

The Community is the Curriculum

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June 2007 marked the first anniversary of the Community Informatics Corps (CI Corps) as a formal program of study within the Graduate School of Library and Information Science master's degree at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Focused on addressing local needs and developing capacity, it was created in partnership with Chicago's Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) in the inner city neighborhood known as Paseo Boricua. Here, CI Corps students have collaborated with community members through action research and various practical engagement experiences. Through interviews with stakeholders from the community and university, this paper will inquire into attitudes toward the university's presence in the neighborhood, perceptions of the partnership as a whole, and the outcomes of action, particularly with various youth organizations in the community. "The community is the curriculum" and "Live and help others to live" are two tenets that represent the teaching and learning practices of Paseo Boricua and, by extension, of the CI Corps itself. The purpose of this paper is to develop a sense of the complexities, engagement practices, and early outcomes of the partnership within the larger community and, more broadly, of university/community partnerships within the field of community informatics.

Keywords: university-community partnership, practical engagement, reciprocity

ASK

What happens when a cultural institution in Chicago engages in a partnership with a library and information science program from a central Illinois university? The experiences of Puerto Ricans in Chicago and the shared ethos of Puerto Rican Cultural Center's members guide their work in developing community programming which responds to the needs and interests of local residents who live in the inner city "barrio" of Paseo Boricua. The students in the Community Informatics Corps (CI Corps) concentration come from multiple social, economic and educational backgrounds, and each brings a unique political, personal, and ideological approach to their studies in library and information science. Both groups share an interest in the way that communities create, access, and disseminate information to build social capital, but is this commonality a strong enough foundation on which to build a sustainable partnership? "The community is the curriculum" is one of the tenets of the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School, an affiliate of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. This concept of community as an intellectual space creates an environment of discourse, practice, and reflection which acknowledges the assets and contributions of all of its members. The CI Corps' adoption of its community partner's principles may be a key to an enduring and prosperous relationship.

The Community Informatics Corps arises from the Community Informatics Initiative launched in 2004 at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The Initiative works with communities to develop information and communication technologies. The CI Initiative employs the principles of community inquiry: collaborative action, democratic and participatory models of engagement, and the integration of theory and practice (CII n.d.). The university's relationship with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center began when then PhD candidate, Dr. Sarai Lastra, based her dissertation research on the development of information and communication technologies through community events on Paseo Boricua (Lastra 2006). Dr. Lastra introduced Dr. Bishop to key members of the neighborhood's Puerto Rican Cultural Center, opening the door for continued cooperation between the university and community. While the Initiative has many

community partners throughout Illinois, Bishop saw its relationship with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center as an ideal forum for engaging students in a formal program that would be tied to a community known for its innovative social action and pedagogy. The Community Informatics Corps began when a group of LIS students began meeting for courses on site at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in the summer of 2006. In the past year, students have been actively engaged in several projects based on the mission and goals of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and its affiliates. Their work with the community as well as their study of community informatics has furthered the development of an academic program, firmly based in the Initiative's mission, which introduces library and information science students to community engagement and provides opportunities for the practical application of their studies within the Graduate School of Library and Information Science.

In March 2007, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Chancellor visited Paseo Boricua to celebrate the accomplishments of the university's partnership with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and to announce the university's commitment to supporting the further development of the partnership (CIC Garners... 2007). In addition, the community informatics program was recently awarded two grants from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services. One focuses on expanding and improving the Community Informatics Corps itself; the other, a partnership with University of Illinois Extension, supports community informatics learning that pairs library and information science students with middle and high school students. With a year of experience behind us and new projects about to take off, the participants in the CI Corps partnership decided to evaluate the first year of the program, looking at how it has succeeded, which mistakes should be avoided in the future, and how the partnership can be encouraged and sustained.

One of the primary practices of students in the CI Corps is reflective journaling. Students regularly submit entries, called practical engagement journals, and share these reflections with their classmates through online forums and classroom discussion. The structure of these journals follows the Inquiry Cycle format (<http://ilabs.inquiry.uiuc.edu>) which consists of five flexible components: Ask, Investigate, Discuss, Create, and Reflect. Students use the Inquiry Cycle as a guide to critically assess the progress of active learning through class readings, discussion, and their practical engagement experiences.

