



Great Cities Institute



# UIC ni

**UIC**

Neighborhoods  
Initiative



UIC'S METROPOLITAN COMMITMENT

**UIC** The University of Illinois  
at Chicago

# AT THE HEART OF AN URBAN

Unlike many other universities, UIC sits in the heart of an urban neighborhood. Because neither the university nor the community is monolithic, the relationship between the two institutions is both complex and fluid. What remains constant, however, is their interdependence.

“We are of the community. We have the biggest house, but what happens in the neighborhood is important to our survival,” says Cynthia Barnes-Boyd, director of the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI). [“We live in the community all the time; we have to work in it all the time.”](#)

The UIC Neighborhoods Initiative leads the university’s commitment to community development partnerships in Pilsen and the Near West Side, communities adjacent to the campus. Through its Partnership Council and the Community/Campus Partners for Health Council, it brings together academics, representatives of community-based organizations, residents and others to exchange information and seek opportunities to collaborate.

Barnes-Boyd and Atanacio Gonzalez, Associate Director of the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative, move easily between the university and the community. Barnes-Boyd, who holds a doctorate in Nursing Science from UIC, served as executive director of the Mile Square Health Center for seven years. In addition to numerous professional activities, she is on the board of directors of West Side Future, the Illinois Coalition of School Health Centers and the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation.

Gonzalez is secretary of the Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, one of the most successful community development corporations in the country, and president of Humboldt Construction, a community staffed construction company. He has a master’s degree in Urban Planning and Policy from UIC.

While the relationship between UIC and its neighbors is sometimes rocky, Gonzalez points out that most community people understand that the university is a large institution with varied interests, including real estate needs that might collide with the interests of community groups. [“People also know that there are hundreds of faculty members and thousands of students who are interested in developing the quality of life of the community around them,”](#) he says.

Sister Virginia Phillips, director of Westside Employment Education Center (WEEC), says that collaborating with the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative has given her access to information and resources she never would have otherwise. For example, UICNI helped WEEC and the Gads Hill Center in Pilsen obtain a grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs to purchase computer workstations with Internet access. University students set up and maintain the equipment.

# NEIGHBORHOOD

Because of their proximity to city neighborhoods, UIC students are able to apply what they are learning in the classroom to real people and institutions. “Students can walk to a local school, local YMCA or community development corporation, work with community residents and engage in useful research,” Gonzalez points out. In addition, “UIC is able to attract academics who are interested not in an ivory tower, but who want to do cutting edge research on today’s urban problems,” he says.

The UIC Neighborhoods Initiative not only fosters collaboration between the university and the community, but within the university. Barnes-Boyd, who has offices on the medical campus and on the east side of campus, straddles the two worlds herself.

Her goal is to find ways to stimulate academics “to think out of their particular box; to make what might seem like unlikely connections.” She adds, “I’m asking them to sit together as equal noncompetitive partners and to collaborate with community partners, not as individual departments, but as a university.”

While some disciplines and individuals work together on certain issues, Barnes-Boyd points out that “in a research institution like ours, there’s a level of competition that I don’t think inspires people to be collaborators.”

Nevertheless, there are striking examples of successful partnerships. A collaborative effort among a variety of disciplines at UIC—including nursing, dentistry, medicine, kinesiology, psychiatry and education—and community-based organizations, including Mile Square Health Center, Horner Homes Local Advisory Council, West Side Future and Chicago Commons, resulted in a comprehensive health clinic at Suder School on the Near West Side. The clinic offers health services to students and their families, as well as programs focusing on responsible behavior, conflict resolution and anger management.

The partnership was born at a UIC Neighborhoods Initiative event attended by Barnes-Boyd, then executive director of Mile Square, representatives of other community-based groups and UIC faculty members. The participants submitted a joint proposal for a federal Healthy Schools, Healthy Communities program grant. The five-year initiative was funded and subsequently renewed.

“From the perspective of the university, we have a single coordinating entity bringing resources together in a non-duplicative manner in a single site. Community partners are equally involved in supporting the program,” says Barnes-Boyd. “We are all committed to the same vision.”

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