

Rockhurst and Our Neighborhood: Rockhurst University Neighborhood Committee

Alicia Douglas
Director of Community Relations & Outreach
Rockhurst University

Rockhurst University is a Catholic, Jesuit institution that has thrived in the heart of mid-town Kansas City, Missouri, for more than a century. Approximately 3,000 students are enrolled at Rockhurst, with 800 students who live on campus in residence halls or in university-owned houses in the neighborhood. Rockhurst is located in what is called the 49/63 neighborhood, which has a population of approximately 11,410 people, who reside in 4,501 households, according to the 2010 census. The 49/63 neighborhood consists of 9 different plats (smaller distinct areas) that are very active and diverse. The university is also part of an educational research and cultural district within our larger community, which includes two universities, two research institutions, and a number of cultural arts institutions. Interestingly, this part of Kansas City is also known for its main corridor, Troost Avenue. This thoroughfare runs through the center of the community, and has historically been a racial and economic dividing line in our city. Rockhurst is located on the east side of that avenue, an area with a history of economic disinvestment and racial disparity due to segregation practices of real estate and mortgage redlining before (and after) the Fair Housing Administration Act of 1968.

Three particular issues were identified in our community that needed to be addressed by neighbors and university representatives working together.

1. Community members expressed a need for regular communication with university administrators regarding properties owned by the university and other issues, such as student parties.
2. The university expressed a need for the development of a new campus master plan that included the construction of new buildings on campus or near campus.
3. Both university and community members expressed the desire to build better relationships in order to address mutual concerns and goals in the community.

In late 2007, Rockhurst University administrators met with neighborhood leaders to discuss how we could streamline and improve lines of communication between neighborhood constituents

and the university while creating a campus master plan that would be beneficial and agreeable to both parties. Before this meeting, communication between the neighborhood leaders, businesses, residents and the university officials was conducted in a piecemeal fashion, whereby one representative conveyed the messages from the university to the neighborhood, while a myriad of neighborhood leaders conveyed messages to the university and relayed messages to their neighbors and constituents. This ineffective process needed improvement to meet the main goals implied in all three of the identified issues—strengthening relationships and improving communication.

Neighborhood constituents clearly stated a desire for more contact with Rockhurst University administration through a uniform, structured means of communication. They also stated their strong desire to maintain their established working relationship and regular communication with the Community Relations Director. This meeting in 2007 was the beginning of the Rockhurst University Neighborhood Committee, which remains active and engaged in the life of the community in which the university resides.

Committee Membership

The Rockhurst University Neighborhood Committee (RUNC) was formed with the intention of fostering better communication and building better relationships between the university and the surrounding neighborhoods. More specifically, the committee would be an effective communication vehicle between university administration and neighborhood association leaders. The university representatives are from the following university areas: president's cabinet, student development and residence life, security department, community relations, facilities and technology, and public relations. The neighborhood representatives are from the three active neighborhood associations that work on behalf of all residents and constituents in our neighborhood: Troostwood (plat north of campus), Troost Plateau (plat south of campus), and 49/63 Neighborhood Coalition (the major stakeholder which incorporates the aforementioned plats and 7 additional plats). While our campus is embedded in a densely residential neighborhood in the urban core of Kansas City, our community also encompasses our neighboring university, the University of Missouri-Kansas City, who also has representatives actively engaged in the RUNC.

When developing the key members within our committee, we wanted to connect neighborhood leaders with university representatives who could address areas of common concerns and interests, such as student behavior issues, campus master planning, property issues, community relations, and security. It was decided that we would have a convener, a university administrator who would lead the group through agenda topics at each meeting. In the inaugural committee meetings, it was decided that the university's Chief Financial Officer (CFO) would serve in this capacity. This officer had the authority to speak for the university when the president was absent, and at that time the university property management office was under the responsibility of the CFO.

It was important to include the three active neighborhood associations adjacent to the university. Each of the neighborhood associations and their leaders were invited to join the Rockhurst University Neighborhood Committee and were asked to send their presidents or vice presidents as representatives for their groups. At first, the associations were concerned with a perceived lack of transparency and trustworthy communication. RUNC leadership responded by inviting the neighborhood associations to send any additional members of their executive boards that would like to attend the meetings; the additional voices and thoughts would be welcomed, especially

ideas pertaining to the campus master plan. The committee expressly asked each of the neighborhood association representatives who attended meetings to consistently share factual information with their constituents, and emphasized the importance of sharing any specific notices about campus master plan developments, property updates, and neighborhood-related student life activities. The neighborhood leaders were encouraged to share all feedback from their associations and neighbors regarding the campus master plan and any other topics.

Building Trust

During the first few meetings, the neighborhood leaders informed university officials that they had strong feelings of mistrust, believing the university had a hidden agenda and lacked transparency in their communications. At the university, we were concerned that even though we were presenting all information and asking for neighborhood input and feedback, this information would not be shared by neighborhood leaders in an unbiased manner to all members of the community. We were concerned that the relay of biased information would cause a more contentious outcome. To help resolve these issues, it was proposed that a facilitator be brought in to guide the process of building mutual trust and developing effective communication. Both sides agreed to hire a facilitator, and they worked diligently to develop cooperative skills and heal the relationships between the neighborhoods and the university.

