

# Building Institutional Infrastructure Through the Center for Urban Partnership

By Sr. Judy Molosky, CSJ

## Abstract

*Building an infrastructure to sustain an organic movement such as experience-based education involves timing, tension and respect. This article addresses these important elements, which have played a vital role in creating a solid foundation of support at Mount St. Mary's College (MSMC) for civic engagement and service learning.*

Have you ever watched someone learn how to sail? The keys to success seem to include timing, maintaining just the right tension, and respecting all the variables: vessel, weather, skill, and determination. Over the past three years, the same principles of timing, tension, and respect have played major roles in creating the Center for Urban Partnership (CUP) at Mount St. Mary's College as a tool for enhancing the College's urban mission.

Timing was key in establishing the new Center. In support of the program, the mood at the college was that "after 70 years of service in the community, it's about time that we focused our energies to have a greater impact." Tensions arose when players worried about who was "in" and who was "out" as we chose to build relationships with certain community partners versus others. After three years of tireless organization, respect has empowered the various players to stay on board for the duration of the journey.

## Focusing Our Urban Mission—The Time is Right

A challenge for anyone in Los Angeles is to identify the "center" of the city; LA is synonymous with urban sprawl. One of the main goals of the Center for Urban Partnership was to focus service involvement for greater impact. A survey conducted on both campuses of MSMC in 1997 revealed more than 300 community sites where student involvement was present or had taken place at some point in the past. For a college of approximately 1,000 undergraduate students, we knew we faced an enormous challenge. We were concerned about the quality and consistency of student learning and of partner relationships over so many sites. We looked to the history of the college for direction.

In 1925, Mount St. Mary's College was established in Los Angeles by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. This Catholic community of religious women was founded in

1650 in France to practice “all the spiritual and corporal works of mercy of which woman is capable and which will most benefit the ... dear neighbor” (Primitive Constitutions). The first sisters were to “divide the city” to meet the most desperate needs. From the beginning, MSMC’s mission has been about the “education of women for participation and leadership in our society and our times” (MSMC Mission Statement). What better historical basis could there be for honoring an urban mission? Our present day challenge was more clearly defined to “divide the city” of Los Angeles and focus our urban impact through building sustainable partnerships with the “dear neighbor.” We set ourselves to the task of narrowing our list of 300 community contacts to 15 strategic partnerships for a more focused impact.

Timing also seemed right for community engagement since our student population mirrors the cultural diversity of the city of Los Angeles. Designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), the Mount’s enrollment statistics closely reflect the region’s ethnic composition: 12 percent African-American, 16 percent Asian-American/Pacific Islander, 40 percent Hispanic, 22 percent Caucasian and 10 percent Other. Nearly 60 percent of our students are the first in their families to attend college, 60 percent have family incomes of less than \$25,000, and 85 percent speak English as a second language. Considering this culturally-diverse population, it is not surprising that so many of our students regard the social action course or urban internships as part of their college education. All Associate of Arts students at our downtown Doheny campus are required to take the Freshman social action course which includes 15 hours of community service. Both the Doheny and Chalon campuses have service-based clubs and sororities and each semester students register for one or more of the 40 service learning courses.

From this pool of service-focused students come the applicants for the CUP Urban Intern program. Each spring more than 30 students apply for the 12 paid positions as Urban Interns. The quality of these applicants speaks to their desire to engage their energies at community service sites such as Juvenile Hall, homeless drop-in centers, and various after-school programs. The community and college proudly support their efforts to involve both their heads and their hearts in bringing about a better world.

## **Setting Direction for Strategic Urban Engagement—Addressing Tensions**

Receiving the *Implementing Urban Missions* grant of \$149,000 in 1998, from the Council of Independent Colleges, gave us the impetus we needed at the Mount to focus our energies for more effective student involvement in the community. Previous efforts at centralizing community-based education had been unsuccessful due in part to a lack of funds, but more significantly we lacked a common language around experiential learning. The new Center for Urban Partnership began direction-setting efforts by hosting three consecutive days of roundtable strategy sessions. Community members joined college students, faculty, staff, and administrators to discern next steps to attain deeper, sustainable partnerships in the areas of education, health care, and social services.

The outcome of the roundtables and subsequent site visits with 50 potential strategic partners resulted in the naming of criteria for effective partnerships. Effective partnerships must:

- be mutually beneficial;
- focus on under-served populations;
- have compatible missions; and
- be geographically feasible.

