



Center for Urban and Regional Affairs

KRIS NELSON COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH PROGRAM

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HECUA's First 50 Years

Prepared in partnership with
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	5
Research Activities	6
Key Findings	8
Outcome	9
Recommendations	10
Acknowledgments	13
Appendix A	14
Appendix B	15

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA) sought to deepen its understanding of the organization's founding and history in celebration of its 50th anniversary. This report summarizes a research project undertaken to fill in the gaps in the organization's history. Research activities included conducting interviews with alumni, program directors, and community partners, review of organizational documents, and review of archival materials. Analysis of these materials revealed "throughlines" from HECUA's founding to the present day that center on social action driven by a sense of moral urgency and an emphasis on humanity and empathy. The report includes recommendations for further research and evaluation work.

INTRODUCTION

HECUA (Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs) has provided undergraduate students experiential and community-based programs focused on social and environmental justice movements since 1971. HECUA's programs, which operate both in the U.S and abroad, combine theory with field experiences and internships, and operate within a paradigm of co-learning and co-teaching. HECUA's approach to education is grounded in theories of community organizing and community education advanced by scholars such as Paolo Freire that aim to liberate and transform students through active learning.

HECUA locates its origins the civil unrest that emerged in urban centers across the United States in the late 1960s. Specifically, the organization cites the 1967 Plymouth Avenue uprising in North Minneapolis as the spark that ignited the "fire" from which it was born. Reverend Joe Bash, a youth minister in the Minneapolis-based American Lutheran Church partnered with sociology professor Joel Torstenson of Augsburg University (then Augsburg College) to offer students a semester-long program called the Crisis Colony in 1968. Crisis Colony participants sought to understand and take direct action to address the "urban crises" by living together in North Minneapolis, attending lectures given by both college faculty and community activists, and volunteering with community organizations. Additional colleges in Minnesota and around the country joined Augsburg in sending their students through the program over subsequent years and ultimately formed the consortium that HECUA is today.

Similar to other long-lived organizations, HECUA has weathered changes in staff, program direction, partnerships, and mission over the last five decades, and these changes have resulted in a loss of organizational knowledge, particularly as it relates to the organization's founding. The organization continues to adapt to the times while staying anchored to its anti-oppressive, community-focused roots, particularly as the issues that led to its creation—staggering inequality, systemic racism, widespread protest against oppression, international conflict—continue to evidence themselves. HECUA wishes to use the opportunity presented by 50th anniversary of its founding to explore its roots in an effort to inform its plans for the future. With this goal in mind, the organization proposed a research project with the following guiding questions:

- What are the themes and activities of HECUA's 50-year history that are most relevant and pressing to today's world and that may help guide HECUA's work in the future?
- How do we better tell our origin story?
- What are our other impactful stories and how should we be telling them?
- What has been HECUA's impact and influence on individuals and communities, and how can that guide us?

The research project that grew from these guiding questions was exploratory in nature. The following report summarizes the research activities undertaken to answer HECUA's questions, highlights key findings, and offers some recommendations for further

historical research and program evaluation.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Research for this project centered on two main areas: history and impact. Overarching research questions for each study area, as well as overall research strategy were developed in consultation with HECUA staff. Research consisted of review of documents currently held by HECUA (electronic and physical), online searches of archival materials, physical review of archival materials, and interviews with HECUA current and former staff, alumni, and community partners.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with program staff (past and present), program alumni, and program partners via Zoom. Interview protocols can be found in Appendix A. In addition, HECUA staff distributed an online questionnaire to program alumni and program partners. Questionnaire items can be found in Appendix B. In total, 10 current and past HECUA program directors (program faculty), 3 alumni, and 2 program partners were interviewed, though many more were contacted. In addition, the online alumni questionnaire received 11 responses and the online community partner questionnaire received 1 response.

