



**CREATING WHOLE COMMUNITIES**  
A PARTNERSHIP OF UMSL, MU EXTENSION  
AND OUR REGION'S NEIGHBORHOODS

| 2022 | CWC Research Brief #1 |

## **Creating Whole Communities Project**

**Student Unity Enhancing Communities**

**2022-2023**

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## Overview of Project

Community art has numerous benefits for students and communities, such as community-building, cultural experiences and education, and increased pride in the work produced (Borrup, 2006; Lowe, 2000). For the Creating Whole Communities project, University of Missouri–St. Louis faculty, staff, and students partnered with a local school district to design, collaborate, create, and celebrate a community art project informed by students and the greater community.

Borrup (2006) describes five ways that community art projects offer support and significant engagement to improve communities. Application of these examples were used in the project development. In her research, Lowe (2000) examined the relationship between community art and community development. Her team conducted multiple visits to a static art piece, and evaluated a cultural play over the span of one year. The key opinions shared by community members were that the art allowed for solidarity, building relationships, providing support, communicating common concerns, and renewed identity and identity expression. In summary, she found that art is indeed effective in creating community.

As stated in the original proposal, the UMSL CWC team proposed working with students to create collaborative art to be displayed in their community. It would have been quite lofty to claim such an outcome as the Lowe (2000) project, as this project included designing, creating, and displaying art by the end of the project timeline. In addition, a development evaluation framework was used to be adaptive to the work and scheduling with the school district and guest artist, and coordinating efforts made by the full team. Process evaluation methods were also employed.

Ultimately this project addressed the question “Can an art project that is informed, developed, and created by students facilitate community building, strength, and ownership in a community?” The developmental evaluation of the process, experience, and final product support a positive response to this question.

The University of Missouri – St. Louis (UMSL) faculty worked with University City School District (UCSD) on a developmental project during the spring semester of the 2021-2022 academic year. During this developmental period, faculty worked with school officials, students, and community members to inform a plan and a design for the hoped for community art project. Thus, the Student Unity Enhancing Communities project was planned and named in collaboration with the community.

## Artist Selection and Contribution

Much thought and consideration was put into the selection of an artist to work with students in this project. The UMSL Child Advocacy Studies Program (CAST) has been working with the Cheyenne River Youth Project (CRYP) in Eagle Butte, South Dakota for the past five years. This relationship has been strengthened through an annual trip to the reservation each summer to offer project support and children’s activities for their annual RedCan Graffiti Jam. This graffiti art festival invites Indigenous artists to Eagle Butte to share their artwork that often incorporates key community themes and words, brings

the community together to celebrate the art, and provides activities for youth in the area. University City School District has an existing connection with this service trip as well. The youth center on the reservation has a large community garden on their grounds. For the summer 2021 trip, (and funded by an UMSL community services grant), UMSL worked with UCSD students (through their summer school program) to build bee houses for the CRYP youth center community garden in Eagle Butte. The completed bee houses were transported to the reservation and subsequently the youth who attended the children's art activities during the 2021 RedCan Graffiti jam painted the constructed bee houses. The bee houses are now works of art displayed in the community garden at the community center on the reservation. The youth also exchanged 'artist cards' between the two groups so the students could have a better understanding of all of the student contributions for this project, and in this minimal way, connect to the other artist that created or painted/decorated their piece. This existing relationship was the perfect catalyst to further connect the University City School District students with an artist from the RedCan team.

The UMSL team met Nino Rodriguez, (artist name, TSEL One) on one of the reservation service trips as he is an Indigenous artist who has contributed work to the RedCan Graffiti Jam festival celebration numerous times. Through conversations at RedCan, the team learned of Nino's extensive experience working with children and youth on numerous art projects, including many projects in Chicago-area schools. In an effort to increase knowledge of Indigenous culture at UMSL, build further collaboration between UCSD and UMSL, connect the two previous projects as well as the ongoing indigenous learning at UMSL all together, Nino was contracted as the artist for this project engagement.

