

## INTRODUCTION

An emerging set of collaborations between scholars and activists is creating living laboratories for hands-on, community-based research that grapples with critical issues emerging in cities and proposes innovative policy solutions to advance social equity. This approach to engaged scholarship is a critical way to develop, test and refine new knowledge and a body of theory from the ground up that will contribute in meaningful and significant ways to addressing challenges and realizing the full potential of urban areas.

To advance this type of community-based research, a working group of urban scholars and activists, along with the Miller-McCune Center for Research, Media and Public Policy, and SAGE Publications, have established the Urban Research-Base Action Network (URBAN), a multi-disciplinary, distributed network of scholars and practitioners committed to articulating and strengthening the collaborative methods and impact, sharing findings, raising the visibility, developing career pathways and increasing the acceptance within the academy, of community-based research. URBAN will create physical and virtual

spaces where thinkers of all stripes, academic and non-academic, can explore, debate and share lessons, with the ultimate goal of becoming both a robust source of new scholarly work, and, by leveraging publications such as Miller McCune Magazine, a powerful resource for making policy proposals broadly accessible to an increasingly knowledgeable and activated citizenry.

In its initial stages, MIT Community Innovators Lab (MIT CoLab) will anchor the process by which a core set of institutions, particularly CUNY Graduate Center and other public universities will co-create and steward URBAN. It will build on the work of Marilyn Jacobs Gittell, a passionate and engaged teacher and scholar whose long career of pioneering community-based urban research to inform social change is the inspiration for this effort. In celebration of her legacy, we aspire to create a community of scholars and change-makers who engage and explore big questions now emerging in cities--the future of governance and democracy, the role of markets, stewardship of nature and the environment and the role of race and identity in constructing communities, to name a few-- and break through the barriers that have stymied collaborative

problem solving. We aspire to learn across academic disciplines, across institutions, across geographies, and other boundaries that can limit the reach of important theoretical and policy breakthroughs, and to do so while helping legitimize an under-recognized and highly promising path of scholarship and knowledge creation. We aspire to study transformative models of local innovation in cities, both in the US and around the world. We hope to reinvigorate urban disciplines and create opportunities for creative and collaborative scholarship to be recognized and rewarded, judged on its contributions both to theory and to more vital, prosperous, and sustainable urban communities.

### THE CHALLENGE

Urban areas face multiple complex challenges – economic, environmental, social, and political – that will alter much of what we now know about cities. Though rich in their engagement of multiple disciplines, urban studies tend

toward fragmentation and compartmentalization, leaving urban scholars working in isolation, often with only limited and episodic engagement with communities. Addressing these challenges requires a shift in mindset away from fixing isolated problems (such as education and employment) to multi-disciplinary thinking that reframes urban areas as places of great potential, and hotspots of innovation in democracy, and social equity. This shift requires embracing a social justice agenda informed by the many different kinds of knowledge--technical, political, and socio-cultural--generated through the lived experience of urban residents. New forms of collaboration are needed to examine what works and what does not, help strengthen and capitalize on community institutions and assets; foster and apply technological innovation; and identify, value and deploy the untapped social and intellectual capital found in urban neighborhoods. If the academy is to be a relevant partner in this process, urban disciplines will need re-examination and refreshing.

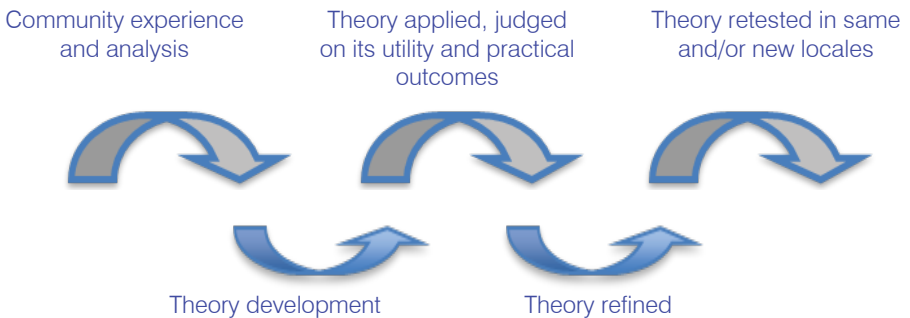


Fig. 1: Planning-action-observation-reflection process.

## URBAN

The Urban Research-Base Action Network is a distributed network of prestigious, primarily public, urban research institutions. Other potential members of URBAN include policy research centers, progressive think tanks, individual researchers, community-based organizations, and other non-governmental organizations. URBAN supports an approach by which academics from multiple disciplines work with communities to develop and test theory through collaborative engagement. This form of scholarship rests on four pillars:

- 1) Recognition of the value and importance of non-technical expertise;
- 2) Seeking to work beyond disciplinary silos
- 2) Knowledge-creation judged both on the basis of its practical utility and its contribution to theory;
- 3) A cyclic or spiral planning-action-observation-reflection process, involving multiple stakeholders and disciplines (See Figure 1).