I reviewed a number of archival materials in the hopes of finding mentions of community programs and organizations that were believed to have worked with HECUA in its early years. When possible, photographs of potentially relevant materials were taken. I visited the Minnesota Historical Society library and reviewed:

- 3 years (1968-1970) of the Minneapolis Spokesman newspaper on microfilm
- Organizational documents from The Way
- Organizational materials from the Upper Midwest American Indian Center
- Organizational materials the Twin Cities Opportunities Industrialization Centers (TCOIC)
- Meeting minutes from the Mayor's Commission on Human Relations

I contacted the archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) to find additional information about key HECUA staff who were affiliated with the church (at the time it was the American Lutheran Church) and received a number of pertinent pdf files of meeting minutes, correspondence, and newspaper clippings. A summary of research activities can be found in Table 1. I attempted to access archival materials at Luther Seminary, Augsburg University, and Hamline University, but these institutions were all closed to the public due to the pandemic.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, as were archival recordings found online. I photographed archival materials I physically handled, and I received materials from the ELCA archives as pdfs. When possible, textual materials (such as scanned materials and historical newspaper articles) were processed with OCR software. These materials were imported in NVivo and coded, using an iterative process guided by the HECUA's

Table 1: Summary of activities address research questions

Research Area	Overarching Questions	Data Sources
History	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why did HECUA start in the way that it did? 2. What drives program development (why these programs, in these locations)? 3. What are the connections between the past and the current time, with respect to social conditions and the need for the type of education HECUA provides? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical organizational and program documents on HECUA’s server • Physical files of old newspaper clippings, historical documents, and correspondence stored at HECUA’s offices • Online databases of historical Minneapolis newspapers and student newspapers of 12 original consortium member schools • Online archival recordings of speeches and presentations • Materials published by program founders (pamphlets, theses, research reports, etc.) • Microfilm and archival documents held at the Minnesota Historical Society • Interviews with current past program directors • Materials from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) archives
Impact	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How has HECUA participation affected alumni’s contributions to their communities? 2. How has HECUA participation affected alumni’s understanding of the world and their place in it? 3. How has partnership with HECUA affected partner organizations? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of historical student evaluations • Interviews with alumni • Interviews with community partners • Alumni questionnaire responses • Community partner questionnaire responses

guiding questions and the framing questions we devised. Emergent themes were discussed with my HECUA supervisor during our weekly check-ins.

KEY FINDINGS

A number of themes emerged from the coding of documents and interviews. Themes addressing **history** questions (drawn largely the writings of Reverend Joe Bash, historical newspaper articles, speeches by Reverend William Youngdahl; to a lesser extent, writing and speeches by Dr. Joel Torstenson, Gary Hessler, Chip Peterson, and Mahmoud El Kati; and to some degree, current HECUA program directors) are as follows:

Moral brilliance: University faculty, religious leaders, community activists, current faculty, and alumni all spoke of urgent moral obligations to do work in aid of those impacted by racism, war, and injustice.

Whippersnappers: Adult leaders cited youth as leading the way in demanding a more just society, and youth themselves demanded action from societal institutions. HECUA founders stressed that it was youth who pushed them to try the educational experiment that later became HECUA.

Academic irrelevance: Leaders from academic institutions and from the Lutheran church critiqued the “ivory tower” nature of the academy and urged higher education institutions to play a bigger role in engaging the challenges facing urban communities. Higher ed officials also mentioned the need to continue bringing in tuition dollars by offering innovative programming.

Stock taking/reckoning: HECUA founders and community leaders spoke of the need for students, faculty, and other members of (white) society to examine their roles in perpetuating racism and other injustices.

Complacency is complicity: Religious leaders spoke of those not affected by racism and disinvestment in cities, suggesting that those who chose to ignore these issues were complicit in that damage they inflicted on communities.

Skin in the game: Institutions of higher education have a stake in what happens to their urban surroundings and to their neighbors.

Educating to cope with complexity: Academic and religious leaders spoke of a need to educate young people to be able to engage effectively with their neighbors and with institutions to understand and address issues with complex origins and consequences.

Meaningful action: Comments in historical documents and comments from present-day HECUA staff pointed toward a belief in the need for people to take meaningful action to address injustice—activists must move beyond protest and demonstrations and begin to build the world they wish to see.

Program growth: Drawing from comments made by past and present HECUA staff it appears that programs developed based on staff interests and connections. For example, one program director had conducted his research in Colombia, and developed HECUA’s South American program. Current program directors draw on their current activist networks to develop their courses.

In reviewing alumni questionnaire responses and interview transcripts, the following themes addressing **impact** emerged:

Radicalization/realization that Another World is Possible: Many alumni spoke of exposure to leftist social theory and thinking as a result of their participation as well as a tendency to rethink their lives in America after seeing life in other countries or other communities.