This paper's structure also uses the Inquiry Cycle to present and assess the research findings. It *asks* how the community-university partnership has progressed thus far and how it can continue to flourish. It *investigates* previous findings about active learning in community settings. It *creates* a report of the activities of the partnership and their early outcomes. It *discusses* methods used by students and community partners to develop goals, create projects, and reflectively critique their experiences. Finally it *reflects* on accomplishments, mistakes, challenges, and overall perceptions of the partnership.

INVESTIGATE

My exploration of university-community partnerships in community informatics began in 2006 when, as a first term master's student in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, I began taking Community Informatics Corps courses onsite at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. Much of the literature assigned to students in the introductory course, Community Information Systems, serves as an orientation to Paseo Boricua and the experience of Puerto Ricans in Chicago. The investigation of the history and ethos of a community in preparation for a practical engagement experience is central to the CI Corps. The colonization of Puerto Rico and its connection to the gentrification of Humboldt Park are particularly relevant to the community both historically and currently. New and economically prosperous residents and business owners have rehabbed, rebuilt, and renamed neighboring communities. Bucktown and Wicker Park were collectively known as West Town until the late 1980s when the migration of white suburbanites to the city began to transform the predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood into an area of high property values and resultant high taxes and rent (Alicea 2001, Flores-Gonzalez 2001, Ramos-Zayas 2001). Leaders in the Cultural Center point to the traumatic stress engendered by the displacement of a community as presented in *Root Shock* as an accurate representation of the consequences of the gentrification on Paseo Boricua (Fullilove 2004).

Simultaneously, Paseo Boricua is a decidedly Puerto Rican community despite the influx of white middle and upper class residents. Puerto Rican owned businesses and community organizations line a one-mile stretch of Division Street marked at either end by towering sculptures of the Puerto Rican flag. Two of the organizations that

have had major roles in the partnership with the University of Illinois are the youth collective Café Teatro Batey Urbano (Batey), and the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School (PACHS), both affiliates of the Cultural Center. The cultivation of artistic creativity, social action, and participatory democracy in the youth of Paseo Boricua is described by members of the Batey in a chapter of *Beyond Resistance!: Youth Activism and Community Change* (Flores-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, and Rodriguez-Muniz 2006). PACHS was founded as the antithesis to a public education system biased toward white culture and history. Antrop-Gonzalez (2001, 2006) and Flores-Gonzalez (2002) both address the Puerto Rican experience in the Chicago Public School system while Antrop-Gonzalez also explores the unique challenges confronted by both students and educators in the creation of a secure and supportive space at PACHS.

The nature of relationships between community organizations and universities in collaborative engagement and the partnership's place in this context is an important area of inquiry. University alliances with community groups are inevitably informed by structural inequalities which are based in different levels of class, status, and education (Cherry 2004). Paternalistic tendencies and the historical position of the university as the sole producer of knowledge (and often the owners of data collected from a community) limit their ability to view communities as valuable sources of knowledge (Gills 2001) and to acknowledge the expertise of the community (Ball 2005, Fisher et al 2004). However, when universities recognize a community's culture, assets and agenda, partnerships are initiated by common concerns, interests and objectives (Amuwo and Jenkins 2001, Kelley et al 2005) rather than the university's perception of the community's needs. Capacity building as a partnership objective stresses the importance of facilitating empowerment and community development (Kelley et al 2005) by promoting the recognition, use, and expansion of existing community resources and assets. Social capital and sustainability are created when development is done *by* the community rather than *for* the community (Simpson 2005).

Flexibility is essential for the progress and sustainability of a partnership and involves adjusting to local dynamics and responding to community identified concerns (Venkatesh 1997). The University of North Carolina at Greensboro's long term relationship with the High Point neighborhood in Macedonia, NC was initiated as a specific engagement, the EPA Brownfields Project. It evolved into a sustainable partnership because of the participants' willingness to evaluate and adapt their practices to objectives identified by the community (Arbuckle and DeHoog 2006). The authors cite the absence of a research agenda as an opportunity for greater responsiveness to the wishes of the community. Saint Louis University's School of Social Services is engaged in several ongoing partnerships with community agencies, and the school's Emmet J. and Mary Martha Doerr Center for Social Justice Education and Research is centered in social action efforts which encourage the participation of underserved community groups (Berg-Weger, et al 2004). In this case, the university has identified an agenda in social justice, but an evaluation of their research projects demonstrated the need for individual relationships with community partners to be open to specific goals and needs.