Although all parties agreed to the criteria, doubts were voiced by community partners as to their ability to meet the students' needs with limited staff. The college also had concerns about maintaining mutually beneficial experiences where students would receive rich learning experiences while meeting real needs in the community. Could both goals be achieved? A year of site visits, interviews, and negotiating expectations by all involved resulted in 15 strategic partners who met all the criteria: one hospital, one community housing corporation, five schools, and eight social service organizations.

Community partners were invited to become members of the CUP Advisory Council. The Council had initially begun as a support to the CUP staff to fulfill the intent of the *Implementing Urban Missions* grant program. Council membership was initially college-based: students, alumni, service learning faculty, administration, student affairs personnel, and other staff representing the offices of career development, assessment, and institutional advancement. With the inclusion of community partners, a sense of energy, challenge, and engagement began to permeate the monthly meetings. The CUP office brought everyone together and initiated the process of building trust through respectful communication and by addressing tensions.

CUP saw its task change from "How can the college support community-based learning?" to "How can the college and community work together to address long-standing problems in Los Angeles?" Community partners challenged MSMC to strengthen its efforts to provide a community-based education by inviting local experts to address college classes and provide orientation to students before they became engaged off campus. The Center facilitated these information sessions by acting as an institutional bridge between faculty and community partners. The establishment of a reciprocal process of college-community partnering made its most sustainable mark through the collaboratively-authored Mission Statement for the Center for Urban Partnership in the spring of 1999. The three-month process resulted in a Mission Statement that incorporated the ideals, goals and criteria of each partner:

*The Center for Urban Partnership develops mutually beneficial partnerships between MSMC and community organizations in order to: (1) connect students with community partners to instill lasting patterns of civic responsibility and community involvement, (2) address together community needs and systemic urban issues, and (3) promote healthy, socially just communities in Los Angeles.*

Upon acceptance of the mission statement, a community member of the Advisory Council insightfully declared, “Now we have the document. Our work is to integrate it into all we do together.”

## **Building Institutional Infrastructure—Respect for All Constituencies**

The Mission Statement for CUP was affirmed by the college’s Administrative Council in the fall of 1999. Presentations were given to campus groups of department chairs, service learning faculty, students, and at various college-community meetings to explain the purpose of CUP. Alliances were solidified as groups with strong interests in building effective college-community partnerships were brought together.