Nino was delighted to spend a week and then return for another few days in April of this year in service to this project. Nino's primary activity of the week (of April 10) included a pre-planned visit to an art classroom in all seven schools of the University City School District. During each visit, he outlined for each art class an unique student-led descriptive art piece that was then painted by the students of that school. Each distinct piece was carefully crafted and pre-cut to enable them to later be assembled into the much larger piece that connects them all. During this initial week-long visit, Nino also provided a talk on indigenous art for UMSL students, staff and faculty in the UMSL art department (University City School District art teachers were invited and hoped to attend, but none were able to make it). This presentation in the art department at UMSL provided an opportunity for our psychology faculty to build a deeper relationship with faculty and students in the art department.

This much larger connective piece (a "U" representing the district, as requested by students in a focus group the year prior) was then placed on display for the District Wide Arts Night, held Friday, April 21 at the University City High School. Nino returned for this event, and assisted in the community-wide invitation for painting contributions tying the full piece together. Please see the appendix for photos of this impressive project as it was being created during the first week, then finalized the following week.

As is true in any community collaboration, unexpected or unforeseen community needs and desires may surface. In the most ideal situations, these needs may also be addressed directly or as an adjunct to the initial collaboration. Such was the case with this project. The UMSL hosting department (Psychological Sciences/Child Advocacy Studies) had suffered a recent loss of a young but well-established faculty member. Her loss to cancer was devastating to the community. As early discussions and planning meetings were held with Nino, he became aware of this loss, and mentioned that he has produced numerous memorial murals. With grant incentive funds from an indigenous-focused grant (Dana Klar serving as Principal Investigator), it was appropriate to also contract with Nino for this additional piece to aid the community, as well as recognize his indigeneity and related contributions through the addition of his indigenous art discussion at UMSL. He graciously added time to both his first and second trips to engage the community in producing an amazing memorial mural in the psychological sciences department at UMSL. The same model employed with the University City School District

collaboration was used for this second community engagement. Ideas were sought from the full community, a design was created and juried by the community, and the full community was then invited to participate in the mural's creation. This immediate impact, including leveraging of additional funds and re-creation of the first community engagement model for enhancement (and healing) the larger host community was an amazing example of the huge benefits this Creating Whole Communities grant program affords our communities. We greatly appreciate the tremendous gifts of both of these murals representing significant community engagement and honoring community pride and even memorializing community for those who come after.

## Student Participation

The artwork design for the UMSL-UCSD Student Unity Enhancing Community project was selected from UCSD student suggestions that were gathered during the developmental phase of this project. The students suggested a large-scale puzzle installation that would be designed in collaboration with the visiting artist. With consultation with Nino, a design was created. The UMSL art department cut the puzzle pieces for the project and assisted with ordering paint and supplies for the school art sessions with the students. Each school in the district contributed a puzzle piece, and the puzzle pieces formed a large 'U' to be showcased at the district-wide community art fair at the end of the 2022-2023 school year. In sum, there were seven puzzle pieces that represented the early childhood center, four elementary schools, the middle school, and the high school. The art teachers at each of the seven schools selected a class for Nino to work with during his visit. He was able to meet and work with students at all seven schools in the district and his impact could be felt during the art class sessions. He started each session by discussing the project, age appropriately because this project spanned from early childhood to high school age students, and then hosted a brainstorming session to determine what he would sketch on each puzzle piece. He then created an outline for the students to paint. He mixed the colors that they needed and offered encouragement as they painted throughout the entire session. This allowed the students to demonstrate ownership of their work.

The community was involved with the creation process at the community-and district-wide art fair (Arts Night). Community members were invited to paint their own artwork at the wall surrounding the display. (see the Appendix for images of this process and the final event.) Students took great pride in helping to come up with their individual school design, and then painting at their own school and later at the high school to tie the work together, and create a more "permanent installation" that will stand at the high school for years to come. Young students were overheard during the Arts Night event to say "I did that!" or "that's my school!" when approaching this larger piece. It was an incredible evening and well attended.

