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Improving the Quality of Education



Improving the Quality of Education

INTRODUCTION

By Ira Haarkavy, Ph.D.

Ira Harkavy is associate vice president and founding director of the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn). As a consultant to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), he helped create the Office of University Partnerships (OUP) and the Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) program. He also assisted former HUD Secretary Henry G. Cisneros in writing The University and the Urban Challenge. An historian with extensive experience building university-community partnerships, Harkavy teaches in the departments of history, urban studies, African studies, and city and regional planning.



Dr. Harkavy

In their first decade COPCs have made a number of important contributions in housing, community development, the arts, and job training. In my judgment the COPC program has made a particularly significant and long-term contribution to educational improvement through its impact on teaching and learning and its creation of partnerships among higher education, local schools, and communities.

From its inception, the COPC program placed educational change at the forefront of its agenda. A hallmark of the program has been its integration of service with research and teaching. This approach has embedded collaborative community work and action-oriented problemsolving into the university curricula. Curricula change is a particularly noteworthy achievement because it indicates both institutional centrality and the likelihood of sustainability. Quite simply, if something *really* matters in higher education, it appears in the curriculum, in what and how students learn and in what faculty members teach. Moreover, there is wisdom in the old academic saying that “presidents and provosts come and go, but faculty abideth forever.” Innovations in higher education that survive over time are those that are made a part of the ongoing work of the faculty.

COPCs have helped to move university-community partnerships from the margins toward the academic center of numerous colleges and universities, and the successes of those COPCs have served as models to other colleges and universities as they work to forge meaningful, academically based partnerships with their communities. The significant role that educational improvement plays in the COPC program is apparent from a simple statistic. Of all the COPCs funded to date, approximately 30–35 percent focus significantly on partnerships with schools in their local communities. Higher education-school-community partnerships are far and away the most frequent of all COPC partnerships. What accounts for this?

First, partnerships with local schools are the most natural collaborations for colleges and universities to develop and sustain. “Higher eds” are, after all, part of the wider schooling system. As such, they share greater similarities with the culture of K through 12 schooling than they do with community development corporations or neighborhood organizations. Faculty and students have also experienced precollege schooling so they have at least some knowledge of how that schooling is different from, and similar to, what they do on a daily basis.

Second, higher education is the most powerful component of the entire school system and therefore has a particular responsibility to ensure that K through 12 schooling is successful. In 1998 Donald Langenberg, chancellor of the University of Maryland, said that collaborations with local schools have helped higher educational institutions to more fully recognize their responsibility:

We have come to believe strongly, and elementary and secondary schools have come to believe, they cannot reform without us . . . This is not telling them how to do it, but both of us working together to fix what’s wrong with our education system . . . We prepare teachers for the public schools, and we admit their students. So it’s our problem just as much as theirs.¹

Chancellor Langenberg’s observation echoes remarks delivered by the founding president of the University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper, in an 1899 address at the University of California. Harper explicitly emphasized *why* quality education is central for a truly democratic society: “Education is the basis of all democratic progress. The problems of education are, therefore, the problems of Democracy.” (Harper 1905).

More than any other institution, the university determines the character of the school system. To quote Harper again:

Through the school system, the character of which, in spite of itself, the university determines and in a larger measure controls . . . through the school system every family in this broad land of ours is brought into touch with the university; for from it proceeds the teachers or the teachers’ teacher. (Harper 1905)

Harper identified the school system as the strategic subsystem of democratic societies. He suggested that, more than any other subsystem, the school system influenced the function of the society as a whole. Moreover, for Harper, universities functioned as the primary shapers of the overall schooling system. This influential role stemmed not only from the university’s enormous power and prestige, but also from its mission to educate teachers. In my judgment, what colleges and universities do and how they do it has more complex and far-reaching effects on today’s schooling system and society than when Harper made his insightful observations more than a century ago.



Footnote

¹ Donald Langenberg, as quoted in “University Joins With Entire Community to Raise Academic Standards in El Paso Schools.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Vol. 45, p. 13.

