

A village experience: Ron Berkman has built Cleveland State University on a foundation of collaboration

By Lynne Thompson, May 2016

Life in Miami had been good to Ron Berkman. In the dozen years since he'd arrived at Florida International University, he'd risen from dean of its College of Health and Urban Affairs to the university's provost, executive vice president and chief operating officer. By spring 2009, he was a candidate on the short list for president. And he was able to wear shoes without socks, even in the winter.

Yet Berkman dropped out of the running for FIU president when Cleveland State University offered him the same job. As the first member of his family to go to college – one who paid for his bachelor's degree from William Paterson College, a state school in his native New Jersey, through student loans and need-based financial aid along with driving a beer truck and working in a liquor store and gypsum factory – he identified with the institution's many first-generation students. And unlike FIU, located on Miami's western fringe, CSU was an integral part of Cleveland, both in terms of its location and role as an urban anchor.

"It was really a major player in downtown and downtown development," Berkman, now 69, explains. "It seemed to be a place where partnerships – and what I hoped to do with partnerships – could flourish. Particularly in a city like Miami, partnerships are often geographically constrained because it takes so long to get from one place to the other place."

Berkman has used that shared affinity for developing partnerships to grow institutions and create new ones. In the process, he's expanded the university's footprint. Some might argue that it stretches to the Gateway District, a result of a two-year deal struck with the Cleveland Cavaliers and Quicken Loans Arena that allows the CSU Vikings men's and women's basketball team to play some home games a season on King James' court. At the same time, he's achieved a feat considered truly remarkable by those who remember the days when Cleveland State was a commuter school.

"From the day that I was installed, I said that my goal is not to simply build a vital urban campus, which is difficult in its own right, but my goal is to build a neighborhood with the campus as its center," Berkman says. "And that, to me, is and continues to be a very, very exciting prospect."

The first major partnership Berkman brokered after he arrived at CSU was with the Cleveland Municipal School District. As the City University of New York's dean for urban affairs during the early 1990s, he'd seen the horizons that high schools on CUNY campuses opened for young minority students who'd never entertained that idea of attending college, let alone visiting one. He also knew that an excellent public school could serve as a magnet for neighborhood development.

"If you look at what most young people look for when they're thinking about location," he notes, "schools are incredibly important."

In 2010, CSU and CMSD opened the Campus International School for kindergartners and first- and second-graders in the Methodist church on East 30th Street and Euclid Avenue, and it's now on the CSU campus. The institution, accredited by the International Baccalaureate Organization – "the platinum standard in international education," as Berkman describes it – boasts an impressive curriculum that includes daily lessons in Mandarin Chinese beginning in kindergarten. Four years later, the academic partners established a division of CMSD's MC2STEM High School for juniors and seniors studying science, technology, engineering and math in a wing of the university's main classroom building. Berkman notes that the approximately 150 attendees are on a perpetual schedule of 10 weeks in school, then two weeks on break. There are no long summer vacations.



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"It has a very, very rigorous curriculum," he says. "It goes on a different calendar completely than, I believe, any other high school in Cleveland" – a schedule, along with the location, that affords qualifying high-schoolers the opportunity to take up to 36 credit hours of CSU classes free of charge before they earn their first diploma.

In the years since the Campus International School opened, it has become a K-7 institution with close to 450 students. It will add an eighth-grade class before moving into a new structure that opens later this year. Like the MC2STEM division, Berkman notes, the school is an integral part of CSU. Education majors do their student teaching there. Faculty members volunteer to teach classes, mentor instructors, etc. And students use the university library and recreation facilities.

"It has been a real village experience," Berkman says. "Sometimes I can look out my window and . . . see four or five blocks of little bodies walking down through the campus to the student center or to the auditorium to hear a performance."

In 2012, Berkman expanded the CSU footprint by moving the arts programs from a former factory on Chester Avenue to the CSU Arts Campus, which includes two floors of art, acting and dance studios and rehearsal spaces in the Middough Building on Playhouse Square. Like the Campus International School and MC2STEM division, the facility represents a partnership, in this case with Playhouse Square and the Cleveland Play House. Student productions, for example, are presented on the Cleveland Play House's Allen Theatre stages. And Play House costume-shop staffers have also supervised student design and construction of

costumes for campus productions such as the recently staged *Dangerous Liaisons*.

“We never had students who went across [East] 17th Street,” Berkman observes. “By opening up [the arts campus at] Playhouse Square, we now have 600 students a day who go to the Mid-dough Building.” The university is hiring a recruiter to build arts enrollment.

The university’s Partnership for Urban Health with the Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED) is sending medical students into the surrounding communities on what some would say is a greater mission: providing health care to underserved residents. Berkman explains that those enrolled in the initiative complete 50 percent of their studies, including their first year, at NEOMED’s Rootstown campus; the rest is completed at CSU’s new Center for Innovative and Medical Professions, where the partnership is based. Clinical training, overseen by physicians, is performed in five Cleveland neighborhoods, where medical students connect with residents and provide more specialized primary care to them for extended periods of time.

The first class of participants will graduate this year. But challenges remain in implementing the program, namely recruiting enough willing residents with the help of churches, community-based organizations and ambulatory care clinics.

“It’s still a work in progress,” Berkman acknowledges. “We’ve tried to create a unique program.”

Perhaps the biggest indicator of CSU’s success in realizing Berkman’s goal of creating a campus-based neighborhood is the number of students looking to live there. Last year over 200 students were on a waiting list for accommodations in two dorms with a combined 1,200 rooms. And there’s been an explosion of off-campus housing options. Berkman rattles off examples such as 1900 Euclid Avenue Lofts, Sphere apartments at 1801 E. 12th St., and 600 apartments being built on the former Jewish Community Federation headquarters site at 1750 Euclid Ave.

“This was not the case just a certain number of years ago,” he points out.

Berkman hopes to increase the “feet on the street” with a 2017 summer arts festival, a showcase of student dance, digital media, film, music and theater on campus and at Playhouse Square that could become an annual event. He’s particularly interested in attracting suburbanites who haven’t ventured downtown in years, people who haven’t seen the rise of new, aesthetically pleasing campus buildings.

“They’re very surprised by the overall energy you feel on the street,” the former Floridian says, then quips, “particularly if it’s not 15 degrees below zero and people can walk on the street.”