

Partnerships and Collaboration Rebuild Communities

A Case Study in Pawtucket, Rhode Island

by Marcia Marker Feld

Question: How does a Rhode Island neighborhood, replete with abandoned properties, crime-ridden streets, unemployment, and very few residents who have completed secondary or higher education, become a model of neighborhood revitalization? The answer is by partnering with educational, municipal, and community organizations on a comprehensive and inclusive strategic planning process.

University Partnerships and Urban Neighborhoods

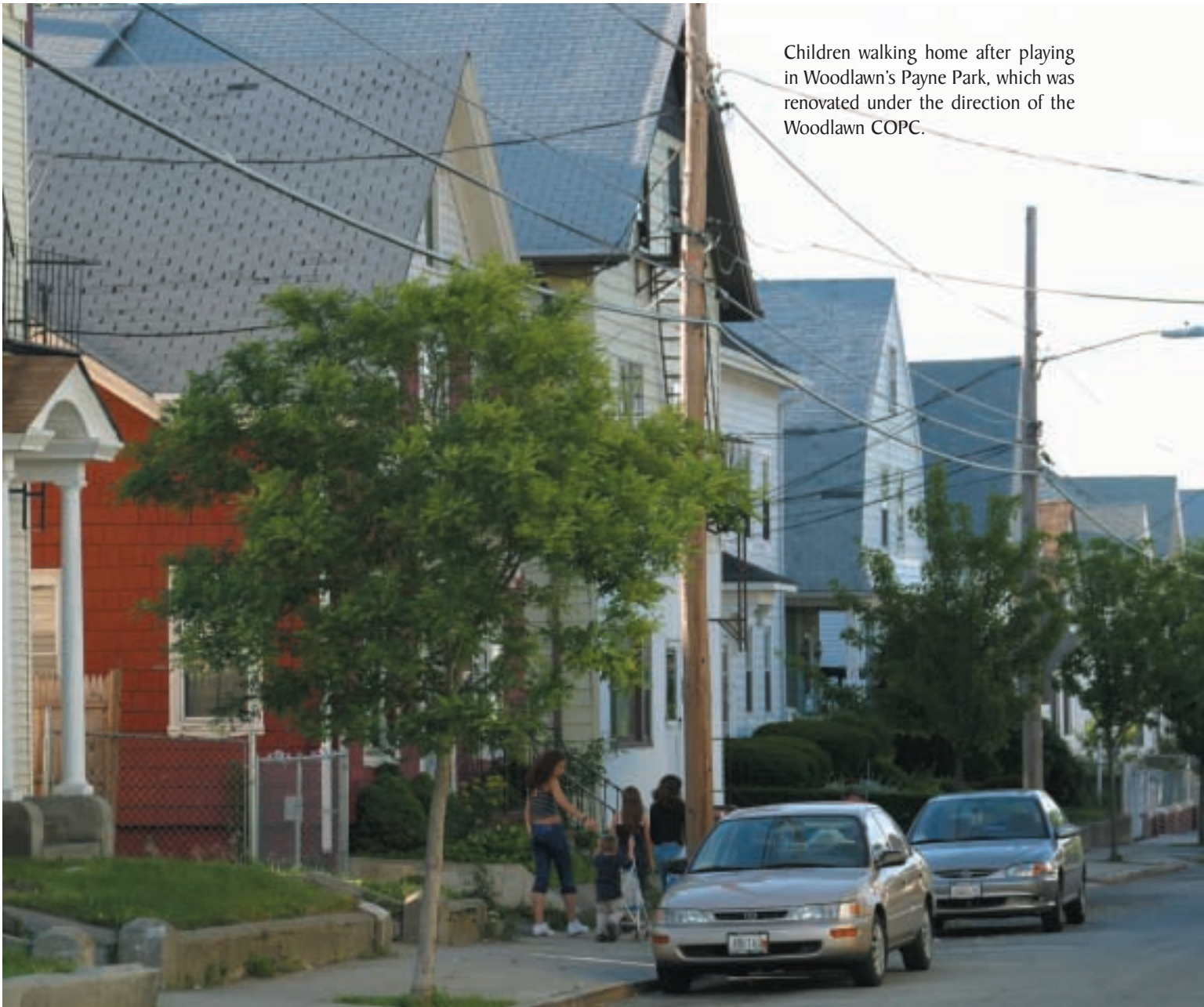
Partnerships have always been an important aspect of American public

