



BIG PLAN ON CAMPUS

At a Shuttered Detroit College, a Community
Redevelopment Experiment Takes Root



By Anna Clark

ON A CLOUDY SUMMER MORNING IN northwest Detroit, the campus of Marygrove College was bustling. A crowd of adults and children in bright blue shirts swarmed the green lawns, surrounded by tents and balloons, readying for the opening ceremony of the Relay for Life cancer walk. A DJ blared rousing music to keep energy levels high. Elsewhere, in one of Marygrove's English Gothic buildings, the Detroit Neighborhood Summit offered free lunch and childcare to residents who had gathered to discuss foreclosures, air pollution, school closings, and blight. In another room, teachers prepared for a workshop on the dignity of learners; in the art gallery, an exhibition of local artists opened for its final day. Outside, parking attendants joked with each other and with drivers inching up in a long line, hoping to find a spot in the packed lots. You'd never guess that two days earlier, the 104-year-old college had announced that it was shutting its doors for good.

The closing of Marygrove College marks the end of an era for the institution, but it won't mean the end of Marygrove's impact. Occupying 53 leafy acres in the middle of a Detroit neighborhood that is on the road to revitalization, Marygrove is the setting for an unfolding story that's about education, but also the instrumental role public and private partnerships can play in stanching the slow bleed of disinvestment. They are doing it by creating new structures to meet long-term land use needs. At Marygrove, a community-focused "cradle to career" program is taking shape on campus, an experiment supported by influential entities including the Kresge Foundation, the University of Michigan, the Detroit Public Schools Community District, and others.

The members of the nascent Marygrove partnership don't claim to have all the answers, but their venture will have a lot to teach other communities.

Marygrove College and the Livernois-McNichols neighborhood.
Credit: Jordan Garland, courtesy of The Kresge Foundation.

A Legacy of Progressive Education

Marygrove has a special place in Detroit history. Founded in 1905 by a religious order known as the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary—or the IHM nuns—it moved to the city in 1927 from its original location 40 miles south. It quickly became a hub for progressive education, prioritizing service and social justice while serving many non-traditional college students. It nurtured generations of leaders, especially African-American women, with a focus on the fields of teaching and social work.

“I just loved teaching at Marygrove,” said Frank Rashid, a longtime faculty member and former dean. He pointed out that Marygrove, compared to other local colleges, was “most responsive to being in the city”—turning toward the community while others built walls.

Rashid remembered one of his favorite students, a woman about his age who worked a graveyard shift sewing upholstery in cars for GM, but somehow had enough energy to be attentive in class. An essay she wrote about growing up in segregated schools in Mississippi has stayed

with Rashid for more than 30 years. The woman graduated with a double major, got a master’s degree at another local university, and returned to Marygrove to teach while raising her grandchildren.

“You want to make a difference,” Rashid said. “That was the call those of us who loved working there felt, and the students made it worthwhile.” For this neighborhood about 10 miles outside downtown, Marygrove served another important role: along with the nearby University of Detroit Mercy (UDM), it anchored the community, even as the city endured decades of decline. This two-square-mile area is commonly called Livernois-McNichols, referencing two major corridors lined by low-rise commercial outlets. It is pockmarked by vacant lots and vacant houses, 400 of which are now publicly owned. But 33,000 people still live here, mostly in single-family homes, and their home ownership rate (66 percent) and median household income (\$43,849) is relatively high. Recent years have seen the renewal of the 2.5-acre Ella Fitzgerald Park, the arrival of new retail to fill storefront gaps, and festival programming along Livernois, once known as the “Avenue of Fashion” (City of Detroit 2018).



The gates of Marygrove College, left, have welcomed generations of students. At right, Marygrove students and faculty participate in Detroit’s Freedom March for Civil Rights in 1965. Credits: Courtesy of Marygrove College.



As anchor institutions, Marygrove College and the University of Detroit Mercy have played a critical role in neighborhood stability and revitalization. Credit: Reimagining the Civic Commons.

When Marygrove began suffering from declining enrollment and suffocating debt in the 1990s, neighbors and others began to wonder: Would its precariousness cause the campus to go dark? Detroiters are all too familiar with how vacancy is contagious. It spreads like disease, first creating a tipping-point neighborhood with more and more empty doors before becoming all-out blight. They know that the loss of any major institution is a grave threat to residents and businesses.

