St. Louis County. In 2010, university faculty from the Social and Behavioral Sciences Department and from the Anheuser-Busch School of Business worked with Jefferson County nonprofit organizations to create that CHDO.

JCORP Gang Abatement Program + Jamison Memorial After-School Program

Two other early CNA projects involved juvenile gang abatement and after-school programming. CNA provided grant writing assistance to JCORP, a program for North City youth that was meant to take them out of gangs. CNA also evaluated the Jamison Memorial's program, school and summer programs for academically at-risk students that are structured after the "Freedom School" model.

A New Direction: The Harris-Stowe Way—Doing More with Less

In the fall of 2011, the Center of Neighborhood Affairs decided to proceed in several new directions. The primary motivation for this shift was the increasing difficulty in securing funds, as well as a desire to be more effective in the community. While CNA had been very successful initially in obtaining grants and contracts, shrinking federal urban programs and the Great Recession made finding funding more difficult. Center staff found themselves spending increasing time marketing and finding meaningful projects.

The Center decided to move toward becoming internally self-sufficient. Instead of trying to constantly work to buy-out their time, Center faculty members have made the conscious decision to use their course work and their students as the primary instrument of delivering services to the community. The intent of this decision was to free the Center from the constraint of always look-

ing for money, and also make it possible for the Center to have Urban Affairs students work on more valuable projects.

In effect, the Center made a total commitment to the idea of service-learning. The Center had involved the students in community projects since its inception; however, these activities tended to be mostly in the form of community service or volunteer work. Starting in the fall of 2011, the faculty began shaping their syllabi and student learning outcomes around community-based projects. The goal was to change the attitudes that students had regarding community work, rather than simply provide hands-on experience. The objective was to impress upon the students that the projects were more than just academic exercises. They were real projects with real outcomes and they needed to be treated as such.

Service-Learning

For faculty associated with the Center for Neighborhood Affairs, service-learning has a very specific meaning that makes it distinct from community service. Community service is any volunteer activity that benefits a community. It may or may not involve students and can be anything from alley clean-up to after-school tutoring. Service-learning involves community-based projects with specific student learning outcomes that are tied to a particular course or internship.

During the past four years, CNA faculty members have undertaken a variety of projects tied to their courses. Students have engaged in historic research efforts to record the history of the West End neighborhood as part of the preparation for an Urban History course. Students have prepared a strategic plan for the Ville neighborhood as part of a Local Economic Development course. Likewise, Urban Affairs students have prepared Geographic Information System (GIS) maps for a variety of community-based groups. Another good example of CNA service-learning involved students in *Megatrends and the Future of the City*—an urban policy course—who prepared case studies identifying best practices to address a range of community problems.

Partnerships

Another important component of CNA's new approach is the heavy dependence on community partnerships. Acknowledging that the CNA has limited faculty involvement and a small student population, Center staff has sought out partnerships to fill certain deficiencies in CNA's skill set or "tool box."

In terms of neighborhood planning, the main void was in design capacity. Center faculty members have expertise in planning theory and practice, research analysis, and implementation tactics, but virtually none in architecture or urban design. During the last two years, the Center has formed an essential partnership with the Creative Exchange Lab (CEL), a local nonprofit urban design organization. Like CNA, CEL is dependent upon the use of students to provide affordable services to under-served communities. The Creative Exchange Lab and the Center for Neighborhood Affairs have undertaken several projects since forming their partnership in fall 2013, particularly in the Ville neighborhood, which is the oldest African American neighborhood in St. Louis and the site of the former Stowe Teachers College. CNA and CEL are also leading a team preparing a comprehensive neighborhood plan for the Lansdowne neighborhood in East St.

Louis. Soon, CEL staff will work with HSSU faculty to create a Certificate in Urban Design within the Urban Affairs program.

The use of partnerships has also been important in expanding the Center's network. Although CNA has developed extensive professional relationships over the last fifteen years, it has lacked relationships with community groups. Since 2011, CNA has formed a strong relationship with SLACO—the St. Louis Association of Community Organizations. The annual SLACO Neighborhood Conference, started over twenty years ago, has been hosted by the Center on the Harris-Stowe campus. Center faculty and SLACO have coordinated several service-learning projects involving HSSU students. The Director of the Center for Neighborhood Affairs is also the current president of SLACO's Board of Directors.

