



LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO:

CENTER FOR URBAN RESEARCH AND LEARNING (CURL)



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PROGRAM SUMMARY

The Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) is a research center that works across the whole of Loyola University Chicago — including its 13 schools and colleges — to do interdisciplinary, collaborative, community-based action research. CURL forms teams of community and university partners to produce research with the community, with an aim to promote social justice. In doing so, the Center is able to provide research and hands-on educational opportunities for faculty, staff and students.

Founded in 1996 (CURL was built on the work of the former [Policy Research Action Group](#) (PRAG), a community-based, collaborative research effort of Loyola Chicago, DePaul, Chicago State and the University of Illinois-Chicago), the Center recognizes that universities are not alone in creating knowledge that can contribute to the common good. If we are going to address society's most urgent issues, we must put multiple knowledge sources together in partnership with each other. Local communities and other such actors play a key role in that work, especially regarding issues they face every day.

CURL engages with community groups as equal partners in collaborative research projects.



The exact form and scope that a research project might take varies from project to project based on the resources available and the work that needs to be done. In general, however, CURL forms teams that include community partners and Loyola faculty, staff, undergraduate, graduate and professional students. While community partners are not expected to be equally involved in the day-to-day work of the research team, *they are equal partners* in shaping and guiding the

project throughout the life of the research — from deciding what the research questions should be, all the way through dissemination of the research results.

CURL graduate and professional students are awarded competitive fellowships with the expectation that they will work 15–20 hours per week during the academic year. Undergraduate students join CURL via paid fellowships (10–20 hours per week) or through credit-bearing courses such as the capstone course of the interdisciplinary urban studies minor created

QUICK FACTS

Year founded: **1996**

Project source: **Community**

Duration: **Year-long**

Students per year: **35**

Interdisciplinary: **Yes**

Vertical integration: **Yes**

by CURL or other departmental crediting mechanisms (e.g., internships, independent studies linked to majors).

CURL does not specialize in any one topic — rather, topics develop organically in collaboration with our community and university partners. However, given that relationship development and maintenance are key to the model, it is not unusual for community partners to return to CURL multiple times for the same subject area.

A more complete listing of our research projects can be found [here](#); our current lineup of projects includes:

- Evaluation of a Flexible Housing Pool, a private/public partnership to provide housing and services to those facing chronic homelessness.
- Creation of a university-based Supervised Visitation Center for families involved in Domestic Violence Court.
- Evaluation of We Rise Together, an effort to promote racially equitable economic recovery from COVID-19 in Chicago.
- Assessment of the multi-generational impact of Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8) for affordable housing.

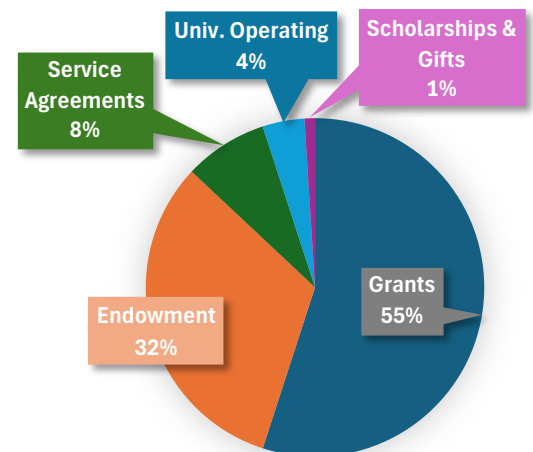
RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATIVE MODEL

CURL has always been located within the provost's office at Loyola, by intentional design. While the program has had various reporting structures within Academic Affairs in its 29 years, we believe that our interdisciplinary research needs to remain distinct from any particular school or discipline in order to more easily connect the disparate university resources to each other and, in turn, to the community. The liminal space between schools and disciplinary boundaries is where we thrive.

CURL staffing size and structure have varied over the years depending on the number of projects and overall funding. In general, however, we have been led by a director who partners to manage the larger work of the center with full-time, CURL-based staff and research faculty.

Fellowships for undergraduates, graduate/professional students, faculty and community members provide part-time funding to round out the typical CURL research team.

For the fiscal year 2022, CURL had approximately \$1.2 million in expenditures with the vast majority of those costs coming from salary and benefits (including



student workers). As the above figure highlights, CURL is almost exclusively funded by outside grants/contracts (63%) in combination with support from the CURL endowment (32%) that was created when we began the center.

BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

“COLLABORATION, STUPID”: It may seem self-evident for us to point to collaboration (with a paraphrased wink and a nod to James Carville), but we also recognize that it is easy to glide over the critical importance of this part of our model. Too often, the collaborative effort gets enthusiastic nods or firm pats on the back and not much more. The reality is that the collaborative, participatory nature of our model is not simply window dressing. It is the lifeblood of our model. The aforementioned budget breakdown (63% from grants/contracts) shows the critical nature of our collaborative partnerships with community groups. Without that collaboration, the economic model of CURL breaks down.

THE TEAM IS EVERYTHING: We are fiercely committed to our team approach and believe that it is the best way to combine the collaborative nature of our work between university and community while also fulfilling our educational mission. Having students (graduate and undergraduate) at the table with faculty and community partners allows for multi-directional, multi-leveled education for all.

THE CURL “SCRAPPY MODEL”: One of our partners noted some years ago that we are willing to take on the projects that many other university-based researchers might pass up. They applauded our “scrappiness” and willingness to meet partners where they were and to do the research that needed to be done instead of being slavishly devoted to a particular vision of what important research might look like.

ENDOWMENT: Talking about our endowment isn’t the most inspiring part of the CURL model, but time and again it has proven to be critical to our success. It gives us a basic operating core while also allowing us freedom to bring on underfunded (or even unfunded) projects without having wild swings in staffing levels.

CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

With a 29-year history, we have seen a lot of challenges and obstacles. Here are a few current and ongoing issues:

ALWAYS “HUSTLING”: Given that the CURL model is so heavily driven by grants and contracts, full-time staff and faculty at CURL are always having to “hustle” for the next round of funding. While the endowment softens this a bit, burnout is always a common threat.

RARELY “CRUISING”: Beyond the burnout, the other most significant impact of the “hustle” is

that we are rarely able to cruise, by which we mean spending the necessary time reflecting on our work, how it might be done better, exploring ways to mentor our students more fully, etc.

ONGOING UNCERTAINTY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: Like many in higher education, Loyola is keenly aware of the drop in college-aged young people and its impact on higher education. While we believe the CURL model is an excellent way to attract students to hands-on education experiences, we also have to prepare to be buffeted by these demographic forces and their budgetary implications.

Having said all of that (and likely missing some other critical challenges), CURL is still optimistic about the future. We know that there is a great deal more work we could be doing, and we continue to seek new partners within and without the university. A key component of solidifying the next 25 years of work will be deepening and expanding our partnerships with young faculty and students and expanding our endowment funding to better support our work.

Loyola University Chicago is a Jesuit Catholic University with over 17,000 students enrolled (11,819 undergraduate) in 13 Schools and Colleges with four campuses (two in Chicago, one in Maywood, Illinois and one in Rome, Italy).