UMSL also engaged a number of Child Advocacy Studies (CAST) alumni (a few of whom are current UMSL graduate students) in this total project. Those engaged in the first phase attended the focus group /or the University City School District event in the Fall of 2022, to assist in gathering the initial community art ideas. An additional CAST alumna and current UMSL graduate student participated in this second phase of the project by assisting with the painting activities in the University City schools as well as in the UMSL Psychological Sciences Department. Two of this total group of CAST students had previously attended the RedCan service learning trip and had met Nino there. Service therefore to this project created and honored a full circle connection.

This utilization of students from both settings allowed for significant sharing amongst all students. We heard of many instances wherein University City School District families were already engaged with UMSL (via the “Building Bridges” program of the office of Collegiate Services, advanced classes, or early scholarship programs), typically elated in their conversing with a current UMSL student. We also witnessed many other instances of students engaging with each other by merely asking what life is like in the other setting. It most definitely felt as though some inroads were made in creating an even larger community that encompasses all school settings (child, youth and young adult) of our greater St. Louis county community.

## Project Outcomes

This project had numerous positive outcomes in addition to meeting four of the five ways that community art can have impact, according to Borrup (his work was used as the framework for our project, as mentioned in an earlier section). Since this was grounded in Borrup's (2006) work, the project outcomes are linked to his book. This outcome section provides our description of four ways that this project demonstrates the project outcomes. (Borrup does mention that community art can broaden the participation in the civic agenda as his fifth goal, but this was not a goal in our project.) To promote interaction in public spaces (1), the UMSL CWC team met with UCSD students during phase one of this project to collect input on ideas for the artwork that they would be creating in phase two. The students' initial request for consideration for project design is a “larger, movable arch that includes at least seven puzzle pieces, one produced by each separate school in the district.” The students had suggested that this artwork be created with the ability to be moved from school to school and even utilized as a centerpiece at community events. Displaying a piece of work that engaged the youth in such a way and that travels around the community would allow for more engaged pride and public interaction. Students enjoyed the project as indicated by the satisfaction information collected as part of the process work.

To increase civic participation through celebrations (2), the students had planned to showcase their artwork in the community. In the planning process, the school district contact was able to arrange for the completed community art project to be a central part of the District Wide Community Art Fair (Art Night) held at the end of the school year. Students, parents, school personnel, and community members were invited to this event. In addition, the project was featured in the artist's blog, (Nino is internationally known as TSEL ONE). Please see the following link to review his project experience, St. Louis Schools Puzzle Art Project, (<https://tselone.blogspot.com/2023/04/st-louis-schools-puzzle-art-project.html>).

As previously stated, during this project, the UMSL Department of Psychological Sciences lost one of their faculty members to a long battle with cancer. For further community participation, Nino worked with faculty, students, and staff in the department to create a mural to memorialize this beloved faculty member and to represent the varied parts of the department. This mural will be enjoyed by future students for years to come and will be considered a ‘sister’ to the installation showcased at the high school and created by the students of that district. The following is the interpretive piece that is being created to express the mural's meaning:

“The Psychology Tree (Our Tree of Life)

TSEL ONE, aka Nino Rodriguez

At the forefront, The Psychology Tree embraces Psychological Science symbols representing clinical and neurobiological knowledge and the related disciplines of forensics, social justice and child advocacy. The brightly colored word “EQUITY” is included, and the background majestically mimics galaxies with fingerprints added by Department faculty, staff, students and even children to represent identity. The multi-colored trunk and branches represent a diversity of people growing tall and healthy, spouting green leaves inside the universe representing discoveries yet to be made. Included is a tribute to a colleague, Dr. Bettina Casad, no longer with us. The top branches include a bench, dogs (whom she rescued regularly and loved dearly), a book and reading glasses, representing her dedication to study and research. The intent is to know her influence remains, while recognizing her gifts to the department.”

