University of Pittsburgh: Community Engagement Center
ABOUT THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CENTER IN HOMEWOOD

A beloved Pittsburgher, Mister Rogers embodied what it meant to be a good neighbor. Rogers would have embraced the University’s creation of new front doors right in the heart of bordering neighborhoods. Two years ago, the University opened its first Community Engagement Center (CEC). The CEC is the keystone of Pitt’s place-based engagement in Homewood, housing the staff who coordinate Pitt’s efforts in the CEC and throughout the Homewood community. The CEC aligns the involvement and expertise of the University with the agenda and wisdom of the community by building mutually beneficial partnerships that harness the University’s research and educational missions.

The Community Engagement Centers are part of Pitt's institutional commitment to strengthening communities. Last fiscal year, the University invested $16.8 million in community engagement activities, including support for historic community-university partnerships, some of which are more than 40 years old. Faculty, students, and staff working through the Community Engagement Center in Homewood agree to a set of guiding principles established by Homewood residents which include non-judgment, collaboration, mutual benefit and respect, as well as intergenerational, sustainable, and inclusive engagements.

The CEC is located in a 20,000 square foot building on the main commercial corridor of Homewood, which is owned by Bible Center Church. The church had purchased the building as a strategy to block speculative development which had been encroaching on the corridor. While weather secure, it had stood vacant for a number of years before Pitt invested $6.5M to completely renovate the property. It now offers meeting rooms, computer and science labs, a health and wellness pavilion, education multipurpose space, offices for small business development, and a gallery space for local arts exhibitions. The project achieved a 42% Minority/Women-owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) contract participation rate and 40% minority labor rate, which far exceeded the city and state MWBE averages.
The center hosts programs and activities at no cost to community members. CEC programs are facilitated by all 16 of the University’s schools and focus on

- inclusive economic prosperity
- quality of life/social services
- health and wellness
- cultural arts
- enriched learning and youth development
- organizational capacity and data analytics
- environment and sustainability

In its first year, the CEC hosted 667 events with 41 ongoing programs for children, families, adults and senior citizens. Since October 2018, 14,789 visitors have walked through the doors of the center. Of these visitors, 60% are return visitors.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CENTER COLLABORATIONS

CEC programs related to innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic growth help to ensure that the benefits of the region’s recent economic transformation are shared more equitably in neighborhoods such as Homewood. For example, the University’s Institute for Entrepreneurial Excellence (IEE) offers a six-month counseling and training program at the CEC in business education to area women- and minority-owned companies. Since 2017, the IEE has graduated 50 entrepreneurs from its Homewood-based activities in partnership with the Katz Graduate School of Business and the David Berg Center for Ethics and Leadership. University student teams have also provided consulting services and improvement plans to 21 businesses from the Homewood area.

Other CEC collaborations address educational inequalities with unique university-community interventions that foster academic success in schools and students who are agents of social justice. Several of these programs involve the Pitt-Assisted Communities & Schools (PACS) project of the School of Social Work’s Center on Race and Social Problems. In partnership with the School of Education, PACS offers a distinctive program, the Justice Scholars Institute, which strengthens the preparedness of Westinghouse Academy 6-12 students for the transition to college by offering University courses and additional instrumental support at no cost.
The Justice Scholars Initiative with Westinghouse Academy

The Justice Scholars initiative addresses the low post-secondary matriculation and completion rates of Westinghouse Academy students (in one report, only 63 out of 100 students graduate from high school and only 6 graduates from a two- or four-year college). Before this partnership, Westinghouse Academy students were not able to earn college credits and since its implementation one-quarter of upperclassmen are enrolled in college credit earning courses. Enrollment in college courses while in high school has shown to have positive effects on four- to six-year college completion rates, yet students in communities of color are often underexposed to opportunities to take advanced courses.

As part of this initiative, the CEC offers Homewood youth a space to discuss social justice issues and receive support for coursework. Through the out-of-school component, students take an active role in addressing social justice issues in Homewood through a qualitative research project, participate in service-learning opportunities, and learn the value of giving back to the community. Discussions are underway to launch Justice Scholars at other high schools that serve students low-income communities in Pittsburgh. Another PACS-supported pilot project brings together the Justice Scholars with University English faculty and graduate students at the CEC for work in digital humanities and civic education. The H.Y.P.E. (Homewood Youth Powered and Engaged) media project equips Westinghouse Academy students with new media and digital composing skills that empower them in having a voice and shaping the narratives of their community.

Research for Equity and Power Project

The CEC also connects research with community concerns. One example is the Research for Equity and Power project, which engages youth and adult residents in addressing the community’s concern with the effects of gentrification, which has intensified with the City of Pittsburgh’s recent economic resurgence. The University’s School of Social Work and Homewood’s Children Village are co-leading a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service to address the issue. Outcomes of the project have included the creation of a resident advisory board, an equitable development playbook, Citizen Training Academies, and the hiring of a community-based researcher from Homewood.

Through impactful projects and sustainable partnerships, the CEC in Homewood is a model for public-private partnerships and for research that is shaped by engaged citizens. These outcomes on our communities give whole new meaning to the city’s
reputation as a neighborly place and certainly would have made Mister Rogers proud.
LINKS TO FURTHER INFORMATION

Articles:
- Community Impact Report

Partnering Organizations:
- University of Pittsburgh
- University of Pittsburgh – Office of Engagement & Community Affairs
- The Institute for Entrepreneurial Excellent (IEE)
- University of Pittsburgh - Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business
- David Berg Center for Ethics and Leadership
- University of Pittsburg – School of Education
- Pitt-Assisted Communities and Schools
- Justice Scholars Institute
- University of Pittsburgh – Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences; Department of English
- Research for Equity and Power Project
- University of Pittsburgh – School of Social Work
- Homewood Children’s Village
ABOUT APLU
The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is North America’s oldest higher education association. APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The association's membership consists of public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations.

APLU’s mission is to: expand access and improve student success to deliver the innovative workforce of tomorrow; advance and promote research and discovery to improve society, foster economic growth, and address global challenges; and build healthy, prosperous, equitable, and vibrant communities locally and globally.

Based in Washington, DC, the association's work is furthered by an active and effective advocacy arm that works with Congress and the administration as well as the media to advance federal policies that strengthen public universities and benefit the students they serve.

ABOUT THE IEP UNIVERSITIES PROGRAM
APLU and its Commission on Economic and Community Engagement (CECE) established the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) Universities Program to help higher education institutions codify, elevate, and advance their campus enterprise supporting economic and community development.

The IEP designation program recognizes institutions that have demonstrated a meaningful, ongoing and substantial commitment to economic and community development, growth, and economic opportunity.

The IEP awards program recognize exemplary and innovative projects in university-based economic and community engagement:

- **Talent** and workforce development
- **Innovation**, entrepreneurship, and tech-based economic development
- **Place** development through public service, outreach, and community engagement

Learn more at: [www.APLU.org/IEP](http://www.APLU.org/IEP)