

# Creating Diverse Networks to Foster Social Innovation in the New New Orleans

Nathan Rothstein 09 May 2010

Five years after Hurricane Katrina violently struck the Gulf Coast in late August 2005, New Orleans is now seen as social justice ground zero. A young person new to the city can join many different networks and interact with a diverse population. But this was not always the case. This article shows how diverse networks can be created, what kind of networks exist in the city today, and how other cities can emulate the convergence of these types of networks. Despite the magnitude of the destruction, Katrina also forced the city and its residents to re-imagine themselves. It brought hundreds of young people to New Orleans, disappointed by the lack of effective federal and state government reaction to the situation and wanting to help.

In the weeks, months and years after the storm hit, the residents of the city, newcomers and natives alike, sometimes deliberately and other times inadvertently, began to engage the diverse populations of New Orleans to forge connections and partnerships that would be needed to help rebuild the city. The influx of a newer, younger, more progressive population disrupted, in a

positive way, traditional networks that had grown stagnant.

The city capitalized on the talent and passion brought by many of these new arrivals by giving them a role in the citywide planning process. This civic engagement process fostered connections between the newcomers and long-time city residents. It allowed the new arrivals to first connect with each other and learn the histories and traditions of New Orleans' neighborhoods. To continue to build successful partnerships through the city planning process, these young newcomers worked with city leaders to create new networks and organizations. The city recognized the need to retain these new young professionals by giving them the opportunity to connect with the city's history, building trust between locals and newcomers through a common understanding of history and culture.

In the summer of 2006, the city created the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) in order to receive federal and state-issued recovery funds. Planners from all over the world were commissioned to engage local communities, get input from residents, and devise charrettes (intensive, multidisciplinary design workshops) to guide a comprehensive recovery plan. These meetings were held throughout the city's neighborhoods, and the planners worked with different neighborhood groups to ensure diverse representation. Maps were set on the table, and residents were asked to identify neighborhood assets and

make suggestions for how their neighborhood could be improved. Also gathered around the table were the new and old guard of New Orleans leadership. This process invested in young people by including them in the decision-making process, but also provided them with a New Orleans education. In a city deeply rooted in history, knowledge of the cultural and historical significance of the neighborhoods was crucial.

In the summer of 2007, after finishing my AmeriCorps term of service, I worked with other young people in the city to organize the New Orleans Young Urban Rebuilding Professionals. Our mission was to create a diverse network for young people to connect and find work, and also to educate others about the city and facilitate connections among other interested individuals. Our method was rooted in simply asking people how they wanted to be involved and what kind of programs they wanted to participate in. Instead of hiring focus groups, we systematically recruited "connectors," people who represented diverse networks, to give their input and suggest programs. Within a few weeks of beginning participant recruitment, more than a thousand people signed up and began sharing their professional and personal networks.

Historically, it was difficult to reach across neighborhood boundaries in New Orleans. This barrier hindered robust job searches across the city and was a major cause of the exodus over time of the New Orleans skilled workforce. In

order to combat the neighborhood divides, we identified common interests and held meetings in non-traditional venues. For example, a diverse group of financial advisors led a financial literacy seminar at the African-American Museum in Central City, a primarily poor African-American neighborhood, and a discussion on creating diversity in the workplace was hosted in the Vietnamese community in New Orleans East. By virtue of being new to the city, and not worn down by the stereotypes applied to the different neighborhoods, we were able to build a diverse network that allowed young people in the city to connect to each other, thus creating a place that was attractive to our peers around the country.

We also actively sought out other organizations, including other emerging Generation Y-led groups, with which to partner. This collaborative approach led to diverse and well-attended events, and also helped these different organizations and businesses grow by creating new networks, fostering an atmosphere that was conducive to making creative personal connections and exploring innovative ideas.

Now, in 2010, there are many networks for young people to join, and the city's business community has seen their importance and invested in them. But the movement started with youth-led organizing. Other cities can learn from the experiences of New Orleans in taking steps to attract talented young professionals and create diverse networks for them to join when they arrive.

Almost three years after my experience with New Orleans Young Urban Rebuilding Professionals, and five years after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has a rich web of networks for young people. Someone looking to connect with mentors and business leaders might join 504ward. For help with finding a job or in learning about the work climate in the city, [worknola.com](http://worknola.com) is a good resource. Social entrepreneurs needing tools, resources and people to connect with might benefit from involvement with the Social Entrepreneurs of New Orleans (SENO). At Tulane University, a special Office of Social Entrepreneurship helps students of the school connect with many of the people featured in the SENO network. Neighborhood organizations can get resources and tools for better advocacy techniques from the Neighborhood Partnership Network. The group Stay Local advocates on behalf of small business in the city. Budding entrepreneurs who want a communal workspace can rent office space with their peers at Launchpad NOLA, and be inside an office with Idea Village, a nonprofit that fosters economic development in the city. The Urban League Young Professionals, which has chapters across the country, now has a thriving community in New Orleans that partners with many advocacy organizations and does a lot to help public school students prepare for high school. Mitch Landrieu, the recently elected mayor of New Orleans, aware of the success of these groups, has asked many of them to be a part of his transition team to find innovative ways to address the challenges the city continues to face.

How can your city build diverse networks that retain a diverse, progressive young professional demographic?

Here are five ways:

1. *Engage young professionals in a neighborhood planning process.* Find an eclectic group to help promote and recruit young professionals to get involved in their neighborhood associations and larger citywide meetings. Ask them how they want to help and how they would like to be involved.
2. *Hire diverse young public relations firms.* Instead of contracting with one large established public relation firms, use smaller firms that represent fewer people but have a more loyal following.
3. *Hold events in all parts of the city.* Location matters when young people assign a label to the type of event. If too many events are held in one part of the city, it will attract the same followers.
4. *Help young professional groups conduct events that discuss the history of the place.* Utilize academic institutions to create partnerships with students' groups/professors and city groups to hold educational events. When young people leave college, they still will seek events that challenge them intellectually.
5. *As a city, market the new networks that have emerged.* Instead of featuring individuals, create

marketing campaigns that show how a diverse group of networks are connecting with each other.

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