

## Housing Inventory Promotes Inter - University and Community Collaboration



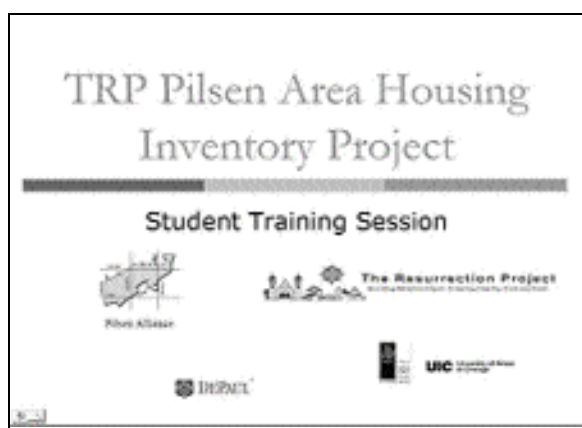
*Above is a student out in the Pilsen community collecting data for the housing inventory project.*

On a typical late November day in Chicago, one would be hard pressed to find anyone voluntarily spending long periods of time outside in the often near-wintery weather. But during this past fall and winter, a team of undergraduate students from DePaul University braved the weather, with a clipboard and camera in hand, and roamed the streets of the predominantly Latino community of Pilsen, located just southwest of Chicago's downtown area. As part of a University of Illinois at Chicago Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI)-facilitated collaborative research project, which was made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation, these students participated in a community housing inventory project that documented the existing conditions of Pilsen's current housing stock.

Preparation for this housing inventory began well before the Fall semester. Early in 2004, UICNI and The Resurrection Project (TRP), a community based organization in Pilsen, began to make plans to conduct a full assessment of property taxes and housing stock in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. After many discussions, a comprehensive research project was developed to conduct a survey of existing housing conditions in Pilsen in order to provide TRP with the tools necessary to make more informed planning decisions. TRP also hoped that the research would inform their work on monitoring changes to the zoning code in Pilsen.

The initial plan for the project was to engage in a participatory research project to assess housing and property conditions of each housing unit in Pilsen. The housing inventory was to be carried out primarily by staff and volunteers from TRP. UICNI would develop the rating instrument, train volunteers to collect photographs and rate data on current housing stock, and analyze the initial data collected by volunteers. As the project began to unfold, TRP facilitated partnerships with other Chicago organizations that would increase the effectiveness and benefits of the project. Pilsen Alliance, a network of community based organizations in Pilsen, was brought into the project, and they recruited Professor Winifred Curran, a visiting assistant professor in DePaul University's Department of Geography to work with the project team. Curran created a class assignment for students enrolled in her Urban Geography course to complete the assessment of current housing conditions and property taxes in twenty-five selected neighborhood blocks in Pilsen. The class assignment allowed students to take an active and vital role in the project. According to Amanda Eichelkraut, a UICNI

*Students from DePaul University were trained by UICNI graduate students to collect information for the housing inventory survey. This also shows all the university and community partners that were involved in this inventory.*



research assistant working on the project, "Since most of the DePaul students are not originally from the city of Chicago, I think this project really gave them the opportunity to be out in a community setting and see how the project could really make a positive impact." With each partner contributing a distinct and necessary piece of the puzzle, a natural collaboration between UICNI, TRP, Pilsen Alliance, and DePaul University was formed to complete the project.

However, the unique needs and timeline for the project presented some challenges in the collaboration. As the project began to develop, the project timeline presented a significant challenge for the partners. TRP wished to complete the project and analysis before City Hall announced a public hearing to review zoning changes. Also, the university partners were subject to the time constraints of the beginning and ending dates of the academic semester (or as in this case, DePaul's quarter) system. The project team was faced with developing a legitimate inventory instrument that addressed community needs, creating a training curriculum and teaching DePaul students to use the instrument, and completing the actual survey of the community within 2 months.

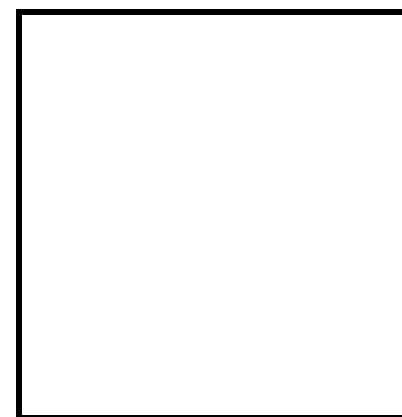


*A photograph taken by one of the students of the Pilsen community during their housing inventory survey.*

In a flurry of meetings, with UICNI taking the lead, all the partners worked together to develop the inventory survey instrument, test it in the field, develop a three hour training presentation, prepare the students, and develop a data cleaning manual over a two month period. DePaul students carried out the inventory, Professor Curran collected all the information gathered by the students, and then handed the data over to UICNI, which reviewed the data collected and trained TRP staff and volunteers to clean the data. Data cleaning was completed by TRP in March 2005 and is now being incorporated into a comprehensive database, which was designed in collaboration between TRP and UICNI. The database features a user-friendly Visual-Basic interface and will be able to complete specific criteria searches based on the information gathered by the DePaul students. Also, additional inventory surveys were completed by community leaders from the Pilsen Alliance and this data has yet to be cleaned and incorporated into the database.