Fellows

Another important component of the Harris-Stowe Way is the use of Fellows or associated professionals to expand the Center's capacity. The Center currently has 30 Fellows, who are practicing or recently retired professionals who work *pro bono* with students in the Urban Affairs program as small consulting teams tied to service-learning projects. Due to its partnership with the Center, CEL is also developing an overlapping body of Fellows that work in a complimentary fashion.

Practicum Students

Even though HSSU currently does not offer graduate degrees, the Center has built its capacity and financial self-sufficiency through the use of graduate or practicum students from local universities in complimentary programs. The main source of graduate students has come from the Washington University Brown School of Social Work's MSW Program in Community and Economic Development. These practicum students have been invaluable in developing a number of Center initiatives.

Urbies

Although the Center uses students primarily through course-related service-learning projects, the Urban Affairs program has a long-standing student association known as the "Urbies." In recent years, the Urbies have become involved with the projects and activities of the Center. The Urbies have been active in community service, served as advocates for student interests, and provided career information, as well as being paid workers in community projects.

Junior Fellows

The most recent initiative of the Center and the Harris-Stowe Way is the creation of the Junior Fellows program. The Junior Fellows is a program designed for high school students to expose them to the possibility of urban careers. The Junior Fellows program recruits students from local high schools to work alongside CNA Fellows and HSSU students in service-learning projects to earn dual credits from both their high school and HSSU.

Current Projects and Activities

Because of the Harris-Stowe Way, the Center has been able to position itself at present to undertake four major projects and a number of auxiliary activities. These initiatives promise to be valuable contributions to metropolitan St. Louis, and a strong stimulus to the HSSU Urban Affairs program.

3A/SLPS “Hubs For Hope”

Throughout 2012, Center staff worked with the St. Louis African American Aldermanic Foundation (3A) to prepare a strategic plan for internal use. The purpose of the 3A Foundation was to leverage aldermanic influence, thus enabling service providers in North St. Louis to increase their effectiveness.

The essential tactic that the Foundation has devised to achieve their goals is the creation of a network of centers or “hubs” to better coordinate the efforts of North St. Louis service providers. The Foundation is now in the process of establishing a partnership with St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS) to make community schools into full service hubs, where the Foundation could funnel additional resources into the schools in order to better address the needs of the students and their parents, and also increase the capacity of the schools to meet the ongoing needs of the surrounding neighborhoods. The Center is currently working with both the Foundation and SLPS to secure funding to provide more staff for the hubs. The project is called “Hubs for HOPE” or “Helping Our Partners Excel.”

The Ville/MLK Corridor

The “Ville” is the oldest African American neighborhood in St. Louis. Once a thriving middle- and working-class community, the Ville has suffered severe depopulation and economic decline over the last generation. Because of its historical significance to the African American community, Harris-Stowe and CNA feel a special attachment to the neighborhood and its institutions. Indeed, Stowe Teachers College was once housed in the now abandoned Turner Middle School that is part of the Sumner High School Campus—considered the heart of the Ville.

Over the last three years, Center faculty members have undertaken several service-learning projects in the Ville. The Center is presently working with community alderman to revitalize the business association, assisting SLACO in forming a new neighborhood association, and beginning conversations with the 3A Foundation to generate a corridor plan for Martin Luther King Drive, the main commercial strip in the Ville. Additionally, the Center is partnering with several Ville faith-based organizations and other metropolitan universities to form the Ville Collaborative in order to coordinate redevelopment initiatives in this important historic community.

Lansdowne Comprehensive Neighborhood Plan

Lansdowne is a neighborhood in the northeast corner of East St. Louis. As with the rest of East St. Louis, Lansdowne has experienced dramatic declines over the last fifty years. This once prosperous community has now become a sea of vacant property and derelict housing.

The Center is in the process of partnering with the Creative Exchange Lab to prepare a comprehensive neighborhood plan of revitalization and beautification for the Lansdowne Community Initiative—a faith-based organization dedicated to the revitalization of Lansdowne.

Campus Master Plan

The Center for Neighborhood Affairs is part of the Harris-Stowe State University family and has started preparing a campus master plan for the university that will map out campus expansion for the next ten years. This plan will examine circulation, beautification, property utilization, student amenities, community interface, etc.

