

VOICES FOR CHANGE

**The University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia
nurtures its own community of alumni**

On Monday evenings, an eighth-floor lounge in Anderson Hall is abuzz with energy. Each week, students and alumni convene there for dinner and organizational meetings. But the attendees are not necessarily Temple students, nor are they traditional Temple alumni. Instead, they are the members and staff of the University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia (UCCP), an organization that attempts to foster and maintain strong community relations.

STORY BY MARIA RAHA



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The UCCP, which has been in operation since 1992, is run by a staff of six, five of whom are Temple graduates. The UCCP's goals—to empower young people to articulate community issues and prepare them to become leaders, and to train organizations to effectively work with youth—are far loftier than their professional quarters, a humble hallway in Temple's Political Science Department.

When Professor of Political Science Barbara Ferman arrived at the university in 1992, her brainchild was a cross-city research collaboration with Dr. Philip Nyden, professor of sociology and director of the Center for Urban Research & Learning at Loyola University in Chicago. The pair aimed to bridge the two universities with their communities and join the cities—which share similar issues and challenges—by providing research services to local organizations.

But when Ferman applied for funding, she discovered that although their target foundation was excited about the project, it reserved its funds for youth programs. Ferman and Nyden regrouped and consulted their community partners before altering their organizational focus to incorporate youth into the program.

“They said, ‘That’s great, because a lot of the youth in the communities are disengaged,’” says Ferman. “‘We’re getting older, and we turn around and there’s nobody to replace us in these organizations, so we need to develop that next generation of organizers.’ We put together a proposal, we got funding and that was it.”

According to Ferman, the program began by utilizing community teens for a research project with Asian Americans United. It then slowly moved toward youth-driven programming over a period of seven to eight years.

Today, the UCCP focuses 90 percent of its work on programs for Philadelphia's young people. Its members generally range in age from 14 to 23 and are primarily from North, West and South Philadelphia. Approximately one-third of the group's members currently attend Temple; another third are community college students who plan to attend Temple; and the last third are either presently unable to attend school or are high school seniors, says Catie Wolfgang, *EDU '05*, associate director of the UCCP.

The UCCP's progressive programming—the Temple Youth VOICES Project, Leaders Corps and the Temple Youth VOICES P.O.W.E.R. (Prepare, Organize, Write, Educate Yourself and Others and Reform and Reflect) Internship—provides advancing education for its participants and allows the same members to repeatedly return to the program for new levels of enrichment. “What we’re trying to do as an organization is to provide continual leadership development criteria,” asserts Ferman.

The Temple Youth VOICES Project is the current crux of the organization's programming. VOICES members decide on an issue of collective concern, develop a position, research it and work on activities—both legislative and community-based—to effect positive social change.

Barbara Ferman (above, right), professor of political science and director of the UCCP, has hired five alumnae, including Ieshia Nelson CLA '07 (above, left), to work at the organization.



PHOTOS BY RYAN S. BRANDENBERG

It's about making that person you're dealing with stronger, and a better citizen in Philadelphia.

—David Cruz, freshman legal studies student and Leaders Corps member

Members of the Leaders Corps meet on campus to discuss their progress and the UCCP's pending organizational issues (left and far right). VOICES participants develop technical skills as part of the project (center).

“What VOICES tries to do,” explains Ferman, “is to provide these certain people with the tools, skills, knowledge and wherewithal to navigate their world. They understand what’s happening around them, but we want them to understand why it’s happening and where to go to get some resolution on those issues.”

For example, in summer 2008, a VOICES group came to the conclusion that in order to decrease community violence, people need, in Ferman’s words, “positive alternatives to counterproductive behavior.” They agreed to start a scholarship fund for underprivileged Philadelphia students and organized a car wash that raised \$500 to be used for textbooks and other educational resources.

Ieshia Nelson, *CLA '07*, is the program’s coordinator. She began working with Leaders Corps while she was a Temple student. “It was amazing to me to see youth taking an active approach in what they wanted,” she recalls. “These kids were doing research and actually wanted to be included, and almost demanded to be included. I was very moved by that. That’s what drew me into VOICES, and I’m still here.”

Each year, VOICES members create a media project of their choice to express the issue they have focused on, thus adding technology training and media literacy components to the program. In the past, groups have opted to make documentaries, narrative films, public service announcements, magazines and web sites, says Natalia Smirnov, *SCT '08*, UCCP’s media and communications coordinator. At the end of the program, VOICES showcases its finished products at an on-campus celebration.

One group in the 2007–2008 afterschool program focused on how drugs impact their families and communities. As part of the project, they surveyed more than 100 people about their views on the impact of drugs. Based on their findings and community interviews, VOICES participants created a narrative film about how drugs affect families. They also created a web site (www.temple.edu/uccp/dvc) that contains drug statistics and information.

Once the VOICES program is completed, members can attend the Leadership Development Institute, a summer leadership workshop, to gain the skills necessary for Leaders Corps. Generally, those who have experienced VOICES programming comprise Leaders Corps, who also are paid staff members and mentors to VOICES participants.

“We’re trying to really develop our alumni network,” says Wolfgang. “My vision is that a couple of years down the line, we’ll see more young people finishing high school. In situations where they’re not immediately ready, they would remain connected to us and eventually end up here—well-supported and well-prepared to meet the academic rigor that Temple is asking for, coming through Temple and then coming back either to work for us or with our partner organizations.”

Beyond being mentors to VOICES members, participants in the Leaders Corps lead VOICES programs and are active decision-makers within the organization.

David Cruz, a Temple freshman legal studies major, is experiencing his first semester with Leaders Corps after more than two years of involvement with VOICES.



“We have classes and teach [VOICES members] different skills,” he explains. “It’s about making that person you’re dealing with stronger, and a better citizen in Philadelphia.”

Through a work training program at the Philadelphia-based Latino organization Congreso, Cruz ended up working with VOICES as a high school student, while his peers gained experience in more traditional office environments. His involvement lasted long after he completed the work training program.

“Pretty soon, it’s not a job where you just go to do work and get paid,” he says. “You go to see the people, you go to talk with them and have fun and to come up with new ideas. It’s a very open atmosphere. It’s something that helps you get through school and your daily life.”

The UCCP also provides training to resolve the social and professional preconceptions adults might have about employing and collaborating with young people in community settings. The initiative is led by Catalina Gonzalez, SBM ’04, the UCCP’s assistant director of youth civic engagement.

Adults also can collaborate with high school students by partnering with the UCCP through the Temple Youth Voices P.O.W.E.R. Internship program, which is handled by Alison Huxta, CLA ’07. As if this amount of activity weren’t enough, the UCCP maintains its original roots in research with projects for its community partners.

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— Ieshia Nelson, CLA ’07, Temple Youth VOICES project coordinator

As the organization works to sustain a well-rounded system of support for communities in Philadelphia, Wolfgang believes Temple is “perfectly situated” to aid the organization in reaching its goals.

“Because of Temple’s founding mission,” she explains, “we have this unique opportunity to connect in meaningful ways to the community. And I think that is exactly what we’re trying to do here with the UCCP. We want to engage young people before they become Temple students; and while they’re Temple students; and recent Temple alumni to come and do work that is informed by their education and connects them back to the community. To create that circle, I believe, is what the university was founded to do.”

For more information, visit www.temple.edu/uccp. ♦