A third, and perhaps primary, reason that COPCs have focused on higher education-school-community partnerships is the belief, held by faculty, students, and community members, that there is an intrinsic connection between good schools and good communities. Effective community change depends on transforming local public schools. Effective public schools depend on community engagement and mobilization.

Thanks to a COPC grant and related activities, the University of Pennsylvania and other institutions of higher education have worked to develop community schools that are designed to help educate, engage, activate, and serve all residents of the neighborhood in which the school is located. This strategy assumes that colleges and universities can help develop and maintain community schools that, in turn, can help create healthy urban environments. It also assumes that universities find this work worthwhile because they function best in such environments.

This strategy also assumes that public schools can function as environment-changing institutions. These schools can become the strategic centers of broad-based partnerships that genuinely engage and coordinate a wide variety of community organizations and institutions. Public schools “belong” to all members of the community. They are particularly well suited, therefore, to function as neighborhood “hubs” or “nodes” around which local partnerships can be generated and formed. When public schools play that role, they function as community institutions *par excellence*; that is, they provide a decentralized, democratic, community-based response to significant community problems. They also help all students, including college and university students working at the school site, to learn better through action-oriented, collaborative, community-based problemsolving.

From Penn’s experience with a COPC, and from what I know about the COPC program in general, my suggestions for the next steps can be summarized in two words: *more* and *curriculum*. More colleges and universities need to be supported and encouraged to develop serious, sustained, mutually beneficial, and mutually respectful democratic partnerships with local public schools and their communities. In addition, solving school and community-identified problems should become the curricular focus for students from pre-K through higher education. Such an approach, I am convinced, would help the COPC program contribute substantially to the development of good, democratic communities, schools, and universities during its second decade. ■

Selected Readings

Basinger, Julianne. 1998. “University Joins With Entire Community to Raise Academic Standards in El Paso Schools,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Vol. 45, p. 13.

Harper, William Rainey. 1905. *The Trend in Higher Education*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

More colleges and universities need to be supported and encouraged to develop serious, sustained, mutually beneficial, and mutually respectful democratic partnerships with local public schools and their communities.

Butler University

Indianapolis Cemetery Becomes Classroom for Butler University Students



Keith Norwalk

Keith Norwalk has many friends in Indianapolis. There's Benjamin Harrison, who served as 23rd president of the United States; notorious bank robber John Dillinger; and playwright Booth Tarkington. Not to mention three vice presidents (Charles Fairbanks, Thomas Hendricks, and Thomas Marshall), 13 Civil War generals, numerous senators, and a few governors.

Most of Norwalk's friends are dead but that does not bother him. And it should not surprise anyone who knows that Norwalk is president of Crown Hill Cemetery, a 555-acre expanse where many of Indianapolis' most prestigious former residents are buried. With an office located 2 blocks from Butler University, Norwalk is also a valued COPC partner.

To understand how a COPC and a cemetery might become partners, one must understand a little bit about Norwalk. In the 12 years since he arrived at Crown Hill, Norwalk has done his best to ensure that the third largest single-location cemetery in the country operates smoothly on a day-to-day basis. He's also taken on a personal mission to preserve the cemetery while at the same time making it relevant to modern-day Indianapolis residents.

Dedicated on June 1, 1864 on the site of a popular Indianapolis picnic spot, Crown Hill has witnessed more than 190,000 burials since Lucy Ann Seaton, a young victim of consumption, was interred there a day after the cemetery opened. All of the cemetery's memorials and markers have stories to tell, says Norwalk. In addition, the cemetery's inventory of 4,156 trees and its 350 acres of undeveloped green space make it an environmental treasure.