The concept of service-learning and action research as a meeting ground for theory and practice significantly influences how University of Illinois students approach their practical engagement experiences. Traditional research practices employed by universities often involve the collection of data without any return to the community, which has created a "legacy of mistrust" (Riger 2001). The roles of university faculty and students as researchers present challenges to the concept of equal partnership and can potentially place the university in a position of power over its research subjects (the community). Students as volunteers or community service workers presents the danger of an altruistic approach and discounts the benefits students gain from applying classroom learning to practical experience (Witbodi 2004). In contrast with volunteer service and traditional research practices, engagement based in reciprocity between the community and the university can create a collaborative educational environment (McCook 2000) that demonstrates mutual respect for the experiences and knowledge of participants (Gills 2001).

Reciprocity also implies flexibility in identifying the teachers and learners within an engagement experience. One goal of a partnership is the stimulation of dynamic teaching and learning experiences (Fisher et al 2004), in which all participants potentially adopt both of these roles. While a university faculty member is by nature the teacher and university students are learners, the addition of community offers other opportunities for the exchange of knowledge. In the California Campus Compact's study of community partners' perspectives of their alliance with universities, many stated that they view themselves as the community educators of the service-learning students (Sandy and Holland 2006) rather than as the receivers of a service. Saint Louis University's School of Social Services' Research Education Partnership model emphasizes that among faculty, students, and community, there

exists a transfer of knowledge in which each member has a different expertise which is shared with one another (Berg-Weger et al 2004).

CREATE

Students' and community members' experiences within the CI Corps provided data for our study of the nature and results of the first year of the partnership. I interviewed five community members and seven UIUC students who have participated in CI Corps courses in the fall 2006 and/or spring 2007 semesters. Students were also asked to permit access to their practical engagement journals. All participants were known to both me and Prof. Bishop before the study commenced, and through involvement in CI Corps courses and partnership activities, both have developed relationships with many of the participants. My interviews with partnership participants were, therefore, rather informal discussions of partnership activities and perceptions of the program's current status and future potential.

Four areas of inquiry guided the interviews:

- 1) What specific practical engagements have the participants undertaken?
- 2) How have these engagements been initiated, developed, and sustained?
- 3) How have these engagements affected either participants' educational experiences in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science or their experiences as affiliates of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center?
- 4) What are the anticipated outcomes of these experiences and the partnership as a whole?

Although critical reflection and discourse are primary components of the CI Corps curriculum, it is important to note that in order to encourage honest and open responses, I conducted the interviews, and Prof. Bishop was not made aware of any student's participation or non-participation in the study. While anonymity was used throughout all stages of the research, participants were made aware that the details of the practical engagement experiences could possibly make their identities known to other participants in the partnership.

Practical engagement within the CI Corps is not structured as autonomous practica or internships in which the "real" world is but a kind of laboratory in which to test concepts" (Riddle 2003). Rather the process involves scholarly study in conjunction with community engagement and reflection through the exchange of ideas and resources via online course bulletin boards, frequent journaling, communication with community partners, and applied action. It also involves the development of social capital in the relationship of the two partners, each of which is strong in its own right. The interaction between *bonding social capital* which supports community ownership of resources and *bridging social capital* which provides external support is a key to the success of community organizations (Alkalimat and Williams 2001). The Puerto Rican Cultural Center's longevity, achievements, and community support demonstrate the bonding social capital that sustains the organization. Through the university, the Center has gained access to financial resources and organizational support from CI Corps students who conversely acquire educational and practical experience through their engagements. The University has also gained organizational support through its partnership with the Center, in the form of, for example, the 'Paseo Boricua Hostel' (a storefront flat converted to lodgings for visiting students and scholars). Shaped by a cyclical method of inquiry, action, and contemplation (Riddle 2003, Stringer 1996, Inquiry Unit, n.d.), the specific activities in which students have been engaged are often ongoing and evolving.

