Urban Empowerment

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

"You might be poor, your shoes might be broken, but your mind is a palace."
- Frank McCourt
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Dear Friends of Urban Empowerment,

The nature of the Community Change Initiative (CCI) is to envision, develop and bring to fruition real and lasting community change in collaboration with others. The underlying purpose of the CCI is to apply and reinforce the skills and insights gained throughout the Pioneer Leadership Program at the University of Denver. Without this “hands-on” application of cultivated knowledge and skills, a leader’s journey would be simply incomplete. The project allows a group to test current abilities, challenge held assumptions, and develop creative and transparent public good.

Within the realm of community changing service, words can be used in many ways. Oftentimes, labels are a part of human nature and are used to adequately define the human experience. For some, the labels of “privilege,” “upper class,” and “educated” are used, especially in a University context. Others suffer the marginalizing label of “homeless” which effectively relegates them to an inferior position within society, emphasizing their shortcomings rather than their contributions. The discourse surrounding the homeless does not address the potential for growth, transformation, identity and career cultivation, or societal integration.

For this Community Change Initiative, homelessness was the main issue addressed and was loosely defined as the lack of adequate housing forcing an individual or family to resort to unconventional measures of survival, including doubling up with friends or family, living in hotels, cars, shelters, etc. (Snapshot of Homelessness, 2013). Homelessness is not reserved for one specific city or culture as it is global issue affecting millions of people daily. The last survey conducted by the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative found that 11,167 people were homeless in Denver (Homelessness & Poverty Statistics, 2013). Of those sampled in January of 2013, 25.4% of the individuals surveyed were newly homeless. The Initiative posits “economic crisis” as one of the circumstances which could cause a person to become homeless. This ostensible economic crisis could include a myriad of circumstances: loss of job, prolonged illness, life-altering situations, and housing-related costs. The fastest growing homeless group in the United States is families with children.

After talking with several stakeholders, our group became mainly concerned about introducing homeless youth to the endless possibilities that exist post-graduation. We were specifically addressing the lack of public assistance that addresses the professional and academic disparities that these students experience on a day-to-day basis. Rather than focusing on purely academic foundations, students should also be exciting and invigorated by the plethora of opportunities available to help them break through the cycle of poverty.
After reaching out to the Denver’s Road Home, Urban Peak Academy, and two contacts in the Governor’s Office, we started talking with the Academy of Urban Learning, an institution which specifically caters to students who are at-risk, impoverished, disadvantaged and facing other strenuous circumstances.

Starting the conversation about homelessness with AUL came about quite easily through communicating with the principal of the school and with the Chair of the Board at AUL. At first, the executive staff of the school wanted to make sure that our group was not pigeonholing the students to a homeless status, and our group was challenged to create the space so that disadvantaged students could relish the benefits of experiential learning. Eventually, a project was born through an adequate access to resources and the relationship established between the Academy of Urban Learning and the University of Denver. The principal tasked our group with developing ten experiential learning lesson plans, of which the school would pick five. The five opportunities that were found most appealing and relevant included trips to the Denver Art Museum, the Museum of Nature and Science, Civic Center Park, Coors Field, and the University of Denver.

At each of these locations, we asked the students to fully engage with experts in the respective industry. The principal told students that if they attended all five sessions, he would offer experiential learning based credit (which is required of all students graduating from AUL). From these experiential learning sessions, we hoped to truly inspire and empower these students to live wholesome, fruitful lives while navigating systems of oppression. We felt that they were empowered to realize their full potential and escape the throes of poverty by seeking opportunity, seeking support when needed, and taking strides toward a better future by capitalizing on their authentic passions for a future worth living.

Mission Statement

To empower homeless and at-risk, socially, and economically marginalized teens to realize their potential for professional, academic, and personal growth through experiential learning opportunities. By introducing students at the Academy of Urban Learning to such opportunities, students have noticeably grown through their cultivated interests in sports, arts, service, and academic related industries. Our five-week curriculum has allowed these students to gain relevant skills to comfortably and supportably succeed in post-high school graduation environments and effectively break through the cycle of poverty.

