

# Chapter Four

## Village Partners Program

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**W**illiam Jewell College is a private residential liberal arts college, located slightly north of metropolitan Kansas City, in the town of Liberty, Missouri, with an approximate enrollment of 1,100 students. Our mission statement emphasizes active engagement in real-world problems through community interaction: “William Jewell College promises students an outstanding liberal arts education that cultivates leadership, service, and spiritual growth within a community inspired by Christian ideals and committed to open, rigorous intellectual pursuits.” This case study will focus on the Village Partners Program and its activities in the urban core of Kansas City.

### **Westside Neighborhood**

We are currently focused on building relationships and engaging collaborative partners in the Westside Neighborhood, located just southwest of downtown Kansas City. This historically Latino neighborhood occupies about one square mile with a population of approximately 3,100 people. With a median age of 33, 21% of the population is 19 years or younger, while 10% is over 65 years. This multi-ethnic community is comprised of 63% Hispanic, 16% African American, and 6% multi-racial, with the remaining 52% classified as Caucasian. This is a mixed-income neighborhood, with a median household income of \$30,000, placing 30% of the residents below the poverty level. Only 11.5% of the population have earned a BA degree or higher, while 34% have not earned a high school diploma. The unemployment rate was 9% in 2014, which was higher than the national average. A Kansas City Public School System (KCPS) elementary school, Primitivo Garcia, is located in this neighborhood. All students at Primitivo Garcia School participate in the free breakfast and lunch programs. The Kansas City Public School (KCPS) system has recently earned provisional accreditation. There are three additional education centers in this neighborhood—elementary, middle and high schools—that are charter schools sponsored by The Guadalupe Center. Two nonprofit organizations, LINC and The Upper Room, offer after-school and summer programming.

### **William Jewell’s Involvement**

The Village Partners Program seeks to partner with communities to achieve sustainable healthy

change. We engage with these communities in three incremental ways:

- Build relationships and learn about community goals
- Collaborate with other organizations to achieve community goals
- Multiply healthy changes in other communities

We have partnered with the Westside community for three years, developing relationships and forming collaborations with the KCPS Primitivo Garcia Elementary School and the Westside Housing Organization (WHO). Dr. Lori Wetmore, the Director of the Village Partners Program, is a member of the WHO board. Her interaction with this organization has helped develop the Village Partners relationship with the Westside community. Jewell students engage in this partnership on several levels: service, service-learning, and internships.

The following activities provide descriptions of student opportunities within these partnerships. The Jewell Chaplain's Office coordinates a day of community service, in collaboration with WHO, which entails at least 20 students working in the community orchard and garden each semester. Students taking either Spanish language or core curriculum courses participate in service-learning opportunities as after-school Urban Impact reading partners at Primitivo Garcia School, a collaborative program with LINC and Turn the Page KC. Students taking business courses have completed wealth assessment mapping of the Westside community. Interns with a major in Business or Non-profit Leadership have worked for WHO in the summer, and have also coordinated the Urban Impact partners throughout the school year. Jewell student groups have also engaged the community via parent/student engagement efforts at Primitivo Garcia School, providing activities including soccer, physics and step-team programs. Dr. Claudia McVicker, Associate Professor of Education, has provided summer training for VISTA Member volunteers of Turn the Page KC, and has established a simple reading assessment tool in collaboration with a William Jewell Education student.

### **Potential Outcomes**

Many positive outcomes have been witnessed in the Village Partners Program. William Jewell College seeks to enhance student civic engagement by providing participation as an academic opportunity through the Village Partners Program. By partnering with this urban neighborhood, we have provided an opportunity for our students to interact with a multi-ethnic community as a way to enhance their classroom experiences. We were able to contribute to our civic community in a substantial way by providing over 350 hours of service to the students at Primitivo Garcia School during the 2014-2015 school year. By participating in Mayor Sly James' initiative, Turn the Page KC, our students and faculty were able to participate in a community-initiated program that targets children in the urban core. Our students learned about cultural sensitivity, community development principles, and urban challenges as they reflected on course content that included insight into issues concerning culture and justice. The positive outcomes for the community included the installation and maintenance of a community orchard and garden. An additional positive result of the engagement work by Jewell students has been the increased student one-on-one reading time and parent engagement with the elementary school.

### **Challenges**

As we plan for future partnerships and growth of this program, there are barriers to face. We want to develop a deeper relationship with the Westside community, but this process is incredibly slow. The neighborhood does not have a well-developed neighborhood council. The West-

side Housing Organization is working with the neighborhood members to build the necessary leadership capacity. The search for a new principal at Primitivo Garcia School is completed, and we are enthusiastically partnering with this new administrator. LINC and Turn the Page KC have been excellent collaborators, and as with any after-school program, we need to stay flexible while working with them. KCPS lacks funding and the school staff members are overextended, so communication with the community liaison is often a struggle.

There are also challenges within the institution that we have worked to address. We have found that the keys to success for increasing Jewell student participation are early recruitment at the beginning of each semester and weekly van shuttle service to the elementary school. We have also found that a short, effective training session for Jewell students enhances the experience for everyone involved. In all, we have learned to effectively communicate more often and through multiple means with school staff members and collaborators. Improvement in our communication efforts has also extended to Jewell students. They are instrumental in recruiting other Jewell students for service-learning courses.

### **Next Steps**

The next steps for the Village Partners Program center on assessment and partnership development. We are exploring ways to expand our collaborative efforts with WHO and other stakeholders in the Westside Neighborhood, and make additional connections with other organizations in the greater Kansas City community. We are planning the implementation of an easy assessment tool for the after-school reading program as a way to more accurately measure the effectiveness of the reading partner program. We are also implementing an assessment process to measure personal perceptions and values before students participate in civic engagement activities, and then assess and evaluate any shifts in these values after their experiences with service-learning and community engagement at William Jewell College.

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### **Author**

**Lori Wetmore, Ph.D.**, currently teaches courses in Chemistry and the Core Curriculum at William Jewell College. In 2008, after returning from a year as a visiting professor in Lisbon, Portugal, at the University of Lisbon, she became Director of Village Partners at William Jewell College. Village Partners seeks to partner with other communities to create sustainable healthy communities. This enables Dr. Wetmore to pursue her other passion of addressing justice issues both in Kansas City and other countries. For her, teaching at Jewell enables her to have the joy of partnering with students in the discovery of new ideas and new experiences, while confronting real-world problems.