

Urban Missions Mini-Grants as Faculty Development Tool

By Christina Butler

Abstract

Using mini-grants to stimulate faculty development proved successful in encouraging Ohio Dominican College personnel to go out into the community to forge learning partnerships with agencies and residents. The grants also served to identify future leaders in the ongoing implementation of the college's urban mission and leveraged support for the transition to an integrated service learning program.

Ohio Dominican College (ODC) has a long-standing commitment to its urban mission. Aside from physically removing a chain link fence that surrounded the campus until 1983, ODC has a history of community engagement, including work with Upward Bound and the Village to Child program. For an institution like ODC, mini-grants provide an efficient way to engage faculty, staff, and students with the institution's urban mission.

Today, the College defines its urban mission in both a "macro" context to meet educational needs in central Ohio as a Catholic liberal arts college, and a "micro" context, participating in the formation of a learning community in our immediate neighborhood. Located in Columbus, the college enrolls 2,050 primarily first-generation students and is committed to the urban neighborhood surrounding the college, where residents have an average per capita income of \$9,714. Our increasing commitment to the neighborhood and surrounding region was illustrated in 1993 when we "adopted" our ZIP code, 43219, and began referring to the area as Village 219.

Since that time the college has established several after-school programs designed to impact the lives of young people and their families through mentoring and tutoring opportunities and cultural enrichment activities. College students, a few faculty, neighborhood residents, and employees from the Defense Finance Accounting Service and the Junior League form a corps of tutors and mentors who interact three afternoons a week with middle and high school participants. Soon after these outreach programs were established, a regional accreditation site visit team noticed the varying degrees to which the programs were integrated into the college's curriculum and suggested careful planning so that they could evolve into integrated, rather than parallel, programs.

The *Implementing Urban Missions* grant, received from the Council of Independent Colleges in 1998, provided the impetus and the opportunity for Ohio Dominican College to increase the capacity to fulfill its urban mission and to take a giant step

toward mainstreaming outreach activities into the curriculum. This was to be accomplished through three specific objectives:

Involve more faculty and staff in Village 219.

Provide leadership, consolidation, and coordination of outreach activities.

Serve new populations undertaking employment in the 43219 ZIP code area.

The core strategy for achieving these objectives was to create a faculty mini-grant program to promote our outreach activities. Ohio Dominican's experience with small faculty development grants has shown that they can be a powerful stimulator of innovative projects and that a small amount of money (\$2,000–\$4,000) can sometimes produce astounding results. A similar experience is documented by the Indiana Youth Institute whose own mini-grant program is described in their publication, *Stacking the Odds* (Snyder and Spindel 1997). The ODC mini-grants provided the opportunity for faculty and staff to go out into the community and forge partnerships with agencies, businesses, and schools. In this way faculty, students, and staff from the college could become familiar with Village 219 residents and workers, and form a better understanding of neighborhood assets and needs.

The Mini-Grant Program

Academic Divisions and other segments of the College were invited to submit proposals that involved the College and Village 219 partners. The proposals for the *Implementing Urban Missions* mini-grants were required to meet some or all of the following criteria:

- Increase the capacity of the discipline or staff group to serve the Village 219 neighborhood.
- Integrate the liberal arts mission of the College into project activities.
- Be planned and implemented with the support of members of the Village 219 neighborhood.
- Include College students in their planning and implementation.
- Develop the College and Village 219 neighborhood as partners in a learning community.
- Create continuing relationships with schools, businesses, or agencies in Village 219 to meet project goals beyond the term of the grant.
- Facilitate the creation of self-sustaining neighborhood groups that improve the quality of life in Village 219.

To stimulate interest in the mini-grant projects, the Academic Affairs office sponsored a first-ever bus tour, to familiarize faculty and staff with 43219 residential and business areas off the beaten path of the major arteries leading to and from campus. Conducted by the director of one of the after-school programs, the tour generated such an enthusiastic response that it has now become a standard feature of faculty, staff, and student orientation.

While the major objective of the mini-grants was to increase the capacity of disciplines or staff groups to engage in learning activities with neighborhood groups, they were

also designed to identify and prepare champions for the ongoing implementation of our urban mission and for its extension in the future. In the first year, four grants totaling \$13,000 were funded. In the second year, one of the first year grantees who showed substantial leadership potential was asked to work with faculty and staff toward generating grant applications. Ten grants were funded, averaging \$3,100 each. In all, \$44,000 was dispensed through the mini-grant program.

The level of interest in community partnership from the full-time faculty of fifty-five suggested that the time might be ripe to introduce the concept of service learning to the campus community. A successful half-day service learning workshop open to all faculty and staff resulted in the identification of an enclave of interested personnel and in the fall of 2000, the College was awarded a \$250,000 service learning grant from the Corporation for National Service. Thus, the modest investment of mini-grant seed money has led to major curricular innovation grounded in partnerships with Village 219.

Grantee Characteristics

The fourteen funded mini-grants involved seven individual faculty, one staff group, two teams of two faculty, one team of three faculty, and one team of staff and faculty. A variety of disciplines were represented, including sociology, theology, education, physical education, library/information services, fine arts, and music. Most of the represented disciplines fall under the category of professional programs or “service providers.” Women comprised the vast majority of grantees. The job satisfaction research of Ropers-Huilman (2000) found that many women faculty are “interested in how their scholarship [can] work toward positive social change, of serving various communities of people.” Other research (Astin and Davis 1993) has determined that women faculty members tend to participate in action-oriented scholarly activities.

