

# Youth, the Arts, and Community Outreach

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## Abstract

*The University of Florida Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) has used youth programs and the arts as outreach tools to organize neighborhood associations and build ties with local Community Development Corporations. This article discusses the evolution of the strategy of using the arts in outreach and organizing. The strategy attempts to achieve university-community partnership, wider participation by the university, additional support for the program, viable neighborhood associations, and progress toward institutionalization of the COPC. Examples of this strategy include the involvement of youth in a dance troupe that performs throughout the community and using visiting artists at the university to conduct classes and programs in the neighborhoods.*

Smaller southern cities generally have not had the same tradition of strong neighborhood organization that exists in other areas of the country. Compounding this problem, as it relates to the university taking a role in neighborhood organizing, is neighborhood distrust of the university that dominates their city. The University of Florida Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) has used youth and the arts as outreach tools to organize neighborhood associations, build ties with local Community Development Corporations (CDCs), involve youth and their parents, create university-community bonds, and achieve broader university participation in outreach. Examples of this strategy include involving of youth in an African dance troupe that performs throughout the community and using visiting artists at the university to conduct classes and programs in the neighborhoods. Neighborhood residents have had the opportunity to participate in performances at the university. Neighborhood associations pull residents together through festivals and neighborhood gatherings that feature arts activities. In these gatherings, other community needs are discussed and additional programs created.

This article discusses the evolution of the strategy of using the arts in outreach and organizing. It discusses the results of that strategy in achieving university-community partnership, wider participation by the university, additional support for the program, viable neighborhood associations, catalyzing additional initiatives, and progressing toward institutionalization of the COPC program.

Neighborhood organizing has at its root the goal of creating networks and associations that can be mutually supportive and give voice to neighborhood preferences. Organization in this manner results in neighbors who watch out for and help one another, and, through advocacy, can lead to improved conditions in the neighborhood. However, in communities without a history of neighborhood associations or Community Development Corporations (CDCs) engaged in neighborhood organizing, it is difficult to start the process.

Outside entities can play a role in facilitating neighborhood organizing, but at its heart organizing is the result of neighborhood participation. One of the organizations that can play a facilitation role is a university, but there are pitfalls in determining the most effective and appropriate role of the university in the process relative to other organizations. This article discusses the role played by the University of Florida in neighborhood organization, with a focus on the use of the arts as a central strategy in developing neighborhood organizations.

Using the arts serves several functions. First, many of the programs are targeted at performances by children, providing outlets for them after school and on weekends. Performances involve parents and others in the audience, creating opportunities to come together. Art and photography can provide opportunities to document and react to neighborhood conditions—a first step toward seeking changes. The arts can break down barriers and create trust, particularly in situations where historically there has been a lack of trust. With arts programming as a starting point, other services that the neighborhood would like to have can be identified and attempts can be made to provide these services or advocate for their provision.

## Community Development Corporations and Neighborhood Organizing

CDCs in Gainesville, as is often the case in other southern cities, have not focused on neighborhood organizing. As a result, a void existed in Gainesville that could be filled by the University of Florida's COPC. While CDCs and other nonprofit organizations exist in these communities, they tend to be newer and have broader geographic and different programmatic focuses than their counterparts in other areas of the country. The lack of a history of neighborhood organizing requires different approaches and partnerships as well as cooperative relationships between the COPC and local CDCs.

The National Congress for Community Economic Development (NCCED) conducts a periodic census of CDCs. These organizations are characterized by the NCCED census "as groups which are indigenous to a community, are targeted to specific geographic areas with concentrations of low- and moderate-income people, are comprehensive in their approach to community problems, and produce tangible results." (NCCED, 1995.) C.I. Walker defines CDCs as organizations that "self-identify with particular neighborhoods or groups of neighborhoods, restrict development activity to those neighborhoods, and otherwise undertake community-building activities that typically serve only residents of those neighborhoods." (Walker, 1993.) He argues that CDCs are more likely than other nonprofit organizations to perform nondevelopment functions, "including community organizing, social service provision, advocacy of neighborhood strategic interests, and so on." (Walker, 1993.)