As can be seen by the process, the final database and training could not have been completed in such a timely fashion without the collaboration and cooperation of all the partners involved. When asked to reflect on this type of collaboration, Eichelkraut said "[T]his project has shown how the university-community partnership model can really work, and provide benefits to all partners involved. Through this truly collaborative process, the community organizations and undergraduate students received training and technical assistance, while we at UIC benefited from the local expertise and knowledge of the community organizations to develop a survey and process that would provide them with the information they needed to make good planning decisions for the community." UICNI research assistants also benefited from the partnerships and collaboration of the project. "Watching this collaboration, while developing new relationships and knowledge exchange among the partners was a great experience," said Asma Ali, another UICNI research assistant on the project, "It was phenomenal as a student researcher to be part of many different strengths, ideas, and products that were involved in this process. Each partner contributed something unique and necessary to the project. The success of this project is really a testament to the collaboration and hard work of all of the partners and students involved in the project."

This type of collaboration, from start to finish, shows how partners from both the university and the community can work together in every aspect of a comprehensive research project - from defining the boundaries of the housing study, to designing questions for the survey, planning the training curriculum, and planning for the data cleaning and evaluation component. This project was very unique, in that it was both a cross-university collaboration (with DePaul University), and strengthened both universities' partnerships with their local community partners.



*Shown is the interface designed in conjunction between UICNI and TRP. The database can be searched individually or in a combination of the following criteria: address, study area, age of structure, rating/address, structural classification, and rating.*

# UIC Neighborhoods Initiative Receives New Directions Grant From U.S. Department Of Housing And Urban Development

The University of Illinois at Chicago Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI) was awarded a Community Outreach Partnership Centers New Directions grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to expand the scope of the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative programs to new activities in the North Lawndale neighborhood.

The New Directions grant will address two urgent needs currently facing residents from the North Lawndale community, which is part of the West Empowerment Zone/Enterprising Communities Cluster: improving services and capacity building



**UIC students meet to discuss survey results for an assessment tool for a community organization.**

of agencies and non-profits in the North Lawndale area and increasing affordable rental housing and improving accessibility to housing in North Lawndale. The project will be completed in fall 2006.

Also, this grant will increase the involvement of UIC faculty, staff, and students and the number of courses to be taught in COPC-related activities. These activities include affordable housing, accessible housing and community living needs of people with disabilities, capacity building through

employment services and assisting non-profit organizations, and revising an existing UIC class to assist with surveys to develop an assessment tool for a community newspaper.

The community and university partners are; the North Lawndale Employment Network, North Lawndale Community News, Chicago Rehab Network, Steans Family Foundation, Access Living, UIC Voorhees Neighborhood Center, UIC Center for Urban Economic Development, UIC Great Cities Institute Professional Education, and UIC Applied Health Science.

The UICNI is a partnership between the University of Illinois at Chicago and organizations in the neighborhoods adjacent to the university. It brings together resources from the community and the university to help strengthen the quality of life for the benefit of current residents, businesses, the university, and other institutions. The Initiative is a major component of UIC's Great Cities Commitment and is housed at the Great Cities Institute.

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## Partnering to Build Bridges Across the Digital Divide

In efforts to bridge the digital divide, the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI) and the North Lawndale Community News (NLCN), also known as Strategic Human Services, have partnered together to increase the capacity of NLCN's existing community technology center (CTC). Funded by a grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, UICNI and NLCN were able to purchase 6 computers and add two UIC graduate students to teach basic computer literacy courses so community residents could have access to the equipment and the training needed to acquire and enhance their technological skills in hopes of obtaining a job.



**Computer Literacy Classes taught at the North Lawndale Community News Community Technology Center.**

Located just west of the Chicago Loop, near Garfield Park and the Near West Side, the North Lawndale community consists primarily of African American residents. Although the neighborhood suffers from a high poverty rate of approximately 45%, it is experiencing many opportunities for development that appear to be building on the strengths of the community. One of the strengths of the community is NLCN. Founded in 1999, the North Lawndale Community News became a community newspaper that communicated the community's key areas of concern, primarily issues of employment

and housing in the community. It is a community-based newspaper that currently distributes 15,000 newspapers to residents in the North Lawndale community area. Because of an increase in the demand for its services, it has expanded its service areas and is now also serving East & West Garfield, Austin, Pilsen, Humbolt Park, Near Westside and South Lawndale. The newspaper is published bi-weekly and distributed by Strategic Human Services (SHS), an information and resource network dedicated to the spiritual, social, and technical advancement of

residents in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood. Their objective is to cover local stories, events, and resources for neighborhood families and businesses with the purpose of informing the community on issues relevant to the community and nearby communities.

**Ram Chandrasekaran, UICNI Research Assistant and computer instructor at NLCN.**



Joining NLCN's efforts, the UICNI has been able to provide graduate students to assist in the implementation and instruction of the basic computer literacy course at the enhanced CTC. Current course offerings include computer writing classes, media workshops such as web site design, and desktop publishing courses. Ram Chandrasekaran, a research assistant with UICNI, teaches basic web design classes at NLCN and feels that his work there is making a positive impact on the community and can help residents become even more qualified for jobs. He feels that "overall, computer literacy classes would improve the resident's skills and could help to better prepare them for employment opportunities in technology." The courses also provide community residents with access to necessary technological resources to develop their communication skills. The computer writing classes in particular give students the opportunity to have their written work published in the newspaper, allowing for residents to express their feelings freely and openly.

The UICNI partnership with North Lawndale Community News has allowed for the university to share its technological resources with the community and build on the newspaper's efforts to reach out to its residents and address the digital divide that affects many low-income communities today.

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