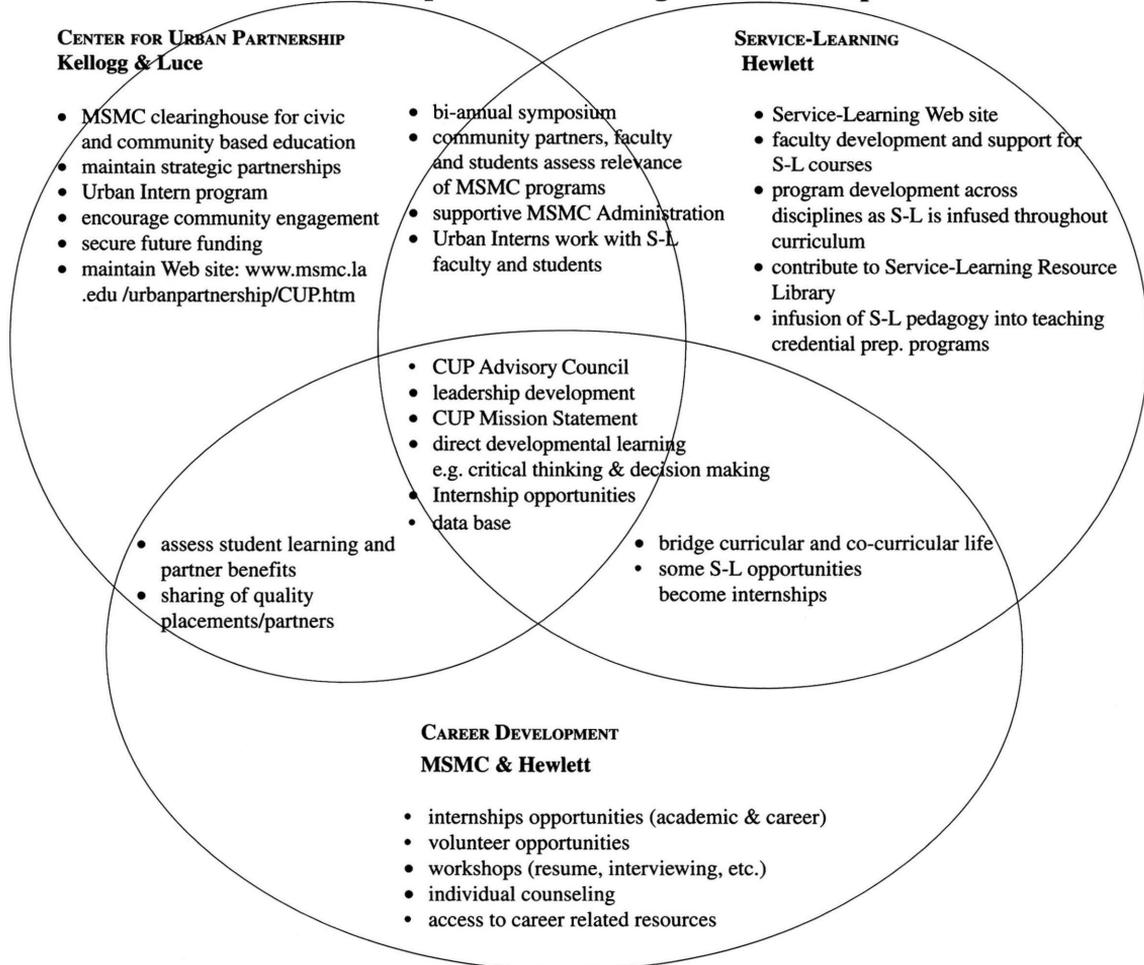
The vision and hard work were rewarded with a Henry Luce Foundation grant of \$150,000 to support the work of CUP, which dove-tailed with the faculty-focused Hewlett service learning grant that supports faculty and student involvement in community-based learning. The fall of 1999 marked the naming of ten Hewlett Faculty Fellows who worked diligently to infuse service learning into their curriculums. As they searched for viable community partners for student involvement, CUP was ready with 15 previously identified strategic community partners. The grant from the Luce Foundation supported 12 Mount students as CUP Urban Interns with needed stipends and skill-building workshops for effective community involvement. In the words of the MSMC Director of Service Learning, “The interns act as bridge-builders for the work of service learning.” Their main role is to become expert at their chosen community site to represent its needs and opportunities to both faculty and service learning students.

The synergy created by the three grants coming together resulted in a well-rounded effort to sustain community-college activity for a better Los Angeles. The overlapping graph on the next page illustrates CUP’s efforts to visualize the infrastructure needed at our college, to not just partner but also sustain long-term partnerships for a more socially just society.

In October 2000, a new MSMC president specifically addressed the relationship between the college and community in her inaugural address. Her words articulate the commitment shown by the college in the following graph:

At the heart of our belief about learning is its grounding in application. To that end, fully half of our faculty have integrated a service learning component into their courses across all disciplines. Our students are at Head Start; in elementary schools tutoring math; counseling battered women at Alexandria House; listening intently at A Place Called Home.... We find students not only doing good work [but] also thinking about what their knowledge demands of them, what responsive attitude it exacts. (Doud 2000)

## MSMC Overlapping Urban Involvements Center for Urban Partnership/Service-Learning/Career Development



In March 2001, President Doud again highlighted the importance of CUP in building our institutional infrastructure for community engagement:

Our Center for Urban Partnership has been central to this ongoing transformation of Mount St. Mary's College. This program has demonstrated our belief that we are an institution whose education is inextricably tied to the external community. Collaborating with our college-wide service learning initiative, the Center for Urban Partnership has identified, trained, and placed interns in venues where local needs and student learning intersect to produce a self-enhancing community. This type of education has enabled Mount St. Mary's College to address the individual and social aims of higher education. Indicators of the positive impact this program has had are evident in the invitations our students and faculty receive to engage and re-engage with the surrounding community. (Doud 2001)

These statements by college leadership demonstrate the unwavering support CUP has had since its inception. With this kind of support we confidently address day-to-day issues involved in timing, tension, and respect.

## **Strategies and Lessons**

To accomplish clear sailing we needed to be attentive to the challenges as well as the successes. Potential obstacles for long-term success surfaced early in Spring 2000 and included:

- the transportation of students to off-campus community sites;
- incompatible student schedules with operating hours of community partners;
- avenues of additional financial support for program maintenance and growth; and
- recruitment of new faculty to incorporate service learning in the classroom.