While several shared projects have been initiated by community organizations and university students, three specific projects in various stages of development are presented in this paper. The commonality shared between these engagements is their involvement with various youth organizations in the community: a high school, a preschool, and a youth arts and social action collective. One engagement was short term and contributed to the creation of a play performed by the Batey. Another project involved group collaboration, both academic and artistic, with multiple CI Corps students and the students and teachers of the Center's Consuelo Lee Corretjer Day Care. Finally a third project in curriculum research and development which began in 2006 is still in progress, although

notable outcomes have already materialized in the form of an official educational strategy and funding for a summer pilot program. The investigation of three distinct projects demonstrates the adaptive processes applied to individual practical engagement experiences based on the needs and goals unique to each undertaking.

The Play

Tato Laviera, a renowned Nuyoricano playwright and poet, first began working with the Batey in 2006 when he wrote an original play about the 1966 Division Street riots to mark the event's 40th anniversary. He returned to Paseo Boricua in the spring of 2007 to begin research on a second play, devoted to the 1977 Division Street riot that began in Humboldt Park. Laviera visited a CI Corps class meeting to discuss the play's progress and the need for source material in the form of news coverage, police records and other original resources related to the 1977 riot. Laviera was simultaneously speaking with residents of the community, collecting oral histories of their experiences in the riots; he was interested in supplementing these personal recollections with historical documentation of the riots' catalysts and outcomes. Several CI Corps students contributed to the initial research of news coverage, police reports, and court records, and one student, Hope, continued to assist Laviera in his investigation throughout the writing process. What originally began as a side project for her class was transformed into a partnership between the playwright and the student researcher that exceeded formal course boundaries. Hope's research led to not only a set of print, audio, and video resources but also facilitated telephone conversations between Laviera and several Chicago news reporters and law enforcement officials who were willing to contribute their recollections of the events to Laviera's investigation. The culmination of both research and writing was the premiere of '77 *Puerto Rican Chicago Riot* performed by the Batey at the third Community as Intellectual Space symposium, an annual conference presented jointly by the Graduate School of Library and Information Science and the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. Hope's collaborative work with Laviera and Laviera's collaboration with the play's director and actors in the Batey collective is notable for the opportunity it provided students to work intimately with an internationally known artist, and for its culmination in a tangible outcome. In many ways it serves as a model for the potential contributions of CI Corps students to community owned projects.

The Coloring Book

The coloring book project of the Consuelo Lee Corretjer Day Care engaged four CI Corps students in the development stage of a bilingual coloring book produced collaboratively with day care professionals, children who attend the day care, a local artist, and one of the leaders in the Cultural Center. The coloring book represented Paseo Boricua from the perspective of the Day Care students, who regularly walk between the Puerto Rican flag sculptures on Division Street, gaining exercise while they learn about their community and culture. One student prepared the layout while two others researched publication costs and marketing possibilities. A fourth student translated the text from Spanish to culturally accurate English. The participants learned to adapt their practices to accommodate many skills, talents and perspectives while advancing the publication of a community created informative and artistic resource.

While the students involved in the project communicated with one another via email, they could not rely exclusively on email to communicate with their community partners. It was imperative that they visit the day care to build relationships with both the day care professionals and the children. They brought guitars to the Day Care and sang with the children, told stories and made crafts with them. They also conducted research into the developmental stages of children, how to interact with youngsters, and how to design coloring books. The nature of the project as an original artistic work called for in-person interaction between the layout designer and the artist, who once met at one of the student's home. These are relationships which could not have been built through email or online forums, and they resulted in a more personal and meaningful experience for the students. One student reflected in her final Inquiry Unit that, "Our collaborative spirit forged the creation of a community publication that will resonate with the hope of the PRCC day care children, the strong partnership with the community, and the [Community Informatics Corps]."

