Why Chicago?

Professors reflect on integrating the city into the classroom

From the moment DePaul students step on campus, they are immersed in the city, which can be an overwhelming experience. Discover Chicago and Explore Chicago offerings help acclimate new students to the sprawling metropolis that is their extended campus. In addition, as they progress through their academic programs, students continue to engage with coursework that involves Chicago in unique and exciting ways. “Many [AAS] faculty and classes introduce students to Chicago, both as a laboratory where ideas and methods are studied and tested, and as an object of study,” says interim Dean Lucy Rimhart. “Like many urban universities, DePaul invites prospective students to think about the advantages of going to school in a big city. There, they will encounter diversity, complexity and opportunity. The question for our faculty and students is, ‘What opportunities for study does Chicago provide better than other cities?’”

Examing transit data

Divvy bike sharing burst onto the Chicago scene in 2013, opening up a new way for residents and tourists alike to get around the city. For the past two years, Hugh Bartling, associate professor of public policy studies, has been working with students in his capstone class to analyze data from Divvy to determine usage patterns. They examine times and locations at which users check out and check in bikes; however, these data reveal little about the users themselves, so the students also conduct surveys by camping out in front of Divvy stations. “The idea is to get a sense for how people are using this transportation option,” he says. To date, Bartling and his students have found that more men use Divvy than women; it often serves as one leg of a user’s commute and recreational use increases on the weekends. “We asked people if they would have taken the trip if Divvy hadn’t been around, and a lot of them said they wouldn’t,” he explains. “We argue it’s giving people more opportunity to explore the city.”

In addition, Bartling includes CTA data in the course he teaches in the sustainable urban development master’s program. “We’re trying to get a sense of how people move around on public transportation and how that relates to the demographic conditions in a particular neighborhood,” he expounds. “It gives the students a way to engage their own point of view and their perceptions about a neighborhood through the lens of their own lived experience,” he asserts. “That’s everything as far as I’m concerned, especially as a sociologist.” With the help of DePaul’s Storms Center for Community-based Service Learning, students in Schlichtman’s Community and Society class choose between working with homeless services nonprofit La Casa Norte in Humboldt Park, exploring public policy and activism with the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization in North Kenwood and mentoring youths at the Peace Corner in Austin.

“Can’t be just charity,” Schlichtman stresses. “Students should engage with the issues of their community. For many students, when they chose their college, they chose Chicago. I encourage them to take that a step further and become residents of Chicago, not merely tourists. This is a global city, but it is a global city in which political and social life are accessible. Students can quickly fall into step with what is going on with a particular issue or in a particular neighborhood. The microcosms of different types of neighborhoods and different ways of life are especially important to Chicago being what it is today. They provide students great opportunities for engagement as they further their understanding.”

In other classes, Schlichtman has his students conduct photographic inventories and ethnographic studies of neighborhoods. “Chicago is a place where you can see a problem as a student, learn about it, align with folks who are working to resolve it and then actually make your living in a career related to it,” he says. Students in the new cities, action, power and practice concentration take that statement to heart. “This is how my students find work. They engage in community-based relationships the moment they step on campus, cultivate both those relationships and their interests, and develop an expertise that can benefit the community before they leave us,” he says. “Ideally, when they leave, those interests are not merely passions, but they also become marketable.”