The key to addressing these challenges was the continual and clear communication of partnership expectations. CUP cannot solve what we do not understand. By far, the bi-monthly reflection sheets of the urban interns have contributed the most to seeking appropriate solutions to obstacles. Interns and site coordinators are asked to reflect both on their learnings as well as what hinders effective site participation. A serious commitment to resolve problems raised on the reflection sheets is made by all CUP staff. One urban intern said that part of the solution takes place when the “urban interns come together in our monthly ‘quality circle sessions’ to discuss problems and build stronger systems of support.” One purpose of the reflection sheet for another intern is “to make sure we are doing more than just charity at our sites. CUP personnel encourage us to think deeply to see the societal implications of our work for more socially just communities.” Trusting our students to name issues and needs is the basis for early resolution of potential problems.

The transportation needs of our students are not limited to off-campus community-based learning. Our west-side LA campus, located in the Santa Monica mountains, has no access to public transportation, and our downtown campus is home to many resident students without cars. Resolution of the transportation issue was marked by negotiation and creative use of resources. The college’s STOP TRANS shuttle was employed for service learning students with site visits in west LA on the weekends. To assist the downtown students who did not own vehicles, more community partners were sought with sites within walking distance of the campus. During this process, additional partners interested in an association with the college were discovered.

Recruiting new service learning faculty and searching for new funding sources are ongoing issues addressed at monthly CUP Advisory Council meetings. These issues are also addressed at faculty forums and with the MSMC Development Office. Recently, the five community members on the CUP Advisory Council have begun to include requests for urban intern and service learner stipends into their own solicitations for funds. Our partners feel confident that their benefactors will also support college-community engagement efforts. Moreover, the inclusion of an alumna, the assistant

vice president of an international bank, on our Advisory Council has allowed us to think more boldly as we engage the corporate, for-profit world in supporting our programs. To maintain awareness of our partner concerns and successes, Advisory Council meetings begin with the sharing of a site experience from an urban intern. As we continue to tackle each new obstacle and community need identified by our partners, it has become clear that the commitment, energy, and enthusiasm generated at our monthly CUP Advisory Council meetings is essential to our sustainability.

## **Establishing CUP as a Learning Organization**

Now in its third year of operation, the Center for Urban Partnership supports both curricular and co-curricular learning experiences with 20 community partners. More than 30 faculty members are committed to infusing service learning in their courses, assisted by valued urban interns who, in turn, involve themselves with over 200 MSMC students and more than 900 clients at partner organizations each semester. Each one of these participants relies on the infrastructure of support they receive from the Center for Urban Partnership. We have learned that ongoing, quality communication is vital as we continually evaluate our partnerships to ensure rich, life-long learning experiences marked by civic involvement and commitment to creating more socially just communities. In the words of the MSMC Associate Vice President for Student Affairs:

I believe CUP has influenced the building of an institutional infrastructure at MSMC in three ways: (1) it has reinforced the significant role that faculty play in the success of service-based education; (2) it has heightened awareness of service learning on a college-wide basis (i.e. people talking about service learning at faculty meetings, convocation, college committees, etc.); and (3) it has created a common purpose for faculty, staff, students and community partners. (Wadsworth 2000)

We take pride in the bridge building CUP has accomplished between academic affairs and student affairs. We know people are talking, sharing, and comparing stories of involvement both on and off campus. Our goal is to ensure that these experiences lead to reflection and civic involvement marked by the belief that one person can make a difference.

## **Conclusion**

Based on our brief yet intense three-year history, we view the Center for Urban Partnership as a learning organization at MSMC, organically growing as it nourishes itself on experience-based reflection. We commit ourselves to sustaining an infrastructure of support marked by timely interventions. These interventions respectfully address tensions via:

- ongoing reflection on our experiences using a variety of assessment measures to evaluate the impact of college-community engagement on all participants;
- monthly CUP Advisory Council meetings where all members commit to ongoing learning marked by sincere listening to the stories of actual experiences;
- frequent communication between the CUP office, faculty, administrators, and community site coordinators; and

- celebration of successes and affirmations to give thanks for the efforts of all involved.

The MSMC sailing vessel, created by the *Implementing Urban Missions* grant program in 1998, is marked by college-community connections and multiple stories of conversion from individual acts of volunteerism to collective, organized, sustainable efforts at changing unjust systems. These stories of personal and social conversion reveal themselves as we take time to enjoy moments of quiet reflection on our actions, often resulting in more clarity about our impact in Los Angeles and how to sustain our commitments.

### **Author Information**

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