A general outline for RUNC meetings was developed to create a flow of communication and encourage open dialogue among the representatives in attendance. Committee members decided there should be monthly meetings, and that the day of the month and start time should be the same each month for consistency. For the first few years, the meetings were held early mornings on the first Tuesday of the month. In later years, the meetings were changed to early evening; this allowed neighborhood representatives time to participate in meetings at the end of their work day and then move on to any other personal or community activities. This also worked well for the university representatives; the meetings were a productive way to wrap up the end of their work day as well. A standardized agenda was proposed, with a set list of topics for discussion at each meeting. Those standard agenda items for discussion or updates included safety/crime issues, property or campus master plan items, student activities or concerns, and general community needs.

Neighborhood and community representatives are always invited to add items or topics to the agenda. Minutes from the committee meetings are sent out to all committee members and the neighborhood association presidents to review the information and stay current on community issues. Other neighborhood leaders unable to attend a RUNC meeting can request a copy of the minutes. This continues to build trust and transparency with increased delivery of factual information to all neighborhood residents and association members.

Working Toward Goals

After resolving some of the communication issues, the committee dug deep into the primary topic of the neighborhood conversations at that time: campus master planning and property management. The university asked for constructive feedback that would assist in designing a campus master plan that would be beneficial to both the university and the neighborhood. More specifically, they wanted to know if the community valued the following items:

- Availability of additional parking
- Pedestrian walkability and increased safety
- Coordination of efforts to address crime and public safety issues
- Improved communication regarding student behavior or university properties

Since campus master planning and property management were intertwined, the committee talked through concerns associated with campus property development. Neighborhood leaders expressed specific concerns regarding the campus master plan, namely:

- Encroachment of university grounds into the residential neighborhoods
- Condition and maintenance of residential properties owned by the university
- Acquisition and divestment of properties owned by the university
- Development of campus properties that fit with the aesthetic look and feel of the neighborhood
- Impact on the ability to attract homeowner occupants to the neighborhood

The committee members came together to identify specific issues that were considered important for the common good. Key issues selected as important for the committee to address included crime, poverty, vacant property, education, collaboration, and relationship-building. Looking beyond the discussion of the campus master plan, the committee members worked to create a mission statement and a long-term strategic plan to solidify and sustain the Rockhurst University Neighborhood Committee. During the strategic planning process, the committee worked to identify its strengths and weaknesses, and to identify issues facing the university, the neighborhoods, other institutions, and the city. Short-term and long-term goals were developed to meet the identified needs and issues. Some goals included creating a New Neighbor guide or handbook for student residents and non-student residents, addressing the issue of vacant houses and disorder, and continuing communication and engagement between neighborhood residents and the university.

Subcommittees were formed to address the issues of public engagement and healthy neighborhoods. The public engagement subcommittee was charged with getting more residents involved in the life of the neighborhood and generating a sense of hope. This happened shortly after a local teen was murdered near the university's campus. He was robbed while returning home from the public library with a college application in his pocket. The public engagement subcommittee decided one way to inspire children and families in the wake of this tragedy was to host a Back-to-School Rally at the Rockhurst University Community Center. There, families would receive free school supplies and connect to community groups and youth programs that provided services throughout the year: Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts, the Kansas City Zoo, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City Public Library, etc. Any school supplies left over from the event were donated to Troost Elementary School, a local neighborhood school.

The healthy neighborhood subcommittee followed suit with a program to bring long-term neighbors and college students together by hosting a neighborhood block party. Students and neighbors mingled with free food and music. It was an opportunity for them to get acquainted in a fun environment. The committee also created a Neighborhood Mixer networking event where local residents and business owners could build collaborations and community relationships. The mixer was hosted at a local business establishment.

The full RUNC worked together on the campus master plan. The members discussed the placement of future buildings designed to blend with neighboring residences, beautification projects to make the campus appear more connected to the community, and infrastructure development strategies for dealing with congested parking on certain streets. After several months of discussions and negotiations, the group agreed upon a campus master plan that the neighborhood leaders fully supported and willingly presented to their constituents as a viable development option that benefited the university and the neighborhood. The RUNC members also met with city planners and city council members to discuss the master plan and the Rockhurst Campus Master Plan became the first Campus Zone Development adopted by the City of Kansas City. Neighbors and university officials went to City Hall in unity to move the campus master plan development forward. Through the campus master plan, the university was able to build an environmentally friendly green-wall parking garage that incorporates storefronts. The storefronts currently include the Neighborhood Walk-in and Family Care clinic operated by HCA, and the Prosperity Center for Financial Opportunity, an agency that provides employment coaching and financial counseling. Both agencies are open to the public. Working together, the RUNC not only created a campus master plan that architecturally and environmentally worked well for the community, it created a plan that also reflects the heart of the Jesuit mission of Rockhurst University—social justice and care for the community.

