

Fall 2016

## Vol. 27 No. 3 (Autumn 2016), DOI 10.18060/21388 Building an Engagement Center through Love of Place: The Story of the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center

Sara Woods

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*, [swoods@unomaha.edu](mailto:swoods@unomaha.edu)

B. J. Reed

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*, [breed@unomaha.edu](mailto:breed@unomaha.edu)

Deborah Smith-Howell

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*, [dsmith-howell@unomaha.edu](mailto:dsmith-howell@unomaha.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/scholarshipofengagement>



Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

[SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

---

### Recommended Citation

Woods, Sara; Reed, B. J.; and Smith-Howell, Deborah, "Vol. 27 No. 3 (Autumn 2016), DOI 10.18060/21388 Building an Engagement Center through Love of Place: The Story of the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center" (2016). *Scholarship of Metropolitan Mission*. 5.  
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/scholarshipofengagement/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Community Engagement at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship of Metropolitan Mission by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

# **Building an Engagement Center through Love of Place: The Story of the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center**

Sara Woods, B.J. Reed and Deborah Smith-Howell

## **Abstract**

Universities throughout the United States operate engagement centers to extend campus faculty, staff and student resources to their communities. In 2014, the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) opened the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center (Weitz CEC): a privately funded \$24 million, 70,000 square foot facility located in the middle of its original Dodge Street campus. In addition to offices for its service learning and community service enterprises, the CEC houses over thirty university and community organizations and offers extensive space for meetings, dialogue and collaboration. This paper will discuss its strategic and programmatic origins, unique design, and lessons learned in developing and operating the center.

## **Keywords:**

University Engagement, Partnerships, Community Engagement

## **Introduction**

The University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) opened the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center (Weitz CEC) in March of 2014. Costing just over \$24 million, the new 70,000-square-foot facility, fully paid for by private funds, supports the creation and expansion of university-community partnerships, satisfying growing demands for community meeting and planning space, and extending the campus's resources far beyond its physical boundaries deep into the community. The Weitz CEC is located in the heart of UNO's original Dodge Street campus. By serving as a destination where campus and community connect, the Weitz CEC has exponentially increased UNO's ability to engage its faculty, staff and students in high-quality, meaningful, and impactful engaged scholarship, service learning and community service experiences throughout the community, particularly in areas of economic stress.

The hallmark of the Weitz CEC is shared space, and the multiple benefits that this concept derives. Anchors of UNO's engagement efforts—in particular its nationally recognized Service Learning Academy (SLA) and its rapidly expanding Office of Civic and Social Responsibility—are for the first time in the same building on campus. By moving and expanding a nonprofit incubator from an off-campus location to the CEC, over thirty nonprofit, government, university and student organizations now are housed in the building, working side by side in a rich, collaborative environment that encourages and supports opportunities for ongoing dialogue, investigation and cooperation. Shared space is also achieved by hosting multiple community events—as many as fifty per day—in the building's 21 reservable meeting spaces, and for having an open door to the UNO campus itself. The everyday presence of a multitude of partner and

anchor organizations, the hundreds of daily visitors to the building attending a wide swath of events, and the unpredictable diversity of university students dropping in for a study session or a chat—all in one building—makes the Weitz CEC a truly unique place in higher education.

The Weitz CEC’s mission is to “contribute positively and measurably to the community’s quality of life by creating, supporting, and expanding mutually beneficial partnerships, engaged scholarship, and academic and student programming that create tomorrow’s leaders and agents of change” (University of Nebraska Omaha, 2016). Its vision reads “the dynamic programs, initiatives and partnerships fostered and supported by the Weitz Center will inspire generations of leaders, groundbreaking solutions, and synergetic collaborations that will transform our community and campus into world-class metropolitan partners” (University of Nebraska Omaha, 2016).

The Weitz CEC was funded entirely with private donations, with most funding coming from two prominent, local family foundations. Both foundations had strong connections to UNO, having funded capital projects in the past. One of the foundations had also funded scholarships and program endowments as well, and had a firm commitment to the university’s service learning efforts from their beginning. An accompanying program funding campaign has raised \$4.5 million, with funds going to support an endowed directorship for the Service Learning Academy and programming support for the P-16 initiative in the SLA, the Collaborative, and a summer work academy for youth through the Office of Civic and Social Responsibility. Additional endowments provide student support and internships.

### **The Evolution of the Weitz CEC**

The conceptual design, broad-based buy-in, rapid success of the Weitz CEC capital campaign, and ongoing program funding success can be attributed to three critical factors in UNO’s history. The first was UNO’s legacy and continuing reputation of deeply rooted engagement and outreach in the Omaha area as a distinguishing feature of its identity as a metropolitan university. The second was the launch, growth, and flourishing of UNO’s service learning enterprise, which has evolved from a small cadre of engaged faculty and a handful of classes to a sweeping, galvanized movement encompassing every college and almost every department at UNO. The third factor was UNO’s pioneering community role as an incubator of collective impact nonprofits beginning in 2000. Using a 2,500 square foot collaborative work space shared with the University of Nebraska Medical Center, UNO worked with community leaders to launch, administer, and house issue-focused nonprofit initiatives that responded to emerging community needs.

All three of these movements have gained local and national attention. As the Service Learning Academy and the nonprofit incubator (later called the Collaborating Center) grew in size, their influence through expanded stakeholders, partners, visibility, and outcomes also widened. Both became known as two of UNO’s signature outreach efforts along with other UNO’s mainstream engagement activities, some of which were long-term, college-driven initiatives and others that were more recent and campus wide. The confluence of these movements into one coherent, but still decentralized, engagement agenda was communicated in UNO’s successful 2006 application to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. UNO was among the first group

of U.S. colleges and universities to receive its new Community Engagement Classification. Separately and collectively, these three factors (embracing community engagement as central to its role as a major metropolitan university, a thriving service learning movement; and the successful Collaborating Center) provided the programmatic, philanthropic, and values-based foundation on which the CEC is built.

#### Factor 1: Growing into a Metropolitan University

The first, and most far reaching factor, has been the university's long term commitment to the city of Omaha and its surrounding metropolitan area. Consistent with its metropolitan mission, UNO has contributed positively and extensively to the quality of life in the Omaha area since its inception as the University of Omaha in 1908. While the university has grown substantially in terms of its physical footprint, enrollment, and alumni base, its overall impact on the city and region's economic health, quality of life, and intellectual capital has steadily increased. The area's business, nonprofit, education, and government sectors have come to rely upon UNO's academic, programmatic, and student resources in their day-to-day operations, long-term growth, and sustainability. UNO has invested heavily in its community through a broad spectrum of outreach and scholarship activities, spanning from individual student internships to major, multidisciplinary programs. These have collectively engaged thousands of faculty, staff and students, and involved the campus' full range of academic areas ranging from the fine arts to engineering and mathematics.