Thanks!

Alex, Jaser, Katie, and Will
11,167 children are homeless in Denver.

Every night there are children and families sleeping on the streets or in shelters. Often this will create a cycle as children in this environment are less likely to do well scholastically and socially and two to four times as likely to have some sort of learning or social disorder (Impact of Denver Camping Ban, 2013).

"Homelessness is a major issue of this time and we will always have some level of it. The key is to end homelessness as we know it and we have to figure out what that looks like," said Bennie Milliner, the Executive Director of Denver’s Road Home.

Colorado ranks 30th in the nation for the number of children without a permanent shelter to call home (MCPhee, 2009).

64 percent of the homeless are with children in Denver compared to other major metropolitan areas which are about 38% (Snapshot of Homelessness, 2013).

37.6% people acknowledge that their reason for being homeless is due to a lost job.

26.7% are due to high housing costs being rent or mortgage.

22.4% are due to relationship or family breakup (Homelessness in the Denver Metropolitan Area, 2013).

The fastest growing homeless group in the United States is families with children (Homelessness & Poverty Statistics, 2013).
It costs $15,000 if a person is housed yet it costs $40,000 if the person is on the street,” stated Dr. Jamie van Leeuwen, who has done extensive work in creating affordable housing in Denver (van Leeuwen, Personal Communication, Oct. 20, 2013).

The political responsibility comes from politicians needing to stand up and although it may not always be pleasant, it needs to happen.

42% of the homeless in the Denver metro area are women, which is also much higher than the national average of about 30% (McPhee, 2009). In Denver County, a mother with an infant child would need to earn $15.51/hour working full time to make ends meet. A recent report made by the Colorado Center on Law and Policy found that 1 in 5 Colorado households and 54% of single mothers cannot afford to make ends meet.

The social responsibility comes from individual people because we cannot accept the problems as it is; it is our responsibility to make a change and help those who are in need. However, similar to Inderjit Khurana’s school movement to develop a safe and effective rail system in India, one movement does not answer every problem, but for those it does help, it is a meaningful, culturally-relevant solution (Larson & LaFasto, 2012).

Overall, it is everyone’s responsibility to help those who are less fortunate and more vulnerable. It takes more than just a government entity, non-profit organization, or faith-based organization to help. It takes everyone doing a little something to help the disabled, infirmed, senior, recently discharged neighbor, relative, friend, or total stranger (Milliner, Personal Communication, Oct. 17, 2013). According to Peter Block in Community, by allowing others to be held accountable for their community we will be able to create a restorative process such as the ones involving restoring homeless individuals back into the community (Block, 2009).
September - Started forming group around helping homelessness in the Denver community

Mid and Late-October - Began preliminary meetings with possible stakeholders including members of Governor Hickenlooper's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness and Urban Peak

October 30th - The Team witnesses homelessness first-hand by serving at the Denver Rescue Mission

November - Team continues to research topic and starts refining goal to work towards helping homeless youth after several meetings with stakeholders

December - Team continues brainstorming ideas for how to execute project; one of these ideas is to have a workshop series at Urban Peak which becomes the group’s primary vision.

Mid-January - In a meeting with Jamie van Leeuwen and Karla Maraccini it is suggested that the homeless population is entirely too transient to have any success with the plan to host a resource workshop series at Urban Peak. Jamie suggests setting up an experiential learning program for the homeless teens.

Late November - Team presents initial findings to Program heads
February - The Team meets with both Gary Sanford at Urban Peak as well as Sabrina D'Agosta the president of the board at the Academy of Urban Learning who puts us in contact with David Brown the principal.

Early March - Set up meeting with David Brown and the Executive Staff of the Academy of Urban Learning.

April 11th - Roll out with first activity at the Denver Art Museum.

