

Underwood, Charles; Welsh Mahmood, Mara  
**University-community links. A collaborative strategy for supporting extended education**

*International journal for research on extended education : IJREE 5 (2017) 2, S. 207-210*



**Quellenangabe/ Reference:**

Underwood, Charles; Welsh Mahmood, Mara: University-community links. A collaborative strategy for supporting extended education - In: International journal for research on extended education : IJREE 5 (2017) 2, S. 207-210 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-225695 - DOI: 10.25656/01:22569

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-225695>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:22569>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:



<https://www.budrich.de>

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# IJREE

ISSUE 2

2017

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**Marie Fahlén** • Freedom of religion and secular education: Teachers define the meaning of religious freedom in everyday school practice

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# University-Community Links: A Collaborative Strategy for Supporting Extended Education

*Charles Underwood & Mara Welsh Mahmood*

## Mission and Strategy

University-Community Links (UC Links) is a University of California faculty and community engagement initiative designed to promote relevant scholarship and integrate the University's community service efforts with its teaching and research missions. Since 1996, UC Links has been an active collaborative network of university and community partners, providing quality after-school programs and activities for pre-school through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (P-12) students from underserved communities in California. UC Links programs prepare these young people academically and socially for high school and college, while also preparing university students for advanced professional training. To achieve this dual mission, UC Links faculty teach academic coursework that places their students in practicum experiences with young people in local community after-school programs. There, the university students guide their younger peers in learning activities designed to promote multiple literacies and digital skills, as well as collaborative behavior and college-going identities.

In this way, UC Links enables the University to extend educational services to the community and to gain access to authentic new contexts for teaching and research on educational issues of crucial concern to both community and university partners. For underserved communities, UC Links offers a collaborative context for garnering scarce educational resources to support their young people, while providing the local knowledge relevant to the development of pedagogical practice for those youth.

## History

UC Links was originally based on the Fifth Dimension and *La Clase Mágica* after-school models. Cole (1996) approached after-school programs as activity systems in which the collaborative engagement of young people generates multiple opportunities for *the zone of proximal development* in which individuals can together accomplish tasks that they could not have completed alone (Vygotsky, 1978). Cole designed the Fifth Dimension as a pragmatic implementation of his findings, and it has been adapted worldwide (Cole, 2006). Through *La Clase Mágica* programs, Vásquez (2003) has expanded the view of extended education as collaborative learning, sustained in the larger context of dynamic relations of exchange in broader community systems. UC Links grew out of this theoretical and practi-

cal work, as a means to institutionalize this activity system as a long-term strategy for engaging universities and communities in the collaborative development of sustainable after-school programming for underserved youth.

In 1996, UC President Richard C. Atkinson, established UC Links as a pilot statewide initiative and in 1998, given its initial success, made UC Links a permanent University program. As a statewide UC program, UC Links was based on the recognition that the educational problems many underserved children face are symptomatic of much broader economic and social problems (Duster et al., 1990; Underwood, 1990). In response to this recognition, UC Links has focused on educational equity not as a distant future goal but as a pragmatic collaborative process for developing and sustaining the institutional means for extending educational resources to underserved students (Underwood & Frye, 1990).

Since 1996, UC Links has evolved into an extensive socio-technical activity system that both supports individual sites as primary activities and connects them in a broader organizational system that promotes cross-site information sharing and assessment (Underwood & Parker, 2011). Together with its worldwide partners, UC Links has become a dispersed learning community of practitioners and researchers operating a network of programs that offer learning activities to engage young people and connect them to each other, to their communities, and to the larger world around them.

From the outset, UC Links drew on the local knowledge of the community, to adapt each program to interests and needs of local children and their families. Community members played key roles as equal partners in the collaboration, defining themes and activities that were culturally appropriate for their children. University partners offered multi-disciplinary experience in building innovative learning activities and in using new digital resources to serve those themes and activities. Practicum coursework placed undergraduates in the community setting, thus offering real-world opportunities to connect educational theory to practical learning experiences that benefited both their own learning and that of the P-12 students.

In 2016-17, UC Links served 3,576 participants, including 3,013 P-12 students and 563 undergraduates at 29 locations throughout California. University faculty (17 at 9 campuses in 14 California cities) led these programs, and 104 graduate students assisted them in teaching UC Links coursework and coordinating site operations and assessment. Since 1996, UC Links has served over 40,000 P-12 culturally and linguistically diverse young people across the state.