The benefits of UNO's outreach efforts have been reciprocal, enriching the university's teaching, student services and research enterprises as well as its community partners. In 1993, UNO joined the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU). This affiliation has elevated UNO's community outreach efforts on a national level, and has helped sharpen UNO's focus as a "metropolitan university." In 1998, UNO adopted a vision statement that reflects its commitment to be a leading urban institution: "The University of Nebraska Omaha will be among the nation's premier metropolitan universities - a university of high distinction with strong academic and scholarly values distinguished by creative relationships with the communities we serve." (University of Nebraska Omaha 2010)

*Building Engagement into the Strategic Fabric of the Campus.* Since 1997, UNO has utilized a dynamic strategic planning process to drive campus resources and priorities. In 2000, UNO established three strategic goals that continue to guide campus priorities today. Goal 3 of the UNO strategic plan reads, "UNO will be recognized for its outstanding engagement with the urban, regional, national, and global communities" (University of Nebraska Omaha, 2010). UNO has expanded and extended its outreach efforts through increased financial, logistical, human resource and organizational support for service learning, applied research, community service projects and community leadership activities across the full breadth of university divisions, colleges, and units. These activities range from multi-disciplinary, comprehensive initiatives such as the Service Learning Academy to long-term applied research programs such as the Center for Public Affairs Research, and to hundreds of individual outreach activities of faculty, staff and students. Campus-wide examples include UNO's participation as one of the first group of institutions in AASCU's American Democracy Project initiative (labeled Civic Participation

Project at UNO) and development of the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance (formerly American Humanics) at UNO.

In his 2009 convocation address, UNO Chancellor John Christensen said, “We are the University of Nebraska at Omaha, but we always have been “of” our community. In many ways, I believe we are among the nation’s distinguished institutions, serving as a national prototype for innovative interactions within our community, particularly in the area of service learning. However, the time has come to raise the proverbial bar.” Continuing, Dr. Christensen challenged the audience, as well as the broader campus community, to broaden the campus’ engagement activities, saying “groundbreaking work in the field of institutional engagement suggests that it is no longer enough for such activities to remain the province of a select few within the university. Rather, the art and science of engagement must permeate the academy, and be reflected broadly in all areas of teaching, research, and public service” (Christensen, 2009).

In response, the campus has taken additional action to make community engagement a clear focus of UNO’s metropolitan mission. All colleges recognize the scholarship of engagement to some degree in their reappointment, tenure and promotion policies, and three have very detailed guidelines addressing it. Faculty can notate scholarship of engagement activities in their annual reports, collected through an online reporting system (Digital Measures). This will enable the campus to keep metrics on the type and trends of engagement-related scholarly activity, teaching and service.

*Funding Engagement.* Privately funded community chairs have been added to the ranks of faculty, and the Office of Academic Affairs offers annual engagement grants to encourage new scholarship activity. The NU Foundation has an endowment sufficient to support two Centennial Engagement Graduate Fellows, who serve in community engagement related roles on campus. One of the fellows is assigned to the CEC. Staff in academic affairs provide support in data collection and measurement regarding the campus’ community engagement activities and are involved in the development of a “Campus Commitment” website highlighting community engagement.

*Role of External Recognition in Furthering Engagement.* In 2015, UNO once again received Community Engagement classification from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, one of 361 universities to have this classification. The application included details regarding the CEC and the partnerships that had already ensued in preparation for its opening, along with an extensive list of engagement activities that had occurred since UNO’s original classification in 2006. UNO has been intentional in utilizing both external recognition opportunities such as the Carnegie classification to promote engagement on campus, in the community, within the NU system, regionally, and nationally. This has helped to elevate the work of faculty, staff and students, create informal and formal rewards, and connect even more effectively with funders. In doing so, each award builds upon the one before it, developing a broader and deeper cache of community and campus supporters.

A similar approach can be seen in UNO’s history with the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll. The campus was first named to the honor roll in October of 2006. The excitement that occurred as a result helped fuel additional interest in service learning

and community service activities; for example, during that time the Seven Days of Service Initiative was launched.

In 2009, UNO was listed among the 141 institutions recognized “with distinction” on the honor roll, and soon following discussions began regarding the CEC. In justifying a nationally-unique engagement center to the University of Board of Regents in 2010, both the Carnegie Classification and the Honor Roll were detailed as examples of the campus’ exemplary commitment to engagement.

In 2011, UNO was a finalist for the President’s Award, and in 2014, UNO was the honor roll’s national recipient of the Presidential Award for Economic Opportunity category. One of the programs identified in the honor roll in 2014, Summerworks, received over \$2M of private funding in 2014 and 2015.

Another factor in recognition has been in the campus’s ability to host national conferences, raising its visibility. UNO hosted the International Association for Research in Service Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLC) conference in 2014, the national conference of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) in 2015, and will host the Engaged Scholarship Consortium’s national conference in 2016.

## Factor 2: The Service Learning Movement at UNO

The second critical factor in the creation of the CEC was the transformational and defining impact of service learning on the campus’s community engagement efforts. Service learning as a formal practice began in 1998-1999 as an initiative of the UNO Center for Faculty Development (CFD). In March of 1999, the Midwest Consortium for Service Learning in Higher Education awarded a \$29,575 grant to the UNO CFD to create the UNO Service Learning Academy (SLA) within the Center for Faculty Development (Leach & Bacon, 1999). A total of nine service learning classes were offered in a variety of disciplines. After the Consortium grant ended, UNO sustained the Service Learning Academy with the director of the CFD providing leadership. A .70 FTE service learning specialist, hired in 2003, provided partnership support to both the community and campus faculty. With its origin in the Center for Faculty Development, UNO’s Service Learning Academy developed as a faculty support and resource center. All service learning courses at UNO are integrally linked to the curriculum and course learning objectives. Service learning at UNO also focuses on the scholarship of teaching and learning, encouraging and support faculty, students, and community partners’ participation in conferences and publications. This model has been instrumental in creating faculty and administrative buy-in for service learning specifically and engaged teaching and research more generally.

Among the faculty engaged in service learning at that time was Barbara Weitz, who taught in the UNO School of Social Work. She and her colleagues became campus advocates for service learning, hosting experts as well as visits to other campuses. In 2004-05, UNO had sixty service learning courses and growing interest among the faculty. In the summer of 2005, the Midwest Consortium for Service Learning in Higher Education funded the “South Omaha Seminar” to familiarize faculty interested in service learning projects with community organizations and

issues in that part of Omaha. In the summer of 2006, a second grant funded a similar seminar in North Omaha.