These statements imply that CDCs are engaged not only in physical development, such as housing and economic development, but also in community building (Sullivan, 1993). The historic development of CDCs indicates the range of roles that have been central to these organizations. CDCs in the United States developed with little Federal support in the

1960s. The Federal programs that were available to directly support CDCs in the 1960s and 1970s were largely eliminated by the early 1980s (Drier and Hulchanski, 1993). Despite this lack of Federal funding, a substantial increase in the number of CDCs occurred in the 1980s. Evidence of this increase can be seen in the finding of the 1991 NCCED survey that 39 percent of the CDCs surveyed were less than 10 years old. Cities sought to encourage the development of CDCs through various forms of assistance. CDCs were seen as a vehicle to facilitate public-private partnerships for development activities. The emphasis of these new organizations (and some older ones as well), to achieve accountability in terms of measurable accomplishments, was and continues to be on production.

An examination of CDCs nationally indicates that many of the CDCs created in the 1960s and 1970s are located in the large cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Even today, dividing the number of CDCs in a region by that region's population indicates that CDCs in the South Atlantic region are underrepresented relative to the population of the region, while those in the New England and Middle Atlantic regions are overrepresented (Walker, 1993). National production totals for CDCs are dominated by the CDCs in large cities, with almost 60 percent of all housing units produced in cities with populations above 500,000 and 39 percent in cities with populations above 900,000 (Walker, 1993). These data suggest that CDCs have been most prominent in regions other than the South.

One characteristic that seems to characterize CDCs in the South in particular is that they are created by city agencies and staffed by city employees (Walker, 1993). This structure and its requirement for accountability measures may be another factor leading to a premium being placed on production as opposed to other potential functions of the CDC (Drier and Hulchanski, 1993). The increased level of government involvement also may impact the CDC's geographic boundary of focus. This situation is a result of pressure to provide services to a larger area than might be the target for neighborhood-based CDCs.

The discussion above suggests that CDCs that are located in Florida, as elsewhere in the South, are generally fewer in number and more recently created than those in the North (Connerly, 1989; Blakely and Aparicio, 1990). Given the motivation for their establishment and the resources available at the time of creation, these CDCs have emphasized production goals. Specifically, CDCs may have become predominantly housing providers rather than addressing a range of problems in a specific neighborhood in the manner that the traditional CDC model suggests.

It is in such an environment that the University of Florida COPC began its operations in 1995 with a program that included housing support, small business counseling, and neighborhood organizing. In particular, the COPC has sought to provide a neighborhood organizing component in support of production-oriented partners. In 1995 Gainesville had two CDCs, both with a large geographic scope and an emphasis on production activities. One is a Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation-affiliated organization engaged in housing production, housing rehabilitation, and the promotion of homeownership. The other is focused on economic development through small business lending programs, but it also has one multifamily housing complex. COPC has had a relationship in which it provides community-organizing support for the housing organization, including identifying residents to serve on the CDC board. It has played a similar role in helping the other CDC to provide programming for a community center built by the CDC. New neighborhood groups, a neighborhood coalition, and a new CDC with a community organizing component working cooperatively with COPC have emerged since 1995. The Florida COPC serves as a model for the use of university resources to expand and extend the activities of the CDCs (other university-CDC relationships are described in the HUD publication *Building Higher Education-Community Development Corporation Partnerships*).

## The University of Florida COPC and Neighborhood Organizing

The University of Florida COPC in Gainesville, based in the Shimberg Center for Affordable Housing within the College of Architecture and funded by HUD, was conceived to address several objectives. Projects and activities were proposed in response to extensive efforts to identify community needs, efforts that include building on the work undertaken in spring 1994 to prepare the joint Gainesville/Alachua County Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community application. The activities that were a part of the COPC were in three general areas: housing, economic development, and neighborhood organizing.

