Our Mission

The Monsignor John J. Egan Urban Center (EUC) represents DePaul University’s tangible and enduring commitment to the research, development, deliverance and transfer of innovative education and community-based programs and services that have a significant social impact.

Our mission gives concrete expression to the University’s Vincentian commitment by extending opportunities for DePaul to collaborate with Chicago communities to alleviate poverty, promote social justice and address critical urban problems through teaching, service and scholarship. Specifically, the EUC focuses on partnerships, collaborative programming, research and evaluation.

Youth Project Focuses on Racial Healing

Jamika, an African American junior at Gage Park High School on Chicago’s South Side, says that racism “is a topic that people in my community normally don’t ask questions about, but we should be talking about it.”

Jamika and many Chicago Black and Latino youth have been doing just that through the EUC’s “Community Builders Working Together Towards Racial Healing” project that encourages open dialogue and critical reflection on race and race issues. The project is conducted with four community based organizations (CBOs) in the Chicago Lawn and West Humboldt Park neighborhoods. The project, which was designed in collaboration with the partner CBOs, is funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a first for DePaul.

The EUC serves as a coordinator, facilitator and evaluator of the project. “We believe this is dynamic work that has great potential,” says Keith Lewis, who manages this project and is Community Coordinator for the Egan Center. “It’s about collaboration and relationship-building as Black and Latino youth strive to understand issues across cultures and race.” The purpose of the project is to bring Black and Latino youth together to discuss race and race issues in their communities while also recognizing and beginning to organize around common concerns and social justice. The project works to build trust between groups through a process of reflective practice developed by Senior Egan Fellow Dr. Ceasar McDowell, who is a Professor of the Practice of Community Development at MIT. Dr. McDowell is the

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From the Director

The Egan Urban Center (EUC) continues to embrace the legacy of Monsignor John Egan and strive to be a catalyst for change in Chicago’s most disadvantaged communities. While we can be a catalyst, the Egan Center also understands that the community is the expert in solving its own problems.

We expect citizens to take on their biggest challenges and help forge workable solutions. The Egan Center works with grassroots leaders in developing support in their initiatives. We realize that sustained investment in grassroots leadership development results in an expanded long-term leadership capacity for the community.

Our work is steeped in the understanding of the nature and functions of communities. We see that there is a fundamental shift occurring away from a deficiency-based view, emphasizing hand-outs and alternative support systems, to an asset-based view, focusing on how to influence markets and other systems to see, invest in and deploy neighborhood assets. This, in turn, requires an increased focus on building connections and enabling market and other transactions that reconnect neighborhood people and assets to the larger economy and society.

Neighborhoods are dynamic, not static. They are constantly in motion, as people, households, businesses and investors choose to stay or leave, move in or invest. Indeed, this process is the primary mechanism of change in neighborhoods. A neighborhood that is not renewing is dying. Fortunately, we are seeing a promising development as neighborhoods renew themselves: in most communities, reliance on grassroots leadership is growing.

In this newsletter, we share examples of our recent work in Chicago communities. In our lead story on the efforts of neighborhood organizations to address the need for racial healing, we see a number of recurring themes. New (and, in this case, young) leaders are finding ways to talk about a challenging problem. In the process, they are showing how solutions can be forged at the community level. In these pages, we also introduce you to a new community organization, broad efforts we are involved in to address key policy questions, and staff and students who are making an impact at the Egan Center.
founder of the Center for Reflective Community Practice at MIT and of the nonprofit organization Engage the Power, a global initiative to fuel the hope for democracy by supporting the diverse global public to raise questions exchange knowledge, and organize for action. "This work is based on the deep belief that communities, and those on the ground, have a wealth of knowledge," says Dr. McDowell,

"We try to create processes that let people in communities work together."

The EUCs partners with four main Chicago-based organizations for the two-year project: Block Club Federation, a small volunteer-run organization based in Humboldt Park; Broader Urban Involvement and Leadership Development (BUILD), which collaborates with more than 100 private organizations and public agencies in the city and in Chicago Law; the Southwest Youth Collaborative (SWYC) which serves five local community areas, and the Latino Organization of the Southwest (LOS). In addition to the reflection and dialogue activities, the project has also supported a "question campaign" as well as activities in the partner CBOS. As part of the question campaign, youth participants brainstormed questions on race and highlighted questions for a series of thought provoking ads that they designed and are distributing in schools and communities. One of the ads asks: "Why does the media portray minorities as ignorant and violent?" Questions that the youth raised will fuel a mobilized grassroots effort towards policy change.

Cindy Ibarra, a youth organizer with SWYC, says the project's critical reflection component "helped youth dialogue about the root causes of racism. This training brought up questions that helped us understand each other's race and culture. For example, youth would talk about stereotypes and break them down. Youth began to trust that we were coming from a place of healing."

Jamika was one of about 15 youth who participated in critical reflection sessions. Through the process, she says, she and other youth explored "how Black and Latino neighborhoods are different. We also talked about schools and relationship." For example, she says "Even in classrooms, many Black and Latino students don't communicate with each other." Jamika says she is already seeing signs that the racial healing project is working. "This experience made me start talking about racism more," she says. "I'm also introducing myself more to Latinos."