higher education. The first and second Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 formalized partnerships between land grant institutions and their surrounding areas. These Acts pioneered unique American institutions – cooperative extension and agricultural experiment stations – that have a mandate to intervene and strengthen their regional economies.

More recent partnerships between communities and universities took root in the late 1950s, when the Ford Foundation tested a model of urban extension at the University of Delaware. Then, following the fight to

desegregate public schools in the 1960s, the federal courts ordered a few partnerships between higher-education institutions and failing public-school districts. In the 1970s, Congress passed the Urban Grant University Program entitling land grant universities and state higher-education institutions in urban areas fiscal support from the U.S. Department of Education; the program also supported learning about community service in urban public schools.

Despite these developments, there was no real national direction for universities to work with their urban



Children walking home after playing in Woodlawn's Payne Park, which was renovated under the direction of the Woodlawn COPC.

neighbors until 1992, when President George H. Bush signed the Housing and Community Development Act, which established the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) Program. The COPC Program was created so that universities and colleges could assist urban communities through outreach, use community advisory committees to help define university activities, and conduct applied research together with the community. It encouraged universities to work on a level playing field with the community and municipality to resolve neighborhood problems.

Further strengthening of the COPC program occurred in 1994, when HUD Secretary Henry G. Cisneros established the Office of University Partnerships to administer the COPC and other university-related programs. Cisneros believed in the potential of university-community partnerships for urban revitalization. As he expressed in an essay,

Our nation's institutions of higher education are crucial to the fight to save our cities. Colleges and universities must join the effort to rebuild their communities, not just for the moral reasons but also out of enlightened self-interest. The long-term futures of both the city and the university are so intertwined that one cannot, or perhaps will not, survive without the other. Universities cannot afford to become islands of affluence, self-importance, and horticultural beauty in seas of squalor, violence, and despair.

The Office of University Partnerships, which remains the only unit of the federal government with the primary mission of supporting university and neighborhood partnerships, has provided over 200 COPC grants for

community economic development initiatives including social action. COPC program funding continues to be authorized through 2003.

Case Study of the Woodlawn COPC: A Personal View

The partnership between the University of Rhode Island's Urban Field Center and the Woodlawn neighborhood was both serendipitous and substantive. As director of the University of Rhode Island (URI) Urban Field Center, I had just returned from HUD as the founding director of the Office of University Partnerships and was actively searching for a neighborhood interested in working with the university on a COPC proposal. I began by calling my former students, now planners and community development officers at municipal planning departments, and asking if their city fit the federal COPC criteria. Pawtucket and some of its neighborhoods had the required characteristics, and, in addition, the city's community development block grant officer welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with URI. He recommended the Woodlawn neighborhood because of its needs but also because of its assets. Pawtucket's mayor and community-based groups were also in favor of working with URI.

The Woodlawn neighborhood was diverse with recent immigrants and burdened by homelessness and abandoned property. Two-thirds of the residents earned low or moderate incomes and over one-half had not completed high school. The neighborhood residents needed child-care services and an expansion of programs for literacy, life skills, and drug and school-dropout prevention. Chief among the neighborhood's assets was a hugely admired community activist and neighborhood association president. In addition, the local faith-based institutions were committed to helping the community.

