



Drexel University's Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships: A New Path in University and Community Relationship Building

Jennifer Britton 08 December 2014

Drexel University's s Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships took its inspiration from the hundred-year-old tradition of cooperative extension to build a neighborhood-based hub of programming that is designed to fulfill ambitious local goals for transformation. The Center relies on stakeholder planning to coordinate knowledge and academic resources from across the university together with nonprofit program partners to create integrated programming that meets the needs and interests of neighborhood and institutional participants. The strength of the model lies in the combination of participatory planning with a comprehensive institutional commitment to its success.

Drexel University, like many urban universities in North America, is asserting itself as an anchor institution to catalyze a local economic development strategy. This strategy grows from the recognition of mutual benefits-for both the university and local

neighborhood stakeholders that can emerge from a coordinated development process. And in an economic environment in which few cities have available resources for intensive citywide development, the opportunity for 'eds and meds' institutions to play roles in their neighborhoods becomes clear.

Drexel University has committed to a comprehensive strategy for local engagement, with six goals that frame its work and its investments in the residential neighborhoods that border the campus to the north and west. The strategy entails coordinated support for the following goals:

- Safety and sustainability
- Homeownership
- Economic vitality
- Education
- Health and wellness
- Retail and arts

Taken together, these focus areas drive how Drexel situates its work with its neighborhood partners. They connect Drexel's neighbors to other significant development efforts, including, for example, the university's plan for an 'innovation neighborhood' situated on the east side of the University City campus, designed to attract technical and scientific business and entrepreneurial activity. Drexel has committed to supporting residents' access not only

to participation in the innovation neighborhood as innovators, entrepreneurs, scientists and workers but also to broader opportunities in the city. The Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships is set up to be the physical hub for this work.

Two neighborhoods in particular are the focus for Drexel's neighborhood strategies. Powelton Village, lying immediately to the north of the campus, is made up largely of middle-class professional families and student rentals, with students outnumbering the families. Mantua, farther north beyond Powelton Village, houses fewer students, but its demographics also feature high poverty and high unemployment numbers. The historical relationship between Drexel and its resident neighbors has been contentious and distrustful, with many families still carrying memories of losing homes as the universities in West Philadelphia expanded their footprints through eminent domain, and with university students not always being ideal neighbors.

Residents in the two neighborhoods also recall bonds of family and acquaintanceship that once crossed neighborhood boundaries but that have lain dormant for decades and that have been further complicated by the barriers of inequality and racism. In a stakeholder-driven planning process, participants created a vision for the Dornsife Center that not only begins to address residents' immediate interests in areas like jobs access, health and wellness programming, arts and


culture opportunities and legal support but that also sees the Center as a mediating force in transforming this contentious history into a future of creative collaboration and constructive problem solving.

The Dornsife Center was established at 3509 Spring Garden Street on a 1.3-acre property that was formerly operated by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia as a school for hearing impaired children. Located on the nominal border between Mantua and Powelton Village, the property features three buildings that, following an 11-month renovation, were fitted with a variety of meeting, workshop and teaching spaces. Operationally, the Center is inspired by the tradition of cooperative extension from land-grant universities in that it links the interests of local stakeholders, giving neighbors access to the university's knowledge resources and hosting and developing programming to address issues and challenges identified by participants and stakeholders. However, the Dornsife Center gives traditional extension a few new twists: its hyper-local focus on two specific neighborhoods; its vision of extension as a university-wide, comprehensive effort rather than coming from an agricultural college; and its context in a private urban university. At the Dornsife Center, stakeholder participation in planning is embedded in its operations and expectations, and is a key part of the vision for transforming historically contentious relationships. This takes the form primarily of a community advisory council

that was formed following an intensive 2013 stakeholder planning workshop. The council meets monthly and has begun to incorporate periodic planning-vision events to ensure that the Center's mission stays true to local needs and interests.

The Dornsife Center is distinct from both traditional cooperative extension and corollary higher education anchor development activity in Philadelphia. As mentioned above, the Center brings a hyper-local geographic focus to extension, diverging from land-grant-generated cooperative extension's role in translating new research to state- and county-level constituencies. The Dornsife Center also represents a new model for local education and anchor development in Philadelphia with its coherent, focused coordination of institutional resources across internal units. The Center not only offers a physical hub for Drexel's faculty, students and nonprofit partners to carry out programming in support of local needs; in its staffing and operations, it also embodies an institution-wide commitment to and support for local engagement that incorporates both academic and business operations.

The model charts a new path in university and community relationship building in its commitment to stakeholder-driven planning, which lays a foundation of trust and cooperation for the vision of transformation that stakeholders have articulated. This solution - the stakeholder-driven center for problem-solving and

collaboration -  arose as parallel movements within and outside of the University met. Within the institution, growing faculty and student interest in meaningful connection to the university's  neighbors was reified by President John Fry's  stated ambition for Drexel to become the most civically engaged university in the nation. Outside of the university, local neighborhood planning processes articulated a desire for better access to the university's  knowledge resources. The Dornsife Center fills a convener role in its local setting, knitting together a network of program partners from university departments and nonprofit partners to create suites of programming around key topic areas. While it does not completely upend the notion of academics-as-expertise in that academic engagement is a crucial piece of the programming, it celebrates the local-knowledge and content-area expertise of strategic program partners as well as that of its stakeholder planning participants. Drexel University and the Dornsife Center are also important participants in development strategies anchored by the City of Philadelphia and organizations like the LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation) and local CDCs, and it certainly played a role in the successful federal Promise Zone proposal. Drexel's  work with the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation to obtain New Markets and Historic Tax Credits for the site's  purchase and renovation fits neatly into the spirit of comprehensive partnership building that infuses the project.

The Dornsife Center is banking on the strength of a fully stakeholder-engaged process to drive a long-term vision of transformation. Participating stakeholders have articulated a desire for transformation on two levels: one, by transforming individual and family-level circumstances by using the center to help participants meet immediate needs including jobs and college access, health and wellness programming, legal advocacy, education support and arts and culture opportunities. Two, a broader notion of transformation sees the Dornsife Center playing a key role in mediating an overhaul of Drexel's historically strained relationship with its neighbors and in creating opportunities for Mantua and Powelton Village to overcome the long-standing social barriers between them to forge a dynamic community of shared opportunity. The action steps that the Center uses to achieve these goals are fully replicable, and include carrying out basic and simple but powerful community-building work. This might take the form, for example, of hosting community-wide monthly dinners and building programs for civic dialogue on important local topics. Key to filling the Dornsife Center with the right mix of programming geared towards meeting local needs is forming partnerships with high-quality program providers from both within and outside of the university in the service of programming around key strategic areas to enact stakeholders' visions for problem solving. Dornsife Center staff have created forums for both local stakeholders and program providers to interact, share information and work together to identify

important programming opportunities. These core programming strategies, founded on a commitment to stakeholder engagement and on acting in a convener role to attract high-quality partners will, if successful, allow the Dornsife Center to host a profound local transformation.

Author Bio:

Jennifer Britton is the Associate Director of the Lindy Institute for Urban Innovation and the Launch Director for the Drexel University Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships.