



Strong Connections Build Strong Communities

The Need: In the Promise Zone neighborhoods in and around Drexel University, the poverty rate is over 50%, a devastating statistic that is nearly twice an already overwhelming poverty rate of 26% across Philadelphia. Yet throughout the city, there are hundreds of programs, agencies, and organizations that exist to help support those who are living in poverty. Our neighbors living in the communities surrounding the University too often struggle to connect with these resources and opportunities that would help improve their lives, many of which are literally in their own backyards. At the same time, in the same Promise Zone neighborhoods, Drexel students – committed and talented – are looking to engage even more fully in their community. They want to both support their neighbors and better understand their struggles and aspirations.

Furthermore, there is a need for graduating college students to enter the workforce as civic-minded professionals who are equipped with the necessary 21st-century skills to thrive in an ever-changing global workforce. According to a 2013 survey conducted by Hart Research Associates on behalf of AAC&U, 74 percent of employers would recommend a “21st-century liberal education” wherein students develop “a sense of social responsibility; strong intellectual and practical skills that span all major fields of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills; and the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings” (AAC&U, 2015, para. 4). UConnect provides students the opportunities to meaningfully engage with both academic content and their community while gaining the skills required to contribute to our ever-changing workforce and society.

Our Response: UConnect is an innovative new initiative, based on the successful LIFT model and co-designed and supported by faculty and staff at the College of Arts and Sciences and the Lindy Center for Civic Engagement, whose mission is to connect neighbors – students and community members – with each other and with opportunities to improve their lives. The need to connect is universal, and through UConnect, Drexel students will serve as Navigators, working together, one-on-one, with community members to set goals and then connect with vital community resources.

Aided by intensive training and technology, Navigators will build trust and rapport, helping community members find the right opportunities for a full range of priorities, from employment to housing to education. Located at Drexel’s Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships, UConnect will be a welcoming and empowering place for community members to come and discover which of the myriad programs and opportunities are right for them. They will learn about and get connected to those resources, and UConnect Navigators will track their progress, following up and following through to help overcome obstacles, encourage resilience, and build confidence.

By embracing the Navigator role and supporting their neighbors in navigating the complex landscape of opportunities, students will learn first-hand, in a very personal and human way, about knowledge application and real and pervasive issues of social justice. Moved by this collaboration with the community and armed with a deeper understanding of themselves and their neighbors, students will take the UConnect experience with them back into their homes, classrooms, and professional lives, becoming the civically engaged change agents our communities need.

Eligibility: UConnect’s services are available to anyone living in the Promise Zone neighborhoods of Mantua, West Powelton, Belmont, Mill Creek and Powelton Village. On the Navigator side, students and faculty from any discipline, college, or department are eligible to engage with UConnect through community-based coursework, research, and

public service. In addition to students, Drexel alumni, staff, and friends of the University are encouraged to take on the Navigator role as well.

Impact:

- *Academic:* Students will gain a strong foundation in discipline-based knowledge and the real-life application of such knowledge that will support them in becoming engaged civic professionals
- *Significant reach:* In the first three years, over 300 UConnect Navigators will spend more than 20,000 hours working one-on-one with more than 1,500 community members
- *Effectiveness:* We will track our effectiveness, including the number and quality of referrals as well as progress toward achieving community members' goals. We will also glean community member and partner feedback to continually monitor and improve how we deliver our services
- *Transformation:* We will study and assess the Navigator role and the effect that the experience has on students' lives and perspectives
- *Replication:* Our goal is to package and replicate the UConnect model, helping to adapt and implement the model for colleges and universities nationwide and sharing best practices with the broader higher education community