

# Authentic Community-University Dialogues

Supporting community change

---

RICHARD BRAY

Community conversations have emerged as a vehicle to invite different voices into addressing the complexities of society and bridge the silos between public and private institutions and the communities. At IUPUI, the Listening and Learning with the Community Conversations are projected to be spaces where local Indianapolis communities and IUPUI faculty, students and staff can come together to discuss ways to strengthen collaborations in areas of common interest. The project originated as an initiative to further develop the excellence of IU community-engaged research and as part of a larger project to celebrate the IU Bicentennial to be expanded to other IU campuses.

The university has a history of providing breadth and depth of engagement with communities immediately adjacent to the campus. Efforts have been made to leverage our collective resources to support the community initiatives. Specifically in the Martindale-Brightwood community, the university received a multi-year multi-million dollar

grant to support education initiatives. After the grant ended, the Office of Community Engagement – Family, School and Neighborhood Engagement (OCE-FSNE) was committed to remaining engaged and supportive of the community.

So the first community conversation promoted by OCE-FSNE occurred on April 17, 2019 at the Edna Martin Christian Center, a local organization in the heart of the Martindale-Brightwood neighborhood located on the east side of Indianapolis. Holding the first meeting in the neighborhood would increase community involvement and create a sense of joint ownership for the work ahead. Edna Martin participated as co-convenor; and a community resident and university staff member collaborated to create the community conversation agenda and co-facilitated the dialogue. This conveyed a partnership of mutuality and respect. Local clergy, congregation members, neighborhood leaders, area residents, elected officials, law enforcement, university staff, faculty, and students attended the conversation.

---

**Author**

**RICHARD BRAY**  
Community Partnership  
Manager, IUPUI Office of  
Community Engagement



**IUPUI staff members and community members speak during a community conversation in the Martindale-Brightwood neighborhood.** Photo credit: John Gentry

We purposely started the conversation capturing the rich history of the neighborhood while centering community voice and residents' pride in their community. Participants actively listened and learned about the neighborhood's history and voiced their perspectives gained from serving, living, and working in and with the community over the years. Following, there was a robust dialogue on the neighborhood's seven strategic initiatives or MB-7. These initiatives mark the route to long-term change for the neighborhood through the promotion of specific initiatives in the arts, education, entrepreneurship, housing, health and communication. During the conversation, residents expressed appreciation for the continued involvement of the university in supporting neighborhood schools, as well as the recent health initiatives for its senior citizen population. However, they desire a deeper and more comprehensive engagement in all MB-7 areas.

The conversation we started in April has con-

firmed that the community desires that the university remains engaged and supportive with community residents and its organizations. The community is not looking for the university to invest financially but to invest relationally – through faculty, students, and strategic staff persons who can facilitate and foster relationships. There is the desire for the community to co-create knowledge that can be integrated into action for the benefit of the community. One community member said “do not weaponize the data against us. But help us to understand the data and findings so that we can make informed decisions about our future.” This idea of “weaponization” of the data relates to the community sentiment of information being used to achieve purposes that are divorced and sometimes against community interests. This powerful idea also brings us back to the importance of legitimate participation of the community in the decisions that affect their lives and the ethics of university-community engagement.



**37 Place Community Center, located in Martindale-Brightwood, hosted the community conversation with IUPUI.**  
Photo credit: Annie Goeller

Organizing this first conversation was not without challenges. Community organizations have their own processes, projects, plans, timing and interests. While our long-time partnership with the Edna Martin Christian Center facilitated the planning of the conversation, on the side of the university, faculty and student involvement was not as expected. We think that the time the conversation was scheduled (5:00 pm), and the university academic calendar (two weeks before finals) were barriers to consider for upcoming conversations.

Since this initial conversation, key university staff have been participating in community governance and planning meetings and support the neighborhood MB-7. For example, there is a promising initiative to form an internship program that will attract university students from a variety of majors (i.e. social work, business, and education). Graduate and undergraduate

students participating in this program will have common community engagement experiences that support their individual major as well as ongoing initiatives and programs at the community center. Additionally, OCE-FSNE has also renewed its engagement through continuing support to the Martindale Brightwood Educational Zone (MBEZ) developed to improve the educational development and academic outcomes of children in the neighborhood.

As common interests with the community are identified, it is expected that more scholars will show interest. A conversation is not just about an event or a time but part of a larger process that expects to bring about more people involved and ultimately change in the community. Projects and programs will evolve and people will change, it is expected that the university and the community continue fostering meaningful and purposeful relationships that remain in time.