In 2005, The Service Learning Academy was established as an official office, separate from the Center for Faculty Development. Paul Sather, the then Assistant Director of UNO's School of Social Work, became the first full-time director of UNO's Service Learning Academy. The SLA also gained its own office space and a full time assistant director who oversaw service days and volunteer activities (in 2012, this function separated from SLA and now is part of the UNO Division of Student Affairs). In 2008, the SLA began the P-16 Initiative and hired a full-time coordinator to oversee it. With primary funding from the Weitz and Sherwood foundations, this initiative combines service learning classes from a university partner and a P-12 partner focusing on a nonprofit or community partner. In this scenario, university and P-12 students create a cooperative, real-life learning environment in which both types of students have specific learning objectives. The community partner benefits from the expertise and energy of the students. Another benefit is the early exposure the P-12 students receive by having contact with university students and being on a college campus, often for the first time. UNO's P-16 initiative continues today, and continues to receive funding from the Weitz, Sherwood, and other local funders.

Today, the SLA continues to thrive. UNO faculty, SLA staff, and many students have published and presented dozens of articles related to the impact of service learning in a variety of disciplines. UNO has hosted several service learning related conferences, including the International Association for Research on Service-learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) in 2014. The SLA now has a substantial endowment for its director and has access to both state and private funding. It has a full-time evaluator to measure the effectiveness and impact of its programs on students and community organizations, and shares its findings with funders, university colleagues, community partners, and the academy.

Dierberger (2015) reported four ways in which UNO is somewhat unique in the operation of the SLA. First, the SLA takes a more developmental approach in which students have service learning experiences that continue to build upon one another throughout the curriculum. For example, in the School of Social Work, service learning experiences would tie into the curriculum as students progressed from semester to semester, sometimes continuing with the same community partner or in the same issue area.

Secondly, UNO's approach promotes interdisciplinary service learning teams across campus. Through the South and North Omaha seminars, the SLA has encouraged collaboration among faculty from different fields to address common issues. For example, one collaboration around housing engaged faculty with classes in engineering, social work, and business. This interdisciplinary approach created new and creative collaborations throughout campus.

Dierberger also noted that substantial private funding distinguished UNO's service learning activities from those of other institutions. The SLA has received substantial private support to institutionalize its operations and staffing, as well as generous support for program operations. Additional support from the corporate community has allowed for additional programming and increased the visibility of the academy even further in the funding community.

Finally, there is substantial positive energy about service learning at UNO. Service learning is an identifiable component of UNO's brand, supported and promoted by campus leadership at all levels. This clear public support creates an environment that encourages faculty to participate in this pedagogy.

UNO's service learning initiatives have brought a wide spectrum of faculty, representing every UNO college, into the community engagement arena, and have acquainted numerous nonprofit professionals, board members, and stakeholders with the campus and its assets. These efforts have also brought UNO great national recognition, as the aforementioned Carnegie and President's Honor Roll attest.

### Factor 3: The Collaborating Center and UNO's Role as Nonprofit Incubator

The third factor in UNO's progression toward the construction of the CEC was the operation of a prototype nonprofit incubator from 2000 until 2014. The College of Public Affairs and Community Service (CPACS) operated this facility for emerging, local nonprofit organizations. CPACS had deep roots in outreach and the scholarship of engagement, having been founded in 1972 as a direct response to civil unrest taking place in Omaha at the time. The university viewed CPACS as a means to forge more proactive and productive interactions with areas of greatest need in Omaha. The college's academic programs in urban studies, social work, public administration, criminal justice, and gerontology included hands-on community engagement and applied research.

In the early 1990s, CPACS received funding from the U.S. Department of Justice to develop a community plan for youth violence. The project was named PACT (Pulling America's Communities Together) and was part of a nationwide initiative spearheaded by the U.S. Department of Justice in collaboration with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Commerce.

Some of the funds from the PACT grant were used by the UNO Department (now School) of Public Administration) to engage in neighborhood capacity building programs. Additional programs and partnerships with the Omaha Community Foundation, the Chamber of Commerce, the US Attorney's Office, the Mayor's Office, the Urban League, the Chicano Awareness Center (now the Latino Center of the Midlands), and the Omaha Police Department led to a successful Community Outreach Partnership Center grant through the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1997. This grant further broadened UNO's involvement with even more neighborhood-serving organizations in Omaha's Enterprise Community.

In 2000, several CPACS faculty and staff were asked to participate in the planning of a neighborhood center for the Greater Omaha area. The success of the Neighborhood Builders training program and COPC neighborhood initiatives had illuminated the need for a centrally located, comprehensive center that would offer a full range of services to neighborhood associations and grassroots neighborhood-based citizen groups. Several local family foundations and the United Way of the Midlands came forward as funders, but balked at the idea of having the center located in the Mayor's office where it could be subject to political whim. The planning



team were also wary of starting a new nonprofit which would have to balance capacity development challenges rather than start out meeting the immediate needs of neighborhoods. Instead, funders and stakeholders sought a third party that would serve as an incubator for the center and assume an administrator role.

UNO, and specifically CPACS, was asked to serve in this capacity, as it had already proven to be a neutral convener in the past. Simultaneously, the University of Nebraska Medical Center approached CPACS to see if it would partner in the launch of the UNMC/UNO Collaborating Center for Public Health and Community Service. UNO agreed as the location for the center – called the “Collaborating Center” - was in central Omaha, just two miles from downtown and on the city’s main bus line. The space was open, with offices around the perimeter. Low bookshelves surrounded each space and allowed for conversation between “neighbors.” Rent was very reasonable, with UNO/UNMC underwriting the cost of the common space and adjacent parking.

UNO provided administrative support and technical assistance to the Neighborhood Center for seven years, until the center split off as an independent nonprofit. Other nonprofits incubated and supported by UNO included the Hate Crimes Coordinating Council, Project Interfaith, Omaha Table Talk, Metropolitan Area Continuum Care for the Homeless, and the Family Economic Sufficiency Program. As administrator of these programs, CPACS provided back-office support, including accounting, human resources management, grant administration, and technical assistance. In return, the incubator relationship provided multiple opportunities for service learning projects, applied research, and collaborative activities for UNO students, faculty and staff.

The majority of these programs and their staff were housed at the Collaborating Center. By collocating these organizations in the same physical space, the nonprofits’ staff and constituents benefited from shared meeting space, operating support, and most importantly, common interests and collaboration. In addition to UNO sponsored organizations, the space also housed several other nonprofit organizations that operated more independently, such the Omaha office of the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and the African American Achievement Council. These organizations also benefited from the shared space and sense of community that thrived in the Collaborating Center.