The coloring book project was not completed according to the original schedule desired by the Cultural Center, though one of the students involved has continued her work on the project, outside of any formal class structure. Nonetheless, it both provided students with a rich learning experience and contributed significant progress on the coloring book for the Center, along with lessons for both partners. Reflecting on the difficulties encountered,

Bishop suggested that, in addition to the aggressive timeline imposed, which exceeded the students' work requirements, the project demanded an exceptional level of leadership and oversight from key community members. Students worked diligently and productively, with great enthusiasm, but neither they nor the artist had the deep insider knowledge of Paseo Boricua that would have permitted them to make myriad artistic and content decisions on their own. They also lacked the authority to collaborate with Day Care teachers as equal partners. In this case, in other words, the University partner lacked the power needed to lead the project to a completely successful conclusion.

The Curriculum

The majority of collaborative work within the partnership is not so easily defined by a single conclusive result, but early outcomes can be observed in an ongoing project. Students at PACHS became interested in hydroponics (growing plants without soil) after a classroom research project produced unexpected results. According to a PACHS faculty member, students returned to school in the fall of 2006 to find that beans grown in a soil-less medium had flourished with little care over the summer. Around the same time, in a chance meeting with the PRCC's director, José E. López, a CI Corps student, Amanda, expressed an interest in community-based science learning, particularly in the field of agriculture. López expressed a similar interest in self sustaining urban ecology and agriculture. This led to Amanda's preliminary research in urban agricultural methods in hydroponics and her meeting with members of the PACHS faculty. In my interview with the assistant director of PACHS, he referred to the Humboldt Park neighborhood as a "so called 'food desert'" characterized by its lack of access to fresh produce and healthy foods, which impacts the ability of both adults and children to eat nutritious meals. Recent community health survey findings in Chicago report that the prevalence of diabetes among Puerto Ricans in Chicago is 20.8%, compared to 6.1% nationally (Whitman, et al 2004, 2006). 37% of adults in Humboldt Park are obese (Estarziau, et al 2006). The assistant director additionally noted that the 71.2% drop out or "push out" rate among Puerto Rican students in Chicago reported by Isidro Lucas in 1971 has not significantly decreased. He hypothesizes that deficits in math and science learning among Puerto Rican students are related to the lack of tangible connections between classroom learning and real life.

Two tenets of PACHS approach to teaching and learning are "the community *is* the curriculum" and "live and help others to live." The faculty and staff of PACHS are consistently exploring curricular methods which support this ethos, which has much in common with the inquiry-based pedagogy that informs the Community Informatics Corps itself. Amanda's research in urban agriculture seemed to correspond with PACHS students' expressed interest in hydroponics, the PACHS educational philosophy, the neighborhood's need for healthy food options, and José E. López's vision of a self-sustaining community of food producers and consumers. *Integrating Math & Science with Social Ecology and Urban Agriculture: A Pedro Albizu Campos High School Committee for Curriculum Development* (2006) was created at the intersection of these elements.

The six-month process which led to the creation of this new educational vision entailed considerable commitment on the part of Amanda and her partners at PACHS. While research in curricular models of urban agriculture and social ecology education, alignment with Illinois Learning Standards for Math and Science, and the discovery of grant opportunities for the implementation of the program are significant components of the student's practice, a PACHS faculty member noted that Amanda has also been involved in fleshing out and expanding the program's original concept. Amanda has also developed and taught curriculum modules that integrate technology literacy with PACHS student work in urban agriculture. She will continue her engagement at PACHS as a graduate assistant in the 2007-2008 school year, and the director at the PRCC believes that this particular engagement will serve as a paradigm for future partnership collaborations.

The evolution of CI Corps students' roles within the partnership to include the research and development behind current and planned community initiatives was frequently cited by Puerto Rican Cultural Center members. A PACHS faculty member said that originally CI Corps students were placed in support positions similar to those of undergraduate university students who act as aides or assistants. However, he noted that Amanda's work in curriculum development made it obvious that utilizing students' skills in research and information organization was more beneficial to both PACHS and the CI Corps. This has been an invaluable realization in the progression of the partnership. While at the onset the use and development of CI Corps students' skills in library and information science were the focus of the academic program, students were anxious to help with most community initiatives

regardless of their direct connection to their practical studies. These three engagements demonstrated that research, information organization and dissemination, and the connection between practical skills and community programming could forge a clear path between the university and the community.

