

# Fulfilling Their Urban Mission: Engagement Among Small-to Medium-Sized Private Colleges and Universities

By Michelle D. Gilliard

An urban university is not only a center of learning that happens to be located in a city. That is its minimum requirement. It should be an institution developed specifically for the purpose of relating to the wide range of issues faced by cities and their communities.

Berube, *The Urban University in America*

The *Implementing Urban Missions* grant program, sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), a Washington, DC-based international organization comprised of nearly 500 small-to moderate-sized private colleges and universities, enabled eight private institutions to refine and enrich the capacity of their institutions to fulfill their urban mission. The grant program grew out of a series of conversations among presidents of private colleges and universities during the Council's annual conference for private college and university presidents. During the mid-1990s, a group of presidents began meeting regularly at the conference to discuss common concerns and possible solutions regarding their institutions' responses to the changing urban environments in which they are located. CIC staff recognized that the significant contributions already being made by these institutions had the potential to realize even greater promise through a more intensive, collaborative effort. In 1997, with the support of a \$1.5 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, CIC launched the *Implementing Urban Missions* program.

The national competitive grants program attracted 158 of CIC's member institutions located in metropolitan areas of 500,000 or more people. In January 1999, out of the 77 final proposals received, eight institutions were awarded grants of up to \$150,000 to support project activities over a two- or three-year period. The approach was to encourage these institutions to address their urban mission through program-specific initiatives while simultaneously extending that work to the broader institution.

Within the national landscape of urban colleges and universities, small, private, urban institutions represent a unique resource for America's cities. While these institutions are often plagued with the bureaucracy commonly found among other postsecondary

institutions, their center of gravity is different. A particular strength of these institutions, fostered by their relatively small-to-medium size and focus on teaching and learning, is their tendency to have a strong sense of community. Community, the creation and maintenance of it, is a central feature of their environments. Their notions of community are often articulated in their mission statements, as well as during convocation speeches and other public addresses. Their institutional cultures emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships, creating environments in which students, faculty, and staff interact with both their internal and external communities in ways that are supportive and welcoming. These characteristics help to make these institutions ideal partnering organizations to work with local communities. In addition, the autonomy these institutions have from their state governments also creates a situation where they have the potential to respond quickly and efficiently to a wide variety of community needs and interests, as well as being able to form collaborative partnerships with all types of organizations, both public and private.

The challenges these institutions are experiencing, and the impetus for the conversations among the presidents, include, for example, how to best distribute and maximize their limited resources—human and fiscal—when community needs are so great and it is their mission to serve both students and society. Additional challenges include negotiating the bureaucracies of institutions of higher learning within the context of community engagement; creating strategies to appropriately acknowledge, support, and reward faculty and staff; and understanding the implications, for both the institution and the community, of the institution's response to community needs.

With these and other opportunities and challenges in mind, the institutions participating in the grant competition proposed a variety of initiatives designed to improve the quality of life in their surrounding communities, as well as to further develop and understand the overall capacity of their institution to implement its urban mission.

## **Historical Context of the Private College Urban Mission**

The cultural and religious founding of these institutions, and correspondingly, the historical and current characteristics of the people they serve, help to tell the long story of the civic engagement among this group of institutions. While the stories and histories vary, the eight institutions that participated in the grant program represent only a few small-to medium-sized private urban institutions located throughout the country. Among the eight participating institutions were women's colleges and co-educational institutions, an historically black university, and Catholic institutions. The institutions that received a grant include: Bloomfield College (Bloomfield, NJ), Columbia College Chicago (Chicago, IL), Johnson C. Smith University (Charlotte, NC), Holy Family College (Philadelphia, PA), Lesley University (Cambridge, MA), Marygrove College (Detroit, MI), Mount St. Mary's College (Los Angeles, CA), and Ohio Dominican College (Columbus, OH).

Founded between 1867 (Lesley University) and 1964 (Ohio Dominican College), a majority of the institutions have been intimately connected with their communities since their founding. For Mount St. Mary's College (founded in 1925), this represents more than 75 years of service. In recent years, the nature of the interaction with their communities falls into two broad categories: educating a diverse group of students and community development.

