

Patterns of Innovation: Common Themes and Lessons Learned from the Urban Educator Corps Initiatives

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Abstract

Lessons from the work of the eleven Urban Educator Corps member institutions are outlined. They include the necessity to create strong partnerships, foster university leadership and address a compelling local need. Successful initiatives build strong financial networks as well as connect the classroom with the community and with parents and families. They also are integrated with ongoing teacher education initiatives and are driven by a commitment to continuous improvement.

As the preceding pages illustrate, there is no single answer to improving educational opportunity for all our young people—and no perfect solution. Assuring quality teachers for diverse urban classrooms and helping high-need students to succeed is hard work. The answers cannot be reduced to quick fixes. Many of the innovative ideas shared by Urban Educator Corps (UEC) members are only beginning to bear fruit.

Nevertheless, from the real world of our nation's urban schools, there are answers emerging to the challenges we face. There are lessons that can inform change elsewhere. As the stories from the UEC universities illustrate, there are eight components that contribute to real change:

1. Create a strong partnership.
2. Foster university leadership.
3. Address a compelling need.
4. Build a financial network.
5. Go beyond the classroom.
6. Connect with parents and families.
7. Connect to teacher education.
8. Set standards for continuous improvement.

1. Create a Strong Partnership

Two institutions have created wide-ranging partnerships—the University of Cincinnati and the University of Houston. Their stories illustrate an important lesson: effective educational change cannot happen without the collaborative involvement of schools; colleges of education; universities; community organizations; parents; civic groups; business; and local, state, and national government. The complex challenges we face

require no less than a united focus. Both Cincinnati and Houston exemplify the kind of strong community-wide P-16 partnerships that advance access and student success: they engage stakeholders directly, and they focus partner efforts.

In Cincinnati, for example, the university, under the leadership of its president, has created a network of partners who “leave turf behind” to work together on goals vital to the community. Strong partnerships become more than the sum of their parts, leveraging the expertise of diverse members to focus efforts and better coordinate resources so that they can make a greater difference.

The University of Houston’s P-16 partnership recognized early on that it could not implement programming for the half million students it serves. What it could do, however, is to convene those who can do this, connect them in a “web of local councils” and serve as a catalyst for policy development.

While Cincinnati and Houston provide examples of two systemic partnerships, each of the eleven universities is anchored in a school-university-community partnership as well. Whether it encompasses one school and one university, like The University of Akron’s LEAP UP program, or involves multiple school districts like Georgia State University’s PDS2 initiative, none of the universities’ successes would be possible without the collaborative energy a partnership brings.

However, as the The University of Akron reminds us, partnerships require attention. The needs of all partners must be heard and addressed. Multiple perspectives, interests and contributions make collaboration challenging, but, as has been illustrated here, they also obtain results not otherwise possible.

2. Foster University Leadership

While effective partnerships are essential to addressing the challenges of access and student success, they are not sufficient. They also require leadership by those universities committed to serving their urban communities. Urban universities are uniquely positioned to provide the catalytic leadership necessary for educational change. Their leaders, presidents and deans have *convening* power, able to bring together diverse stakeholders on what is often perceived as “neutral” ground. These universities also have a resident pool of scholars in their faculty, staff and administrators. They have the research capacity to bring rigor and new ideas to their community initiatives. They provide experienced grant writing and expertise in working with state and national funders. They have access to a large pool of students who can serve as mentors and tutors as well as assist in a variety of other ways. Additionally, as a *coalition* of Urban Serving Universities, they have a wider network of like-minded institutions engaging in shared work.

University leadership can take many forms. Key administrators can help to advance change initiatives through their personal involvement, as was the case at Virginia Commonwealth University where the president participated as a mentor, in addition to

the project leadership provided by deans and faculty. Universities can also help to define both the direction and the focus for partnership efforts. The University of Memphis's College of Education core principles helped to shape its work with the ACE Academy, creating a program that was relevant to its diverse community, anchored in effective practice, and educationally innovative. North Carolina State University implemented an exemplary pre-college program by researching best practice, providing vital staff support and faculty resources, assessing performance and connecting its students to the resources of the entire university, enriching their learning. The education school dean assumed a major leadership role throughout.

3. Address a Compelling Need

There is an old saying that the best way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. Tackling educational change requires that university-school partnerships focus on what their communities need most. In North Carolina, the pre-college program was developed in response to a growing demand for students prepared to enroll and graduate with math, science and technology degrees. What began as a single program for high-need students was taken to scale statewide. In Kansas City, the need to recruit more prospective teachers of color from the urban center and also to retain those teachers in challenging urban schools prompted the University to develop its Institute for Urban Education (IUE). This program, designed specifically to prepare teachers for the urban context, serves as a model for all of teacher education. The University of Minnesota recognized that talented immigrant students with limited English language proficiency were slipping through the cracks and failing to attend college. Its program began at one school and has grown to serve diverse populations at three different schools.

Meeting the national challenge to help all of America's young people succeed in school and graduate prepared for their careers will not happen with a single "one-size-fits-all" model. The challenges are complex, and our responses must focus on where the need is greatest with resources from across the university and the larger community. The array of creative interventions shared earlier illustrates the variety of successful approaches to improving access and success.

4. Build a Financial Network

There is a common thread that runs through all of the innovations profiled in this issue. Adequate funding is essential for quality and effectiveness—and securing and maintaining adequate funding is a constant challenge. At Florida International University, a combination of university, school district and private funding enabled the program to support a residential summer camp for the students engaged in the Algebra Project, an experience that both distinguished the program and contributed to significant positive outcomes.

