

Pupils Learn What They Live in the Urban Experience/Urban Semester

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The daily struggle for survival and self-enhancement is the curriculum in a unique program of inner city living.

CHARLES SILBERMAN recently held that "the object is to reconnect the schools with the larger community, not through the conventional field trip, but through some continuing experience."¹ In line with this idea, Indiana University's School of Education, in conjunction with Flanner House Multi-Service Social Agency of Indianapolis, sponsors a remarkable program called "Urban Experience/Urban Semester." This approach combines student teaching and community experiences in a semester-long program in the inner city of Indianapolis.

The purpose of the 16-week program is twofold. On one hand, it offers students from a middle class background the opportunity to gain firsthand knowledge of the problems of urban living—exposing them to the special life-styles, aspirations, fears, struggles, hopes, and frustrations of the poor. At the same time, it is hoped this experience will lead the participants to crucial self-analysis. They must ask themselves, "Am I willing and ready to inject myself into the daily struggle for survival that is the way of life for thousands of inner city residents?" Each participant will answer that question in a very personal way. Only he or she will know at the end of the Urban Semester

whether a career of working in the inner city is a worthy and realistic goal.²

The Indiana University School of Education has established eight initial objectives for the Urban Semester program:

1. To expose the participant to persons from the various subcultures that are found in the inner city

2. To expose the participant to situations that illustrate the complexity of the interwoven connections existing between the public schools and other agencies within the inner city and the creation of awareness by the participant of the need for cooperation and/or understanding

3. To expose the participant to the variety of roles thrust upon inner city residents and teachers and the extent to which these roles vary from the roles assumed by a person living in the dominant culture

4. To supplement the knowledge about inner city residents (especially public school students) which is gained on the campus or in public schools with experiential knowledge gained outside the traditional academic setting

² The Indiana University School of Education presently administers the program from Bloomington under the title, "Urban Education Program," assigning students to specific agencies and schools in Indianapolis. Twenty students are enrolled in the current semester. Director John Brown indicates that more than 20 will participate in the next semester program. "It is our hope," says Brown, "that students will begin to understand the external pressures to which urban dwellers are subjected and be better able to deal with students in assisting them in coping with these pressures as reflected in the classroom setting."

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¹ See: Charles E. Silberman. *Crisis in the Classroom*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970.



Participants in the Urban Experience program encounter at firsthand the aspirations and frustrations of urban living.

5. To enable the participant to gain firsthand knowledge of the kinds of fear suffered by inner city residents and to form an opinion as to whether such fears are based on reality

6. To simulate as nearly as possible the frustration and lack of personal freedom that result from material deprivation

7. To expose the participant to an environment that will enable him more realistically to arrive at a decision concerning the feasibility of a career in the inner city and to create an awareness of the other available occupational directions in the field of education

8. To place each participant in close physical proximity to other persons whose vocational goals are similar but whose backgrounds may differ.

Students are initiated into the Urban Semester through a process called "the plunge," in which they are deposited in the inner city of Indianapolis with no resources except for 50¢ a day. For three days during the plunge, the students are expected to feed themselves, find someplace to sleep, and otherwise manage to cope and survive in an utterly alien environment.

Survival in the Inner City

After completing the plunge, participants set up residency, as a family, in rented houses in the inner city neighborhoods in which they will be working. In order to gain a greater sense of the reality of ghetto life, they participate in a simulated welfare situation, in which they live under the regulations

of the Public Welfare Department, and have assigned to them a case worker from the Welfare Rights Organization.

In order to adhere to the simulation of an inner city, poverty-level family, participants are not allowed the use of a private automobile. They are restricted to public transportation, hitchhiking, or hustling rides from the inner city contacts made after involvement in the program. Except in cases of home emergencies, professional interviews, or travel requested by the University, they are restricted from traveling outside the city limits. In addition, they are financially bound to a planned, welfare-style budget, with the use of outside funds prohibited.

To accomplish its objectives, Urban Semester has selected and developed experiences around seven clusters:

1. *Program Orientation.* This phase of the experience includes 11 days of instruction and experience familiarizing the students with the physical layout and facilities of the city; discussion of inner city survival techniques; and explanation of details and participant responsibilities in the program.

2. *Environment Experiences.* Involving day-to-day living in the inner city in poverty conditions, this experience includes participation in the decision-making process of a survival ethic.

3. *Family Training.* This experience includes 40 hours of encounter group involvement, emphasizing development and use of communication skills; development and use of problem-solving techniques; creation of awareness of one's social and physical environments through personal sensitizing; and development of a cohesive, supportive family structure.

4. *Occupational Experience.* This aspect of the program provides for six 40-hour weeks of work with inner city agencies and/or organizations. Its goal is to acquaint the participants with the objectives and methods of the institutions that affect the inner city and to provide the participants with a perception of their actual effect.

5. *Exposure Activities.* These activities include encounters with inner city organizations, institutions, and their representatives, and encounters with inner city dwellers and activi-

ties outside the family's immediate neighborhood. Some of these experiences include attendance at storefront as well as established black churches; riding in a police car on beat; visiting inner city bars; attending sessions of municipal court; going to Black Arts Theatre; visiting and eating at welfare homes; discussions with principals and other personnel of inner city schools; development, administration, and participation in surveys in inner city communities.

6. *Internal Seminars.* This activity provides a structured framework in which family members can share their experiences, ideas, and feelings about the program, the inner city, and the people with whom they have come in contact.

7. *Student Teaching.* The goals for student teaching are determined by Indiana University and the Indianapolis Public Schools.

In the evenings, participants attend specially designed courses on "Crime and Criminal Justice" and on "Poverty and Social Welfare," for which they receive academic credit. Conducted for the most part in the houses in which the students reside, the courses include such innovative elements as accompanying police on their rounds; interviewing justices; visiting penal institutions; and working in various rehabilitation programs.

Though sponsored by the School of Education, Urban Experience is not limited to education majors. Liberal arts majors may also participate and earn academic credit by working in the inner city. For example, one participant in the 1973 program lived and

worked at the Women's Prison; another at Flanner House's new Residential Youth Center; and a third worked and resided at the Pleasant Run Children's Home.

The Urban Experience/Urban Semester program had its origin in the successful Flanner House-American Friends Service Committee work camps which, in 1942, enlisted conscientious objectors to assist in clearing a site and building Flanner House. In 1950, these camps enlisted American Friends Service Committee volunteers to assist in a self-help housing venture within the inner city. In 1966 the camps, under the direction of Flanner House Homes, enlisted high school and college students to aid residents whose homes were being threatened by the construction of I-65, an inner city superhighway. In 1969 the work camps, now titled Urban Experience, became an alternative form of Urban Education.³

Since 1969, the number of students enrolled in weekend programs—generally a weekend "urban collage" dealing with topical themes such as Black Culture—has reached 1,729.

Since its inception in 1971, 66 students have participated in the full semester program. Subsequent to their graduation, students have elected various career pursuits in the inner city. One is heading the Sex Discrimination Section of the Indianapolis Human Rights Commission; another is involved in the Drug Education Center in Indianapolis; and others have become teachers.

For those students who dared to take "the plunge," Urban Experience has been a remarkable challenge, in which perspectives have been stretched, knowledge deepened, and understanding heightened. No matter what his professional goal, the survivor of Urban Experience will be enriched through his involvement in the essence of inner city existence. □

³ The Urban Experience program was underwritten at the outset by a grant from the U.S. Office of Education under provisions of the Education Professions Development Act, the so-called "triple-T" section. Restrictions in funding precipitated a resultant modification or scaling down of the program.



Photos courtesy of the authors

Student teaching in urban schools leads to self-analysis concerning possible careers in the inner city.

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