Developing courage and capacity: Alumni spoke of challenging experiences during the HECUA semesters and how these experiences gave them opportunities to test their abilities and develop new ones that allowed them to engage more effectively in community work.

Commitment to social action: Alumni spoke of having their eyes opened to social issues and reinforced commitments to working for social change.

Reckoning with self: Some alumni spoke of understanding for the first time their privileged positions, and also of understanding how they might find common cause with those who may appear on the surface to have different challenges but underneath share the same struggles.

I think about it every day: Most alumni were profoundly impacted by their HECUA experiences and continued to reflect upon and process those experiences even though many years had passed.

Interviews with HECUA program directors revealed some commonalities across disparate programs. These commonalities related to the learning objectives program directors devised for their students including:

- Creating a community with others for learning and support
- Developing empathy for others and for themselves
- Developing attitudes of hope and abundance and a realization that better futures are possible.

HECUA staff gathered for a group meaning-making session where we reviewed interview excerpts and archival images. The group determined that many of the themes could be combined into three overarching themes that intersected to describe HECUA: Higher Education, Faith, and Action.

OUTCOME

This project unearthed a great deal of information. A large portion of this material has been cataloged and provided to HECUA staff, as they are still deciding how precisely to present the narrative of their history. Much of the historical information has been combined into a Google document with links to images and digital versions of primary documents.

Limitations

This was a challenging project to undertake in one semester. Many archives were inaccessible due to pandemic-related closures, so the reported findings rely on a limited set of sources. Additionally, much time has passed (50 years) since HECUA's founding,

and those most knowledgeable about its origins have moved on or passed away. Finally, the reality that society privileges the preservation of some histories and not others makes it difficult to develop a complete picture of who was involved, and how.

RECOMMENDATIONS

HECUA staff requested recommendations for measuring ongoing impact of their programs.

Suggestions for measuring alumni impact

Current student surveys gather important information about program functioning. However, it may be useful to survey alumni after they have had time to mentally process their experiences. The handful of interviews conducted this semester produced rich information but were time consuming for both interviewer and interviewee. Additionally, some people prefer to share their ideas verbally, while other prefer writing. A combination of short-term and long-term data gathering may be most useful. Surveys can be quicker to deploy and can also be used to also remind people that HECUA exists, prompting some reflection on past experiences.

- **Survey alumni 5 years post-program** to get a snapshot of where people are and also to remind people that they participated in HECUA:
 - What was your program/year/college?
 - Is there a particularly vivid memory you have about your experiences that you could share?
 - Do you see any connections between what you did in HECUA and what you're doing today?

- **Survey alumni 10- and 20- years post-program** to for greater retrospection and reflection. If particularly interesting responses appear, follow up with these respondents via phone or Zoom. The survey developed for this project has useful questions. Following are those questions with a few suggested changes.
 - Name
 - What was your program/year/college?
 - Looking back to your time with HECUA, what particularly memorable moments, events, or people come to mind?
 - In what ways has your HECUA experience impacted your life since your semester in the program? (e.g. subsequent education, career trajectory, political or community engagement, etc.) Examples are helpful!
 - In what ways has HECUA participation affected your understandings of world events and social issues?
 - What parts of your HECUA experience continue to feel relevant or present today?

- Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview so we can learn a little bit more about your experiences? Y/N. If Y, text box appears where they can enter email or phone number.

Suggestions for measuring community partner impact

Combine short-term and long-term data gathering.

- **End of semester surveys for all partners**, focusing on that semester's experiences so that issues can be addressed. Possible questions:
 - What specific projects were assigned? Did the student complete them?
 - How did the student's work benefit your organization as a whole?
 - What was challenging or needs to be changed for next semester?
 - What else can HECUA do to help support your work with our students?
- **Retrospective surveys (or interviews) for an identified set of current, longer term partners**

The survey developed for partners this semester has good questions. They are the same questions used in the semi-structured interview protocol used this spring. An additional question might produce useful information:

- What motivates your organization to continue partnering with HECUA?

Ripple effects mapping for partners and alumni

Ripple effects mapping is an evaluation process that gathers groups of people to brainstorm (through appreciative inquiry) about the effects (outward "ripples") of a program. It requires getting a group of people together at the same time, which is often the biggest challenge of this approach, but then the process is straightforward. People interview each other in pairs using 3-4 appreciative inquiry questions, then the pairs report back to the group. The facilitator "maps" these responses in real time so everyone can see and help decide how the responses should be grouped. It's an interesting process and it also makes everyone involved feel good about the work they've done because it focuses on accomplishments and reveals connections.

