

A Bridge to Healthier Families and Children: The Collaborative Process of a University-Community Partnership

Carol MacKinnon-Lewis and James M. Frabutt

Abstract

The Center for the Study of Social Issues was created in 1996 as part of the commitment of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to be an engaged institution as defined by the Kellogg Commission. The Center's mission is to enhance the vitality of the community, as well as the research and instructional activities of the University, through interdisciplinary collaborative work that engages faculty and community partners. This paper briefly describes the elements of effective collaboration and how those elements contributed to the emergence of a successful partnership with the City of High Point, North Carolina. The potential of a university-community collaboration to benefit children and families has been evidenced through community-based initiatives such as a neighborhood outreach center, a youth violence reduction effort, and a program to enable at-risk youth to obtain a GED while learning a marketable skill.

Engagement: A Model for University-Community Partnerships

To better meet the needs of communities, children, and families, universities have been called to move beyond outreach and service to a model of engagement (*Kellogg Commission 1999*). Outreach and service connote unidirectional relationships in which the university's expertise and knowledge are transferred to key community constituents. Conversely, the notion of engagement demands bidirectional relationships, reciprocity, and mutual respect between institutions of higher learning and the communities they serve.

As part of the commitment of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) to be an engaged institution as defined by the Kellogg Commission, in 1995 the university revisited its faculty rewards system to incorporate the scholarship of engagement as a valued form of contribution, a change that is reflected in the strategic plan of the university. During the following year, the Center for the Study of Social Issues (CSSI) was created and charged with enhancing the vitality of the community, as well as the research and instructional activities of the university, through interdisciplinary collaborative work that engages faculty and community partners.

The center was developed as a context for the generation of new practical and scholarly knowledge and the application of that knowledge in real-world settings. The approach that guides virtually all initiatives undertaken through CSSI, embraces the viewpoints and perspectives of both scholars and community partners to address relevant and mutually defined goals and objectives. The High Point Initiative discussed in this paper exemplifies the processes and characteristics that we believe to be inherent in a successful scholarship of engagement model.

The Key Ingredient: Collaboration

Given the overarching mission of CSSI, it was important to define early on the characteristics of successful and effective collaborative partnerships. Over the last decade, there has been a movement toward collaborative structures as innovative approaches to addressing critical social problems (*Healy 1997; Scott and Thurston 1997*). The results of this movement, however, are not always positive:

Examples of genuinely positive collaborative outcomes do exist, but it is common to hear stories of slow or negligible process. We have tagged this phenomenon “collaborative inertia” and have contrasted it with the desired outcome of “collaborative advantage,” in which something is achieved that could not have been achieved without the collaboration. (*Huxham and Vangen 2000*)

Collaboration has been defined as a process that leads to the attainment of goals that cannot be achieved effectively by any one agent (*Bruner 1991*). Collaborative partnerships are often mutually beneficial to all parties involved, especially when approached with cultural sensitivity, trust, mutual respect, and commitment by the participants. Collaborative partners must strive to achieve realistic goals, employ open exchange of information, and bring flexibility and adaptability to the table (*Cheney 1998; DeChillo and Koren 1996; Karp 1993*). In sum, viable collaborations most often result from the considerable time, effort, and trust invested and nurtured by the parties involved (*Mattessich and Monsey 1992; Morley et al. 2000*).

Though collaborative relationships can promise mutual benefits, communities sometimes fail to recognize this reciprocity in partnering with a research university (*Stevens 1999*). This difficulty in achieving reciprocity may result from a history of public frustration with the unresponsiveness of the university institution. In the words of the Kellogg Commission report, the perception is that

“despite the resources and expertise available on our campuses, our institutions are not well organized to bring them to bear on local problems in a coherent way” (*Kellogg Commission 1999*). As a result, a preeminent challenge inherent in university-community collaboration is gaining legitimate entry into a community. Research is suspect, especially in communities of color, and deficit models are oftentimes employed. Linking key players and other stakeholders is one avenue for gaining collaborative opportunities and for ensuring that the proposed project/initiative/research will have relevance to the community (*Bogenschneider 1996; Stevens 1999*). In addition, faculty may not view engaged scholarship as mutually rewarding. Engaged scholarship represents an approach differing profoundly from that of academic scholarship. It requires a culture that is conducive to scholarly activity in which the application of knowledge interacts with practice in such a dynamic way that new insights enlighten theory and practice (*Boyer 1990*).