Norwalk oversees a \$2 million annual grounds maintenance budget, 1,400 burials per year, and about 350 funerals through the corporation's funeral home. In addition, he's made it his business to reach out to the community and find creative ways to make sure that funerals are not the only reason people come to the cemetery. For example, Crown Hill offers 10 public tours that explore cemetery history and the famous people buried there. The annual Jason M. Baker Public Safety Memorial Run/Walk allows local residents to explore the 26 miles of cemetery roadways. More than 1,000 middle school students visit the cemetery each year on the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation to see a reenactment that recognizes the contributions of African American soldiers during the Civil War. And a special handbook offers tips on how teachers can use Crown Hill as an extension of their classrooms.

In addition, Norwalk has tried to make sure that the cemetery reflects the diversity—both ethnic and religious—that characterizes modern-day Indianapolis. He has established special Muslim and Latino burial sections

as well as a cremation scattering garden. An Indiana AIDS Memorial now stands at the cemetery as a permanent tribute to community members who have died from this modern epidemic. "That was a pretty controversial project for an historic cemetery, but I felt that it was very important," says Norwalk.

COPC Partnership

A graduate of Butler University, Norwalk had been interested for years in working with his alma mater. So when he met Dr. Margaret Brabant, director of Butler's COPC, he was eager to collaborate. "He's a very creative thinker," says Brabant. "He doesn't say, 'Oh no, we can't do that.' Of course, every time he and I sit down to think about a project we also talk about budget. He is a very smart business person. He knows how to stretch a buck."

Brabant and Norwalk say it has been a challenge to find meaningful ways for students to become engaged in the cemetery's work. After months of brainstorming the partnership officially took off in summer 2003 when 16 Butler science majors helped document the deterioration of Crown Hill's older monuments and memorials, many of which are made of porous materials like marble, sandstone, or limestone.

The students, enrolled in the Butler Summer Institute (BSI), spent 2 months on campus conducting laboratory-based research projects with faculty members. They worked in the cemetery once a week to fulfill BSI's community service requirement. While there, the students identified the location and type of some of the older monuments, wrote detailed descriptions of their designs and inscriptions, and took digital photographs. The information will soon be computerized so that when the memorials begin to fade, a permanent record will still exist. "We are losing this bit of history and that was a concern" says Norwalk, "so it was very rewarding to see the level of interest of the students who became involved." The summer project will be repeated in 2004 and Brabant is hoping to bring more students to Crown Hill to help maintain the cemetery's large tree inventory.

Changing Attitudes

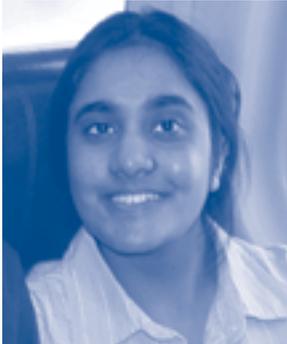
If any of the Butler students had misgivings about working in a cemetery, Norwalk says they disappeared during an opening luncheon that Crown Hill hosted for its new workers. "At first, I did get a sense that they were wondering what they were doing here," says Norwalk. "But we saw their perceptions change. First they were amused, and then they were interested. When they realized that we were very comfortable with them being here, they became more comfortable and started asking great questions. From the very first day, it became a great learning experience."

Watching the students learn has been especially valuable to Norwalk. That learning took place as students perused the cemetery's collection of historic maps, witnessed a cremation, or recognized how their scientific skills could be put to good use on the cemetery's grounds. "I really think there is great value in allowing young people to see all the ways that this cemetery serves the community," says Norwalk. "Any time we are successful in exposing young people to what we're all about, it's very gratifying and enriching and it gives us a great deal of purpose."

For more information, contact Keith Norwalk, president, Crown Hill Cemetery, 700 West 38th Street, Indianapolis, IN 46208, phone (317) 925-8231, e-mail knorwalk@crownhill.org. ■

University of Massachusetts Lowell

Young Researchers Give Voice to Service Provider Concerns



Deepa Rao



Linda Det

Like their counterparts across the country, nonprofit organizations in Lowell, Massachusetts, are facing tight budgetary times. Staff are being let go. Programs are being cut. Youth programs have been among the hardest hit in this diverse community that includes Cambodian, Portuguese, and Spanish immigrants. During summer 2003, students Deepa Rao and Linda Det set out to determine how youth-serving institutions in the city were responding to budget cuts and how those cuts were affecting the community's young people.