But what happened with Marygrove isn't like what's happened anywhere else.

Investing in a New Model

In 2018, The Kresge Foundation, which has an active presence in Detroit and a focus on equitable development, announced that it was committing \$50 million to a program on the Marygrove campus, an unprecedented intervention in land use and education. It is the foundation's largest investment ever for a single neighborhood revitalization project, and one of the largest gifts in its history.

The money will build a "cradle to career" school, or what's sometimes called a P-20 (as in, preschool through graduate education). It is one of the first of its kind in the nation.

On Marygrove's campus, there will soon be an early childhood center, developed with support from IFF, a Midwest-based community development financial institution, and operated by Starfish Family Services, a local nonprofit human services organization (see sidebar page 18).

There is also a new neighborhood school, part of the local public school district. A new teachers college led by the University of Michigan School of Education will work on-site at the schools, training educators in the same way that residency programs at hospitals train doctors. After graduating, the newly minted educators will work alongside veteran teachers in Detroit schools for three years or more. Besides providing on-the-ground experience and guidance, this program will also help the Detroit district respond to a teacher shortage.

As wraparound services develop at Marygrove's campus, other University of Michigan (UM) colleges are expected to become involved, including the schools of engineering, business, urban planning, social work, nursing, and dentistry. The campus will also offer professional development courses and certification programs.

To complement the teachers college, Marygrove College had intended to provide the tail end of the "cradle to career" education. But in 2017, as the collaboration was still being

formulated, the college announced that its undergraduate program would close. Administrators hoped that the graduate school would persist, serving the city as well as the P-20 students, but then this summer brought the news that it too would close, at the end of 2019. While the question of who will provide the post-high school programming remains unresolved—a representative of the Kresge Foundation says the partnership is “exploring opportunities with a number of partners that have stepped forward”—one thing is certain: despite the loss of a beloved institution, there won’t be even a single day that the campus sits empty, a target for the city’s notorious and meticulous scrappers.

The Marygrove collaboration is a preemptive strike against large-scale vacancy. It also leverages local residency as an asset. People who live in the Livernois-McNichols area will most benefit from this new educational opportunity and investment, turning the usual gentrification narrative on its head. The K-12

school will have a selection process, like the application schools that are among the city’s best, and students who live within a one- to two-mile neighborhood catchment zone will receive a significant boost. The result: Teens from the community make up more than 60 percent of the inaugural 120-student class that entered The School at Marygrove, as it has been officially dubbed, this fall. A full 97 percent of the class hails from Detroit, and nearly half are returning to Detroit public schools from suburban districts and charter schools. At capacity in 2029, the school—which will have a focus on social justice, engineering, and design—is expected to serve about 1,000 students.

“Even in the midst of the financial difficulties, Marygrove knew it wanted to preserve its legacy in Detroit, and it’s a tremendous one,” said Wendy Lewis Jackson, managing director of the Kresge Foundation’s Detroit program. “It’s why we wanted to be deeply engaged in creating a path for educational leadership in Detroit, particularly in serving underserved populations.”

Kresge Foundation President and CEO Rip Rapson, flanked by Marygrove partners and by banners representing the project’s “cradle to career” stages, announces the new educational partnership in front of Marygrove’s Liberal Arts building in 2018. Credit: Ryan Southen, courtesy of The Kresge Foundation.





The catchment area for the new School at Marygrove offers students within a one- to two-mile radius of campus a leg up in the admissions process. Credit: Detroit Public Schools Community District.

Kresge’s investment includes renovations to the college’s Liberal Arts building, which houses the new high school, and to the former Bates Academy building on campus, future site of the new K–8 school. (The latter structure was originally Immaculata High School, a girls’ school run by the IHM nuns from 1941 to 1983; Bates Academy, a public school, occupied it for 15 years before moving to another site in Detroit some years ago.) Kresge is also funding the construction of the new early childhood education center, expected to open in fall 2021. The Detroit Collaborative Design Center at UDM is one of the partners in making this happen.

“We’re really trying to put education in the center of neighborhood redevelopment,” Jackson said, “and using neighborhood schools as a way to both retain residents and serve residents well, and serve as a magnetic factor for new residents.”