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High Point, North Carolina, and CSSI: Building a Collaborative Relationship

The early efforts of CSSI have been highly dependent upon building a significant level of trust in the community and initiating, and then sustaining, productive relationships with community members. The director of CSSI was at the forefront of this endeavor, listening to community concerns, attending meetings of local leaders, and asking the often challenging and difficult questions that began to inspire change. Town meetings were held in which residents were encouraged to raise issues that must be addressed if their community was to be revitalized. This critical foundation led to CSSI's collaboration with High Point community leaders in October 1997 when it conducted a “Brownfields” study of the West Macedonia neighborhood in the heart of the city, funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

This project included a community needs assessment as a necessary starting point to define the existing social, economic, and physical problems and needs of the West Macedonia area

residents and property owners. The collaboration determined that community-building and revitalization efforts should include an inventory of the area's perceived assets and strengths, including physical structures, agencies, and community leaders. CSSI was guided in these initial efforts by a belief that only by understanding what the community considers its needs, strengths, and resources to be, could partners move forward to plan collaboratively a program of redevelopment. The community needs assessment included four components: quality of life comparison, business survey, household survey, and focus groups with key leadership groups. These various components yielded converging results that indicated high levels of concern about certain community problems. The most

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critical issue identified by most respondents concerned crime/public safety. Other considerations included a lack of recreational facilities in the neighborhood (especially for youth), the need for community leadership and empowerment, the need for safe, affordable housing, and the desire for employment and training opportunities for residents. The community needs assessment set the stage for all of the subsequent work conducted in the West Macedonia neighborhood and the broader High Point community.

Community Outreach Partnership Center: The EPA grant provided support for an assessment of community needs but not the resources to implement change in the community. Toward that end, CSSI convened local residents and agencies to establish a Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) within the West Macedonia neighborhood, an effort funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This program provided seed money to institutions of higher learning to encourage collaborative efforts with distressed local communities. In addition to CSSI, the collaboration included the City of High Point, Guilford Technical Community College, the High Point Police Department, and the West Macedonia Neighborhood Association. Locally, this work was driven by individuals representing grassroots organizations, parents and families, the faith community, and human service agencies.

COPC has placed a strong emphasis on addressing those issues that were identified in the needs assessment, including community-based strategies for preventing crime, especially violent crime. Also included were programs that provided residents with education and training, job opportunities, leadership development, advocacy on issues such as housing, access to computer technology, and other strategies for improving quality of life.

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Youthbuild Program: Three of the issues identified in the needs assessment were the need for job training, youth programs, and affordable housing. Consequently, a Youthbuild initiative was implemented in the West Macedonia neighborhood. Funded through HUD in the amount of \$300,000, the program provides high school dropouts with a GED, and on-the-job training in homebuilding and leadership development. This program is being carried out in partnership with Guilford Technical Community College (GTCC), the High Point chapter of Habitat for Humanity, and the City of High Point. The youth are trained in specialized areas of construction, working closely with faculty and mentors at GTCC. They also receive leadership training through workshops and seminars taught by faculty from GTCC and UNCG. Through Habitat for Humanity, the youth work with construction supervisors in honing their skills, and also have the opportunity to team with volunteers building two homes in the West Macedonia neighborhood, which will provide single-family housing for two families.

Youth Violence Prevention Initiative: The violence prevention work facilitated by COPC linked closely with a larger initiative operating at the community level. In particular, the High Point Community Against Violence Initiative (HPCAVI) was formed by local officials and community residents to develop a comprehensive strategy for reducing violent crime. CSSI serves as a critical member of HPCAVI, along with representatives from federal, state, and local agencies involved in law enforcement (e.g., High Point Police, the U.S. Attorney’s Office), community-based service agencies and nonprofit organizations, clergy, and neighborhood residents. The High Point Community Against Violence Initiative has adopted two overarching approaches to prevent violence: (1) direct intervention with adults who have committed violent offenses, have

been incarcerated, and are on probation, in order to discourage future violence, and (2) adoption of a more preventive approach with young persons who are at risk of committing violent acts.