Community Service

Besides the major projects described above, the Center is also involved in a number of Community Service activities. These include:

- **South Grand CID:** Center faculty and students are assisting the South Grand Business Association expand its Community Improvement District in South St. Louis.
- **SLACO Initiatives:** For the last two years, students in *Megatrends and the Future of the City*, a course in the Urban Affairs curriculum, have provided background research for SLACO policy initiatives.
- **Ferguson:** Since August 2014 and the Michael Brown incident, Center faculty members have been involved in various community responses to this tragic event.
- **Project Uplift:** In spring 2012, CNA prepared a strategic plan for Project Uplift, a faith-based project in the Penrose community in North St. Louis. Since that time, CNA has continued to provide assistance to the organization in the form of grant writing, board development, and other capacity-building activities.

Future Goals and Objectives

The Center, in partnership with CEL, is in the process of completing a five-year strategic plan that will guide development until 2020. This plan has five major goals.

Merge Operations of CEL and CNA

To better utilize the resources of CNA and CEL more effectively, the staffs and the boards of the two organizations are considering various scenarios where the two organizations essentially operate as one. The long-term vision is that CNA and CEL share staff, space, and resources, while retaining their separate identities to maximize both nonprofit and higher education status.

Revamp Curriculum/Add Design Component

The original intent of the Urban Affairs program was to prepare students very broadly in Urban Studies and Public Administration. Housed in a small department with eight to ten faculty members, the curriculum was designed to concurrently prepare students in Criminal Justice and various traditional Social Science disciplines (such as History, Sociology, and Political Science) where

the various programs shared a common core curriculum that was very social science oriented.

As the Center developed and became more active in the community, this curriculum was more and more deficient in adequately preparing students for careers that were community-based. The faculty has been slow to integrate necessary skills into the program, such as GIS, grant writing, data analysis, fundamentals of real estate, budgeting, etc. In addition, the partnership with CEL has highlighted the lack of any type of design training in the curriculum, such as Computer Aided Design (CAD).

The Urban Affairs faculty are currently working with CEL and the Fellows to revamp the Urban Affairs major. The goal is to make the major much more skills-based and to create “stand alone” minors that the students can complete as either part of their program or in conjunction with other majors, e.g., Business or Urban Sustainability. Minors that the faculty are developing include 1) Urban Design, 2) Community Development, 3) Fundamentals in Real Estate and Housing Policy, and 4) Geographic Information Systems and Data Analysis.

Increase Student Enrollment

Like many universities, Harris-Stowe has experienced declining enrollments since 2008. Over the last ten years, enrollment has dropped by almost 50%. As a result, the Urban Affairs program has also dropped significantly. This drop in enrollment has made it difficult to justify new courses and new faculty, and it has also made it more difficult to effectively carry out community projects.

The new university president has already made a dramatic turn-around in enrollment through an aggressive recruitment and retention program. In like fashion, members of the Urban Affairs program have made a commitment to become actively involved in recruitment. In addition to the Junior Fellows program, the faculty plans to participate in high school and community college visits, and explore the possibility of offering dual-enrollment courses in Urban Studies to area high school students. It is also anticipated that the inclusion of new courses and minors into the program—especially design-related courses—will be a major recruitment tool.

Achieve Financial Self-Sufficiency

While the decision to go “cashless” has allowed members of the Urban Affairs faculty to jumpstart the Center, it has become clear that this strategy is not sustainable for the long term. One reason the Center has been in a position to not need additional funding is that the director does not ask for a stipend or release time to undertake projects. However, if the Center is going to remain effective after this director retires, it simply must obtain a sustainable source of funding for operational expenses. The Center is looking at fee-for-service contracts, fundraising, and grants as possible avenues for generating revenue.

Build Organizational Capacity

The search for sustainable funding sources is critical at this juncture in the Center’s history. The community needs are great, and resources are stretched thin in terms of being over-committed. There is simply more demand for services than CNA has resources available. The Center and CEL

need more students, more interns, more non-faculty staff, and more office space to house them. The five-year plan for the Center calls for half-time release for funding the director, adding two assistant directors (one in programming, one in operations), providing stipends for practicum students and interns, adding an administrative assistant, and obtaining dedicated office space in the community. Annual budget funding to provide adequate resources for these needs is approximately \$250,000 per year.

Challenges

Institutional Buy-In

The biggest challenge that the Center for Neighborhood Affairs has faced—and continues to face—is the lack of institutional buy-in. Since the inception of the Center, Harris-Stowe State University has faced almost continuous severe financial distress. As an institution that serves a primarily lower-income clientele, and with continued multiple budget cuts by the state government to all Missouri institutions of higher education, the university simply does not have the luxury of supporting programs that do not generate income or support themselves. Although the university's administration and Board of Regents have seen value in the public relations aspect of the Center, there continues to be no commitment of time or resources. Essentially, the Center is expected to be self-sufficient.

