UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

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Choices in community-higher education collaborations

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Introduction

In just two short decades, colleges and universities have begun to transform themselves from remote ivory towers to neighbourly community citizens as their faculties and students collaborate more and more with groups outside the academy. But will higher education institutions be the neighbours who borrow without returning and criticise others for not keeping their yards neatly manicured? Will they be the bumbling neighbours who keep coming over to help but, because they are incompetent, make things worse? Or will they be the neighbours who loan tools, provide free help, and offer support in a crisis?

I have been working collaboratively with community organisations ever since a community activist demanded that I return something to the community in exchange for an interview in 1985. During the intervening years, as a facilitator and researcher involved with various institutions attempting to institute various types of civic engagement programmes, I have witnessed everything from a patronising colonisation of poor communities, to amazingly equal partnerships between high-powered universities and the US's poorest communities. The increasing pressures from taxpayers for accountability in public institutions and calls for relevance from higher education critics have sent academics scrambling for a different approach to higher education.

This paper reviews some past and current practices in US universities, asking questions and exploring tensions in the hope of helping find the way to a form of collaboration that truly benefits community and society.

Forms of community-university collaboration

Community service
Historically, the new push for community-university collaborations began with community service programmes. These programmes are disconnected from any classroom learning objectives. A variety of campus-based and foundation initiatives recruit students to provide services in poor communities, e.g. neighbourhood cleanups, house painting, tutorial/literacy programmes, and soup kitchen services (which provide food to those in need). These programmes are the most basic of all the options. In addition to recruiting individual students to volunteer their services, the programmes are mostly geared to helping individual clients, whether a child who needs help learning how to read or an impoverished elderly resident who needs their house painted.

Service learning
Service learning tries to link volunteer work with in-class

learning objectives. The hours put into community service are reflected upon in journals, and the causes of poverty or forms of social service are discussed in the classroom. The projects differ little, however, from those in community service programmes: the focus is still on students, and the model of service is still individual-to-individual. Historically, there has been a specific absence of a social change orientation in service learning, and an explicit emphasis on collaborations with agencies rather than community-based organisations (Stoecker, 2003). In the worst cases, communities were seen as 'laboratories' for students to learn course concepts without any obligation to return anything to those communities, prompting one community activist to ask, 'What does that make us, the frogs?' (Beckwith, 1996). Very recently service learning has been changing, as some service learning faculties are now drawing on people like Paulo Freire (1970), and working with social change organisations.

Community-based research

Community-based research, or CBR, has a somewhat independent history from community service and service learning programmes. Drawing partly from Third World participatory research, and the earlier use of the label by the Loka Institute, a US NGO dedicated to advancing the practice of community-based research, CBR is rooted in non-academic traditions. Today, in institutions of higher education, CBR may be done with or without students. Also, in contrast to traditional service learning, projects are defined through a community-based process, and ideally led by a community-based organisation. In CBR, communities are seen as having strengths and wisdom as well as needs. Community-based forms of information, such as oral and artistic traditions, are respected as legitimate knowledge. Most importantly, the goal of CBR is to support community-based social change efforts. Today, there are an increasing number of CBR centres and networks supporting evaluations of community programmes, participatory needs assessments of school students, collection of community statistics, surveys of residents to guide grants applications and programme design, and many others.

Whether it is community service, service learning, or community-based research, or some combination of these, the next question focuses on what kind of infrastructure can be used to make it happen.

Community-university collaboration structures

There is an old adage in the community organising profession that says if an organisation doesn't grow it dies (Beck-

Examples of cards marked with FSS and TIP status. Source: Chinsinga et al. (2002)

with with Lopez, 1997). Whether that is true for community-university collaboration remains to be seen. Many collaboration programmes fade away as their funding ends, but others are trying to grow and expand from single campus centres to broader networks of multiple campuses and community organisations.

Single campus centres

These currently remain the most popular model. Individual institutions establish a programme of collaboration within their own organisational confines, often as 'enclave offices' separated off in a corner where they won't have much impact on the institution (Staudt and Brenner, 2002). In many cases these programmes partner with a single neighbouring community. The US federal government's Community Outreach Partnership Centre (COPC) programme has promoted this kind of centre. It is also popular with large urban institutions that border poor neighbourhoods, allowing them to help improve the neighbourhood and their own image at the same time. Most of these programmes also practise some form of specialisation. The University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia at Temple University, which until recently was a single campus centre, focuses its efforts on youth and community development. A few single campus centres develop out of a diverse accumulation of projects seeking institutional support, and are part of a growth pattern within the institution. Georgetown University in Washington DC began with a service-learning programme that grew to become the Centre for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service, an academic unit combining community service, service learning, and CBR programmes, and housing seven staff. The University of Texas El Paso has also developed a large and complex

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Centre for Civic Engagement and Institute for Community-Based Teaching and Learning.

Metropolitan networks

Metropolitan networks supporting community-university collaboration are not new. The grandparent of them all, since 1989, is the Policy Research Action Group in Chicago, connecting four universities and 24 community organisations. In the past two years, an effort was sponsored by the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation to build networks of institutions doing community-based research in six US metropolitan regions (along with a network in rural Appalachia). Most of these networks expanded from strong single campus centres. In three cases, these networks are very broadly based. The Trenton network, in New Jersey, has institutional partners ranging from Princeton University to Mercer County community college, and an equally broad range of community organisation partners. In some cases the networks are skill focused. The Philadelphia network focuses on developing institutional and community organisation expertise in youth programming and community development. Most of the projects sponsored by these networks currently involve individuals from single institutions partnering with individual organisations. The hope is that over time the networks will solidify enough to move from independent projects to joint projects involving multiple institution partners and multiple community organisations.

