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INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY UNIVERSITIES
AWARDS PROGRAM

CASE
STUDY
2013

Strengthening Communities

Putting Community Back in Economic Development

Sustainable economic development goes beyond just advancing the performance of a particular industry cluster in a region. It also requires building healthy economically viable communities. Thus community and neighborhood revitalization is an important tool in university economic development efforts. A challenge, though, is the relationship between community residents and a university in these efforts.

Often the university's faculty and students drive the selection and implementation of the project. While useful, many times such projects may not reflect resident priorities and are not sustained beyond the period of the project or grant.

Addressing these issues, the University of Memphis forged a unique community economic development partnership with the Memphis Regional Community Foundation (MRCF) and United Way of the MidSouth (UWMS). To engage communities more effectively, the MRCF, UWMS and the University formed a partnership changing the power relations in the grant process. The URCF and UWMS annually give the University a block grant of funds called "Strengthening Communities" for community building purposes. Students in the University's Graduate Program in Public and Nonprofit Administration administer the grant program giving them practical experience in working with nonprofits. Nonprofit community groups develop proposals based on what they want done in their communities.

Communities receiving the grants administer the grant's funds. They select the faculty and students that they wish to work with at the university. http://www.memphis.edu/scgrants/docs/2013_cb_rfp.pdf The result is to put the direction of the grant, control of the funds, and selection of the partner in the hands of the community altering what is done, how it is done and how it is sustained.

In the 5 years since its inception, 32 capacity-building and small grants have been awarded to improve neighborhoods and spur economic growth. Thirty community-partner organizations have hosted funded projects with 23 faculty/student research partners funded. Nearly \$350,000 in total combined dollars have been invested in community-based projects and research. Two examples of the process and outcomes of the Strengthening Communities initiative are the South Memphis project and the Memphis Music Magnet.

In the first case, a neighborhood south of downtown Memphis called South Memphis has been one of the most economically distressed and neglected communities in the City. Reverend Kenneth Robinson, pastor of St. Andrew's AME Church in the area approached the University to be a partner in revitalization of the neighborhood. A community development corporation founded by church, The Works, formed a coalition including the church, a local architectural firm, the Memphis Regional Design Center, and the University of Memphis to create the South Memphis Renaissance Collaborative. (SMRC). With support from Strengthening Communities and the Hyde Family Foundation, SMRC designed and implemented a comprehensive set of community improvement projects to enhance the quality of life for residents of South Memphis.

Over 400 longtime neighborhood residents and more than 40 students and faculty members from the University teamed to study population and housing trends, survey building conditions, and interview a cross-section of area civic leaders to gain an understanding of existing physical and social conditions of the area. Two-person teams composed of neighborhood residents and University students conducted a door-to-door survey gathering ideas and suggestions from residents for improving the quality of life within their community. The results of the studies were then reviewed by community residents leading to the creation of the South Memphis Revitalization Action Plan (SoMeRAP). <http://www.nw.org/network/green/documents/SomeRapFactSheet.pdf>. The plan laid out a set of intermediate and long term projects ranging from immediate services to long term physical planning.



The Green Machine Mobile Food Market

One action was approval of the plan by the Memphis City Council in March, 2010, committing the city to the public sector components of the plan including the redesign of a major thoroughfare in the community, receipt of a \$250,000 implementation grant for a Children’s Development Center and Farmers Market structure, and steps toward opening a primary care center for the neighborhood.

Another outcome grew from community complaints about the absence of any traditional food supermarkets in the area making South Memphis a real “food desert.” As a result, a South Memphis Farmers Market was created providing access to locally produced healthy foods. <http://somefm.org/>. Not only has the South Memphis

Farmers Market been a success, is spawned the creation of a mobile venue called the Green Machine Food Market. This market in the form of a transformed bus provided by the Memphis Area Transit authority now serves 15 locations in economically distressed neighborhoods throughout the city.

The South Memphis project was featured in 2010 by the White House’s Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. One of the faculty members involved with the project, Dr. Katherine Lambert-Pennington, received the 2011 Ernest Lynton Award for Early Career Scholars.

In another Memphis neighborhood, a recording studio, Stax, in the 1960’s once served as a hub of creativity for community economic and social well-being. Stars such as Isaac Hayes and Otis Redding lived and worked in the area. Stax went bankrupt in the 1970’s and an already modest neighborhood declined, saddled with disinvestment, flight and public housing.

With that history and circumstances as background, with support from a Strengthening Communities grant, a neighborhood association Soulsville USA teamed with students and faculty

members in the UofM's City and Regional Planning program and other support groups to create the Memphis Music Magnet plan. Building on the creative assets and history of the area, the plan connects the music history and assets of the neighborhood with broader community development opportunities. Vacant structures are being repurposed to provide space and facilities in the neighborhood for artists to gather in creative activities. Physical revitalization includes home ownership incentives and creation of single family, music-focused multi-family and mixed-use commercial development on a large concentration of vacant land and properties currently held in the Shelby County Land Bank as a consequence of tax foreclosures. Since Memphis' business and civic leaders recognize the music industry as critical to the city's future economic success the Memphis Music Magnet plan is well on the way to the revitalization of Soulsville USA.