April 18th - Trip to Museum of Nature and Science.

May 2nd - Made Sandwiches with T'aneous Woods (a student at AUL) and handed them out at Civic Center Park.

Mid-March - The teams have their first meeting with David Brown as well as a presentation for the board who fully support setting up an experiential learning curriculum for their students.

End of March - Developed curriculum for students to pick activities from.

May 9th - Tourred Coors Field with students.

May 16th - Wrapped up program with a tour of the University of Denver and meeting with financial aid advisor.

May 21st - Final presentation of program for program heads.
OUR STAKEHOLDERS

DENVER’S ROAD HOME – ending homelessness, restoring

GROWING HOME -
Our mission is to guide children and their families on the path to a brighter future. We work to break the cycle of poverty for kids and parents. We envision the community working together so that all children and their families have a place to call home, food on the table, and the opportunity to pursue their dreams.

URBAN PEAK - helps youth experiencing homelessness and youth at risk of becoming homeless overcome real life challenges by providing essential services and a supportive community, empowering them to become self-sufficient adults.

DENVER RESCUE MISSION - changing lives in the name of Christ by meeting people at their physical and spiritual points of need, with the goal of returning them to society as productive, self-sufficient citizens.

ACADEMY OF URBAN LEARNING -
AUL’s mission is to empower young people to become self-sufficient adults by providing a rigorous and individualized high school diploma program to youth who need extensive wraparound services to succeed academically and socially.
“The Academy of Urban Learning is a Denver Public Schools charter high school serving students ages 16 to 21 who have experienced many difficult barriers to achieving success at their former schools. They provide the wrap-around services and individualized support the students need to succeed academically and socially, and to become successful, self-sufficient adults.”

The Academy of Urban Learning strives to meet each individual student where they are and help them develop a plan to graduation. They work on skill development and project completion in order to get students on track to graduate. The individual student is given an Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) that they develop with an Advisor to determine the “proficient level” at which point they can graduate. The ILP outlines what the student needs to complete and what each project needs to demonstrate to pass that specific proficient level.

In addition, the Advisor works one on one to understand the individual’s strengths, interests, and acts as a support person for the individual student. Along with the Advisor, the Counselor works with students to help them with life outside the classroom and any non-academic needs through other agencies as well as the school.