The neighborhood organizing component of the project was the most difficult at first, but it has developed into a successful and well-received activity that has become the COPC's most recognized role. The startup was more difficult than other COPC activities because the COPC staff sought to find the right approach. Its role in this area has evolved, and staff work closely with several CDCs and city agencies in Gainesville. The focus of the remaining discussion is on the neighborhood organizing activities of the COPC.

Early in the project, staff members were located in two neighborhoods and focused on beginning neighborhood organizing efforts. The major initial effort was to meet all of the residents of the two neighborhoods to assess their interests, capacities, and needs for services. In addition, the initial effort was designed to build the confidence and trust of the neighborhood residents in the COPC staff. This process was slower than anticipated. The COPC staff were faced with cynicism over the past role of the university in these neighborhoods. Residents believed that staff were there to conduct research and then leave when the research project was finished. COPC staff were also perceived as outsiders in the neighborhoods and therefore viewed with suspicion, as not all residents understood what the COPC was doing in the neighborhood. A considerable amount of effort in the first 6 months was devoted to building relationships with neighborhood residents.

As a new organization, it was also necessary to fit into the existing fabric of organizations within the community to determine what they were doing and how we could assist, to identify voids that we could fill, and to overcome competitive and resource concerns. The COPC has worked with two existing CDCs and has been involved in the creation of a third one. The COPC was able to provide support and activities that these organizations did not have the resources to provide. It was through this process of working with the community and local organizations that the COPC developed a strategy based on the arts as a means of neighborhood organizing.

By the end of the first 6 months, the COPC had begun to achieve a measure of confidence and trust in the neighborhoods. Contacts had been made with most community residents. Residents were coming to COPC staff for assistance with problems, primarily at the COPC's streetfront center in the neighborhood. COPC staff members' roles included assisting residents in finding resources and making referrals to other agencies. Agencies with which the COPC has worked included health care (including an agency primarily serving elderly clients), local youth clubs, Santa Fe Community College, city and county agencies, the Gainesville Police Department, the Florida Departments of Juvenile Justice and Health and Rehabilitative Services, schools, the housing authority, and social service agencies. Neighborhood newsletters were established to provide information to the residents.

## The Arts and Neighborhood Organizing

COPC has used youth and the arts as outreach tools to organize neighborhood associations; involve youth and, through them, their parents; create university-community bonds; and achieve broader university participation in outreach. Programs for youth and children have been developed because of the need for such programs in the community and because involving youth and children was viewed as a means to eventually attract their parents and create a positive image for COPC. While it is too early for an evaluation, this strategy appears to have been successful.

A recent publication (Presidents Committee, 1999) suggests that arts education can play the following important functions for youth:

- Contributes significantly to improved critical thinking, problem posing, problem solving, and decisionmaking.
- Involves the communication, manipulation, interpretation, and understanding of complex symbols.
- Fosters higher-order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, develops imagination and judgement. (President's Committee, 1999, p. 6).

## Dance Troupe

Not originally envisioned as a central activity of COPC, the arts have become a core of its programming. Two examples of this strategy illustrate the effect of the approach. First, since the beginning of the COPC children have been involved in an African dance troupe that performs throughout the community. This ongoing program has been offered at two sites. These students have learned traditional dances and have performed on a number of occasions. Some 30 children ages 6 through 14 participate in this program led by a doctoral student. Through this program, parents have become involved in providing transportation to performances as well as other support. The group has received considerable media exposure and pictures in local newspapers. The children have gained a sense of concentration, self-awareness, and self-confidence, and have learned to work in a group.

One highlight has been participation in the University of Florida homecoming parade, one of the largest annual events in Gainesville. The COPC was able to initially attract and involve children through the dance troupe, and the group has expanded through positive word of mouth. Public performances by the group drew attention to the organization and serves as a component of neighborhood celebrations and other events including several CDC-sponsored or cosponsored events.