Tenured senior faculty comprised the majority of grantees. While mini-grants were not limited to senior faculty, they reflect the college’s strategy to provide post-tenure faculty development opportunities that rejuvenate routine teaching and retrain faculty for curricular innovation (Clark and others 1990).

Faculty Strategies and Experiences

Lindquist’s description of collegiate faculty development as a “deep-rooted, thick-trunked tree that has lately sprouted new branches” (1981) remains a fitting image for the recent recognition and integration of campus neighborhoods as learning spaces for faculty, staff, and students alike.

In a group discussion of their learning from their mini-grant experiences, several faculty expressed surprise at their initial difficulty in making contact with community members who eventually served as their partners. The modes of contact standard in academia—phone messages, E-mail, written letters or packets of information—did not result in the desired connection. Getting started took much longer than expected and required a more personal form of networking than they were accustomed to. Some even found their entrée to the neighborhood through police liaison officers assigned to work

with civic associations and community-based organizations. The slow start could also be attributed to the tendency to remain in the role of expert when approaching community members. In some instances, learning for the faculty member involved the realization that it is necessary to move in and out of that role, and to share the role of expert with the community partner.

Making Connections

Once the appropriate community partner was identified, faculty also expressed surprise at the partner's enthusiasm to help out, to bring others into the project, and to share ownership in the work and the eventual outcome. Unexpected partners emerged in some projects, as in the building of a victory garden at a senior resident complex. When children from a family housing community next door became interested in the digging and planting they were hired as assistants, providing an unplanned multigenerational aspect to the project and minimizing the possibility of later vandalism to the garden.

Some faculty ascribed their learning to an aspect of the project that "took on a life of its own." The effort to establish a reading group for at-risk girls, ages 11–13, at the local public library actually turned into a mother-daughter reading group when the mothers picked up the young adult books their daughters were reading and decided that they would like to talk about them, too. The mothers were so eager to express themselves that strategies had to be developed to "let the girls in on the conversation." The discovery that young adult novels might be used as a basis for adult or intergenerational reading groups has inspired the faculty member to write for publication on the topic. This project, which involved the Shepard Bush Library Branch, was designed and implemented by Tina Butler, Professor of Library Science at ODC, and Sheryl Owens, the library branch manager. As originally conceived, this project was to be a reading group for 12–16 year old girls and older library patrons. Professor Butler, the library staff, ODC faculty and students, and young female library patrons all participated in selecting books for the reading list, and arrangements were made to purchase the reading materials through the library's system, saving considerable money, and allowing the library to retain and catalog the books.

A faculty member in fine arts with a background in museum outreach spoke eloquently of her mini-grant experience (engaging neighborhood children and three artists in the creation of a "community book") as an opportunity to merge two aspects of her professional life that had not previously been in harmony. She has found a way to develop synergy between the museum outreach approach (one-day engagements between children and working artists) and the educational approach (two-week extended contacts in the summer). Having already delivered a conference program based on the experience with art educators, she is planning a second, has submitted several other conference proposals, and is exploring the possibility of developing a service learning component for an art methods course. She is also determined to find additional funding to enable repetition of the community book project.

Summary

These examples illustrate how mini-grants can provide an effective approach to faculty development. Such grants are flexible and adaptable to any department or discipline, and they allow for experimentation and discovery. They provide a relatively risk-free trial run for activities that may become self-sustaining. They allow leadership for subsequent related initiatives to emerge. They have potential to stimulate junior faculty toward activities that will lead to tenure and to energize those with “snow on the roof [and] fire in the furnace” (Bland & Bergquist 1997). The mini-grant strategy, like other sound faculty development strategies, is most likely to succeed if the desired outcomes are directly linked to the institution’s mission and policies, if they are a visible and ongoing priority of the institution, and if they are directly supported by the administration (Bland and Schmitz 1988).

The *Implementing Urban Missions* mini-grants supported thirty ODC faculty, staff, and community partners and approximately three hundred neighborhood youth in a variety of projects and activities over a three-year period. The enduring value of the mini-grants, however, lies in the leveraging impact they have had upon our ability to segue from stand-alone, peripheral projects to the attainment of a Corporation for National Service grant for a more integrated approach to service learning. The mini-grants identified a cadre of faculty and staff prepared to “use their specialized knowledge and expertise to address problems and needs in the community” (Gaff and others 2000). From this cadre, a faculty leader emerged who now serves as Director of Service Learning, a recently created position. The cadre also produced several of the first faculty to develop service learning components for courses.

As mini-grant activities have now grown into service learning activities, we recognize them as agents of change at Ohio Dominican College. When the *Implementing Urban Missions* grant proposal was written, it was not part of a larger strategy to bring service learning to our campus. Rather, the mini-grants represented an effort to develop a new facet of the existing friendship with our community by sending faculty and staff out into the neighborhood to learn and serve. Their embrace of mini-grant opportunities, however, signaled the college’s *readiness* for service learning, a readiness recognized first, and encouraged by, the *Implementing Urban Missions* program consultants.

The mini-grant strategy represents ODC’s response to the sound advice of Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence (1998) to colleges seeking new approaches to fulfilling their missions: “...the best strategy is to provide incentives for faculty and to fund the early pioneers in innovation....Faculty development programs have been successful in encouraging transition; even more successful if they extend to other members of the faculty community.” The mini-grants as a strategy for faculty and staff development have provided us with a transition to a new method for learning and teaching and for new levels of partnership both internal and external to the institution. They have more than fulfilled our expectation.

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