**Educating diverse learners.** A number of these colleges, in responding to shifting demographics and employer needs of their areas, have developed educational models for diverse student bodies including significant percentages of minorities, part-time adults, or individuals with deficiencies in their preparation for college work. In addition to the greater individual attention and sense of community possible in these smaller-scale institutions, many feature programs that work with community mentors, and involve ongoing partnerships with local organizations.

**Providing professional community development.** Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of these institutions is the rich interaction between their core educational programs and the life of the local community. In particular, these colleges and universities offer majors in teacher education, business, nursing, social work, and other professional or pre-professional fields that contribute directly to the development of the community. When combined with liberal arts traditions that acknowledge the importance of broad knowledge and values, these educational programs often play distinctive roles in preparing community leaders, and in matching the institution's academic resources to community issues. Moreover, since many students come from nearby communities and return to those communities, these institutions have an explicit agenda of developing their local environs.

## **Fulfilling Their Urban Mission:**

### **Common Experiences Across the Institutions**

A common feature across all eight institutions is that their engagement activities were strongly connected to the institutions' core teaching mission, especially to the objective of promoting a commitment to service among students. Unlike other institutions with multiple missions and objectives, small- to medium-sized private liberal arts and sciences institutions have as their primary mission teaching and learning, which helps to shape the nature of relationships they have with their communities. Much of this tradition has been realized through programs that emphasize voluntary community service activities that involve faculty, students, and administrators in partnership with the local community. The evaluation of this grant program found that these eight institutions tended to begin institutionalizing their engagement efforts more through their voluntary community service activities than through course-based service or service-learning, which is a more common approach among public sector institutions (Holland 2001). Most private colleges have a long history of working with their communities, many in the context of church-related service programs. These activities continue to evolve into reciprocal partnership activities, and stakeholders look to these

programs to recount the history of the institution's presence in the community. When one looks for evidence of institutionalization in private colleges, it is often found first in the service programs that have been in place for decades. The article by Holland in this issue explores this and other differences between the experiences of small- to medium-sized private liberal arts and sciences institutions and public institutions.

A key goal of the program was to promote broader commitment to the urban mission across the institution's departments. We learned that, for the grantee institutions, making the leap from project-specific work to institution-wide impact was challenging and variable. The most effective mechanism for broader impact on mission was investment in supportive infrastructure. We have also learned that an advisory board, depending upon its composition, role, and function has the potential to be a mechanism that can promote project sustainability and connect the program or unit to related activities. Marcia Marker Feld, Director of the University of Rhode Island Field Center and a technical assistance consultant to CIC's grant program, has written an article for this issue in which she presents a typology of advisory boards, their composition, roles, functions, limitations, and strengths. While advisory boards appear to be an effective way to help institutions build on the experiences of individual units, and thus develop the institution's overall capacity to engage in this work, other strategies for disseminating and integrating ideas within institutions need to be developed and pursued.

## **Overview of Campus Articles**

In the articles that follow, the reader will develop an understanding for how the quality of the relationships the eight institutions have with their communities became richer and deeper, and for the substantial organizational and pedagogical changes that took place across the institutions. At the same time, the reader will see how these institutions continue to struggle, as do many engaged colleges and universities, with notions of reciprocity and the ways in which the curriculum, teaching methods, and institutional practices might be transformed in response to what faculty members, staff, and students are learning through their relationships with their communities.

The following descriptions of the activities pursued by the eight institutions and their community partners provide a broader context in which to interpret the articles. Collectively, the eight articles provide examples of how small-to medium-sized private colleges maximize their resources in ways that enable them to fulfill their urban mission.

**Bloomfield College.** Bloomfield College collaborated with local public schools, the New Jersey Historical Society, and other community organizations to increase the community's recognition and understanding of the area's distinguished history of jazz music. Working together, and drawing on the college's expertise in creative arts and technology, the authors explain how the partners used a capstone course to create a CD-ROM that documents the history of jazz in Newark and is being used in the official campaign to preserve the Newark jazz culture.

**Columbia College Chicago.** Over the course of the grant program, the College created

the Office of Community Arts Partnerships (OCAP) to bring coordination to and strengthen the many collaborative initiatives with which the institution is engaged. The centerpiece of OCAP and its activities is a carefully structured advisory board characterized by a uniquely strong commitment to shared representation and decision-making powers across community and college representatives. The article gives voice to the experiences of community and campus representatives during the creation of the advisory board.