With many partners – ranging from residents, local unions, businesses, and community-based organizations to the housing authority, public schools, municipal planning office, and URI – the Woodlawn neighborhood received a three-year COPC grant followed by a two-year implementation grant. While there were many problems to fix, it was critical to create a sense of empowerment among the residents of Woodlawn. The resident neighborhood association's motto, "Bring Back the Pride to Woodlawn," encouraged residents to embrace their community. Active participation in the entire COPC process further strengthened the neighborhood.

HUD has historically encouraged citizen participation in its programs – for example, there have been Urban Renewal advisory councils, Model Cities boards, public housing tenant councils, and Empowerment Zone committees – but the COPC Program offers the most energetic and far-reaching mandate for citizen participation to date. According to the call for proposals, community residents must agree with the planned programs and join the advisory committee, which controls the programs and their funds. Planning professionals are directed to act as facilitators, mediators, and information-providers, not decision-makers. The governance structure also emphasizes community power. If there is a vote, the votes of the community representatives outweigh the combined vote of the university, mayor's office, and planning department.

Along with empowering residents and revitalizing the neighborhood, the Woodlawn COPC aims to make the university aware of the bonds and common concerns it shares with the community. Although federal funding of the Woodlawn COPC ends in September 2002, its community development work will continue through Woodlawn Community Development Corporation, the non-profit 501(c)3 formed by the COPC.

Highlights of the COPC in Action

From a base of operations in an unused parish house, the Woodlawn COPC has made tremendous accomplishments, ranging from redeveloping abandoned properties to providing residents with leadership and citizenship training. The sidebar "Improvements in Woodlawn" on page 20 details some partnership achievements. During the past five

What To Handle When

During the initial three years, the Woodlawn COPC tackled issues including housing, neighborhood revitalization, education and social services, and community planning and organization. The COPC also worked to disseminate its results. Neighborhood residents decided on the projects and policy direction and the university provided technical assistance. Grant money could not be used for physical development.

During the following two years, the Woodlawn COPC focused on microeconomic development, job training, and a targeted neighborhood revitalization process. The COPC programs and strategies were also incorporated into the newly created non-profit Woodlawn Community Development Corporation.

Improvements in Woodlawn

From initiating dropout prevention programs in the local schools to establishing a local community development corporation, the range of activities undertaken by the Woodlawn COPC is broad. In most instances, the role of the University of Rhode Island has been to provide technical assistance. The section below provides examples of Woodlawn COPC solutions for various community problems.

Housing

- * Organized local housing service providers into a Woodlawn Housing Coalition
- * Developed a priority list of abandoned and poorly managed property; discussed it with the city council, mayor, and city planning department
- * Developed a Fair Housing Impediment Assessment and a subsequent action plan with Roger Williams Law School students
- * Improved landlord and tenant relationships through diversity training, mediation, and community policing
- * Circulated knowledge of Pawtucket Housing Court procedures to the neighborhood
- * Renovated a run-down property across from Payne Park into a multiservice community center; restored other neglected homes and properties
- * Developed a neighborhood revitalization strategy, submitted it to HUD, and received designation of Woodlawn as a revitalization area; this brought in over \$200,000
- * Established a Woodlawn CDC with a broad mission to improve socioeconomic and physical conditions in the community

Job Training/Economic Development

- * Recruited public housing residents into technology classes taught by Urban Field Center staff
- * Assisted residents with career development plans
- * Referred residents to general equivalency degree and adult literacy opportunities
- * Established the Woodlawn Business Association and Manufacturing Alliance
- * Created a microenterprise start-up program
- * Organized the Woodlawn credit union into a community development credit union

Neighborhood Revitalization

- * Developed crime watch teams on each block
- * Participated in a URI Landscape Architecture Department-sponsored planning project, called a charrette; the focus was physical restoration of neighborhood parks and playgrounds