**CORE values:**
- Community
- Academics
- Respect
- Empowerment

- **87%** of students have been deemed economically disadvantaged by US News
- **88%** of students are minority
- **150** students would not be able to attend school and would be on the streets
- **74%** of students are on free and reduced lunch
The Denver Art Museum provided an opportunity to see first-hand how art differs across different cultures and time periods. Pop Art was one of the main exhibits we explored on our day at the Denver Art Museum, which provided an opportunity to look some of the most modern art available. Some of these famous Pop Art pieces included productions by famous artists such as Andy Warhol. We kept the students interested by exploring the exhibits where the students’ curiosity lied, which included the African American Art Exhibit, Pop Art Exhibit, and The American West in Bronze. These exhibits provided a high level of connectivity with the students even though none of them had ever been to the Denver Art Museum in the past. All of the students had a fantastic time at the Denver Art Museum according to their evaluations.
The Denver Museum of Nature and Science provided an opportunity to take a self-guided tour around many of the museum's exciting exhibits. We took an in-depth look at exhibits such as Egyptian Mummies, A Space Odyssey, and A Prehistoric Journey. We focused on exploring the incredible world around us on this experiential learning trip. The students seemed incredibly interested in what was offered at this museum since most (if not all) of them have never had the opportunity to experience such a place. Most of our students were very interested in the sciences but had never seen them in action before. The students' favorite part about the Denver Museum of Nature and Science was the thermal imaging station in the Space Odyssey Exhibit. The students loved this particular activity because it showed them (through thermal imaging) how heat was centered around different parts of their body. The Denver Museum of Nature and Science was one of the students' favorite activities according to their student evaluations.
In terms of Urban Empowerment, we saw that it was important to show the students that no matter how little they had in life, they could always find a way to give back to their community to help rise up the entire community. After a few other plans fell through, we decided to make sandwiches and hand them out to the homeless downtown in Civic Center Park. Although only one student was able to attend, it was quite successful. When we first told T’aunce that he’d be helping us hand out these sandwiches, he was very nervous about talking to strangers but what we saw next was amazing. After several tries T’aunce became far more comfortable with approaching strangers and began to actively seek out the people he perceived had the greatest need (namely people with shopping carts full of their belongings). This was by far one of the crowning moments for our project; a student who himself had lived on the very edge of poverty was deliberately seeking out those needier than himself. While we did not have the number of students we had been hoping for our team was able to find a measure of success by showing at least one student that giving back to his community could be accomplished with simple acts of kindness such as giving out food.
To further learn about life outside of the classroom, the students ventured over to Coors Field to take a tour of the stadium where the Rockies play. The students were given the opportunity to tour a location that for most was in their backyard, but they had never been given the opportunity to go there. The students were given a guided tour starting from the nosebleed seats through the suites, and ended down on the field. Along the way, students were able to see what a career in sports and life around sports looked like in addition to see behind the scenes of the stadium. The students saw the dugout, the locker room, the press box, as well as everything in between. Lastly, they enjoyed views of the city that most of them have called their home for the majority of their life.
For our last activity, the students came to the University of Denver in order to receive a tour of a college campus as well as be able to sit down with a financial aid advisor to discuss the feasibility and benefit to having a higher education. While the goal for the Academy of Urban Learning is to provide a high school degree to underprivileged students, very few of them continue their education. Often these students lack any support system in terms of encouragement to continue their education and they rarely have the financial means to support getting a degree. Through this activity, we wanted to change the minds of at least a few students by showing them that higher education is not only invaluable to break the cycle of poverty in their families but is entirely possible given the degree of scholarships available to them. We started by giving a tour of campus as almost all colleges have a similar environment and atmosphere. The students that were with us that day had never even set foot on a college campus let alone considered that attending college was a possible goal for them to achieve. The goal was to not only show them a college campus, but also was to provide a support structure and ignite a fire inside the students to aim for higher education so that they would one day be able to support themselves with a viable career. To further this point we took them to sit down with a financial aid advisor who provided the resources that these students would need to be able to afford college.
Throughout the entirety of our project we had variable participation and were fearful that because of the transient nature of our students it would be hard to make much of an impact. Then along came T’aunce Woods a freshman at the Academy of Urban Learning. Like many fifteen year old boys, T’aunce likes skateboarding and spending time with his friends but unlike many he lives on the very edge of poverty on a daily basis and has never had much of a support structure encouraging him to excel. When we first encountered T’aunce, he was very shy and reluctant to participate much in conversation but we could see a passion for learning in his interactions with others.

Over time T’aunce transformed from a shy and reluctant fifteen year old, to a self-confident and passionate young man. For example during our activity at Civic Center Park, T’aunce was initially afraid to interact with strangers. After seeing the grateful looks on the faces of the homeless in the park as he gave them food, T’aunce started to go on alone to talk to those in the park and started to deliberately seek out those he perceived with the greatest level of need. Again, we saw this change at the University of Denver when he professed his love for science and computers and how he now feels that he has a chance at going to college because we had given him the support that he had lacked previously.