Rao, then a senior at the University of Massachusetts Lowell (UML), and Det, a high school senior, were participating in a special summer research project sponsored by UML's Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) and its Committee on Industrial Theory and Assessment (CITA). The program pairs high school and college students to research pressing local issues. Rao and Det were part of a research team consisting of four UML graduate and undergraduate students and four area high school students.

During the previous summer, another student research team had worked with CITA to analyze the impact of budget cuts on all of Lowell's service providers. The 2003 project focused more closely on the 30 organizations that serve Lowell's youth, including the Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Girls, Inc., and D.A.R.E. The team's final report (titled *Understanding and Addressing Budget Cutbacks Within Lowell's Youth Service Agencies*) ignited a community discussion about how to best continue and support youth programs.

"The purpose of the project was to understand the problems faced by nonprofit organizations due to the lack of funding and complete elimination of grants," says Rao, who also worked on the 2002 research team. "Part of the project was also to understand how and where the university could extend help to the community so the youth were not affected."

The ability to interact with community leaders and the opportunity to conduct meaningful research attracted Rao and Det to the project. While Det had not done much community work before, she was involved with a local environmental youth group and had friends who belonged to the Boys and Girls Club. "The budget crisis was happening and I did not know much about it and how it could affect me," says Det, who now attends Simmons College in Boston.

Rao, an international student from India who completed her master's degree in computer science in December 2003, saw the project as a chance to learn more about community nonprofits and improve her applied research skills. "When I started the project, I had no knowledge of nonprofit organizations and their

working patterns,” says Rao. Through the project, she says, she was able to meet many community leaders “whom I had only read about in the newspapers.” No matter what drew them to the project, the young women were changed by it, says Project Manager Brenda Bond. “There was an increased comfort level working in a team and individually,” she says. “It was great to see them take ownership of the project.”

The project also taught Rao and Det very concrete skills. “Deepa taught me a lot,” remembers Det. “She taught me how to do interviews and how to get the data. She was a good guide.” Talking with employees at community organizations provided Rao with better insight into the challenges that youth-serving organizations face. “I learned the many different situations that community organizations need to consider when changing their programs and their goals,” she says.

Providing a Voice for Youth Programs

Rao and Det were paired together to track the local media’s coverage of budget reductions among youth organizations. They also interviewed several community organizations about the adjustments they made to programs and staffing. In the end, the young researchers learned that the elimination of funding for youth services threatened many important support services and learning opportunities for local young people. “The kids [in] immigrant families largely depend on the community services like homework clubs, tutoring services, mentoring services, and parental education,” says Rao. “Budget cuts . . . tremendously impact these families.”

The research team shared this and other findings with community leaders and heads of youth-serving organizations during a community breakfast. Students also made a trip to Boston to talk with State Representative Thomas Golden about how youth issues could be tackled at the state and local levels. To make the information more accessible to the public, the students developed public service announcements that aired on local and university television and radio programs. The announcements highlighted the effects of budget cuts on the availability of safe places for young people, art and recreation activities, and teen pregnancy prevention programs.

“Originally, we had not planned on doing public service announcements, but [the students] felt it was important to tell the public about their findings,” says Bond. “They really made the connection between [gathering] the information . . . and making it useful for the public.”

Community leaders responded with appreciation, according to Rao. “By doing this report, we provided leaders of nonprofit organizations a chance to express their hardships, their way of working, their struggle with the bad economy, their management of funds, and the changes they underwent to operate optimally,” she says. “The community leaders really appreciated the project, and many of the community organizations showed an interest in getting assistance from UML in finding ways to survive this difficult economy.”