Admittedly, managing these incubated organizations was time-consuming for UNO personnel. An associate dean in CPACS spent approximately .33 FTE of her time overseeing personnel, managing contracts, and helping to navigate university channels, structures, and procedures on the behalf of the nonprofit partners. Both she and the CPACS dean served on incubated organization’s boards of directors in an ex-officio capacity. This time and effort offered extensive dividends, however. The incubator role created enormous goodwill in the community. CPACS, and more broadly, UNO, were active partners in solving community problems. Students had increased opportunities for active engagement, capstone projects, and internships. Board members, task force participants, and consumers of services were able to connect with the university in ways they had not before. The university was also able to connect with donors in new ways. One of the two donors for the CEC was one of the original donors for the Neighborhood Center and served on its original advisory board. Later, the same donor was a lead

donor for a major renovation of the CPACS building, and connected other foundations to the project.

Initially, UNO placed a full-time staff professional at the Collaborating Center who assisted with building management, scheduling, accounting, and other duties. Within a few years, however, it became clear that the partners did not need “managing.” Working together, they agreed upon a general set of informal operating guidelines that served them sufficiently. This self-governance approach carried over to the CEC, which uses a committee structure for building operations. The organizations became resources to one another, often partnering on new initiatives, bartering services, and providing advice and support. The Collaborating Center remained in operation until 2014. The UNMC terminated its side of the lease in 2013 due to the loss of funding. When the CEC was completed, organizations were given an opportunity to apply. Many of the UNO incubated organizations had become independent nonprofits and had moved out on their own (which was an objective) or had been absorbed by a new parent organization. This was also considered to be a success. For example, Omaha Table Talk, which focused on promoting peaceful dialogue among and with people of color, joined ranks with Inclusive Communities, a growing nonprofit that became a CEC partner. Another Collaborating Center organization, the Family Economic Success Initiative, became part of Family Housing Advisory Services. Only one of the three remaining organizations opted to apply (Metropolitan Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless) and is now part of the CEC.

### **Planning for the UNO Community Engagement Center**

In 2008, UNO announced that it was moving its College of Business Administration (CBA) from the Dodge Street Campus to the Pacific Street Campus. This created a domino effect, as the CBA’s vacated Roskens Hall would eventually become home to the College of Education (COE), leaving Kayser Hall vacant. With a 5-story, campus office and classroom building now available, Chancellor John Christensen began conversations about how this building could contribute to the campus’ growing reputation as a metropolitan university. Conversations quickly led to questions about Kayser Hall’s viability as a potential Engagement Center for the campus.

The timing was right for such a conversation. There was rapidly growing support among the faculty, students and community for UNO’s service learning and community service activities. UNO had recently earned its Carnegie Classification and was establishing a strong identity as a metropolitan university. The Collaboration Center was thriving and demand for its space exceeded its capacity. There was agreement among the campus’ leadership that placing its anchor engagement programs under the same roof would build momentum, campus support, and greater community visibility.

To help dialogue regarding an engagement center move forward, in 2009 Chancellor Christensen convened a campus/community taskforce comprised of university administrators, facility personnel and faculty as well as community representatives and potential donors to discuss potential options. The committee met monthly, with one of the faculty representatives researching prototypes at other universities. The committee made site visits to two universities known for university/community engagement, Portland State University and the University of Utah. At both site visits, the committee met multiple campus representatives of outstanding

engagement programs and gathered feedback on UNO's vision for its campus-based engagement center.

The committee had several options for an engagement center. One was to completely gut the Kayser Hall building. Another was to select an off campus site. A third was to select a site on UNO's Pacific or Center Street campuses. A fourth was to identify a site on the Dodge Street campus. Quickly, the committee ruled out the Kayser Hall option. The building lacked windows, open space, and potential for access. It was not proximate for parking, was located on a far corner of campus, and would require substantial funding for upgrades of HVAC, information technology, and other updates before it could be renovated for engagement purposes.

The committee also ruled out construction of a site off the UNO campuses, as there was a strong desire to ensure the involvement of students. The experience with the Collaborating Center had been that it had been difficult to engage UNO's student population in an off-campus location. Almost all UNO students work, many over 20 hours a week. The committee believed the best way to ensure their involvement was to build the center on campus. Because of UNO's central location in Omaha, close to bus lines and downtown, access to campus is not an insurmountable issue for community. Also, the committee pondered, if building off campus, where? Omaha has two areas of economic stress: North Omaha and South Omaha. UNO's location in between the two communities seemed to be wisest choice, with a commitment to utilize the proposed engagement center to ramp up the campus' outreach efforts in both communities.

With all of this under consideration, the committee recommended that a new building be constructed on the UNO campus. The committee evaluated different sites, including locating the center on the Pacific Street campus to the south of the Dodge Street campus. Ultimately, the committee selected a site on what was then a parking lot on the center of campus, next to the UNO's signature campanile (bell tower). This location would ensure new visitor parking available next to the building, and the campanile would serve as a visible landmark for those unfamiliar with the campus.

### **Operationalizing Engagement into Design and Values**

The physical design of the Weitz CEC involved a deliberate process that spanned over five years and involved multiple site visits, two architectural firms, many charrettes, over twenty-five focus groups representing campus and community constituents, and several university review processes before ground was even broken. First, consistent with university procedure, a local architecture firm developed an extensive program statement for the building that communicated the vision for the building, using feedback from focus groups from throughout the community and campus. The program statement, which contained both a narrative as well as conceptual designs of the interior space, was approved by the University of Nebraska Board of Regents and used as the basis for bidding by firms for the actual design and construction of the center. The selection process of the firms included points for each potential firm's conveyed grasp and understanding of the proposed unique nature of the CEC and its commitment to collaborative work.

The architecture firm selected for the building, Holland Basham Architects (HBA), spent extensive time exploring the concept of “collaborative work and meeting spaces” with future building staff and users, and students. Architects set up site visits for exploration of office, meeting, and casual space design, held charrettes and additional focus groups, and met extensively with the community/university task force to ensure that the vision for the center was achieved. The design of the building reflects a deference to collaboration, shared workspaces, open design and transparency.

UNO’s twelve years of experience in operating the Collaborating Center provided important insight about effective collaboration practices that informed the Weitz CEC design process. The Collaborating Center “neighbors” also were key focus group participants when UNO began planning the Weitz CEC, as they offered insights that proved invaluable regarding the design of the partnership spaces. For example, they suggested including some private office space and creating work areas that allowed collaboration but also gave staff a sense of privacy when they needed it. The Weitz CEC’s space reflects both. The Collaboration Center neighbors also recommended ample open collaborative workspace where Weitz CEC partners could meet and interact, greet stakeholders and clients, and spread out when they needed to. All of this was incorporated into the design, as making sure the Weitz CEC contained one private meeting space (all of the other meeting spaces in the CEC incorporate glass).

