

Community Economists in Action

Economics and Social Science Consortium Students' Research Meets Community Leadership

[Zdravka Todorova](#) Mar. 29 . 2004

The graduate student research panel on Local Economic Development held on the second day of the UMKC Black Studies Conference (March 26 – 27) was one of the efforts by the organizers (Black Studies Program Director Dr. Donald Matthews, and The Center for Full Employment and Price Stability Director Dr. Mathew Forstater) to bring together academic knowledge, business, civic, and political leadership confronting community economic development in Black Kansas City.

Dorothy Hawkins, UMKC graduate student in Economics, Heather Starzynski and Linwood Tauheed, UMKC Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Students in Economics and Social Science Consortium, shared their research on The Jazz District, Troost Corridor, and Prospect Corridor.



Hawkins's presentation introduced the economic and cultural history, as well as the future potential of the Kansas City's Jazz District (18th and Vine). As a part of her presentation, Hawkins showed the video: *18th and Vine: People's Journey* (courtesy of the KC Jazz Museum), which represents an oral history of the community. Hawkins also had prepared a jazz history media compilation as a part of her historical research on the Jazz District.

"The most important thing for us like-minded people is to bring those who do not think like we do to the table," said Dorothy Hawkins

Heather Starzynski presented an intersection of economic development theory and community development theory as applied to commercial revival of Troost Avenue, which houses several buildings of the UMKC campus. The research presented by Starzynski has been supervised by, and conducted collaboratively with Professor Robyne Turner from the Cookingham Institute of Public Affairs and The Center for the City.

Starzynski pointed out the vitality of property value stabilization, job opportunities for neighborhood residents, provision of nearby services, and the creation of a "sense of place" in the neighborhood.

Starzynski pointed out that the "selection of stores and economic activity within inner-city neighborhoods should be socially imbued, and not determined solely by the availability of external economic opportunities that can be brought to the neighborhood."

"The presence of consumers who define themselves as 'excluded shoppers' should be recognized by public officials when developing neighborhood commercial corridor revitalization policy," explained Starzynski.

Tauheed warned that “a community development program that does not recognize that neighborhood and community are not the same thing, will never affect the lives of the poor except negatively or temporarily.”

“Neighborhood is more important for those without financial resources, and community must be established there since they cannot generally extend outside of neighborhood. This relates to the debate over place- versus people-based economic development strategies,” explained Tauheed.

Starzynski distinguished between the two cases of starting businesses out of economic necessity because other jobs are not available, and starting a business by taking advantage of a business opportunity. The first category of people tends to have lower or inadequate education.

Starzynski’s point was a continuation of the concern addressed, the previous day at the conference by Dr. Gary Dymksi, Economist at the University of California. Dr. Dymksi emphasized the cumulative interrelation between the main avenues for action that he pointed out as strategic: capacity creation, job creation, and wealth creation.

Capacity creation, Dr. Dymksi pointed out, includes educating the youth, retraining workers, providing support for working parents. Job creation refers to increasing the number of jobs, and eliminating “glass barriers.”

Wealth creation pertaining to individuals represents balance-sheet stabilization, high enough income in order to be able to realize financial savings, and access to home ownership. Finally, according to Dr. Dymksi, wealth creation as pertaining to firms includes small-business stabilization and growth, access to venture, working, and expansion capital.

“We can have all the public policy in the world, but until everyone has equal access to capital and other opportunities, nothing is going to change,” warned Starzynski.

Tauheed, addressed the challenges of intercity community economic development focusing on the Prospect Corridor, and specifically on the role of, what he called, “The Community Economist.”

Tauheed’s presentation called for better involvement of economists in their communities and for rethinking the framework of conducting community development.

Similarly, in her welcome address at the Black Studies Conference, UMKC Chancellor Martha Gilliland pointed out that “there is no way to find solutions within existing structures, paradigms, and frameworks.” The Chancellor called for “Action, Action, Action!”

Dressed in blue on the last Friday of the month – showing support for UMKC’s Core Values –Chancellor Gilliland invoked “the vision at the university: Community of Learners – making the world a better place” in her welcoming address at the Second UMKC Black Studies Conference.