For more information, contact Deepa Rao, e-mail raodeepa_2920@yahoo.com; or Linda Det, e-mail angelazzi013@cs.com. ■

Morehead State University

Professor Builds Bridges With Community While Educating Students



Dr. Barcus

When Dr. Holly Barcus begins work this year to assess the quality of Rowan County, Kentucky, housing stock, several groups will benefit from the databases she creates. Local officials will gain a clearer picture of which areas in their community need the greatest attention. Residents will receive access to a complete up-to-date listing of organizations in the region that offer housing assistance. And Barcus' students at Morehead State University will get the opportunity to translate their academic studies into professional experiences.

"It is a great opportunity to build [students'] professional skills, not only in data collection, but also in working with community members and faculty," says Barcus, an assistant professor of geography at the university.

Professional Learning Experiences

Working with the local community while mentoring her students is not new to Barcus, who has developed a reputation in the city of Morehead for her commitment to both the community and the classroom. Called a "bridge builder" between the university and community, Barcus has proven highly effective at working with community leaders on important issues, says Michael W. Hail, assistant professor of political science and director of the university's COPC. Community partners and students are especially grateful for the benefits they receive from her research projects, he says.

The housing assessment, for example, is being carried out in concert with the city, local neighborhood groups, and local service providers, including Kentucky Housing, Habitat for Humanity, Frontier Housing, and Morehead/Rowan County Housing Authority. Data gathered during the COPC-supported study will be combined with local and national figures and then plotted on maps. That way, participating organizations can visually assess local needs and determine where in the community they should focus their resources. The assessment and database are still in the development stages, but preliminary data gathering is now underway.

"This is a rural community," says Barcus. "While each organization maintains specific information about housing in the community, there is a limited amount of centralized information about housing quality. The stakeholders really wanted to increase the information available on housing quality so they can better target their efforts."

In addition to providing critical information to local stakeholders, the assessment is helping Travis Torrence, a Morehead senior, gain much-needed research experience. Torrence, a geography major who is assisting Barcus in the

project, hopes his newly acquired skills in geographic information systems (GIS) will help him break into the field of environmental consulting after he graduates this year. In the meantime, Torrence is busy pulling together research on housing assessments that are similar to the one Barcus is planning. He'll use that research to determine what variables should be included in the Morehead study.

"While housing is not my main area of interest, this gives me an opportunity to plan a project, gather the data, develop the maps, and also know what people expect from the research," says Torrence, who will soon be joined by other students in the project. "Dr. Barcus lets me feel like I am a part of the project. A lot of times a professor just assigns a project to an assistant without giving an explanation of why you are doing a particular thing. Dr. Barcus spends time teaching me, and I am then able to use those skills to work on professional projects."

For Barcus, mentoring students in this way is just as important as the work she does in the community. "I had [mentors] who provided similar opportunities for me during college and I gained a lot from it," she says. "I want to do the same for others. For projects like this, students are eager to do well and they rise to the occasion." Barcus has discovered that community partners also are eager to mentor her students. "Many of the students are from this region of Kentucky and will probably contribute to it when they leave [the university], so it is clear that it is in everyone's interest to help them succeed."

Building Partnerships Through Action

Barcus' reputation among community partners was sealed 6 months after she began teaching at the university, when the U.S. Census Bureau released the results of its 2000 census. After reviewing the figures, local officials were convinced that Morehead's population had been undercounted, a mistake that would cause a reduction in the city's share of federal and state funds.

Recognizing the discrepancy in the population count was relatively easy; proving it would be more difficult. Seeking help, city officials approached the Institute of Regional Analysis and Public Policy (IRAPP) at Morehead State, and Barcus agreed to analyze the census data. Using GIS maps and input from local officials, she and colleague Kevin Calhoun were able to help identify inconsistencies in the federal statistics, which proved that the city's population had been misrepresented. As a result of the coordinated effort, the U.S. Census Bureau agreed to adjust the city's population, thus ensuring that Morehead would have access to much-needed federal and state funds.