Separate from the process for the physical design of the building, the Weitz CEC community/university task force concurrently went through a lengthy planning process that identified the core values for the Weitz CEC that continue to guide decision making, partner selection and evaluation, and building operations. This process included utilizing focus group data and gathering additional feedback from campus constituents involved with service, volunteer, and service learning opportunities. Additionally, the Weitz CEC community/university task force conducted a multi-step facilitated conversation process that included brainstorming, refining, and prioritization to clearly articulate the building values. These values continue to guide decision-making, partner selection and evaluation, and building operations.

In meeting both the mission and vision, the Weitz CEC emphasizes core values that serve as the basis for decision-making, selection of partners, and evaluation of its effectiveness. These are described in Table 1.

Table 1

*Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center: Community and University Partner Values*

Diversity	The Weitz CEC actively seeks to represent the many diverse ideas, backgrounds, and cultures that comprise Omaha and the university community.
Civil and Open Dialogue	The Weitz CEC is a space where all opinions can be heard and diverse ideas are not only respected but encouraged in order to foster innovation and creativity.

Collaboration	The Weitz CEC fosters an environment where people are willing to organically develop creative strategies and partnerships for solving complex social problems.
Communication	The Weitz CEC encourages thoughtful, respectful, and transparent communication between all individuals who use the Weitz CEC including community partners, faculty, staff, and students.
Reciprocity	The Weitz CEC is a portal through which the community and the university exchange resources, ideas, and solutions. Through reciprocal relations with clearly stated and fulfilled goals and expectations, community and UNO organizations interact with and benefit from each other.
Welcoming	The Weitz CEC values everyone who uses the building, and shows that by creating an environment that is clear, easy to access, filled with friendly faces, comfortable for all, and meets people’s physical needs.
Continuous Improvement	The Weitz CEC equips all partners (community and university) to better serve the Omaha community by basing decisions for improvement on direct feedback and systematic data gathering and analysis.

Unique features of the Weitz CEC

While there are a number of community outreach centers at universities and colleges throughout the country, many are limited in scope and focus on one component of outreach, such as service learning, or are located off-campus and focus on a specific neighborhood. Others are housed within individual colleges or units within the institution and are focused on discipline-specific outreach activities, rather than being university-wide. The UNO Weitz CEC is unique on a national level in terms of size, scope, the nature of its operations, potential impact, and approach. In particular, the following are examples of the Weitz CEC’s unique approach to engagement and how the nature of the building has been forged by collective learning within the entire campus community.

*Shared Space Requires Principles and Guidelines.* The Weitz CEC contains “partnership” spaces totaling 15,000 square feet - for both community and campus organizations. Currently, thirty-two nonprofit, government, student, and university organizations are housed in the Weitz CEC. The organizations were selected through a values-based application process, in which applicants describe how they will attend to building priorities such as collaboration, communication, diversity, democratic principles, and reciprocity. External partners have an opportunity to apply to be “administrative” partners, in which they enter in an incubator-like relationship with UNO. University partners include several faculty-led engaged scholarship projects that provide opportunities for applied research.

Occupation in the building is built upon the expectation that all residents will engage in mutually beneficial relationships. With the exception of the permanent anchor partners (SLA, OCSR), all building partners go through a rigorous application process. All external partners must indicate in their applications how they intend to commit to reciprocal activities with the campus (service learning, internships, and research partnerships) with the campus. Likewise, university partners

must detail how they will be engaged in the community. Applicants must also describe how they will address the Weitz CEC values if selected to be building partners. A community/university committee reviews applications and conducts face to face interviews with prospective partners. The committee sends its partner recommendations to the UNO Chancellor for approval.

If selected, partners in the building are asked to maintain a level of engagement consistent with what was envisioned in their proposals. This progress is monitored through meetings with Weitz CEC staff and occasional reports. The relationships partners develop with university/community partners are organic, with the individual organization determining the nature of these partnerships and how and when they take place. However, extended occupancy in the building is dependent on these reciprocal relationships occurring and being reported. In general, occupancy in the building is envisioned to last from three to six years for nonpermanent partners.

The Weitz CEC serves the entire Omaha metropolitan area and beyond. Some of its university and community partners, in fact, have a statewide focus. Currently, the Tribal Emergency Management Program (TEMP) serves Native American tribes and reservations within the state of Nebraska with a plan to expand its service area beyond the state in the future. Hunger Free Heartland, a community partner, seeks to address childhood hunger in the state. Similarly, the Buffet Early Childhood Center addresses issues affecting the success of children ages 0-8 in Nebraska. The Weitz CEC is also comprehensive in terms of campus use – all colleges at UNO are engaged in some way in the Weitz CEC. Similarly, the Weitz CEC does not limit its outreach to a specific type – e.g., education or economic development. Rather, its approach is organic, allowing the community and campus to determine priorities and programs collaboratively.

Finally, an essential component of the vision for the building was to offer a variety of meeting spaces to the community, provided at no charge to users. Rather than just offer space, however, the Weitz CEC is a thriving community crossroads. This has cemented the building's role in the Omaha area as a key place for making change, community dialogue, and group learning space. Each of the meeting spaces were designed for flexibility, IT innovation, and group dynamics. Meeting organizers can move walls, store or rearrange tables, utilize whiteboard walls, and take advantage of videoconferencing and other technology, aided by building support staff.

*Decentralization and Shared Ideas.* UNO has avoided, as much as possible, a top-down approach to engagement. The Weitz CEC serves as a mechanism to promote and support engagement at UNO, but the responsibility for initiating, maintaining, and supporting community outreach and scholarship remains the purview of UNO's individual divisions, colleges, departments, and, some instances, individual faculty. This bottom-up approach has helped ensure the sustainability of engagement of UNO despite changes in leadership at all levels. For the Weitz CEC, it has also broadened the appeal of the facility across the campus. Five of UNO's six colleges are represented in its partner organizations, and students and faculty from all colleges have participated in the Service Learning Academy and community service activities.

*Sharing Physical Space.* UNO does not charge rental fees for community events held in the Weitz CEC. This includes events ranging from small meetings of four people to comprehensive conferences and workshops with over 300 in attendance. Offering the space, including its technology, for free has made the Weitz CEC the central place for holding the full array

community and campus-based engagement events. In doing so, it has offered myriad opportunities to place UNO in the forefront of community activities – making it an ideal spot for strategic planning forums, decision accelerators, and other complex events. In fact, in 2014, the Chamber of Commerce used the entire building – including all of its informal workspaces – for an intensive media workshop for young media specialists. Over seventy-five participants developed Omaha’s new brand during the two-day time period.