The approach comes with challenges: fostering joint projects between scholars and urban residents can require bridging “competing logics, incompatible styles of discourse and attitudes towards authority, or inaccessibility of methods and results” (Roper, L.: “Achieving successful academic-practitioner research collaborations”. *Development in Practice*, Volume 12, Num. 3 & 4, August 2002), all of which can undermine collaboration. Additionally, scholars undertak-

ing engaged community-based research often do so at their own peril: universities’ failure to recognize and reward community-engaged scholarship (in part because of the carefully-maintained boundary between academic experts and activists) has limited career prospects (and incentives) for activist scholars.

URBAN seeks to address these and other obstacles in the field by:

- 1) Originating research questions from pressing practical problems in cities and the need to address them;
- 2) Connecting traditionally siloed issue areas and intellectual approaches;
- 3) Forging strong relations between academics and practitioners to fully deploy the expertise, experience, and insights that both bring;
- 4) Bringing together within a single network various universities and academic and non-academic research and policy centers, that have traditionally operated independently of each other;
- 5) Creating collective spaces to gather data that address urban problems, propose new models of social change, and present practical outcomes;
- 6) Creating mechanisms to increase scholarly recognition of, and career pathways for, engaged, field-based research.

We envisage three potential arenas of exchange:

- 1) Professional meetings, convenings and interdisciplinary conferences (phys-

ical spaces)

2) An on-line learning platform where scholar-activists, students, journalists, government staffers, and policy analysts would go to learn about, share information and collaborate on urban field research projects.

3) A peer-reviewed multi-disciplinary urban studies journal that publishes original community-based research.

## **IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

The URBAN working group has established a set of short and long-term goals to be accomplished in two phases. Phase I, sheperded by MIT CoLab, is already underway and is planned to last 18 months. It will establish the broad dimensions of the field and identify key scholars and research institutions engaged in different aspects of community-based research. Phase II includes a set of long-term objectives to strengthen and sharpen the boundaries of the discipline of urban community-based research.

### **I. MAPPING THE DIMENSIONS OF THE FIELD**

*Goal:* to establish the broad dimensions of the field (theoretical, methodological, and thematic) and identify key scholars and research institutions engaged in different aspects of community-based research. This phase includes the following objectives:

#### **A. Convene Core Working Group**

*Objective:* Establish the working group that will lead the effort to build URBAN.

We will identify key members, reach out to all candidates and get agreement to work together, and meet regularly.

#### **B. Database Building**

*Objective:* A mapping of the field by which we will survey likely partners and collaborators among academic centers of research and practice across the US and learn about their needs and interests.

To accomplish this objective we will build a database including the following items: Research Centers, Scholars (senior/junior), Conferences, Journals and Publications, Internet resources, Foundations.

#### **C. Consultation process**

*Objective:* A consultation/diagnostic process through which scholars focusing on community based urban research identify strengths/weaknesses/gaps in the field.

We will be convening special meetings in key cities around the US (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Austin ). This will also be an opportunity to share ideas about promising areas of research, shared interests, and experiences working with communities. We

will also interview key scholars working on a broad range of urban issues (e.g., city planning, education, labor and workforce issues, poverty, race, ethnic and gender studies, immigration issues) to contribute to the identification and mapping of scholars, institutions and issues.

#### D. Presence in conferences

*Objective.* Ensuring the presence of URBAN in professional and academic meetings, building on SAGE’s existing

presence, to start building the network, gaining support, engaging academics in a diagnostic/mapping process, and defining more specifically URBAN’s goals and the mechanisms to be used to advance these goals. We will distribute materials, invite speakers and have sessions at each of the conferences. One proposal is to organize a signature URBAN “Scholarship That Matters” panel at each convening.

In this first phase, URBAN will have a presence in the following conferences:

MONTH	EVENT
November	Equity Summit, PolicyLink (Nov. 8-11, 2011—Detroit)
February	Association of American Geographers (Feb 24-28, 2012—NYC)
April	AERA, American Education Researchers Association (13-17 April, 2012—Vancouver)
	Urban Affairs Association (April 18-21, 2012—Pittsburgh)
May	International Making Cities Liveable Conference (May 20-24, 2012—Portland, OR)
	Planners Network International Conference (May 2012)
August	American Sociological Association (Aug. 17-20, 2012—Denver)
September	American Political Science Association (August 30-Sept 2, 2012—New Orleans)
November	Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) (November 1- 4, 2012—Cincinnati, Ohio)

## **E. Literature review**

*Objective.* Identify academic research that has the dual characteristics of advancing the field of urban studies and having impact at the community level.

We will conduct a literature review of the community-based research field, including best practices in university-community partnerships. As this literature is identified through consultation with our colleagues, it will feed into each of the successive consultations and help us define the parameters of the field, and the critical questions the network wants to focus on.