As Jackson suggests, this deal is about much more than education. Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan also made that link when the project was announced. “Not long ago, we were faced

with the prospect of this incredible campus going dark, which would have been a terrible setback to the revitalization that is taking place in this area of our city,” Duggan said. “Instead, today we are celebrating a new beginning.”

Avoiding a Community Calamity

The \$50 million commitment from the Kresge Foundation followed \$16 million in grants that it had provided to Marygrove College over the previous two years to support restructuring of the debt-choked college. The prospect of the college closing and becoming a burden rather than a boon to the neighborhood “was deemed unacceptable,” stated a Kresge Foundation press release (Kresge 2018). “The damage to surrounding home values, small businesses, and other anchors in the district would have been calamitous.” Other foundations provided bridge funding as well, including the McGregor

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The K–8 program will inhabit the renovated Immaculata High School building on campus. The IHM nuns ran Immaculata from 1941 to 1983; more recently, the structure housed Bates Academy, a public gifted and talented school, from 1992 to 2007. Credit: Ryan Southen, courtesy of The Kresge Foundation.

Fund, the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

To help get the books in order, these early partners created the Marygrove Conservancy in 2018, adopting a management model that’s long been used to move private parks to public use. That step separated the management of the college from the management of its physical campus. (While it was deemed a necessary shift to secure a future for the campus, the creation of the conservancy was not looked upon favorably by all, notes Kresge’s Jackson. “The idea of a conservancy was very foreign to [the college accreditation bodies],” she said. “So the college was facing severe sanctions because the accreditation bodies did not understand some of the land use implications of having these kinds of anchors.”)

The conservancy, whose board includes representatives from Marygrove, Kresge, UDM, and community organizations, now owns the

buildings and grounds. “Our vision is to steward the campus,” said Sister Mary Jane Herb, president of the IHM nuns and conservancy chair. A private management company is conducting an assessment to create an audit of needed upgrades. The conservancy is also looking into short-term leases, and “how the campus could be used for various events—conferences, weddings,” that will bring in revenue to pay down debt and support the caretaking of historic structures, Herb said. It doesn’t have staff, but intends to hire in the near future.

Such a swift and long-term collaboration might seem unlikely, but it echoes recent Detroit history—namely, the unexpected response to the city declaring bankruptcy in 2013.

“The bankruptcy was actually a galvanizing event,” said Robin Hacke, executive director and cofounder of the Center for Community Investment at the Lincoln Institute of Land

Policy, which helps disinvested communities identify and pursue new opportunities for sustainable growth. Hacke's own efforts to build new pipelines for capital brought her to Detroit in 2010. Three years later, the city filed for the largest municipal bankruptcy in history.

The bankruptcy resolved with the help of a "Grand Bargain," which saw a vast swath of philanthropists and the State of Michigan contribute more than \$800 million to satisfy creditors while minimizing pension cuts—and spared the city's signature art museum from having to auction off paintings, a solution that had been considered. For all its much-documented ills, the city had assets—literally. "I think that because Detroit had the economic history it had, it had some really well-endowed foundations that really cared about it," Hacke said. "Not every city has the benefit of enjoying the fact that Kresge is in the neighborhood. Ford [Foundation], which is not generally a place-based investor, is a place-based investor in Detroit."

When Detroit exited bankruptcy at the end of 2014, it was freed of billions in debt and had greater resources to invest back into the city. "What we find in our work sometimes is that things are so bad, the urgency of coming together overcomes the stasis of business as usual,"

The Livernois Community Storefront, a project of the University of Detroit Mercy, is a pop-up community hub that celebrates local culture and businesses. Credit: Reimagining the Civic Commons.



Hacke said. "These crises . . . can serve as a catalytic event so we can imagine a better future."

Aiming for Equity

Livernois-McNichols is one of Kresge's focus neighborhoods. The foundation has committed three to five years of investment in the area, supporting other efforts including the Live6 Alliance, a planning and development nonprofit that is catalyzing the commercial corridors along Livernois Avenue and McNichols Road. Meanwhile, the national consortium Reimagining the Civic Commons is working with local partners to build a greenway that connects the UDM and Marygrove campuses. Representatives from both Live6 and UDM sit on the board of the Marygrove Conservancy. Mayor Duggan also included Livernois-McNichols in his Strategic Neighborhood Initiative, launched in 2018. The city is investing in it with, among other projects, Fitzgerald Forward, a program designed to rehabilitate and sell vacant houses.