*Dedicated and Adequate Parking.* Focus groups held during the design phase were unanimous that ample visitor and partner parking had to be adjacent to the Weitz CEC. Forum attendees described UNO as an island surrounded by a moat with limited access into the campus and a “you can’t get there from here” impermeability. The Weitz CEC includes an adjacent, dedicated parking lot with eight-five stalls, with a gatehouse and attendant, with flexible access to seventy more stalls if needed. Building partners have secure parking underneath the Weitz CEC.

*Shared Space and Access.* One of the primary purposes of the Community Engagement Center is to increase access to the UNO campus by providing meeting space in which critical decisions about the issues facing the Omaha area, region, state and beyond can be deliberated and determined. The flexible, state-of-the-art space in the Weitz CEC meets a significant need for this in the community, and in doing so is drawing key decision makers – including those residents affected most by the decisions – together to have peaceful and productive dialogues. By making the space free of charge, the “playing field” has been leveled and all types of organizations are gathering in the Weitz CEC spaces. On any day, it is common to see Omaha’s most influential donors meeting at the same time, and sometimes in the same space, as students, government leaders, consumers of services, community advocates, business executives, and nonprofit leaders. Not only do formal meetings occur, but informal gatherings in the Weitz CEC’s plentiful casual gathering spots and lounges are locales for serendipitous conversations.

## **From Vision to Impact**

The Weitz CEC has surpassed expectations in terms of its initial impact. In its first twenty-seven months of operations, over 12,000 events involving over 170,000 visitors and 648 separate organizations have taken place in the building. Thirty-two partner organizations – eighteen community-based and fourteen from the UNO campus, share collaborative office space in the building.

### Weitz CEC Anchor Organizations

Four permanent anchor organizations (UNO Service Learning Academy, Office of Civic and Social Responsibility, William Brennan Labor Institute, and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute) are housed within the building, allowing expanded capacity and outreach for both UNO and the University of Nebraska. However, it is important to note that while the Weitz CEC houses these important entities, the vast extent of UNO’s outreach and engagement activities continue to occur within the campus’s six colleges, Criss Library, Athletics, and Division of Student Affairs.

*The UNO Service Learning Academy (SLA).* The SLA supported over 200 classes with more than 3000 UNO students in AY 2015/16, including those from its nationally recognized P-16 Initiative. The P-16 Initiative involves over 1500 UNO students and over 2500 K-12 students working with at least 50 community partners. With a full-time staff of six and twelve graduate students, the SLA utilizes the CEC as a base for drawing partners to campus for culminating events, partner fairs and workshops, and project meetings.

*The Office of Civic and Social Responsibility (OCSR).* OCSR has expanded from a full-time staff of one to a staff of 3.0 FTE and over thirty-five student workers. Leveraging additional private funds gained since the Weitz CEC opened, OCSR now includes a student-run food pantry in the Weitz CEC for UNO students and staff; a volunteer resource center; a signature days of service coordinator; and the Collaborative for Student Service and Leadership (the Collaborative), through which student leaders develop and lead community service teams with nonprofit organizations. In 2013-2014, over 5,400 UNO students, P-12 students, and community volunteers participated in 20 Signature Service Days for almost 38,000 collective service hours.

*The UNO William Brennan Institute for Labor Studies.* The Brennan Institute operates from the Weitz CEC and leads its training program for union leaders on site. Previously, the institute was housed in a state office building in downtown Omaha, isolated from the campus and with limited access to meeting space. Now, it is proximate to its home college, campus leadership, and multiple community partners. It has strengthened its campus bonds and heightened its visibility while building its capacity in the Weitz CEC.

*The Buffett Early Childhood Institute (BECI).* With a goal of making Nebraska the “best place in the United States to be a baby,” the institute has grown from a staff of three in 2014 to over twenty-five since moving into the Weitz CEC. This University of Nebraska initiative focuses on programming and outreach to improve learning outcomes for children ages 0-8 throughout the state.

#### Other roles of the CEC

In addition to housing community/university partners and anchor partners, and hosting community events, the Weitz CEC plays additional roles.

- Supporting the scholarship of engagement by offering dedicated spaces for faculty involved in applied research in collaboration with community partners, as well as space for communities of practice focused on an engaged research theme.
- Serving as a conduit for the community for university service resources.
- Promoting campus events occurring in the Weitz CEC that are open to the public.
- Offering capacity building support to nonprofit partners in the building.
- Collaborating with the Avenue Scholars Foundation to fund AmeriCorps volunteers from Metro Community College as interns for CEC partner nonprofits.



## Lessons Learned Through the UNO Experience

The lessons learned through UNO's experiences with community engagement, the SLA, and the Collaborating Center provided the basis for the values-based, partner-driven approach and business practices that UNO is utilizing in the Weitz CEC today. Through the experiences of operating an incubator, UNO's leadership—for both academic affairs and business—has relied on a strong foundation of expertise and artifacts with which to launch successful partnerships, develop reasonable facility and business agreements, and manage expectations.

*Invest in, learn from, promote, and celebrate bite-sized successes. Then repeat.* The Weitz CEC capitalized on the momentum gained from numerous, entrepreneurial engagement efforts of individual faculty or administrative units. Initially, there was limited return on investment: minimal recognition from the community or campus; challenges in navigating and communicating campus complex policies and procedures to community partners; and limited support, and sometimes resistance, in fundraising. Despite these challenges, these initiatives - such as UNO's Service Learning Academy and the Collaborating Center - moved forward and grew in size, visibility and scope. They grew new sub-initiatives, such as the P-16 Initiative, that continued to fan out and broaden the impact and visibility of UNO's engagement efforts and engage even more faculty and students. UNO administrators learned from failures as much as successes. The experience with the Collaboration Center, for example, demonstrated that proximity to partners was a key to success and that the interaction led to emerging partnerships and programmatic initiatives that would not have happened otherwise. The lack of student interaction in that same space showed that engagement of students with each other and with community partners cannot occur in a significant way unless they were physically connected to each other in some way.