## Innovations and Outcomes

UC Links has proven to be a productive strategy for extending access to new digital and media tools to underserved P-12 students and preparing them academically for higher learning. Its model for high-quality undergraduate and graduate education consistently demonstrates positive results. As a program network collaborating closely with international partners for over 20 years, it has also shown remarkable capacity for sustainability. UC Links fosters the following innovative practices that can be applied in other settings:

- (1) University-community collaboration: Through long-term collaboration, UC Links sustains the inter-institutional connections necessary to keep all partners at the table, provides

an impetus for pooling institutional resources (technology, materials, professional and local knowledge), and changes the ways partners think about and carry out their work.

- (2) Formal and informal after-school educational activities: UC Links provides underserved students with innovative digital and hands-on learning activities, guided by university students, and changes the way they look at their own lives and the world around them. Mentoring by university students promotes P-12 students' college aspirations.
- (3) Practicum undergraduate coursework and fieldwork experience: UC Links coursework offers students deeper understandings of course content, changes how they think about and carry out their work, and prepares them to pursue advanced graduate training.
- (4) Research in real-world settings: UC Links tests theories and practices of using new digital media for teaching and learning, thus enabling local educators to work more productively with the children they serve.

Drawing on the combined expertise of both educational researchers and local community leaders, UC Links has developed evaluation and assessment strategies that provide for data collection and analysis across sites, while allowing for the specific orientations of particular program sites. UC Links studies indicate its effectiveness for academic preparation, especially in reading and writing, 21<sup>st</sup> Century digital literacies, critical thinking, and global citizenship:

- UC Links showed significant pre-post assessment gains for P-8 students. In 2016-17, these students made gains of 20.6% from pre- to post-assessment in the number scoring at proficient levels in literacy skills and knowledge.
- Most UC Links undergraduates continue to graduate training: 72.8% (N=519) planned to enroll in graduate schools. Most (93%) received sustained mentoring from UC Links faculty and graduate students, and 70% pursued collaborative community-based research.
- The UC Links / Fifth Dimension / *La Clase Mágica* model has sparked interest of educators and community practitioners worldwide. It presently collaborates with similar programs in five US states and seven nations in Europe, Central and South America, and Japan. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, UC Links collaborated for five years in developing and providing extended education and social services to displaced families and their children in evacuation camps in Louisiana.

UC Links constantly refines its research and evaluation efforts to improve their reliability and validity. UC Links continues to contribute and disseminate research on key topics relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning – including digital and media literacies, STEM learning and design interventions for students from non-dominant communities, program and curriculum design for both in-school and out-of-school settings, and local inter-institutional engagement and collaboration.

## Conclusion

Working closely with local communities near universities, UC Links provides distinctive leadership in designing and implementing effective strategies for building and sustaining youth-oriented learning activities that reach across geographical, cultural, and institutional boundaries. In promoting the development of underserved youth, UC Links has been suc-

successful in three key areas: (1) providing underserved youth with digital and hands-on activities that prepare them for lifelong learning; (2) providing quality undergraduate and graduate education that connects theory and practice, while also providing underserved youth with positive role models; and (3) building sustainable local collaborations that support local young people academically and socially. The program is particularly effective in working with academically disengaged, socio-economically disadvantaged young people after school, and in preparing them for greater confidence, competence, and success, both inside and outside the classroom.

In these ways, UC Links partners view their collaborative work as both a strategy and a resource. As a strategy, it brings community, school, and university people together as equal partners involved in the long-term process of building the social and academic foundation for their children's future. As a resource, it is both a network of people pooling their professional and local knowledge of how best to stimulate young minds, and a tested strategy for developing innovative digitally-based and hands-on learning activities.

UC Links has become, for community and university people alike, a resource for testing the efficacy of educational tools and strategies for re-engaging the disengaged – for encouraging and activating the minds of young people who have become discouraged by lifelong experiences of poverty and displacement. UC Links faculty, students, and community partners continue to forge collaborative links across geographical and sociocultural borders, to explore innovative uses of new digital technologies for teaching and learning and to develop new tools for assessing student development and program impact, especially for practitioners and young people working together in out-of-school learning contexts.

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