Building a financial infrastructure that can support innovative change is no easy task, of course. For many partnerships it is created by combining resources from several sources, especially on-going partners, and also leveraging local, state or federal grants

as well as engaging a variety of philanthropic donors. The benefits of a sound financial foundation are immeasurable. North Carolina State University's pre-college program owes its twenty-year history in part to a state-level commitment to preparing high-need students for math and science careers.

Multiple-funder networks, while common across partnerships, are too often fragile, and they change as the partners change or become inadequate for the growing scale of the initiative. The University of Cincinnati, for example, has relied on the resources of its partners for its Strive initiatives. It estimates, however, that to provide the systemic interventions from birth through career that the program envisions will require a future investment of more than \$200 million. The partners are contemplating a public campaign to raise these funds.

A lesson to be learned from the examples in this issue is that money remains critical to change efforts and will continue to require as much creative attention as the change effort itself. The key, however, is partnerships. The ability to raise and maintain needed funding is greatly enhanced by strong and stable partnerships. They are not competing for limited funds but sharing and leveraging resources.

5. Go Beyond the Classroom

A common refrain across the initiatives profiled in this issue has been that student success requires more than enriching the classroom experience. Memphis State University's ACE Academy, for example, embeds African American history and culture, community relevance, and experiences focused on developing positive self-identity directly into its academic curriculum, enhancing academic achievement. Virginia Commonwealth University's Project BEST begins with a mentoring program that pairs middle school students with university students, enlarging their ideas of future educational possibilities and beyond. Project BEST includes Saturday enrichment seminars and summer camps that profile postsecondary careers, underscoring the message that students have the potential to think beyond their current life experiences.

The University of Minnesota's Commanding English Program not only provides the academic and language learning needed for students to succeed in college, but also through its advising and on-campus component, helps students acquire the time-management and study skills they need to navigate higher education. At the University of Alabama at Birmingham, the newly implemented TRUST program seeks to support enhanced counseling at partner high schools. The University recognized that academic preparation for college was insufficient for students and their families who had little experience of postsecondary opportunities.

In regard to enhancing student success, faculty at Florida International University's Algebra Project stressed that "in addition to the cognitive, the affective domain must also be addressed." They did so by providing group counseling, peer mentoring, and team-building exercises to supplement the academic component of the summer institute.

6. Connect with Parents and Families

Looking beyond the classroom not only involves providing co-curricular opportunities for urban students, it also requires reaching out to their parents and families, engaging them as partners in the shared enterprise of learning. This is no small task as faculty and teachers involved in the Algebra Project discovered. Even accessing contact information can be a challenge at some urban schools which frequently lack both the technology and the staff to facilitate connections. Finding ways to involve parents, families, and community in meaningful ways requires a great deal of perseverance, listening, talking, and lots of trial and error as faculty from The University of Akron discovered when they struggled to present a reading program that would meet the needs of the ethnic Mon families in the school's neighborhood.

The benefits of engaging families, however, are significant. North Carolina's pre-college program involves families in programming and fundraising which reinforces the students' commitment to the program. The ACE Academy in Memphis builds on the contributions of parents and community members as the students learn about their own histories. This creates a "shared responsibility" between community and student that enhances both parties and strengthens learning.

7. Connect to Teacher Education

Student success and access to postsecondary education requires attention to improving urban teacher quality as the central means to advancing student learning. Several UEC initiatives focus directly on enhancing the quality and retention of urban teachers—from the Urban Teacher Enhancement Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham to Kansas City's unique Institute of Urban Education. Each integrates multicultural education, instruction in culturally responsive pedagogy, and hands-on experiences in diverse, high-need urban classrooms.

In addition to such specific teacher education initiatives, other innovative programs recognize the need to enhance learning opportunities for potential teachers by intentionally connecting them to innovative student success initiatives. The University of Akron's LEAP UP tutoring program has expanded to involve pre-service teachers in classroom teaching and working with neighborhood groups. Florida International's Algebra Project brought together its middle-school students for conversations with the College of Education's pre-service teachers. The prospective teachers greatly benefited from the candid suggestions about what constitutes effective teaching by the program's urban high school students.

8. Set Standards for Continuous Improvement

The Urban Educator Corps has set an ambitious goal: to identify innovative change initiatives that can be adapted and taken to scale by universities and communities across the country. This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* outlines eleven initiatives that are having an impact on the success of urban students and their access to

postsecondary learning. Equally important, however, is the need to continue to evaluate, refine, and improve these innovations so that the partnership investments of time, resources, and energy can be effective and, as importantly, so that they can be accepted at other universities in the coalition.

As the University of Houston's P-16+ Council recognizes, "standards" are critical to educational change. By standards, the Council means setting rigorous and meaningful goals for outcomes that will make a difference in the lives of their students and the community.

The University of Cincinnati's Strive initiative has embedded *continuous improvement* in its Roadmap to Success. The roadmap lays out the critical developmental transitions its partners will impact. Service providers who join the student success networks are required to develop specific action plans and provide ongoing, data-driven assessment of their progress. The initiative borrows from General Electric's Six Sigma model to monitor the effectiveness of the collaboration efforts.

Such attention to results is essential if America is to fulfill its obligation to prepare all our young people for the future. As this issue illustrates, harnessing the collective power of our urban research universities can—and already has begun to—improve the urban education pipeline and support student success.

Author Information

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