Today, the Weitz CEC nurtures multiple, small initiatives that emanate between building partners and UNO faculty. For example, a collaboration with Girl Scouts, Black Police Officers Association, and the Nebraska Watershed Network (a UNO student based organization from the UNO Department of Biology) is working with Sherman Elementary to engage low income girls as citizen scientists to collect water samples on a research project. These small collaborations build into broader networked projects with additional campus and community partners, funding, and visibility, and in turn growing interest in community engagement

*There is great value in the university being a neutral convener.* The impartial role of UNO in helping launch and administer organizations such as the Neighborhood Center, Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless, and Hunger Free Heartland has had real benefits for the campus. While it is behind the scenes work that often does not allow for the UNO brand to shine through, it has connected or strengthened the bonds between the campus and a broad range of service providers and government agencies throughout the community. It has served as a conduit for its students and faculty to find opportunities in service learning, community service, internships, and applied research. It also has solidified the university's reputation as a dependable partner and backbone for community impact efforts. Despite the university taking a back seat role in terms of "calling the shots," the importance of the campus in filling the convener role has increased its exposure to local donors, some of whom are active issue-focused supporters who otherwise have had limited experiences an engaged metropolitan university. This

experience has also demonstrated that this role as “neutral convener” cannot be taken for granted. Trust and social capital built over years can be lost if external partners perceive that the campus and now, if the Weitz CEC itself has a clear partisan interest in the outcome of specific issues. One of the more challenging aspects of hosting organizations and events in the building is for the university to welcome debate and dialogue around controversial concerns and at the same not be seen as an advocate for a particular position.

*In launching a major initiative such as the Weitz CEC, tap the institution’s hidden assets for support.* Institutions of higher education correctly identify student and faculty resources as being critical to their community engagement efforts. Allocations of space and funding to support direct personnel expenses are also highly valued by campus leaders (Campus Compact 2012, 2011, 2010, 2009). In addition to the above, UNO’s fundraising and communications efforts played a vital role in the development of the Weitz CEC. However, the support and partnership of UNO’s business and finance division was a critical key to the successful design, launch and operation of UNO’s Weitz CEC. Led by the vice chancellor of business and finance, the division was actively involved early in the design process, not just in the physical design of the building, but also in determining how the Weitz CEC would be *supported* as an engagement facility, used by community and university partners alike.

Key to this design orientation was the concept of *access*. The vice chancellor personally set this tone early on by convening key facilities personnel and asking them to take an approach not of *control*, but of *access*. For example, this approach meant that community partners and visitors using the Weitz CEC would access immediate parking, unfettered by confusing signage and cluttered access points. This was a turnabout from the presumptive theme of *control* that had dominated the campus’s approach to parking for decades.

Giving community partners physical, logistical, operational and network access to the campus and the Weitz CEC required the cooperation and assistance from a broad array of campus services, many of which had not been involved in the *business* of engagement in the past. Accounting staff created cost centers for community partners and simple procedures for billing rent, copier charges, and miscellaneous expenses. Parking Services has worked with CEC staff to provide a customer-service focused approach to managing its visitor lots. Information Services had to create mock identities for community partners who defied definition by standard campus categories: not an employee, volunteer, alumni, nor student, but someone who needed secure access to buildings, parking permits, recreation facilities, and a MAVcard. Telecommunications created multiple options so that partners could utilize the campus telephone system or bring in their own private provider. The campus compliance officer developed a facilities agreement template for the partners.

The level of cooperation and responsiveness that was provided by the division of business and finance, and that continues to occur, has been critical to the Weitz CEC’s success. This has been achieved through a commitment to transparency, through which problems have been addressed head-on between the Weitz CEC director and the corresponding department head. More significant problems or challenges are directed to UNO’s senior leadership (the vice chancellor for business and finance, senior vice chancellor for academic and student affairs, and the chancellor) or the chancellor’s cabinet for discussion and resolution.

*Free space pays big dividends.* UNO made a decision early in the planning process not to charge any fees for the use of its meeting rooms or corresponding technology. This has proven to be a major win to the campus, resulting in over 100,000 visits to the building in its first 21 months of operation. The Weitz CEC's policy is to be open for free community and campus events that are "for the public good," excluding fundraisers, political campaigns, and press conferences. The Weitz CEC's open door policy has extended the campus to individuals who have never been to UNO before as well as to alumni who have not been returned to the campus for many years. The free space is especially valuable to federal and state agencies that are not able to pay for meeting and conference space for trainings, workshops, and webinars. Nonprofit organizations hold public dialogues, client fairs, board meetings, and strategic planning events. Local elected officials hold town halls, dialogues, and stakeholder meetings. Local foundations hold grant writing seminars, bring in national speakers and panels, and convene planning forums around major issues.

In offering this space for free, UNO's leadership has quickly realized that the gains vastly outweigh lost potential revenue from booking rooms. The university is now a *community destination* from where positive change can take place, where community problems are solved, and where civil dialogue occurs. While there is a value placed on the free space UNO provided: The Weitz CEC also broadened the range of visitors to the campus: *potential students*, attending chess tournaments, slam poetry contests, or inclusivity events; neighborhood association members from the areas surrounding the campus, many of whom had never been to UNO; *business leaders* attending Omaha Chamber board meetings; *policymakers*, including members of Nebraska's state senate, city council, county commission, and Washington delegation, all attending a broad array of meetings; and the broadest array of *donors and potential donors*, attending board meetings, stakeholder events, community dialogues, and even informal gatherings in the Weitz CEC's collaborative nooks. Of course, in all of these circumstances, the opportunity to connect or reconnect UNO with a parent or alumni through the Weitz CEC is always present. "I met \_\_\_\_ at the Weitz CEC last week" has become part of Omaha's local vernacular. Often, visitors to the Weitz CEC take advantage of the building's central location to explore UNO's walkable campus, often visiting the institution for the first time. This has served as an excellent recruiting tool for potential students and parents, as has the Weitz CEC's partnership with the UNO recruitment office, which provides promotional materials (with the event coordinator's permission) at building events involving youth.

*A decentralized approach to engagement works, but it still requires coordination.* The Weitz CEC's university partners represent five of the university's six academic colleges, Academic Affairs, and Division of Student Affairs. All Weitz CEC partners agree to abide by the stated values of the center. Otherwise, each is only accountable to protocols or expectations within their home department and college, not to a centralized community engagement office at UNO. The Service Learning Academy (SLA) serves faculty and students from all of UNO's colleges as well as students attending University of Nebraska Lincoln classes held on the UNO campus, but there is no mandate for faculty to participate outside of occasional departmental expectations. The SLA operates from the Office of Academic Affairs and the Office of Civic and Social Responsibility runs through the Division of Student Affairs, and students participate voluntarily.

UNO and the Weitz CEC's leadership has been careful to define the Weitz CEC as *a portal* for the institution's engagement efforts, not *the container* for the entirety of the campus's work in this regard. While it houses UNO's signature engagement programs (SLA and OSCR), both of these are focused on working throughout the campus, involving faculty and students from throughout the academic and student affairs enterprises. Weitz CEC staff assist with connecting the building's partners with potential university collaborators from throughout the institution, make referrals for internships, capstones, practica, and engaged research opportunities for inquiries from throughout the community, and assist campus organizations in hosting community engaged events. However, even broader efforts, such as supporting faculty in scholarship of engagement through the tenure and reward process, civic engagement grants, and emphasis of UNO's metropolitan mission all promote community engagement as well.