Community Partnerships

While Barcus is pleased with the success of the census project, she maintains that forging community-university partnerships is an ongoing process. With each new collaboration, she says, the university and its partners build a greater atmosphere of trust and, in the end, both partners benefit.

For her part, Barcus has experienced the benefits of partnership both as a faculty member and as a resident of Morehead. As a result, she views her community involvement as a natural outgrowth of good citizenship. "The university and the area hospital dominate the town's economic and land use patterns," she says. "If we want to look to the future and maintain the positive aspects of the community, [the university and the community] have to work together. And, since I live in this community, I also have a stake in keeping it a desirable place to live."

For more information, contact Dr. Holly R. Barcus, assistant professor of Geography, Institute for Regional Analysis and Public Policy, Morehead State University, 100 Lloyd Cassity Building, 150 University Boulevard, Morehead, KY 40351, phone (606) 783-2920, e-mail h.barcus@morehead-st.edu. ■

University of Pennsylvania

Teaching Students to Solve Problems in West Philadelphia

University of Pennsylvania (Penn) undergraduates who signed up for Anthropology 310 in 1991 may have been pleased, at least initially, to learn that their class met only once a week. They quickly learned, however, that *Health, Nutrition, and Community Schools* was not like any other course they had ever taken. Its professor, Dr. Frank Johnston, had spent years in Central America studying how the social environment affects the nutritional status of children, and he wanted his students to follow in his footsteps by becoming problemsolving researchers who were intimately involved in their local communities.

Penn students came to class only once a week, it's true, but they spent many more hours at John B. Turner Middle School in West Philadelphia, observing students' health-related behaviors and trying to change them. At the beginning of the semester they listened to Johnston talk about the interrelationships among ethnicity, poverty, and obesity. However, by the end of the course, they were spending most of their class time telling Johnston (and each other) what they had learned through their reading, observation, and action.

"The students collected data, they did projects on the degree of obesity at the school, they kept records to understand the students' diets, they also taught nutrition classes," says Johnston.

Some Anthropology 310 students moved on after that first semester. Others, who believed that their class projects could bring about lasting change in

West Philadelphia, stayed around to help Johnston turn his class assignment into the Urban Nutrition Initiative (UNI). Now a nonprofit organization with a \$300,000 annual budget and a full-time staff of three, UNI is still bringing a multidisciplinary health curriculum to several West Philadelphia schools. More than 100 Penn students are currently working on UNI projects with about 1,000 students at Drew Elementary School, Shaw Middle School, and

University City High School. Many of the Penn students are enrolled in one of the university's 120 Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) courses, which focus on problem-oriented research and service learning.

Five distinct activities make up the UNI program:

- ◆ *Produce stands* at each school sell fruit and vegetables to students and teachers after school each day. The stands encourage youngsters to exchange a healthy snack, like a bag of grapes, for the fat- and sugar-laden foods they usually eat after school.
- ◆ *School gardens*, initially financed by Penn's COPC grant, provide hands-on nutrition, science, and math lessons for younger students and a chance to learn entrepreneurial skills for older ones. High school students currently sell salad greens to local restaurants, herbs and spices to an on-campus pizza parlor, and fresh mint to a chocolate factory.
- ◆ A *health curriculum*, carried out by Penn students and schoolteachers, brings nutrition information into the classroom through a variety of disciplines.



Dr. Johnston

- ◆ *Weekly Fitness Nights* allow at least 100 local residents to take part in aerobics, yoga, gym, swimming, weightlifting, and cooking classes at University City High School.
- ◆ *A Farmers' Market*, held weekly during the growing season, enhances local residents' access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

UNI has been so successful that educators from across the nation and around the globe are visiting West Philadelphia so they can replicate the program elsewhere. Johnston is the program's most enthusiastic ambassador, recently traveling to South Africa, Australia, Barbados, and Jamaica to spread the UNI message. "I think we must have done something right," says Johnston about the program's growth. "I think we tapped into a real need in the community."