By giving students like T’aunce a support system, they are now able to go into the world with confidence that they can do anything they set their sights on. Following the philosophies of Richard Cuoto and Citizen Leadership, we sought to raise the floor beneath these students so that they would be able to reach the vaulted ceiling that had been so-long denied by them and the growth that we saw in T’aunce is evident of our accomplishment.
In order to determine what students thought about their experience and to give feedback from week to week, the participants filled out a survey at the end of the activity with five questions. The first three questions were based on a scale of 1 to 5 and asked did you enjoy your experience?, did you learn something about yourself or about the world outside of AUL?, and would you pursue a passion post-graduation related to this event? The last two questions were open ended and allowed a response to be written. The last two questions were what was your favorite part about today? and what could have made the experience better? The graphs below show the averages for each week from the first three questions and the overall average. The graphs on the adjacent page show the averages of each of the three questions and a percentage graph. The percentage graph shows how many students answered a 4 or 5 (agree or strongly agree) to the questions. Overall, the students found an activity that they enjoyed and could pursue post-graduation even though they didn’t necessarily love every activity we did.
The last two questions were open ended and allowed a response to be written. The last two questions were what was your favorite part about today? and what could have made the experience better? The last two questions allowed the students to share with us their personal opinion and where we really got to see students open up to us about their experiences. Below are some of the responses we received.

What was your favorite part?

- “The students were caring, respectful, and helpful”
- “Walking outside and getting fresh air”
- “The red room in the Denver Art Museum”
- “That I saw places I’ve never been before.”
- “It was fun and all of it was cool”
- “Meeting new people and seeing all of the opportunities.”
- “Getting to go on the field at Coors Field”
- “Everything was great, especially the tour at DU.”

What would make it better?

- “Nothing. It was good.”
- “If we saw more stuff”
- “Staying longer”

Overall the program was successful in showing the students life outside of the classroom and it began to expose students to the opportunities that they have when they graduate high school.
## Activity Price Breakdown by Location

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<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Adult</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denver Art Museum</td>
<td>$3.00</td>
<td>$10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coors Field Tour</td>
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<td>$9.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making Sandwiches</td>
<td>Cost of supplies</td>
<td>Cost of supplies</td>
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<td>University of Denver</td>
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## Additional Costs

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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Snacks</td>
<td>$15</td>
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<tr>
<td>End of Year Celebration</td>
<td>$65</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

## Financial Breakdown

- Denver Art Museum ($0)
- Coors Field Tour ($100)
- Sandwiches at Civic Center Park ($40)
- Museum of Nature and Science ($130)
- University of Denver ($0)
- Snacks ($15)
- End of Year Celebration ($65)
Group Stake:

Our group has experienced homelessness on a first-hand basis. Though none of us have actually endured being homeless, we are still incredibly passionate about this issue, and we believe homelessness can be ended with enough effort and support.

Individual Stakes:

Growing up in Arvada, I had my fair share of friends lose their homes over the years. That said, even as a child I knew homelessness was a problem because I felt that there was no reason for someone to have to sleep on the street or beg for money. I remember always asking my parents if we could help whenever I saw someone panhandling (I often would ask if I could offer my room to them). When I was in high school, I met Dr. Jamie van Leeuwen who showed me that the issue of homelessness is a wholly human issue that can only be fixed through human means.

Alex Shefrin
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Whether it be through non-profit work or community service, I have always been connected with underrepresented and marginalized populations. By working with Court Appointed Special Advocates this past summer, I was able to directly observe the consequences of not having a stable home life or an environment which continually fosters childhood development and growth. Listening to their stories and aiding in their development propagated my interest in the matter of family stability in pursuit of safe, healthy, and permanent homes. I finally understood that a successful life starts with a safe, functioning home.

Jaser Alsharhan
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I first became invested in the issue of homelessness during my freshman year of high school when I went on an immersion and spent the night as a homeless person. The experience changed my perspective in so many ways I could not have even imagined. Since then, I have continued to be involved with the homeless population both in Portland and in Denver. Working with the Denver Rescue Mission as my Serve to Lead and after more research, the homeless population drew in my focus and made me realize my passion of wanting to help others.

Katie Gentry
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I have always been interested in the problem of youth homelessness especially coming from a city like Chicago. Growing up, I was exposed to homelessness on a first-hand basis which has impacted me in great ways. Through this CCI project, I have been able to help homeless youth which is a cause I have become passionate about through my experiences.

William Huesing
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