**Holy Family College.** The Nursing Department, along with a wide range of representatives from the Frankford community and Mater Dolorosa Parish, created a highly successful community-based nursing and education center for the residents of these communities. The article focuses on the development of the Center and the challenges of extending the success of the nursing department to other college departments whose intellectual resources are also needed and desired by the community.

**Johnson C. Smith University.** Faculty members from several social science disciplines came together to form the Urban Research Group (URG). The mission of the URG is to involve students and faculty in field research projects designed to provide timely information to community organizations throughout the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area. Community partners ranged from neighborhood associations to the police department. They use the information to increase the capacity of their organizations to accomplish their respective missions. The article describes the student-faculty research model developed and the impact of the research activities on student learning.

**Lesley University.** The University's School of Management developed a program of technical assistance specifically designed for small, non-profit, community-based businesses. The assistance, including summer workshops, addresses the professional development needs of these organizations. The article discusses the ways in which the institution expanded their community engagement network, typically involving social service agencies and schools, to include business sector opportunities.

**Marygrove College.** As an institution widely respected throughout its community for its teacher education program, Marygrove College partnered with the Detroit Public School System to address the shortage of African American male teachers in K-12 classrooms. The multifaceted approach identifies individuals at three different points in the educational pipeline and provides them with the education they need to enter the teaching profession. The article focuses on the use of a highly successful cohort model, with a non-traditional schedule of evening and weekend classes, to prepare mid-career African American men from professional fields such as business, law, health care, and the ministry, among others, for new careers as teachers.

**Mount St. Mary's College.** Founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, the institution's service mission originally called for the college to divide the city into manageable sections and provide the necessary assistance and support wherever need was found. After 70 years of service in one of the nation's most demographically and

culturally diverse cities, a College study revealed they had more than 300 extant partnerships with community organizations throughout the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Feeling the strain of having over-extended its resources, the College created a Center for Urban Partnerships through which all partnerships, academic and community-service oriented, are supported and managed. The article explains how the Center for Urban Partnerships has created an institutional infrastructure to support a smaller, more focused set of partnerships, and how it has become a catalyst for bridging the cultural and educational differences between the downtown, largely commuter campus with the suburban, largely residential campus.

**Ohio Dominican College.** To maximize its resources and bring coherence to the College's long history of community engagement, the College has defined the boundaries of its community as everything that lies within the 43219 zip code where the college resides—commonly referred to as Urban Village 219. The article focuses on the experiences of faculty members who participated in a mini-grant program designed to support their engagement with local community organizations that serve pre-college youth.

## **Conclusion**

The work accomplished throughout the *Implementing Urban Missions* grant program has helped to solidify the foundation of community service upon which these eight institutions implement their urban missions. Each project was designed to complement the institution's strengths and history of community engagement, and then expanded upon through the grant program. In the articles that follow, the set of activities pursued by these institutions are interesting in their own right, and also demonstrate the capacity of small- to medium-sized institutions to engage with and support their communities through diverse strategies. The common experiences these institutions have shared helps to expand our understanding of and appreciation for the formation of reciprocal relationships between community organizations and institutions. Each institution, in the course of implementing its grant activities, experienced the consequences and benefits of establishing such relationships. And a new appreciation, perhaps, is developed for the amount of time it takes to establish a shared advisory body that guides the work of the partnership. We also hear about the increased need for faculty to be supported in their efforts through faculty development activities, as well as through promotion and tenure policies. Lastly, we see the direct benefits of developing institutional capacity through the creation and funding of key academic and administrative positions that support the development and maintenance of college-community partnerships and other forms of engagement.

For the Council of Independent Colleges, this national program is one of several multi-year efforts to support community engagement activities among independent colleges and universities. During the past ten years, more than \$4 million has been directed to over 50 institutions across the nation to strengthen institutional capacity and relationships with their local communities. Current efforts include a \$2.5 million program that will provide varying levels of support to more than 100 small- to medium-sized private colleges through 2003.

## **References**

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