The first approach is exemplified by the High Point Notification program, which convenes adults who have been convicted of a violent offense for an intensive session that combines “hard” and

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“soft” messages. In particular, these individuals are notified by law enforcement officials of the consequences of continuing with a violent lifestyle, and then given a supportive message by representatives of community-based organizations. The strategy (based on the Boston model by David Kennedy of the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University) has attracted attention from the national media and the Department

of Justice. CSSI has been involved as a member of the law enforcement/community partnership that conducts these sessions and has conducted an evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention.

Despite these efforts to reduce the rate of adult violent crime, the High Point Community Against Violence Initiative initially deferred the challenge of primary and secondary prevention (i.e., preventing violence among individuals who have not yet evidenced violent behavior, or who have shown only early signs of violence and aggression). Although the High Point community had devoted attention to adult crime reduction, there was still an outstanding need to address youth violence.

Toward preventing the escalation of violence among young persons, CSSI and a youth violence collaborative have initiated an action-research project that uses information from High Point youth in order to develop a locally relevant prevention and intervention strategy. As part of the High Point Youth Violence Initiative, court-adjudicated and at-risk middle school and high school students are interviewed by residents of the community (trained by CSSI researchers) in order to identify issues related to family, school, peers, and neighborhoods that play a particularly influential role in either fostering or inhibiting violent behavior (i.e., risk and protective factors). Initial funding for the High Point Youth Violence Initiative

comes from the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission. On behalf of the collaborative, CSSI recently received a grant to develop a System of Care approach to serve court-involved High Point youth. System of Care engages family, neighborhoods, and community support systems to work as a team with formal agencies to implement a single intervention plan. System of Care employs a preventive approach with High Point youth who are court-adjudicated or have demonstrated risk for violent and/or aggressive behavior. Regular meetings of the youth violence collaborative have ensured community input at each step of the project planning and implementation stages. The collaborative has considered the results of our literature review, evaluated the interview protocols and survey instruments, made recommendations regarding potential interviewers, and assisted in developing strategies for approaching and engaging youth and their primary caretakers in the project. This climate of cooperation, involvement, and commitment among members of the collaborative has become the critical foundation on which a System of Care approach can be implemented to its full potential.

Locally, a cooperative spirit has been the hallmark of the collaborative's efforts, evidenced by such practical matters as monthly planning meetings hosted by the police department and jointly facilitated by the High Point chief of police and the director of CSSI. Local clergy, school principals, service providers, and juvenile justice representatives have come together despite differing institutional climates, diverse cultural contexts, and different ways of defining the problem and possible solutions.

Long-Term Results of University-Community Collaboration

The various projects initiated by CSSI over the past two years complement one another to produce synergistic effects. For example, through community-organizing activities, COPC has engaged local residents more directly in the High Point Community Against Violence Initiative. Also, two young offenders who were called in for Notification sessions have been recruited into the Youthbuild program. The energy and action that have been mobilized within the West Macedonia neighborhood are now attracting attention that is leading to the infusion of major resources to the community. Guilford Technical Community College is expanding its facilities in the neighborhood. Its efforts include construction of the Larry Gatlin Entertainment Center, which provides training in the technical aspects of the entertainment industry. This training program will

serve as a critical resource to young persons identified as being at risk of violence and aggression within the High Point Youth Violence Initiative. As part of this ongoing redevelopment in High Point, CSSI is collaborating with United Child Development Services, Inc. and a number of other organizations, with funding provided by a large church, to build a \$3 million family resource center in the West Macedonia neighborhood. This center will provide education to children aged three and younger under an Early Head Start grant, along with home-visitation services to pregnant and parenting mothers.

Together these recent developments suggest that a “critical mass” of activity and momentum has been established in High Point, particularly the West Macedonia neighborhood. The results achieved certainly reflect the potential to impart lasting changes in services for children and families as well as the potential to foster new opportunities for residents to effectively address community issues. In summary, the promise and potential of a successful university-community partnership has been revealed.

Lessons Learned

Even though universities have been seen as great repositories of resources, historically university-community partnerships, including those at our university, have been characterized as unidirectional in their approach, with expertise transferred from the experts outward. CSSI actively addressed the growing frustration among practitioners and policymakers with universities’ unresponsiveness and inaccessibility, particularly during the first year of the center’s existence. Our work reflects a number of common features, the cornerstone of which is the development of trusting, mutually respectful relationships. Considerable effort was made early on to ensure that our partnerships were indeed genuine, with mutual respect for all members and, in addition, that we did not make promises on which we could not deliver.