Education and Social Services

- * Initiated dropout prevention programs beginning in kindergarten and continuing through high school
- * Encouraged parents, young adults, and senior citizens to attend the Woodlawn COPC's Institute for Leadership Training; about 225 residents have participated and 60 so far have graduated
- * Offered parenting classes in two elementary schools, often in two or three languages.
- * Staffed two high schools with an Urban Field Center staff member to implement the Guaranteed Admissions Program whereby students are guaranteed admission to URI, participate in summer enrichment programs, and take field trips to visit different colleges
- * Brought diverse ethnic and racial groups together through workshops on literacy and diversity; the workshops concluded with a community-wide Heritage Day event and an international fair
- * Hosted the annual national COPC conference in Providence and Pawtucket



Basketball players take advantage of Payne Park's new courts. The building (left) in the background is being renovated into a multiservice community center.

years, neighborhood residents have come together as a community, grown to trust staff at the URI Urban Field Center and Providence campus, and become sufficiently engaged so that they now discuss issues with the mayor's office and city council.

In Pawtucket, the impact of the COPC has been strong and measurable. Mayor James Doyle has requested that a "COPC-like" organization be created in every neighborhood – a process that has begun in Pawtucket's Pine Crest and Pleasant View neighborhoods. The Woodlawn community has obtained special HUD designations (and, therefore, funding) but one of the most dramatic changes within the community has been resident empowerment. Several resident participants in the Woodlawn COPC's Institute for Leadership Training, for instance, have run for public office or have been appointed to city task forces and advisory committees.

The University of Rhode Island was also changed by the Woodlawn COPC. The Graduate Planning Department, the academic home of the Urban Field Center, opened an Institute of Housing and Community Development on the Providence campus. This Institute trains Rhode Island residents and staff of community development corporations and human service agencies. Rhode Island participants in the Institute receive partial scholarships from the Rhode Island Foundation and the state's community development block grant officer. The program, now in its fifth year, allows participants to transfer course credits to the URI Graduate Department of Community Planning and Landscape Architecture.

In addition, the Woodlawn COPC has spurred other developments, namely that the concept of universities and communities working together has gained footing in Rhode Island. For instance, the state legislature passed and funded the Rhode Island Housing Resources Act of 1998 which established a Housing Resources Commission. One purpose of this Commission is to "encourage and support partnerships between institutions of higher education and neighborhoods to develop and retain quality healthy housing and sustainable communities." Likewise, the Rhode Island Housing and Mortgage Finance Corporation has created a committee on higher education and community partnerships to share information and encourage cooperation.

COPC Board Members. . .



. . . Followed These Principles of Community Development:

- * Promote active resident involvement to diagnose problems and fix them
- * Recognize the comprehensive impact associated with possible solutions
- * Disengage from efforts that might adversely effect the disadvantaged
- * Design and implement a plan to solve problems by shared leadership
- * Work to increase leadership capacity, skills, confidence, and aspirations

Conclusion: Partnerships as a Strategy for Neighborhood Revitalization

The Woodlawn COPC experience demonstrates that a partnership between a neighborhood and a university can be an appropriate strategy for neighborhood revitalization. It also shows how such a partnership can change a university's culture and curriculum. Through formal and informal education, the Woodlawn COPC raised the level of community residents' skills. The COPC also increased residents' awareness of the various levels of civil responsibility: neighborhood, city, state, and nation. The success of the Woodlawn COPC is testament to the fact that good community development does not happen effectively through directives; it occurs through collaboration, teamwork, and partnership.

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About the Author

Marcia Marker Feld, Ph.D., member AICP, is a professor of community planning at the University of Rhode Island and executive director of its Urban Field Center. Dr. Feld was the founding Director of the HUD Office of University Partnerships. She currently participates in HUD's peer review of new Community Outreach Partnership Center proposals.

She also recently assisted in founding the Association for Community and Higher Education Partnerships (ACHEP) with support from the Rockefeller Foundation and the University of Memphis. This organization, which is composed of current and former COPC staff and board members, aims to promote, enhance, and sustain partnerships between communities and institutions of higher education for the betterment of residents of economically distressed communities.