The Center has also faced resistance from within its own department. The Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences is also the home of two applied programs and four traditional social science disciplines. While Criminal Justice and Urban Affairs are very social-science oriented programs, there has been resentment from some of the traditional social science faculty members, primarily because until recently, university administrators have resisted the formation of social science majors. With the new administration giving a “green light” to the creation of new majors across the university, the resentment is expected to vanish.

State of Urban Affairs Program

Another major hurdle that the Center faces is declining enrollment in the Urban Affairs program at HSSU. The number of students entering the program has been shrinking even though the Center continues to grow. Part of the problem is the inherent challenge of acquainting high school students with urban careers. The information most high school students currently want to know is what can get them a job in a difficult economy and is it worth the soaring cost of higher education. The Center and the faculty in Urban Affairs must do a better job of going out to the schools and letting the students know the employment options that exist in the urban field.

The Center and the Urban Affairs faculty must improve communicating their value “in-house” to administrators and faculty alike. Sadly, there has been resistance from advisors and faculty in promoting Urban Affairs as a viable educational pursuit and career option for students. The Center believes enrollment numbers for the HSSU Urban Affairs program would greatly improve if students were made aware of the career opportunities available in this field and then participated in the amazing community projects supported by CNA/CEL.

Funding

The Center has never received an operational budget from the university, and Center faculty have not received release time from portions of their teaching loads. While service-learning has provided an avenue to minimize the lack of university funding, the Center must obtain sustainable funding in order to expand. Increased enrollment is one aspect of enhancing the value of the program. In additional efforts over the past year, Center staff started writing grant proposals, sought out fee-for-service opportunities, and explored different types of fundraising.

Branding/Marketing

The Center for Neighborhood Affairs has created a unique niche in Greater St. Louis. Many of the other local universities have urban institutes, primarily oriented to providing research and evaluation support, various kinds of workshops, and crafting policy. The focus of CNA is in providing direct one-on-one community assistance.

Even though the Center is virtually the only university entity that has “boots on the ground” for providing neighborhood planning assistance, most communities remain unaware of the services provided by the Center, or know that the Center even exists. Part of the problem is the lack of media exposure and marketing efforts. Without the size or the resources of other regional universities, many people still perceive HSSU as a “Teachers College.” The Center needs key staff members and students willing and able to develop marketing strategies, including a “break out” event to capture media attention.

Capacity

Unless it is able to grow in terms of staff and resources, it will be difficult for the Center to achieve any significant outcomes that would garner greater institutional and community support. In a very real sense, the challenges the Center faces are interrelated and ultimately lead back to one thing—the lack of money. With adequate funds, we believe the Center would be able to hire the additional staff and faculty needed to support the community engagement projects. As the program attracts more students and builds higher-profile community awareness, the university administration would be more likely to see the benefit of imparting institutional funds to support the CNA.

Conclusion

The Center for Neighborhood Affairs and the Harris-Stowe Way may be the answer for rejuvenating the many distressed neighborhoods in Greater St. Louis. Although the Center continues to face major challenges—especially with respect to funding and student recruitment—it has made tremendous headway over the last three years and has established a solid foundation. The creation of the Fellows program and the partnership with CEL have greatly expanded the capacity of the Center, despite the lack of funds available. With the pending contract of Phase II for the Lansdowne Plan and funding from several grant proposals, perhaps even that deficit is beginning to change. The most pressing short-term challenge is student recruitment. However, the Junior Fellows initiative and the possibility of offering dual-credit courses hold a lot of promise for

increased enrollment. By improving the awareness of the Urban Affairs programming at HSSU, and raising the profile of the engagement activities by CNA, we believe that there are even greater things in store for our community.

Author

Mark Abbott, Ph.D., is a Professor of History at Harris-Stowe State University. He has been at HSSU since 1988 where he teaches courses in History and Urban Studies. In addition to his teaching, Professor Abbott is the Director of the Center for Neighborhood Affairs. His research involves the History of St. Louis and the History of Urban Planning, as well as, identifying factors which lead to neighborhood resilience. He is currently the president of the board of the St. Louis Association of Community Organizations. He is also a past president of the St. Louis Metropolitan Section of the American Planning Association.