Engaging youth in community (3) was a consistent goal for this project. As the project was designed, created, and completed by students in the school community. There is often no greater joy for any artist than to see their artwork on public display. Youth engagement was accomplished in this project as they are involved at each step of the creative process. We also intentionally planned for mutual engagement of UCSD students with UMSL students so that we had various ages of youth and young adults involved in not only design creation, but in full project implementation, allowing for further ongoing UMSL engagement in the community.

Finally, this project promotes the power and preservation of place (4) as the students’ art will live at the high school in the school district. Younger students will be able to view this work they helped create when they are in high school, and alumni can return to the school knowing that they have left their mark.

Certainly, student enjoyment, growing sense of pride, and the efficacy they experienced by being part of a much larger community project was evident in the survey responses. (See below section for detail). In our increasingly insulated society, it is unfortunately more rare than it once was for children and youth to have the opportunity to engage in larger community contributions.

**Process Feedback from Students**

In addition to measuring achievement of the project goals, students were provided with the opportunity to share their experience through a simple satisfaction form provided through the project. This form was developed to allow students to express their thoughts on experience satisfaction and pride. Overall, students reported that they enjoyed the experience and felt pride in their school through this work. Some students opted not to complete the satisfaction form, some teachers opted not to distribute forms, and some children were too young to complete the forms. Student respondents ranged from 4th grades to high school ages.

**Table 1. Satisfaction Experience (n = 31)**

Question	Range	Mean
<b>I enjoyed working with the community artist this week.</b>	<b>1-4</b>	<b>3.29</b>
<b>Working on this project made me feel proud of my school.</b>	<b>1-4</b>	<b>3.08</b>

Qualitative questions were included as a process feedback piece; 31 students submitted opinions about their experience. Overall the students enjoyed the actual process of creating the artwork, the painting, and being creative. They also indicated that they talked to determine what would go on the piece, and although a couple of students wrote that they argued, it seemed to be a collaborative process and one student commented on sharing and taking turns. Some of the most heartfelt responses came from the question about how students felt about the design. Most students had positive responses. See a sample of quotations from the process feedback below.

**Table 2. Questions and a Sample of Student Comments**

Question	Response
<p><b>What was your favorite part about working with this artist this week?</b></p>	<p><b>“Painting”</b></p> <p><b>“I like how he drew out the letters like graffiti.”</b></p> <p><b>“My favorite part was being creative.”</b></p> <p><b>“When we mixed colors together.”</b></p> <p><b>“Being creative.”</b></p> <p><b>“I don’t have one because it was messy!”</b></p>
<p><b>How did your class decide what to put on your school’s puzzle piece?</b></p>	<p><b>“We wanted to make it really pretty.”</b></p> <p><b>“We talked.”</b></p> <p><b>“They just painted whatever they wanted.”</b></p> <p><b>“By taking turns and sharing.”</b></p> <p><b>“Discussing it.”</b></p>
<p><b>How do you feel about the design on your school’s puzzle piece?</b></p>	<p><b>“I am proud of it and it is really good.”</b></p> <p><b>“Great! I loved it.”</b></p> <p><b>“I feel very good.”</b></p> <p><b>“It felt good because I got to be part of it.”</b></p> <p><b>“Very cool.”</b></p>

As to our initial project inquiry, we believe it is clear that the answer is Yes, an art project, informed, developed, and created by students can facilitate community building, strength, and ownership in a community?”

This project accomplished these very things, as evidenced by the community participation in the project, by the survey findings, and by the spontaneous admissions made the night of the District Wide Arts Night. The colorful ‘U’ which represents the seven schools of the district, will hopefully bolster a sense of community pride for years to come.