## Artists-in-Residence

The university's College of Fine Arts has visiting artists-in-residence each semester, and a part of their activities is to be involved in community outreach. In spring 1998 the COPC was asked to provide outreach services for a visiting dance company by arranging visits at schools and community centers and by facilitating the attendance of more than 1,500 children at a children's performance at the university's Center for the Performing Arts. The dance group also recruited community residents to be in the company for an evening performance at the Center for the Performing Arts. The COPC helped to coordinate this process. The resulting performance was well attended. Neighborhood residents came to the campus to attend performances, and the university was in the neighborhoods through

the workshops. Our involvement in this outreach helped to establish our link with another college in a relationship that we anticipate will continue and created a vehicle that we plan to replicate with other colleges using the COPC as their outreach method. This method becomes a means to institutionalize COPC by providing a service to other departments and colleges for which COPC would be compensated.

In addition to programs similar to the two described above, COPC has sponsored, cosponsored, or participated in festivals and neighborhood gatherings that feature arts activities for children and adults. Through these events, residents are brought together and a forum develops to discuss neighborhood issues. In part because of these programs, neighborhood associations have been created to bring residents together. In these gatherings, other community needs are discussed and additional programs are created.

The COPC staff have found that the strong response they have received to cultural activities and special events has allowed them to make inroads in other areas of the project. These activities have led to acceptance of the COPC in the neighborhood, and created positive feedback. In communities that are not confronted with critical issues around which to organize, the arts have served as a means to promote resident involvement that has expanded into other areas of engagement.

## COPC Accomplishments in Youth, Family, and Neighborhood Activities

By expanding on the base of arts and youth activities and responding to perceived needs, the COPC has provided and facilitated a wide range of youth and family activities in our office, various community centers, and other locations in Gainesville. As a result of these activities, the city of Gainesville provided COPC with a city recreation center located in one of our neighborhoods as a place from which to operate youth and family programs. The COPC has offered a number of programs on an ongoing basis and others one time. One set of programs and activities was developed for the community center owned and operated by a CDC. These activities included:

- A tutoring, self-esteem, and enrichment program for elementary and middle school students attended by about 60 students. The program included computer training, social skills, cultural awareness, and tutoring. A career day hosted some 25 persons explaining careers (including the publisher of *The Gainesville Sun*) and received press coverage. The program was designed and overseen by a faculty member from the psychology department and included a number of student volunteers as well as teachers from local schools.
- A photography program originally called Photos About Porters, later called View Our Voices and separately incorporated, in which teenagers take pictures of their neighborhood and discuss its positive and negative qualities. Operated by anthropology graduate students on a volunteer basis and with support from an anthropology faculty member, this program has attracted and engaged teenagers who previously had not been involved in community center activities. The program expanded to additional neighborhoods, and was provided its own darkroom in the community center as well as space in a city recreation center. The program received a \$10,000 grant from the city of Gainesville after the students appeared before a City Commission meeting, and it was included in several other grant applications. One summer the program was able to hire four students to teach new students, providing summer jobs. The city has also provided funding for a program coordinator.

- Computer workshops have been held for children and adults. The adult program was largely informal, with one-on-one assistance. Donations of computers were arranged to facilitate the computer training. Part of the computer training was oriented to building job skills. The training was expanded as a part of the welfare reform effort to prepare students with job skills or for additional, formal coursework at Santa Fe Community College. This training was also used as an entree to GED prep training.
- Health fairs involving a number of community agencies.
- Character-building workshops for youth.
- AIDS awareness workshops.
- A rites of passage program for African-American girls (ages 9 to 13) called Sisters of Maat. The program includes discussions and speakers, field trips, and one-time projects such as a mother-daughter dinner and a retreat.
- An informal basketball program, a drop-in program that also serves as a means to attract children to the center for other activities.
- Support groups for community residents.