This approach has led a broad-based sustainable focus on engagement at UNO that has endured for decades despite leadership changes at the campus, division, college, and departmental level. Decentralization is not without its challenges: as it makes it difficult to identify and quantify engagement activities on a campus level; measure overall outputs and outcomes; and communicate the depth and impact of engagement on students and the overall community. As UNO strives to demonstrate the value of the Weitz CEC and its "proof of concept," capturing and sharing this institutional-level information is even more crucial. The commitment of resources and human capital spanning twenty years, two chancellors, and multiple deans, vice chancellors and other campus leaders along with extended relationships with key donors and community partners led to the realization of the Weitz CEC. This moved from a combination of individual commitments to one that reflected a shift in the institutional culture.

UNO is working to overcome these challenges by utilizing campus wide measurements such as the National Survey of Student Engagement's civic engagement module, a community perception survey, standardized assessments of service learning courses, a more comprehensive approach to evaluation and student portfolios by the Office of Civic and Social Responsibility, and a year-long university engagement data collection process led by the Office of Academic Affairs. In the summer of 2016, a broader campus evaluation of engagement will begin. All of the data collected will be shared on a new "Campus Commitment" page under the "Engagement" portal on the UNO website.

*Building for engagement requires flexibility in physical design and ongoing approach.*

In the design of the Weitz CEC, the UNO leadership team acknowledged that the building's design would be fluid and flexible as the realities of collaborative co-location emerged. There was no prototype nor design basis to learn from in shaping the physical design of the space. Luckily, there was sufficient funding left in the budget to allow for multiple modifications of workspaces, office areas, and project rooms during the first twenty-one months of operation. The office furniture in the partner spaces is modular and allows for redesign. Other spaces, such as a large filing area, have been removed and replaced with open work areas while others have been reconfigured to accommodate hoteling spaces for drop in users and large tables for informal meetings.

This flexibility has also allowed for a focus to continuous improvement. Working with the Weitz CEC advisory committee, Weitz CEC administration utilizes building statistics, surveys, partner

feedback and observation to examine use patterns and make changes. A new, concierge-style reception desk will ensure a volunteer or student will greet all building visitors even when a major conference claims the larger front desk. An underused resource room will soon be repurposed into a flexible classroom. A major partner is planning to vacate the Weitz CEC as it outgrows its current space, opening up opportunities for new programming and innovation.

*When engaging in partnerships, clarify expectations upfront and achieve agreement regarding common terms.* UNO's experience with the Collaborating Center and Service Learning Academy has underscored the value of achieving a common understanding of expectations regarding partner roles and contributions. In the operation of the Weitz CEC, coming to agreement around certain terms is especially important, as its partner organizations are expected to "collaborate," "communicate" and be "reciprocal," among others (CEC, 2015). However, these terms can be ambiguous and carry different meanings, depending on the context. The values-based approach to managing the Weitz CEC has helped clarify these expectations, as each value is defined during the application process and reiterated in multiple ways, events and artifacts. SLA uses multiple strategies to clarify expectations and agreement, including employment of a full-time community liaison and holding an annual, week-long summer workshop for its P-16 initiative, attended by over 150 faculty, K-12 and community participants. By working together to clarifying and operationalizing common terms, partners, faculty and Weitz CEC administrators better understand expectations around what will be gained in a collaboration or partnership and how the work will be done.

## **Conclusion**

The Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center represents vast opportunities for future growth in UNO's outreach and engaged scholarship efforts. Its flexible design and decentralized approach, along with the commitment of university leadership, means that the center will play an important role in developing additional collaborations, new community service opportunities for students, the ongoing expansion of service learning, and increasing the level and impact of engaged research.

The Weitz CEC demonstrates the value of engagement at every level of the institution. From unit-based initiatives like Neighborhood Builders, which later gave rise to a college-based nonprofit incubator, to a small faculty development office promoting and supporting service learning among a few faculty champions, UNO was able to demonstrate the value it provided through its faculty members, staff and students in addressing critical community issues. Accompanied by a solid strategic plan that reiterated the value of community engagement and the concrete role of UNO as the city's metropolitan university, these initiatives took root and steadily grew and gained momentum in terms of visibility, speed and impact. As their velocity increased, so did the attention paid to them by critical stakeholders within and outside of the university: government decision makers, community stakeholders and partners, and donors. Ultimately, these donor-champions participated in the planning process for the Weitz CEC, sharing the vision that emanated from the lessons learned in service learning projects, neighborhood engagement, collaborative workspaces, and values-driven partnership.

## References

Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center (2015). Partner Expectations.

Christensen, J. (2009 October 7). *101 Years: Writing the Next Chapter*. University of Nebraska Omaha Convocation Address. Strauss Performing Arts Center, Omaha, Nebraska.

Dierberger, J. (2015). *Service learning history and P-16 protocols* (Final Report, COMM 8980: Independent Study). Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska Omaha.

Leach, M. & Bacon, N. (1999). *Service learning academy* (Memorandum). Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center. (2016). *Our mission and vision*. Retrieved from <http://www.unomaha.edu/community-engagement-center/about-the-weitz-cec/our-mission-and-vision.php>.

University of Nebraska Omaha. (2015). *Strategic plan*. Retrieved from <http://www.unomaha.edu/strategic-plan/index.php>.

## Authors:

Sara Woods is Executive Associate to the Senior Vice Chancellor for Community Engagement at the University of Nebraska Omaha. She holds an MPA from UNO.

Sara Woods  
Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center  
University of Nebraska Omaha  
6001 Dodge Street  
Omaha, NE 68182  
E-mail: [swoods@unomaha.edu](mailto:swoods@unomaha.edu)  
Telephone: 402-554-3914  
Fax: 402-554-5904

B. J. Reed is the Senior Vice Chancellor for Student and Academic Affairs at UNO. He earned a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

B. J. Reed  
Office of Academic and Student Affairs  
University of Nebraska Omaha  
6001 Dodge Street  
Omaha, NE 68182  
E-mail: [breed@unomaha.edu](mailto:breed@unomaha.edu)  
Telephone: 402-554-2907  
Fax: 402-554-4896

Deborah Smith-Howell is the Associate Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs and Dean of Graduate Studies at UNO. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Texas.

Deborah Smith Howell  
Office of Graduate Studies  
University of Nebraska Omaha  
6001 Dodge Street  
Omaha, NE 68182  
E-mail: [dsmith-howell@unomaha.edu](mailto:dsmith-howell@unomaha.edu)  
Telephone: 402-554-4849  
Fax: 402-554-3143