Regional network

One of the most intriguing developments coming out of the Bonner CBR network programme is the spawning of regional networks. A year ago, representatives of the four networks on the East Coast of the US began planning a regional network to promote community-based research around youth, community development, and information infrastructure issues. In addition, institutions across the Appalachian region have formed a network called Just Connections. This is an independent non-profit organisation involving a collaboration of seven colleges and a growing number of community organisations and groups across five states in Appalachia. In an area of the country where both information and economic resources are widely dispersed, Just Connections allows for an accumulation of information and expertise that maximises the impact of what would otherwise be isolated projects. The projects are still separate and independent, but benefit from the network by being able to tap network expertise in project development, and spread project results throughout the network.

Future choices

The choices that community-university partnerships make on the questions of 'what to do' (community service, service learning, and/or community-based research), and 'how big to make it' (single campus centre, metropolitan network, or regional network) have implications for a set of tensions that exist in those partnerships. Those tensions are between emphasising service versus emphasising social change, institutionalising a partnership programme versus building its independence, and specialising versus diversifying.

Service versus social change

As important as service work is, we keep avoiding the question of whether it is truly helpful. Many of us know the argument that service work is a safety valve – providing just enough help to contain social unrest without addressing the underlying causes. A service perspective often emphasises the commonality across groups in society, and win-win solutions. A social change perspective more often emphasises differences between class, race, and sex/gender groups. It also disputes that win-win solutions are possible, arguing that the 'haves' are unlikely to give up their advantage without a fight.

The service approach is much more comfortable in community service and service learning programmes. There are service learning programmes that actually adopt a conflict perspective, but they are exceedingly rare, with probably the most explicitly social change-oriented service-learning programme being at the University of Colorado at Denver. With most universities divided into a 'student affairs' division and a 'faculty affairs' division, service programmes are typically housed in student affairs away from the control of faculty. And while there has been recent lip service given to how to make projects more community driven, the reality is that very few projects are actually created through grassroots processes, with most being designed to meet the institution's curriculum needs or a social service agency's needs. The level of control needed

to manage programmes such as this also means that they fit best in single campus centres.

The social change approach is most comfortable in community-based research programmes. In contrast to service, which is geared to addressing immediate needs, research is geared to uncovering fundamental causes that can be used in social change efforts. And because the social change model is more community driven, and social change often requires participation beyond a single community, such programmes are much less likely to be geographically fixed by the institution, making metropolitan and regional networks very important foundations. In fact, as we will see next, in a social change context, those networks themselves may become more community-based.

Institutionalisation versus independence

One of the other tensions in community-university partnerships is the question of 'who benefits?'. The US federal COPC programme specifies that universities, not communities, get the grant funds. That's in contrast to a similar Canadian government programme that funds joint community-university partnerships or even community-controlled partnerships.

Service programmes are the least controversial and 'safest' to house in mainstream institutions. Likewise, single campus centres are more compatible with institutionalisation because the locus of decision-making for multi-campus and multi-organisational networks is so uncertain.

Institutionalised partnerships are by far the most common, but we are very recently seeing in the United States a very interesting alternative model. The two CBR networks in Trenton New Jersey and Appalachia discussed earlier have formed their own independent non-profit organisations. Both of these programmes sponsor some service activities, but they emphasise community-based research. Because such independent efforts need to cover their own overhead, buy-in from multiple institutions and multiple community organisations is important. The Trenton Centre even uses a fee for its service model in some cases to build its operating budget. Both of these independent efforts also structured their boards to allow for a majority of community organisation representatives.

Specialisation versus diversification

Wrapped up in the tensions of service versus social change and institutionalisation versus independence is the tension between specialisation and diversification. Academics like me were taught to specialise. But some community activists, thankfully, quickly disabused me of the notion that I was a

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specialist, and even of the belief that I should be. In Toledo I found myself learning about community development, foundation funding, urban political economy, and all kinds of related stuff for which graduate school had poorly prepared me.

Because academia is still about disciplinary specialisation, community-university partnerships are still pushed to specialise. There are centres dedicated to community service, or to service learning. There are department-based programmes that only take projects fitting their specialty. But community issues don't occur in disciplinary packages, they don't fit abstract single-term curricular designs, and they often require combinations of expertise not found in a single location. So for those whose goal is social change, diversification is almost a necessity. A social change-oriented community-university partnership has to shift as the issues and conditions shift. They need to provide the wide range of information, technical assistance, and other resources needed for full-scale social change efforts. They need to see and address the relationship between small isolated issues and bigger structures. All of those pressures push such partnerships to become full service, community driven, and multi-locational.

Conclusion

If we start with the belief that social change must be the goal, then our choices are clear. We need to build independent, community-based networks that can support a diverse range of projects. Such a model goes beyond service to address the causes of social inequality that currently make service seem so necessary. Such a model also focuses not only on the material inequality that faces so many communities, but also the knowledge inequality. The truly radical potential of such collaborations is in their ability to create social change by improving participation, more broadly distributing skills and information, and building a foundation for collective social action. Participation means that the people affected by the service, or the research, or the policy, are integrally involved in making decisions about it. Our collaborations should turn agency clients into organ-

isation participants, both in the agencies themselves and in the institutions of higher education that partner with them. Tutoring school kids in reading and writing, using a mainstream literacy model, keeps those children in the role of client. Engaging those same kids in a social change project that requires them to read and write along the way is much more powerful.

Of course, such a model is also risky when it must confront the confines of tradition-bound academia. The risks are summed up perhaps best by a quote from the late Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil:

When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.

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NOTES
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