In addition to these programs at the community center, COPC has worked on the following activities:

- Two homebuyers' fairs at which information on the homebuying process was provided. Lenders, real estate agents, and staff from agencies providing assistance made presentations.
- A faculty member from the architecture department has developed designs and neighborhood plans for two neighborhoods and convened community meetings.
- A number of neighborhood celebrations, housing project grand openings, and related events.

COPC activities that have been undertaken in response to perceived needs include:

- Creative Expressions, an arts program for children and youth.
- A children's reading hour for parents and children that met on Saturday mornings.
- A COPC-sponsored youth summit titled "All Eyes on Me: Sisters and Brothers Finding Power and Resisting Crime," held at a local school. With a keynote address by Patty King, the daughter of B.B. King, the all-day session ended with a dance in the evening. The goal was to steer kids from crime and help them understand the pitfalls and how to avoid crime. It was attended by about 75 youth, and included the Gainesville Police Department as a sponsor.
- COPC sponsored a business expo for neighborhood businesses that had booth space for businesses and a number of associated activities including performances, food, and children's activities.
- Santa Fe Community College, with the Lofton Adult Education Center, held a summer training program on home rehabilitation skills with 10 student participants and rehabilitated a home in our target area. This program expanded on their construction program, which offers new construction training. The program undertook the rehabilitation of a home in our target area each summer while providing training for students from the neighborhood, with the hope that they will continue to do rehabilitation work in the neighborhood while training residents in minor home repairs.

- COPC involves neighborhood residents in the production and distribution of its monthly newsletter.
- The Powerful Elders Activity Brunch program meets weekly with 30 to 40 elders attending each week. The program includes a meal, speakers, and a chance for socialization. Talks on such issues as healthcare and law are given, bingo is played, and a dance has been held. Among highlights was a Powerful Elders Christmas Extravaganza. Several businesses and agencies continue to provide funds for food and door prizes.
- The “street law” program provided by local law students is regularly attended by 15 to 25 teenagers. The program sensitizes youth to the judicial system and civil rights. They have participated in teen court, and established close ties with the Department of Juvenile Justice and a local judge. This group meets twice a week.

## Conclusion

Newer CDCs, which predominate in Florida and throughout the South, are generally oriented toward housing production and economic development with less emphasis on neighborhood-community organizing and capacity building than their counterparts elsewhere in the country. Part of the reason may be that housing production is measurable, so that goals can be set and an organization held accountable. Community building does not have the same degree of measurable objectives and accountability, which may have resulted in a deemphasis on community building as a goal of the newer CDCs.

To meet the need for community organizing, the University of Florida COPC has worked closely with CDCs in Gainesville, with the COPC assuming the role of neighborhood organizing. In finding a purpose around which to organize, the COPC has settled on a strategy of focusing on youth and the arts. While a longer term evaluation of the strategy may be warranted, at this stage the approach appears to have been successful in generating university-community partnerships and providing an entrée to neighborhood involvement. Our efforts to fill a niche through youth and the arts has led to cooperative relationships with two existing CDCs in Gainesville, participation in the creation of a new CDC, participation by a number of components of the University in outreach activities, establishment of a neighborhood coalition, and cooperative relationships with several city government departments.

Through the arts, the COPC has provided performance opportunities for children, providing outlets for them after school and on weekends. Performances involve parents and others in the audience, creating opportunities to come together. Art and photography can provide opportunities to document and react to neighborhood conditions, a first step toward seeking changes. The arts can break down barriers and create trust, particularly in situations where historically there has been a lack of trust. Finally, the arts and performance serve to bring neighborhood residents together, creating forums in which other issues can be discussed, neighbors can become acquainted, and the roots of neighborhood organization established. With arts programming as a starting point, other services were identified that the neighborhood would like to have and attempts were made to provide these services or advocate for their provision. Throughout the effort, COPC has established a relationship and worked cooperatively with the CDCs.



## Authors

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