In addition, a set of activities that celebrate Marilyn Jacobs Gittell's legacy and support URBAN but for which it is not directly responsible (parallel and related) will include the following:

### **1. MJG Distinguished Speaker Award**

*Objective.* Establish an annual MJG Distinguished Speaker Award. In 2010, Bill Quigley (Loyola Law School), Beverly Wright (Deep South Center for Environmental Justice) and Dr. Marla Nelson, (University of New Orleans Department of Planning and Urban Studies) were awarded at the 41st annual UAA conference in New Orleans. A second award will be given this year at the UAA's 42nd Annual Convening in Pittsburgh.

### **2. Publication of MJG Selected Works**

*Objective.* A SAGE publication of the selected works of Marilyn Jacobs Gittell has already been completed ("Activist Scholar: Selected Works of Marilyn Gittell", edited by Ross J. Gittell and Kathe Newman, SAGE Publications, 2011). A second publication on community-based research is now in process.

### **3. Faculty search for the MJG endowed Chair**

*Objective.* Identifying the successful candidate for the newly-established Marilyn Jacobs Gittell endowed Chair. The search committee has been already selected and the new Chair is expected to be announced in April 2012.

## **II. BUILDING THE FIELD/ EXPANDING THE NETWORK**

*Goal.* To strengthen and sharpen the boundaries of the discipline of urban community-based research.

We plan both to establish unique spaces of learning, collaboration, consultation and exchange, and to expand the space for our approach and agenda in existing spaces (university departments and professional association meetings). Activities will include:

- A SAGE published volume on community-based research, edited by Ross Gittell, Phil Thompson and Kathe Newman.
- An increasingly visible presence at aca-

democratic association meetings, with an increasing number of panels organized by community-engaged scholars.

- An increasing number of peer-reviewed articles in existing journals.

We will also explore the feasibility of establishing:

- A web-based learning platform, tentatively called UrbanSpace, to be co-developed with SAGE Publications.
- A SAGE journal dedicated to community-based urban studies.

In the later part of this phase, we hope to work with other research centers and NGOs to see how we can capitalize on their policy-oriented research and find ways to connect it to academic journals. We also will seek to engage with them in deep discussion about effective community-academy collaboration, opening up the discussion to include changes that academic programs need to make to ensure sustained and effective engagement with communities.

By the end of this phase, we hope to achieve the following:

- Solid examples of applied research being used to support policy development and social change in urban areas.
- Pace-setting research that is accessible and utilized by practitioners in community-based organizations and institutions.
- A robust network of faculty and academic/non-academic research/policy centers collaborating on a local, state, and national level.
- Beginnings of networks with global

partners.

- Development of mentorship projects between established scholar-activists and aspiring students, young faculty, and community-based intellectuals.

Activist scholars doing field-based research while fulfilling the demands of academic careers have limited capacity to help build the organizational and administrative infrastructure needed to sustain URBAN. At the same time, supporting the development of such capacity provides tremendous opportunity for networking, learning and exposure for emerging scholars. We propose the creation of a set of graduate fellowships distributed around the “nodes” of the URBAN network and, working closely with MIT CoLab and the MJG Chair at CUNY, charged with promoting the network within academia and connecting with other researchers and organizations. These fellowships, providing funding for young urban scholars committed to careers in field-based research, will be housed at the four or five key URBAN anchor institutions and chosen by an URBAN steering committee comprised of key faculty from each of the anchor institutions. A part-time Research Coordinator at CoLab will conduct the literature review, further develop the conceptual framework, assist with fundraising efforts, and otherwise support CoLab’s initial stewardship of this project.

## **URBAN FOUNDING SCHOLARS**

Founding scholars include:

Jose Calderon, Pitzer College  
Abel Valenzuela Jr., University of California, Los Angeles  
Michael Dawson, University of Chicago  
Cathy Cohen, University of Chicago  
Beth Richie, University of Illinois at Chicago  
Lani Guinier, Harvard University  
J. Phillip Thompson, Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Ross Gitell, University of New Hampshire  
Kathe Newman, Rutgers University  
Ruthie Gilmore, City University of New York  
Caitlin Cahill, City University of New York  
Mark R. Warren, University of Massachusetts Boston  
Lorlene Hoyt, Tufts University

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

MIT Community Innovators Lab  
77 Massachusetts Avenue, Rm. 7-303  
Cambridge, MA 02139  
Phone: 617-253-3216  
Email: [urban-info@mit.edu](mailto:urban-info@mit.edu)  
<http://web.mit.edu/colab/work-project-urban.html>

**Miller-McCune**  
SMART JOURNALISM. REAL SOLUTIONS.

 **SAGE**

 **MIT**  
**CoLab**  
COMMUNITY INNOVATORS LAB