Community-Based Learning

Tapping into community need, especially as it relates to nutrition and health, has been an interest of Johnston's since the mid-1970s when he and a colleague traveled to Guatemala City to begin a 10-year study on how social environment affects the nutritional status of children.

"I have always been interested in trying to understand the social and economic forces that contribute to malnutrition and trying to do something about it," says Johnston, who received his Ph.D. in anthropology from Penn in 1962 and returned there to teach in 1973. While he retired in 2000, Johnston still teaches one course a year and serves as faculty advisor to UNI.

Johnston's career has changed direction several times over the years. Always interested in genetics, he switched his scholarly focus to anthropology when his work in Peru and Guatemala convinced him that the environment, not genes, influences the growth and health of different populations. He also changed his approach to teaching—switching from lectures to active problemsolving—after trying it both ways. "I've taught classes of 350 students," he says. "I didn't like it very well."

"I have always tried to find students who were interested in doing research," says Johnston. "To me, this kind of learning is more exciting. You're actually

working on a problem and ideally it's the problem that is your major scholarly interest. It's exciting to me because I get to interact with students and the students are generating knowledge. It's not as easy as walking out every September with your 3" x 5" cards from the year before. It's a different kind of engagement, a different kind of environment."

The Student Perspective

Students in Johnston's Health in Urban Communities course experience this kind of engagement by focusing on the problem of health disparity in inner-city neighborhoods and doing research to solve specific urban health problems. Johnston's job is to keep the students on track and to provide them with background information about the problems they choose to address.

"I have students this semester working on such problems as depression, violence, and low birth weights," says Johnston. "They do a needs assessment, they do an analysis, they do formative research, they have to develop an intervention, and they decide how they will evaluate that intervention. Then they work with UNI to gain a perspective on the problem."

Not all students are comfortable with this kind of learning, says Johnston, who admits, "I don't get universally acclaimed reviews." Penn graduate Ryan Kuck agrees.

"It was a struggle for a lot of the students," says Kuck, who served as Johnston's teaching assistant last year. "Students have gone through 14 years of school before they get to this class, and they understand how other classes work: you do certain things and you get a certain number of points, it all tallies up in the end, and you can keep track of what is going on. But with these ABCS classes, it is . . . much harder for them to figure out where they are."

An architecture major, Kuck volunteered in his sophomore year to work in one of UNI's school gardens so he could get out of his studio occasionally and enjoy some fresh air. He liked the experience but did not think of making a career of it until he took one of Johnston's courses. That class led Kuck to take more ABCS courses and, eventually, to change his major to anthropology. Kuck now

PENN STUDENT COMBINES THEORY & PRACTICE

Mei Elansary

Mei Elansary was leaving Sayre Middle School in West Philadelphia on a recent afternoon when she encountered a student she'd met through the Sayre-Beacon Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Program. The boy was eating a packaged cupcake.

"He got a panicked look on his face when he saw me," recalls Elansary, who is a senior at the University of Pennsylvania. "He pointed to the cupcake and said, 'Ms. Mei, I am not responsible for this! Somebody gave it to me.' This program has really helped him develop an awareness of his eating habits and I was really proud of that."

Elansary has a right to be proud. As a sophomore at Penn, she developed the Sayre-Beacon program, a multidisciplinary initiative to change health behaviors at Sayre Middle School. Elansary based the model on her research and on her experiences working with UNI (see *Teaching Students to Solve Problems in West Philadelphia*), which brings similar health and nutrition curricula to public schools in West Philadelphia. As a senior, she received Campus Compact's National Student Humanitarian Award for her work at Sayre. And, after she graduates from Penn in May 2004, Elansary will continue to research adolescent health and nutrition issues for the Population Council in Cairo, Egypt.



Mei Elansary with a student.

works full-time for UNI, a job that has him writing science curricula, teaching middle school nutrition classes, and helping teachers at Shaw Middle School incorporate health-related concepts into their daily lessons. He credits Johnston with providing him with the impetus to change direction.