DISCUSS

While a report of specific activities and achievements does present an abstract of the partnership's structure, discussing the experiences of students and community members may clarify the processes and practices which shape the partnership. The Saint Louis School of Social Services Research Education Partnership model suggests that several facilitating factors contribute to the success of a partnership. These include the clarification of roles and expectations, acknowledgement of all participants' assets, the development of a time frame and continuous communication (Berg-Weger, et al 2004). As a classmate of many of the students involved in these activities, I am aware of the progress and the key characteristics of engagements, but it was not until I spoke individually with students and community members that I gained a deeper knowledge of how numerous elements come together to form the underlying nature of the partnership and the experiences of those involved. The element of communication seems to be especially important in the partnership.

Each semester, students select an area of practice based on their interests, availability, skills, and sometimes their previous engagements. Beyond the few projects highlighted in this paper, their work on Paseo Boricua has included: development work for a website for the Cultural Center's community newspaper; assessing a community health program in which the Center was a partner; creating a preliminary design for a web archive for the Center, and cataloging books in the Center's library. Some student projects entailed work beyond the Cultural Center, such as creating a community information and referral service for the Chicago Public Library's Humboldt Park branch, and setting up a small computer lab for a local nonprofit. Still others, early on, brought engagement with community organizations that had no connection to Paseo Boricua. In interviews with students who worked on Paseo Boricua, I asked each to explain how their practical engagement experiences began, and most pointed to an early class meeting in which engagement opportunities were presented to the class by the professor. These options are currently based on Cultural Center and/or CI Corps objectives, some ongoing and some short term, which are relevant to the skills of students within library and information science. When students express interest in an opportunity, contact information for the project's primary liaison is provided by the professor. The initiation of collaborative work in this manner has proven more successful than the less collaborative approach of students basing their practice on the perceived needs of the PRCC, which was more common in the first stage of active engagement with the community. Selecting a project based on expressed community interests and needs is particularly advantageous in terms of establishing commitment to the engagement, because students have a known contact, making both the student and the community member responsible for furthering the project's objectives.

The project's outline and anticipated time table seem to influence the students' choice of practice opportunities. Some are more comfortable with engagements which produce tangible outcomes which could potentially be realized within one semester. Others prefer contributing to the continual progress of achieving long-term objectives. For example, in the spring 2007 semester one student collaborated with a community member in the creation of a guidebook for a health and fitness program which fulfilled requirements of a grant received by the community member. Because of the grant's deadline, the student's engagement was measured in part by the timely completion of the project. This student said that a finished product was integral to her concept of good work. On the other hand, another student has been developing an online forum to enhance communication between CI Corps students and faculty, community members, and other university students. The forum has been continually adapted as users suggest and test new methods of presenting and organizing materials on the site and is still in progress.

Ideally, engagements are initiated when students meet with other students, the professor, and/or a community partner to discuss the questions, objectives, roles, and expectations which will guide their work. Again, in terms of commitment, these early meetings can shape future practice and communication within an engagement. When this preliminary dialogue is omitted because of scheduling conflicts and communication difficulties, students' and community members' understanding of the objectives may be vague and/or tenuous. A PACHS faculty member noted that while the details of engagements may be "nebulous at first, a clear focus is helpful" for both CI Corps students and their community partners. In the spring of 2007, some students in the Community Informatics Corps

practical engagement course elected to write a flexible contract which they asked their community partner to modify and sign, giving shape to their engagement without limiting its potential for adaptation. In the current fall 2007 semester, following Stoecker (2005), students presented alternative projects (that had been developed by community members before the course), along with an inventory of their own skills and goals and possible project selection criteria, to community leader Alejandro Molina. Molina, who is a PACHS teacher, a member of the Cultural Center's Board, and the chief community liaison with the CI Corps, fleshed out and discussed the alternatives and then made the final selection of projects that class members would pursue.