Evaristo Montoro, a youth organizer with LOS, saw how Latino youth with his organization interacted with youth from SWYC. "It was good to see how kids reacted to each other," he says.

"They became more comfortable with each meeting and learned how to break down barriers."

"So much of the issue with social change, Dr. McDowell adds, is that we don't spend enough time exchanging knowledge and the different experiences that people have. There's not enough listening going on. We have to talk to each other and understand things together, without someone else's agenda." Jonathan, a senior at Gage Park High School, who participated in the project through LOS, echoed Dr. McDowell. "We asked questions like 'Why are we so far apart?' 'Why don't we understand each other?'," he says. "I think a lot of people learned from the experience. Race is pretty much of a constant issue, and getting to know each other better as people really makes a difference."

Community Builders Working Together Towards Racial Healing will culminate in a summit on May 12, 2012. The Summit will bring together youth from all of the partner organizations to share their reflections and experiences.

Voices from the Village

The Egan Urban Center (EUC) supports revitalization efforts in Chicago communities. This regular feature shares a perspective from a community-based organization that has worked closely with EUC.

Asiha Butler, Resident Association of Greater Englewood

A few years ago, I wanted to get involved in Englewood, where I live. The more I got involved, the more I saw things I could share. I enlisted other residents, and we showed films that speak to the community - movies about violence in video games, about the plight of black women, and more. My husband and my daughter, who is 14, also got involved.

After that, I identified more residents who were willing to get involved. I began to see we could create a group that drove some of the goals of the community. That led to R.A.G.E. - Resident Association of Greater Englewood. We wanted to shift some perceptions about this community. We raise kids, we are professionals; now, more of us are getting involved.

We have developed working groups on education and youth, economic development and civic engagement. In the last year, we have taken important steps in these areas. For example, our civic engagement efforts included mobilizing residents from all six wards of our community to change perceptions by using a community asset-based approach. Our membership has increased, and we have hosted three aldermanic forums and various other issue-focused and social events.

We are also very deliberate about getting our message across - on Twitter, through radio interviews, on TV. We've had state senators, principals and youth call us.

My piece is the parent engagement piece: giving parents tools to advocate for quality education. We've held summits that bring together 30 to 50 parents and focus on building partnerships, raising a child and other topics. At one youth event, we also asked 6th, 7th and 8th grade kids to write positive stories about their community.

As we've grown, the Egan Urban Center has supported us in many ways. For example, Egan has facilitated retreats and supported our strategic planning efforts, connected us to resources and offered us interns.

People have asked me to sum up what we are about, and I think of one word: collaboration. We are a catalyst for bringing people together.
Egan Urban Center Scholarship Recipient:
Quintilliano Rios

Quintilliano Rios, a senior majoring in Communication and Media with a concentration in Latin American and Latino Studies, is an intern at the Egan Urban Center (EUC) the first recipient of EUC’s Social Justice and Community Engagement Scholarship. The Scholarship is given to students who have demonstrated a commitment to service and leadership.

“I am happy to be a recipient of the scholarship,” says Rios. “Through the Egan Center, I am exposed to the essence of organizing.”

As a student at Thomas Kelly High School in Chicago, Rios was trained to do ethnographic research and participated in a project with Brighton Park Neighborhood Council that gathered information from parents, teachers and students on how to improve the Chicago Public Schools. His experience also includes helping to register people to vote in the Back of the Yards community, where he lives, and working closely with youth to prepare them for college.

EUC Success Story:
“Cultivating Valuable Partnerships”

The EUC has been working with the Chicago Public Schools on their Voluntary Public School Choice Program. The EUC’s focus has been to assist Community Parent Liaisons (CPLs) in five neighborhood technology academies in building partnerships with local businesses and institutions that will serve students and parents of the respective schools. In the past year these schools have seen an overall increase in partnership of 32% - the largest increase these schools have seen in the past five years.

Parental involvement is a critical component for student success. Parents at one participating school have been mobilized by the CPL to tutor struggling students in reading, resulting in a positive impact on student achievement.

The work of the CPLs has been funded by a grant that was scheduled to run out at the end of the 2011-2012 school year, but as a result of the hard work of these individuals and advocacy on the part of CPS, their funding has been extended another year! The EUC will continue to support their important work in the coming year through technical assistance and capacity-building support.

New Initiative Eyes:
“Social and Economic Sustainability”

Education groups focus on school closings and many other public school policies. A range of nonprofits looks to create new jobs in the city. In the coming years, where will they get key data and resources to support their work? The new Chicago Fiscal and Equity Policy Initiative hopes to answer that question. Formed by the Egan Urban Center, the Initiative is working towards social and economic sustainability for Chicago families. The project has brought together community-based organizations, universities, civic and business associations, and progressive unions to contribute their research and develop policy recommendations. “We aim to raise awareness,” says Egan Urban Center Senior Faculty Fellow Michael Bennett, co-principal investigator of the project. “We want to be a resource for organizations that are trying to move these issues.” The Initiative has created working groups on city budgets and public education as well as sustainable community and economic development.

The Chicago Fiscal and Equity Policy Initiative is supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.