Tauheed identified the phases during which the Community Economist is going to be usefully involved in community economic development. During the Analysis Phase the Community Economist conducts modeling, data gathering and information processing.

The importance of data gathering and utilizing was stressed during the first day of the conference by Dr. Peter Eaton, Director of the Center for Economic Information (CEI) and Associate Professor in Economics at UMKC. Dr. Eaton manages a unique kind of database that puts together geographically (in map format) information about demographics, housing conditions, and neighborhood infrastructure in Kansas City.

“We need to have more information flowing between the university and the community that will allow us to take advantage of the assets of both,” said Dr. Eaton.



“The university should become an asset to the community,” said Dr. Peter Eaton (right) commenting on Dr. Gary Dymski’s talk (left)

Dr. Eaton pointed out that “the university has the capacity to get information and to make it available to guide community development... Such information is not currently available to communities. I think the university should put up some resources to do that.”

“What a university should be doing is providing that sort of access to knowledge and information to the community.”

The intended outcome is a store of knowledge made available for community members as a basis for the initiation of what Tauheed called the Facilitation Phase.

During the Facilitation Phase the Community Economist will serve as a medium to community members in understanding the dynamic structures of their community and in developing a Shared Vision for how they want their community to develop, explained Tauheed. “The community will also identify Indicators of Community Well-Being and start to compile a database of social indicators for alternative analysis and project evaluation,” said Tauheed.

Finally, at the Consulting Phase the Community Economist serves as a consultant responding to requests for research and information.

Specifically with respect to the Prospect Corridor, Community Economist, according to Tauheed should be involved in developing "Community-Owned" Expertise that can provide support for a joint strategic planning process; coordinating for organizational support to increase collaboration between agencies and partners in the Initiative; and developing a measure of program success focused on the Prospect Corridor that can be used to track changes brought about by the Initiative.

Before being able to do this, the Community Economist should be able to: to analyze and adapt "Best Practice" community development approaches to address issues in the Prospect Corridor; to analyze community structure, policies and programs and provide the results for use in program and policy restructuring; and first of all to develop a framework for setting community strategic goals and measuring progress, said Tauheed.

However, economic development programs often "ignore the inter-relationships between economy, polity, education, family and religion," said Tauheed. He then outlined the tasks of the Prospect Corridor Initiative in each of these entities.

"In the sphere of the Economy, the community economic development project should help the urban dweller to become a wise and informed consumer; to facilitate development of wealth in the community; and to promote equal access to capital for business, credit, investments, economic information, technology and training," said Tauheed.

In the Polity arena the strategy of the projects should include: ensuring that every eligible person becomes a registered voter; educating people on how the political system works; involving people; achieving accountability of public officials in fulfilling their public roles, Tauheed pointed out.

He added that at the level of Education, community economic development involves empowering parents to become supportive advocates for academic excellence by providing continuous support for their involvement; involving professionals hands on with students; promotion of neighborhood schools with educational excellence becomes the focus.

According to Tauheed, at the level of Family, projects should be oriented toward strengthening and empowering families to become positive role models in their community, informed citizens, wise consumers, and advocates for quality education in their schools; and promoting support systems for single parents.

Finally, at the level of Spirituality, Tauheed pointed out that, it is important to utilize the faith institutions as a vehicle to reach, teach and instill the spirit of continuous self renewal for its congregates as well as the community they serve. Tauheed emphasized the importance of "all denominations working together."

This necessity was invoked at an earlier session with Rev. Wallace S. Hartsfield, Pastor, Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church, KCMO; Rev. Ray Mabion, Pastor, Victory Temple Church, KCMO; and Rev. John Modest Miles, Pastor, Morning Star Baptist Church, KCMO.



Some of the other participants in the conference included: H. David Whalen, President and CEO, Jazz District Redevelopment Corporation; representatives from the Troost Corridor and the Prospect Corridor; Sharon Sanders Brooks, Missouri State House; A. Marie Young – Executive Director, Black Chamber of Commerce; and Joseph Seabrooks, Director of University Initiative.

All photos in this article by Druu Belcher.

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