All this work would have been undercut if an anchor institution had been abandoned. As Jackson points out, the size of the Marygrove campus is larger than the former Packard plant, one of Detroit's most infamous ruins. Packard stopped making automobiles at the 40-acre complex of brick and concrete in 1958, leaving it to loom over East Grand Boulevard about 10 miles southeast of Marygrove. It has been vacant since the last major industrial users (and ravers) left in the late 1990s. While the crumbling plant was once surrounded by houses, most have vanished into empty lots. A vacant elementary school stands nearby, and the area is frequented by "ruin porn" tourists. It is this sort of future that the Marygrove collaborative is investing against.

To count the Marygrove experiment a success, Kresge will look at the school's ability to help students achieve. It will evaluate whether the school can recruit and retain



The City of Detroit has undertaken a streetscape project on Livernois Avenue that will add several elements illustrated here, including a bike lane, improved lighting, and extended sidewalks. Credit: City of Detroit Department of Public Works.

high-quality teachers, and it will track holistic metrics on the well-being of students and families. The latter approach is borrowed from the wraparound model of community schools. The overarching vision, say those involved, is to break the cycle of disinvestment by creating a new community-centered institution on the grounds of a historic one.

“It’s only worth doing if it creates a better life for people who are already here,” said Aaron Seybert, Kresge’s social investment officer. He and Jackson are Kresge’s two representatives on the board of the Marygrove Conservancy. “If we’re not creating economic cohesion, I don’t know what the point is. There are places that work well for upper-income people. They’re already around us. We’re not trying to turn Detroit into that. That’s not what we’re trying to do.”

The phrase “Two Detroits” is commonly heard now, suggesting that newcomers and commuters—generally whiter, younger, and more educated—are valued in a way that long-term residents are not. “Walking around in Detroit in 2010, the idea of having to worry about gentrification was laughable,” Hacke said. But that’s changed, at least in downtown and Midtown, and it’s happened faster than most predicted. So fast, in fact, that it’s caused concern among residents about how investment in the central city is matching up against investment in neighborhoods, where residents have endured the worst of Detroit’s hardships.

Seybert says investors gravitate toward the central city in part due to scale. “The neighborhood stuff is really, really hard,” he said. “In downtown and Midtown you have bigger

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buildings—large hospital systems, universities; density, relatively speaking for Detroit—and you can deploy capital at a scale that smooths out a lot of the costs of doing this sort of work.”

Northwest Detroit had UDM and Marygrove College, but even together, they couldn't match the institutional breadth of Midtown's Wayne State University, which has 13 schools and colleges serving 27,000 students. Access to employment isn't a primary draw to Livernois-McNichols, as it is for the core city. There is less density, too, with activity mostly along the single-story retail strips that require, Seybert said, many little deals to get the same aggregate value in increased neighborhood investment and appraisal values. And there are fewer investment

tools to do it—a void that explains the power of philanthropy in the neighborhood.

While poverty remains Detroit's greatest challenge, the changes of the past decade underscore the importance of being “a lot more mindful of planning for success,” Hacke said. That is, it's important to establish processes and policies in the beginning that will create equitable structures for when (not just if) things are going well.

In that vein, the P-20 partnership might broaden its scope even further. At the launch, Kresge President and CEO Rip Rapson floated the idea that other campus buildings could someday be used for senior housing and affordable housing (Rapson 2018).

Community members attended a picnic and open house to learn more about the new School at Marygrove in August 2019. Credit: Ryan Southern, courtesy of The Kresge Foundation.



Lessons from Marygrove

Detroit isn't the only place where anchor institutions have found themselves teetering on the brink. In other legacy cities that have suffered population loss, places similar to Marygrove are caught up in the city's spiraling disinvestment. If they close, they exacerbate it.