Challenges

Retaining student participation in the neighborhood committee is a long-term goal that remains a challenge. Student leaders who live in off-campus housing and student senate representatives are invited to participate in RUNC discussions, to share their insights, expertise, and unique perspectives as students. Members of the committee feel it is important to include students in discussions of neighborhood livability and safety. They find it is important for students to build positive relationships with long-term residents and homeowners as this improves the overall health of the neighborhood and quality of life for residents when everyone is in agreement on issues of noise and safety. The Rockhurst University Student Development Office and the Office of Community Relations partner and recruit student leaders to participate in the neighborhood committee. Connecting with students associated with Student Senate and Greek Life, particularly those who reside in the neighborhood, has offered a stronger solution to retaining active student participation and has led to student residents sharing information such as the new resident guides on a peer-to-peer communication level.

The retention and recruitment of neighborhood association representatives has waxed and waned over time. This is mainly due to the fact that neighborhood representatives are all volunteers whose personal and professional lives may take center stage and make volunteer activities more difficult. The neighborhood committee has seen generous participation from the neighborhood association representatives and residents throughout the years. Their participation has granted the neighborhood committee the opportunity to work on the goals set forth in the mission statement and strategic plan.

We learned that cultural competency was important when building stronger relationships between the neighborhood associations and the university. The two types of organizations functioned and communicated differently. Learning to understand the differences helped to dispel some of the mistrust. The neighborhood associations surrounding Rockhurst are grassroots organizations led by community volunteers. These associations have a very open format for communicating and

discussing issues, and they tend to be very active when there are perceived threats in the community. The university has a highly structured chain of command within the organization and considerable time is spent working things through committees or focus groups to reach decisions and then communicate decisions. This could be interpreted as a lack of transparency to another organization trying to get information quickly, until they realize that this is standard procedure in university culture—slow, consistent actions taken to deal with various types of situations. Since Rockhurst is a relatively small university community, communicating through the chain of command and across departments may be more agile than it would at a larger institution.

Stepping Into the Future

Eight years after the formation of the Rockhurst University Neighborhood Committee, the group continues building strong relationships and trust among its members and within the community. There are future opportunities for the committee to grow while still maintaining its core mission as a conduit for communication between the university and its neighbors. In order to sustain the RUNC, it is critical to develop and implement a process to recruit students and keep them engaged in the committee. This will offer an opportunity for neighborhood members of the RUNC to connect with a diverse cross section of students who can provide various perspectives from the student body.

As the committee continues its work, members can proactively share their activities and progress with neighborhood groups and elected officials, and engage those same groups and officials in RUNC conversations so that we all continue to work towards the shared goals and progress for our community. The RUNC must maintain strong communication and positive relationships with neighborhood leaders and utilize their expertise in engaging new neighbor participation throughout the life of the committee. Neighbors and neighborhood organizations can continue to work with the committee as the university considers changes to the campus master plan and potential implementation of new campus developments. While the committee may experience transitions in individual neighborhood leaders and university leaders, the mission of the RUNC remains intact to guide future committee members and leaders.

Conclusion

The Rockhurst University Neighborhood Committee has affected the community as a whole, with impacts spanning the neighborhood, the city, and the university. It has impacted the neighborhood by streamlining communication and building trust. The major issue that sparked the formation of this committee was the concern over institutional expansion and campus planning in relation to the surrounding residential communities. With frank dialogue, facilitation, and numerous meetings, the RUNC was able to agree upon elements of a campus master plan that ensured the protection of each party's interests in expansion.

The RUNC was set in place as a formal venue where the neighborhood and the university could communicate concerns and discuss significant issues that affect many urban institutions. These included items such as safety, security, off-campus student housing, student life, and city infrastructure needs. The committee has found that the university and neighborhood working in partnership is an effective means for achieving civic and community service-oriented goals.

RUNC also impacts students by serving as an extension of a caring community that is part of their college experience. Many neighbors express their desire to get to know students and help them through their transition to living off-campus, whether that's how to party appropriately or how to live safely in an urban environment. At Rockhurst University, one of our Jesuit principles is *cura personalis*, care of the whole person. By welcoming our students to the community and fostering a sense of belonging, RUNC creates partnerships that make our city and our good world better.

Author

Alicia Douglas is the Director of Community Relations and Outreach for Rockhurst University and has been with the university since 1999. She directs the Rockhurst University Community Center, currently facilitates the Rockhurst University Neighborhood Committee, and co-facilitates campus-wide community service projects. She serves as a board member for the Southtown Council, for Show Me KC Schools and as a member of the Kansas City National College Fair Steering Committee. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Communication from Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee, WI., and has completed graduate studies in sociology at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Alicia also holds a certificate in Town and Gown Relations from the International Town & Gown Association.