## Project Summary and Final Thoughts

The larger art piece that currently stands at the University City High School (the pinnacle of the youth’s district experience), stands as a testament to district wide student participation in something larger than themselves. For all students, but particularly for those who participated (either in the original creation of the separate pieces or the larger “tying together” of the final installation), this piece stands as a testament recognizing each student’s identity as they matriculate through the district school levels. The sincere pride they can take at each future district arts night in seeing this piece that highlights their school (and for some, their own artwork) is of sincere value for these students and their family and their enduring connection to their alma mater.

The art installations themselves provide a testament to community engagement. It is more than evident in each that the installation was created by multiple “artists.” The sense of energy and synergy in each is a constant. Both communities benefit from having this large “semi-permanent” representation of their identity and the things that matter to their families and children. A long-term evaluation of this project and its impact over the next few years would be an interesting project as well and ensure that the story of this art installation is shared over time.

As stated, the artist (referred to herein as “Nino,” and who utilizes the name TESL (aka TESL One) as his art “tag,” has honored this project via a Blog post not long after the work on these installations: <https://tselone.blogspot.com/2023/04/st-louis-schools-puzzle-art-project.html>. Any community members or supporters of Nino’s work who follow his blog saw this work and learned of his experience with the UMSL CWC Student Unity Enhancing Communities. As a heartfelt aside, the local team has become aware that Nino is now employed in a Chicago alternative school (serving minority and vulnerable populations) as their art teacher. This was, according to Nino, directly connected to this project, its meaning, and its reminder to him that he can make a huge difference for youth.

Further future collaborations between University City School District and UMSL will include minimally, the plan to request a media release about this project, likely tied to the planned upcoming installation of interpretive pieces for each mural, which will highlight the community engagement and meaning of each piece, as well as tie the two communities together. The UMSL interpretive language was highlighted in a prior section, and the UMSL CWC team plans to work with UCSD to create a similar interpretive piece for University City School District, that will include a mention of its “sister” mural located on the UMSL campus. Our hope is that these pieces as well as the possible media coverage (hoped for in UMSL Daily as well as perhaps then later on the University City School District website), will provide a broader community understanding of this project, and shared pride in what was accomplished.

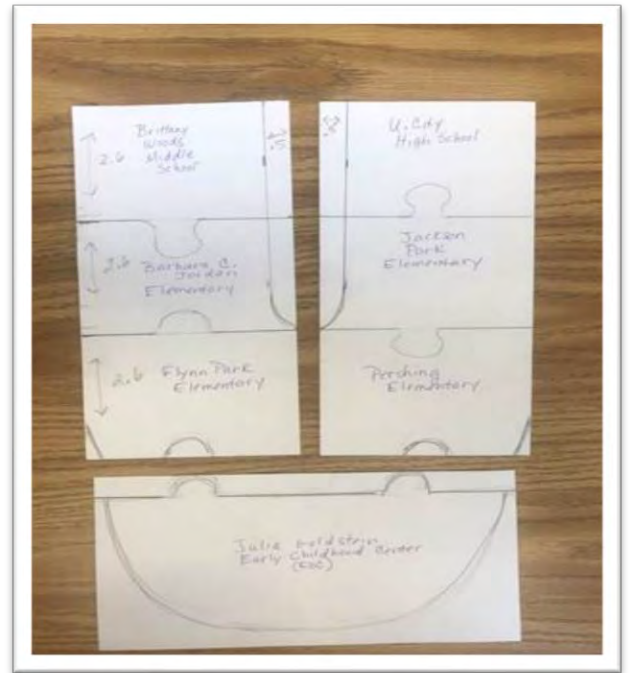
## References

Borup, T. (2006). *The Creative Community Builder's Handbook: How to Transform Communities Using Local Assets, Art, and Culture*. Fieldstone Alliance.