Ripple effects mapping could be conducted with groups of alumni or groups of community partners. Scott Chazdon (SAUS '82 alum) (schazdon@umn.edu) at the U of M Extension is an expert on this technique.

Further history research

As noted earlier, there were a number of issues that made it challenging to gather more complete information about HECUA's origins. HECUA does already possess several history narratives written by various staff at various times. However, some gaps in these narratives remain. Possible future research could include:

- Locating Dr. Joel Torstenson's papers. His writings may shed further light on his

rationale for the formation of the Crisis Colony and Augsburg's involvement in HECUA. His papers were not donated to Augsburg University.

- Access archives at Luther Seminary, Augsburg University, and Hamline University. These archives provide limited online access to their materials, and there may be more alumni stories and photos in student newspapers, yearbooks, and newsletters.
- Continue to pursue connections with early community partners and interviews with long-time partners I was unable to reach this semester. Much of what is missing in HECUA's history is their stories.
- Organize HECUA's existing archive of materials. St. Kate's has a library and archive program, and students in that program may need practicum hours that could be dedicated to this project.
- Obtain higher quality images of archival materials for display. Many of the materials I retrieved online are of low quality because of copyright; formal permissions will likely need to be negotiated if these images are to be used.

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APPENDIX A: Interview protocols

Program Director Interview Questions

1. How and why did you get involved with HECUA?
2. Please tell me a little bit about your program. I peeked at the syllabus but I'd like to hear in your words what this program is "about."
3. How do you identify community partners for your program? What do they bring to the program?
4. How is the work you do with HECUA align with your broader work/philosophy/ethos?
5. From your perspective, what makes the program you direct relevant in this current moment? Why do students need to learn what's contained in this course?
6. From your perspective, how has the program changed during your tenure?
7. Do you have any particularly vivid memories of a HECUA experience that you want to relate?
8. Anything else you want to tell me that I didn't ask about?

Alumni Interview Questions

1. Looking back to your time with HECUA, are there particularly memorable moments or events that come to mind? Why does this stick out in your mind?
2. In what ways has your HECUA experience impacted your life since your semester in the program? (e.g. subsequent education, career trajectory, political or community engagement, etc.)
3. How has HECUA participation affected your understandings of world events and social issues? What parts of your HECUA experience continue to feel relevant or present today?
4. Is there anything else you wish to share with us about your experiences with HECUA?
5. Any artifacts from your time with HECUA that you'd be willing to share with us?

Community Partner Interview Questions

1. What HECUA program(s) have you supported by guest speaking or hosting student interns, or in other ways (please specify)? When?
2. What do you feel is your role in the experience the students are having, and in HECUA as an organization?
3. How does HECUA's mission and work align with your own organization's mission and work?
4. How has working with HECUA students benefited your organization?
5. What has been challenging about working with HECUA students and/or staff?
6. If you have partnered with HECUA for more than one semester, what changes have you observed in the organization or the program? What changes would you like to see going forward?
7. From your perspective, what are students learning/gaining/developing from participating in HECUA programs and from interning with your organization that is relevant to this current moment?
8. Is there anything else you wish to share with us about your experiences?

APPENDIX B: Online questionnaire questions

Community Partner Questionnaire

1. What HECUA program(s) have you supported by guest speaking or hosting student interns, or in other ways (please specify)? When?
2. How does HECUA's mission and work align with your own organization's mission and work? How has working with HECUA students benefited your organization?
3. What has been challenging about working with HECUA students and/or staff?
4. If you have partnered with HECUA for more than one semester, what changes have you observed in the organization or the program? What changes would you like to see going forward? From your perspective, what are students learning/gaining/developing from participating in HECUA programs and from interning with your organization that is relevant to this current moment?
5. Is there anything else you wish to share with us about your experiences with HECUA?
6. Do you have any photos or other artifacts from your semester with HECUA that you'd be willing to share with us that would help us better understand your experience?

Alumni Questionnaire

1. Looking back to your time with HECUA, are there particularly memorable moments or events that come to mind? Why does this stick out in your mind?
2. In what ways has your HECUA experience impacted your life since your semester in the program? (e.g. subsequent education, career trajectory, political or community engagement, etc.)
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