While the proud college in Detroit didn't last, its repurposing reveals a way out of this cycle. The Marygrove reinvention is a microcosm of the possibilities described by Alan Mallach and Lavea Brachman in the Lincoln Institute

report *Regenerating America's Legacy Cities* (Mallach 2013):

To regenerate, cities must capitalize on [their] assets to increase their competitive advantages and build new economic engines Successful regeneration . . . must be multifaceted and encompass improvements to the cities' physical environments, their economic bases, and the social and economic conditions of their residents. If market demand increases and people restore vacant buildings or build new houses on abandoned

REHABILITATING OLD FACILITIES AND OLD WAYS OF THINKING

The Marygrove effort will see another big win in a new \$15 million, 28,000-square-foot early childhood center. It's a significant investment in a city where decrepit childcare facilities, often in the basements of old churches, are the status quo. Ja'Net Defell—former lead developer of IFF and a past participant in the Fulcrum Fellowship program at the Lincoln Institute's Center for Community Investment—remembers visiting some of these places while working in Detroit's IFF office. “We literally had to put on face masks [because of mold and leaks],” she said.

“Improving facilities like this is like doing laundry or dirty dishes—nobody wants to deal with it,” Defell added, noting that repairs and rehabilitation can be “overwhelmingly technical.” Programs are asked, “Why not get a loan from the bank?,” which overlooks the stunted lending in disinvested cities and neighborhoods. In Detroit, IFF had trouble even finding architects and contractors for its projects, Defell said. Working on early childhood centers wasn't as appealing as, say, getting involved in the growing marketplace of charter schools.

The new Marygrove center, serving 144 children, will have 12 classrooms, a library, and health therapy rooms, and its design will feature natural light,

courtyards, and a natural playscape built around existing oak trees. It is the result of years of work, a process that included a citywide needs assessment of preschool facilities and the exploration of funding models that would be sustainable in a neighborhood with a mix of income levels.

The early learning center is expected to motivate community members. Too often, Defell said, low-income programs are treated as such, meaning that “there is no innovation, no excitement. What we tried to do [at Marygrove] is push the envelope. Just because the [new] building serves low-income families does not mean it has to be a ‘low-income project.’” This parallels a best practice with affordable housing, she said: If you develop affordable housing that looks like affordable housing, you've done a bad development project.

Investing in a high-quality facility is especially meaningful for families who may be transient, not living in the best conditions, or battling foreclosure and dishonest landlords. “Detroit was in a depression, and you're bringing people out of depressions,” Defell said. “Yes, it was a horrible period of time, but it's a new day. It's time to come out of this depression mode and be really energized by a new way of thinking.”

land, the city's physical environment will improve. If residents' skills increase so they can compete successfully for jobs throughout the region, their economic conditions will improve.

Hacke is hopeful about the Marygrove project's success because it acknowledges what it takes for people to thrive in a place and be healthy: to have an affordable home, good school, and good job. "Marygrove, in the way it is designed, is not just taking a sliver of the problem. It's looking at a number of different needs and weaving a solution together," she said. Its teacher training model, if successful, "has ramifications for education very broadly."

While the Marygrove intervention is tailored to northwest Detroit, Hacke notes that "the number of campuses like Marygrove around the country is not small."

Catholic schools are particularly at risk, according to former Marygrove professor Rashid. There are a lot of reasons for this, not least the exodus of white middle-class Catholics from urban centers, which contributed to the closure of parishes and Catholic K–12 "feeder schools." Also, as religious vocations declined, higher education institutions that had long relied on nuns and priests to staff their campuses had to hire more laypeople at market salaries.

But it's not just urban colleges that present anchor institution challenges; the closure of rural hospitals, Hacke said, creates a similar vacuum of economic activity and land use. Like a photo negative, such closures expose the symbiotic relationship anchor institutions have with their home communities (Dever 2014).

One way or another, physical investments are a common way to lure people back or entice them to stay. They also provide the satisfaction of concrete results. The Marygrove team is responding to a land use problem by investing in high-quality, all-ages education. It just happens that physical space—the campus—is the vehicle to deliver it.

As Seybert explained it, blight wasn't just caused by disinvestment in Detroit's physical landscape. It was caused by disinvestment from the city's people, mostly African-Americans, and it was carried out through all the systems that serve human potential. The Marygrove project is countering that.

"Education is investing in people as opposed to institutions," he said. "We bet yes." □

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