Building bridges in the community

**UCI outreach center on the Westside focuses on improving education and the overall appearance of the neighborhood.**

*Lolita Harper*  
**DAILY PILOT**

WESTSIDE — It is a bridge of unusual proportions. Large steel beams are absent from its architecture and are replaced by a modest room with four bare walls and a couple of desks. Enormous concrete support pillars are substituted with dedicated individuals.

The UC Irvine Community Outreach Center may differ in structure from traditional models but its function is the same: to provide a link between two points — the university and Costa Mesa’s Westside.

The UCI Community Outreach Partnership Center, at 740 W. Wilson St., is a new venture between the university and the Westside community designed to strengthen the connection between the school and the community it serves.

Kris Day, the center’s executive director and a professor for the university’s Department of Urban and Regional Planning, hatched the idea for the program after extensive work on the Westside with various classes.

“I initially got involved because I taught a class that did research on the Westside,” Day said. “I got more involved, I found that there were a lot of other professors working independently in the same area.

The center will make sure professors are working to reinforce each other and see that the university’s resources are used in the most effective manner.

University officials chose the most western neighborhood in Costa Mesa to house the center because of its diverse makeup and the issues present in the community. Those issues include educational quality, racial tensions, the overall appearance of the neighborhood and the recent efforts to improve the area by both the city and residents.

Victor Becerra, the center’s director, is charged with managing ongoing projects, cultivating new ventures and cultivating funding sources. One of the collaborative projects involves Keep Costa Mesa Beautiful — a campaign to pick up litter on the Westside.

“Our overarching goal is to make Costa Mesa a stronger community, and we want to do that by helping low-income neighborhoods,” Becerra said.

Manuel Gomez, the vice chancellor of student affairs at UCI, said the real genius behind the project is the most basic connection between education and civic well-being.

“We cannot enjoy one investment without the other,” he said.

Gomez said the center is about recognizing that the fate of any one social pillar affects all of them, and all must be strong to build the proper community foundation.

The center integrates Costa Mesa businesses, churches, residents, social services, youth organizations, schools and city officials with UCI faculty, staff, students and all the resources the campus offers.

His hope is that the Westside community would grow stronger through its partnership with the university, and he also believes UCI will grow and deepen its connection to the mandate of the mission, Gomez said.

“I truly believe we have the opportunity to create a model of cooperation between the university and the Costa Mesa community,” Gomez said. “All is in place to accomplish great things.”