My Experience With the Center for Urban Teaching

By: Laura Riegg ’20, teacher-education major

A well-known philosophy of the St. Norbert College Teacher Education Program is that the most insightful learning does not occur in education courses but rather when students are engaging in classroom experiences in various school settings. Beginning with the Village Project in EDUC 130 (Educational Psychology), teacher education students are exposed to multiple classroom experiences throughout their time at St. Norbert. In addition to what is provided through education courses, many St. Norbert students apply their passion for education elsewhere such as through the St. Norbert TRIPS program or in local after school programs. Recently, a new education opportunity known as the Center for Urban Teaching is being offered to students, helping them gain a unique experience outside of St. Norbert and the Green Bay area.

“The Center for Urban Teaching (CfUT) is an independent, Christian non-profit organization that identifies, prepares, and supports high-performing urban teachers and leaders” to teach in a variety of school settings. After observing the critical need for support in urban, Milwaukee schools, the Center for Urban Teaching was established in 2001 by two education professors from Wisconsin Lutheran College. Today, CfUT offers several opportunities for pre-service teachers to expand their practice including a summer school internship, immersion tours, and annual conferences. After college graduation, students can continue to improve their practice with the Center’s Alumni and Leadership Development programs where participants can obtain one-on-one coaching, principal licensure, and even a Master’s degree.

Beginning in June 2017, St. Norbert first became involved with CfUT when three education students interned as summer school teachers through CfUT’s summer school program. During the six week program, the summer school teachers engaged in several activities of a real life teacher including teaching daily math and reading lessons, classroom procedures, tracking assessment data, and weekly professional development meetings. Noticing the positive impact this program had on herself and her fellow St. Norbert teachers, one student, Laura Riegg, wanted other St. Norbert students to have the same opportunity of furthering their education and began working to create an on-campus student organization that would connect the students to the Center. With the help of professor and teacher education co-chair Dr. Reid Riggle, St. Norbert College established a formal partnership with CfUT in addition to the student organization, the Center for Urban Teaching club, in January 2018.
Since the establishment of the partnership and student organization, CfUT has helped several St. Norbert students further their development as future educators. For junior Krista Kemppainen, the experience of having her own classroom and creating procedures proved to be invaluable.

“My experience with CfUT has prepared me to become a teacher in so many different ways,” Kemppainen says “With CfUT, you get to create procedures and morning thresholds for yourself. I think that this is crucial because you get to do a trial and error before you have your own classroom for an entire school year. All St. Norbert education majors should really consider CfUT; the experience and connections you make with coaches and principals around Milwaukee, is something you can't get anywhere else!”

Nathan Simanek, a secondary math education major, agrees with Kemppainen stating how CfUT has given him “a valuable start as [he prepares] to student teach during [his] senior year at St. Norbert.

“I think CfUT is beneficial for St. Norbert students because of how it reflects the idea of communio,” Simanek says. “Through CfUT, education students from St. Norbert are able to meet and work alongside many unique, special members of the next generation. These students are a crucial part of our community, as they will soon be in charge of shaping God's world. It is a true blessing that CfUT recognizes this and reaches out to them”

Outside of St. Norbert, CfUT continues to benefit St. Norbert alumni such as Megan McGorey, a Kindergarten teacher at St. Martini Lutheran School in Milwaukee.

“St. Norbert’s Teacher Education Program prepared me extremely well for my career as a teacher. From the ample amount of time I spent in an actual classroom to the small class sizes on campus, the program was able to meet all of my needs as an individual teacher.” McGorey says, “The Center for Urban Teaching (CfUT) has been an incredible addition to the education I received at St. Norbert. CfUT has given me so many classroom management strategies that are all framed in a positive way. I am so grateful God led me to the Center for Urban Teaching and I can’t wait to see how I continue to grow as an urban teacher in Milwaukee!”

From giving students the opportunity to experience a classroom of their own for the first time to equipping pre-service and current teachers with effective classroom management strategies, the Center for Urban Teaching is an invaluable addition to any St. Norbert student’s education practice. Dr. Riggle has experienced first hand how CfUT is benefitting not only St. Norbert teachers but also students in urban Milwaukee.
“Seeing the positive energy that was created both at the beginning and end of the day and being celebratory about the process of learning” especially spoke to Dr. Riggle.

“I think that positive energy is essential to what CfUT is trying to do: to flip the narrative over that talks about deficits and turn that into positives, talking about the assets children bring to the table and how we can use those assets to help them be successful.”

With the newly formed partnership between St. Norbert and CfUT, Dr. Riggle looks forward to seeing how CfUT will help the Teacher Education program grow.

“I think the key word is ‘opportunity’. I think CfUT provides a complementary opportunity for students in the teacher prep program at St. Norbert to experience what teaching and learning in an urban environment is like. It is an extension of what we do here at the college.”