"Dr. Johnston really showed me the connection between what you do in the community, what you're doing in your academic work, and what your career path will be," says Kuck. "He was a role model for me. By the time I finished his class I was really invested in what I was doing."

Kuck says that Johnston also helped him develop a sense of his own competence. "The whole idea of the ABCS classes is that undergraduate students really can make contributions to what is going on," he says. "They are not just there to condense what everybody else is saying and put it into their own words. They can do meaningful research and they can have meaningful occupations that have a real impact."

Johnston's approach to empowering students has spilled over to the operations of UNI. Over the years, he says, most UNI expansions have taken place because students had an idea about how to improve the program and got the green light from Johnston to "go for it." In fact, the idea of opening afterschool fruit stands, which has become a central component of the UNI program, came from two undergraduates who were enrolled in Anthropology 310 in 1994. Johnston liked the idea and encouraged the students to apply for a small grant from Penn to open a fruit stand at Turner School. One of those students is now UNI's codirector.

"The plan was to pick good people and let them do what they do and get out of their way," says Johnston, who is now largely responsible for evaluating UNI's effectiveness. "We have meetings and I take a major role in saying what I think we ought to do. But I think all of us work together as a team."

Lasting Impact

Despite all the energy that Penn students have put into solving urban nutrition problems in West Philadelphia, Johnston says he does not expect to

see significant improvements in residents' health status anytime soon. However, improvement will come eventually, he says.

"The federal government has spent millions and millions and millions of dollars over the last 30 years on obesity and nutritional problems and . . . the obesity rate has tripled," says Johnston. "So I don't kid myself into thinking that UNI is going to bring obesity rates down. But we can show that building a curriculum around gardening, and around fruit and vegetable stands, and around microbusiness really does change student attitudes . . . and behaviors."

UNI has also changed Johnston, who says he's grateful to be engaged in such a worthwhile project. "It has rejuvenated my own teaching and



Ryan Kuck picks vegetables.

my own sense of what I'm doing," he says. "It's given me a new lease on life." UNI and the ABCS courses have also changed his students, says Johnston.

"Penn students have a different set of concerns about the world if they have been through ABCS courses than if they haven't," says

Johnston. "They are really more concerned about the social problems that affect society. So it has a real ripple effect. On the one hand, nutrition is the focus of my courses; on the other hand, nutrition is the mechanism by which students begin to solve problems themselves."

For more information, contact Dr. Frank Johnston, Department of Anthropology, 325 Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6398, phone (215) 898-6834, e-mail fjohnsto@sas.upenn.edu; or Ryan Kuck, The Urban Nutrition Initiative, Franklin Building Annex, 3451 Walnut Street, Suite P-117, Philadelphia, PA 19104, phone (215) 898-1600, e-mail rkuck@sas.upenn.edu. ■

"Working at UNI was a wonderful experience for me," says Elansary. "It is what convinced me that I wanted to dedicate myself to addressing health disparities and working in the community."

Elansary had been working at UNI for 2 years when she developed the Sayre model during a summer internship in 2002. The city of Philadelphia liked the idea and provided money to launch the program, which now involves 3 full-time staff persons, 70 Penn students, 20 public school teachers, and 650 West Philadelphia students in more than 12 different health-promotion programs. Elansary has modified the Sayre program several times since then, often using her class work to inform her work as coordinator of the program. She used her research for an anthropology course on urban health, for instance, to change the program's curriculum.

"I was able to directly apply what I learned," says Elansary. "Theory and practice came together. I learned that in order to effectively work in the community, you have to understand the underlying issues."

Understanding the health issues that affect students at Sayre Middle School also enhanced Elansary's credibility when she spoke at conferences about the project.

"I sat down at tables with legislators and scholars and activists and I made my own policy recommendations," says Elansary. "And I was taken very seriously by these high-level thinkers. I wouldn't have been taken as seriously if I hadn't had an opportunity to tie my community work with my academics."

For more information, contact Mei Elansary at amei@sas.upenn.edu. ■