Lowe, S.S. (2000). Creating Community: Art for Community Development. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 29(3), 357-386. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124100129023945>

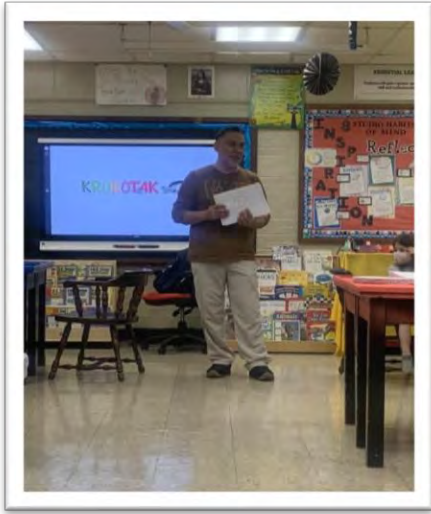
## Appendix

- A. Schematic for final UCSD-UMSL Student Unity Enhancing Community project. The project was designed by students with the help of their art chairperson. The community artist used this design in collaboration with the UMSL art department to create the large scale foam pieces for the installation piece.



- B. Nino Rodriguez working with early childhood students on their piece.





C. Nino working with elementary students.

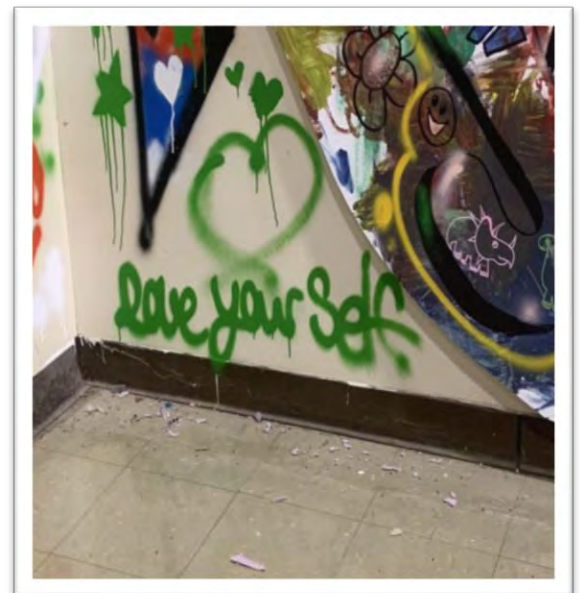




D. Flyer, distributed District Wide, for the Community Art Fair Night: NOTE THE HIGHLIGHTED BOX, MENTIONING THE COMMUNITY ART PROJECT



E. Community members added their own art on the walls around the installation at the Art Fair. This is located at University City High School.

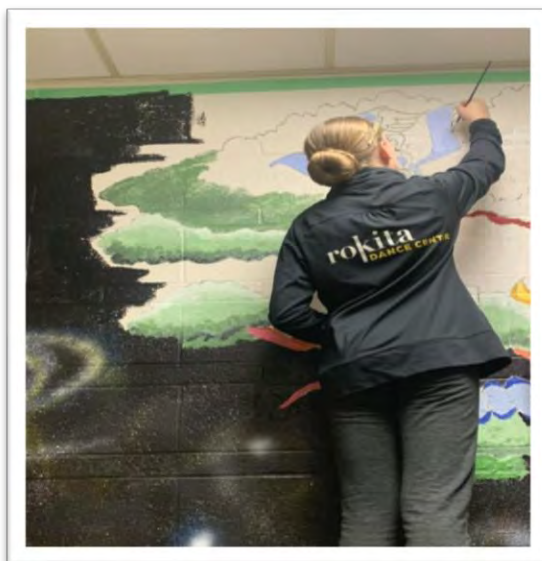




F. The project team with the artist and the installation piece.



G. Final Installation Piece.



H. Faculty, students, and their families contributing to the memorial mural in the Department of Psychological Sciences with Nino.



- I. Final mural representing Psychology Sciences and Child Advocacy Studies and memorializing former faculty member, Dr. Betinna Casad (specifically by the inclusion of a bench, puppy, glasses, and a book with her initials in the upper right section of the mural). Her photograph will be added to the interpretive piece currently being developed by the UMSL art department.