The importance of communication and critical feedback throughout an engagement was noted by all students who have been engaged actively in PRCC initiatives. Community members also stressed the need for reflection and discussion, but after speaking with several participants, I noticed that students typically expressed less satisfaction with communication than community members. There are several possible reasons for this dichotomy, many of which happen to reflect common differences between university and community objectives and methods. Puerto Rican Cultural Center members are involved in numerous activities and initiatives, many of which are outside of the University of Illinois partnership. The core group of community members we work with typically devote many hours to Paseo Boricua commitments that extend well beyond their formal jobs. They have several other responsibilities beyond individual partnership activities with students, and student activities are only a part of the larger, ongoing Center agenda. On the other hand, although many students have professional, personal, and educational responsibilities beyond their practical engagements, the advancement of engagement activities within the university's time structure is a priority. Their projects have a specific closing date, the end of the semester, which inevitably informs their practice and can cause concern or stress when activities do not appear to be advancing. Many students complete their studies in less than two years and are not consistently enrolled in CI Corps courses or engaged in partnership activities, so it is imperative that their engagements produce genuine and effective learning experiences within a rather narrow timeframe. Cultural Center initiatives are also subject to time constraints, but the overall progress of their objectives is not limited by the university's prescribed timeline and sometimes they require rapid progress to very short-term, immovable deadlines that do not fit well with the typical assignment deadlines and time commitments that are most familiar to students.

Another distinction between the University and the Cultural Center is the method of communication commonly used within each community. The majority of CI Corps students are participants in the LEEP program, an online option for students to obtain an MSLIS degree from remote locations. LEEP by its very nature promotes online interaction via email, message boards, and real time chats, and its students tend to be adept at efficiently communicating through these methods. Conversely, it seems that most communication on Paseo Boricua between PRCC members and their partners takes place in face-to-face meetings, many of which are ad hoc and informal. This is not to suggest that PRCC members are technologically illiterate or unwilling to communicate using the Internet, but it points to the fact that they live and/or work within a small geographical area which promotes face-to-face interaction and allows for spontaneous dialogue. Moreover, not all CI Corps students live in the Chicago area. Some students, and all of the CI Corps faculty, commute to Chicago from the Champaign-Urbana campus, a drive of about three hours.

Paseo Boricua as a community is characterized by geographic location, common cultural and social experiences, and the ethnicity of its members. LEEP is a community of learners with common objectives and interests whose members do not typically interact with one another in traditional classroom settings. Because students are simultaneously members of the LEEP and CI Corps communities, they must learn to navigate multiple means of communication and discourse. While a question may be resolved via email with other students, students may need to be physically present in the community to resolve questions with community members. One student articulated her confusion about the expectations of her own communication with community partners by asking, "Is presence in the community as important as getting work done?" This student was involved in two activities which primarily required research and writing which she was able to do from home. Because this student is not geographically based on Paseo Boricua, she was not able to take advantage of the spontaneous face-to-face encounters that often characterize visits to the community. She questions whether she would have completed her projects as effectively if she had dedicated more time to visiting the community and whether the underlying importance of her practice was the tangible outcome of a finished product or the experience of interaction with her community partners.

The Puerto Rican Cultural Center's ideology strongly endorses inquiry into the creation and perpetuation of social and political inequalities and the individual's role in maintaining or combating these constructs. One Cultural

Center member felt that participating in initiatives of the Center and its affiliates without internalizing their ethos is akin to “going to a classroom to take notes without experiencing education.” Students are not expected to adopt the political stances of the PRCC, but they are asked to participate in the partnership with a respect for and openness to the learning possibilities presented by the PRCC and their own reflective and practical experiences. The CI Corps has also sought to ensure that students get to know Paseo Boricua before they embark on their engagements. Students typically read scholarly papers about and by the community, participate in a walking tour led by Molina, and read the Center’s community newspaper. Students are also encouraged to participate in everyday life on Paseo Boricua: eat at local Puerto Rican restaurants; attend community art exhibits, lectures, poetry readings, and musical events; volunteer for neighborhood clean-ups; and attend ceremonies, such as the PACHS graduation. They also are encouraged to participate in the Community as Intellectual Space symposium as their first CI Corps course, which provides an immersive experience for which students acquire formal course credit. A Puerto Rican Cultural Center affiliate notes that because of the Center’s many initiatives and engagements with numerous universities, people frequently come and go through the community, but he is certain that everyone who works with the Center is impacted profoundly by the its vision. Bishop confirms that student course and event evaluations, engagement journals, and personal communications often express the powerful impact that true engagement in the community as *their* curriculum has had, whether they are new to Paseo Boricua or have lived in its vicinity their entire lives.

REFLECT

The Outcomes

A PACHS faculty member stressed evaluation as critical to the enhancement of activities within the partnership, and the importance of reflection was expressed by all participants in the study. The effects of the partnership have been both practical and profound for most participants. Students report that they have enhanced practical skills through engagement as well as reflective skills through journaling and discourse with other partnership participants. In a course evaluation one student said, “The most valuable component [of the CI Corps] has been the reflective practice that I’m now applying to all areas of my life. I am also acting more on my reflections rather than just thinking ‘I should...’”

All students cited their learning experiences within the partnership as greatly significant to their education in library and information science, regardless of the perceived successes and failures within their practical engagements. Students were asked how their experiences within CI Corps have influenced their other classroom experiences within GSLIS. Most responded that they were able to approach theoretical learning in other classes with a practical perspective. For many students, the opportunity to live in Chicago while obtaining a Master’s degree has encouraged the continuation of active engagement “with genuine social issues within local communities” (Riddle 2003). As one student who was born and raised in Chicago said, “I’m rooted in Chicago, not just personally because of my family, but politically because of my social activism; there’s no way I’m going to just up and leave.” The continuation and development of relationships with communities is particularly relevant to students who plan to pursue a professional career in Chicago, because they are able to maintain and develop ties with local organizations and other students that may continue throughout their careers.

Students’ professional goals have also been affected by their participation in the partnership. One student plans to enter public librarianship, but she now says that she now views the library as “more than just bricks and mortar.” Her CI Corps experience has broadened her original career plan to include community engagement in terms of taking the library’s resources to the community in a much more active and community-driven manner. Another student is exploring many career options in museums, public or academic libraries, or archives, but she says that in any institution, knowing the community being served and paying attention to their needs will be guiding principles in her work.

The Future

It is more difficult to assess outcomes from the community’s perspective because the initiatives developed in conjunction with the partnership are a small part of the greater objectives of the community. While those

interviewed expressed enthusiasm and satisfaction with many of the initiatives, their focus was on the future possibilities of further collaboration. A Puerto Rican Cultural Center leader envisions the partnership as a hub of activity within the community that will unite culture, community, and technology. He cites the urban agricultural curriculum development project as a model for future endeavors that will promote the advancement of community initiatives like the development of the Cultural Center's library as a research center. For example, students in the fall 2007 course, Professional Research in Action, will focus on creating the library's online catalog with community members using folksonomy or social tagging rather than traditional subject headings. He also sees the partnership extending to other community organizations like the Barrio Arts, Culture and Communication Academy, an after school program focused on journalism, broadcasting, and the performing arts. He believes the linking of the academy with the community involves the integration of both the community's and the university's resources and skills, which supports reciprocity as a defining quality of a successful and equal partnership.

The realization of these ambitions will require additional resources like space, equipment, and personnel, and the partnership's achievements will no doubt advance with the increase of such capital resources. The need for additional resources stresses the importance of documenting partnership activities and experiences for both financial support and academic development. The progress of the online forum and the encouragement of its use among both students and community members will be essential in chronicling the partnership's progress and opening communication between all participants.

In order to sustain and further develop the partnership, objectives must be made apparent to all involved. There is no formal agreement between the partners in terms of the specific goals and expected outcomes of the university/community collaboration. However, the ethos of the partnership and the nature of community informatics support the evolution and adaptation of practice, which may be a contributing factor to the success of the partnership in its first year. Conversely, this lack of a defined focus has left some participants unsure of their roles and their partner's expectations. One CI Corps student suggests that "greater transparency would help students" to know if their practice is contributing to the partnership's objectives and clarify the aims of individual practical engagements within the larger context of the partnership. A compromise between the rigidity of a formal contract and the flexibility of the partnership's character would likely enhance the individual experiences of all participants, broaden the possibilities of engagement opportunities, and advance the partnership's ambitions and growth.

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