That initial work has paid great dividends through the university and larger community—in terms of interdisciplinary research projects, community-based teaching experiences, unique opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students, and the opportunity for meaningful partnerships with the community. In addition, the image of the university was enhanced within the larger community. The successes of our initiatives have begun to dispel perceptions of university/institutional unresponsiveness. The potential and observed impacts to the larger community have been just as great. This

transfer of knowledge has helped build the capacity of local organizations; in a real sense, we helped community-based organizations make better use of their own resources, as well as marshaling the resources of others, thus increasing problem-solving capabilities of the entire region. As a consequence, the capacity for the community to sustain efforts in the absence of university involvement, or when funding has been exhausted, has been greatly enhanced.

Our experience over the past five years has reinforced our initial belief that the research and teaching mission of the university would be enhanced through successful scholarship of engagement. CSSI has served as a convener and facilitator for transboundary projects that involved faculty and students from various disciplines and community-based practitioners. Melding the expertise of university and community partners can create new approaches for addressing sometimes thorny issues that have plagued our communities for generations (e.g., literacy, violence, poverty). Through our work together, we have informed policy and practice in ways that have led to system-level change. For example, the leadership provided by CSSI in an initial effort in our county to provide a seamless, coordinated System of Care for children who have serious emotional disturbances has resulted in a state mandate that all children under the supervision of the Department of Mental Health and Department of Social Services be provided services consistent with SOC philosophy. (Note: This work was accomplished in collaboration with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Mental Health Services, Child and Family Section.)

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We must acknowledge, however, that the benefits derived have not been accomplished without significant challenges, not the least of which is institutional change. Even though the university revisited its reward structure and we had substantial support from administration, particularly from the provost, in order for engaged scholarship to be embraced broadly across the campus, a culture shift had to occur. Engagement entails mutually reciprocal relationships that are by their very nature different from conventional outreach and

service. The greatest challenge, and one addressed by Boyer (1990), continues to be the notion that only basic research that results in the creation of new knowledge represents true scholarship. Faculty must be convinced that work that may not conform to their traditional disciplinary models is simply a “different manifestation of the same standard of scholarship” (Finkelstein 2001).

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It is important that incentives be provided to faculty for this form of scholarship. Implementation of a faculty intramural grant program for multidisciplinary, collaborative work developed in concert with community partners can provide seed dollars for

larger initiatives. Funding of those initiatives extramurally can make great headway in validating the scholarship of engagement. We also provided support to faculty, graduate students, and community partners involved in collaborative work, funded through grants awarded to CSSI.

On a more practical level, the procedures for supporting engaged scholarship must become significantly more flexible. Frequently, various components of the administrative infrastructure (Human Resources, Grants and Contracts, Personnel, Office of Research Services) have to accommodate different partners’ needs, which dictate variations in processing payroll, travel, and reimbursement requests.

In addition to the institutional challenges, we faced a number of other challenges as we began our work together. First and foremost was the development of trust. Traditionally, communities are accustomed to being utilized as laboratories and their residents as subjects in conducting research. To be invited to the table as equal partners to create a context in which genuine collaborative practice occurs has not been the norm. In our case, many frank discussions ensued. Initially, faculty felt compelled to make the work theoretically driven; community partners were determined to make the work “real.” As faculty attempted to design measurement tools that camouflaged the real questions of interest, community partners encouraged us to simply ask the respondents directly what we wanted to know.

As our knowledge grew out of our collaborative community-based work, we were better able to identify critical issues, create

new approaches to social problems, and make a difference in people's lives. We have seen the collective strengths that emerge from the differences in perspectives. The university-based partners bring their theoretical and research knowledge; the community partners bring their practical and contextually based knowledge. Together, the issues we address, the methodologies we co-construct, the iterations we experience as we refine our process, and the resulting relevant, practical knowledge that we derive, allow university-community partnerships to become a hopeful bridge leading to healthier families and children.

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About the Authors

• Carol MacKinnon-Lewis, Ph.D., is director of the Center for Applied Research through Engaged Scholarship and professor in the Department of Child and Family Studies at the University of South Florida. She received her doctorate from the University of Georgia in child development and family relations. Her areas of research and professional interest include parent-child interactions, aggression, and scholarship through university-community partnerships. Dr. MacKinnon-Lewis recently completed a longitudinal project funded by the William T. Grant Foundation focusing on the transition to middle school. A portion of this four-year study assessed family factors that affect aggressive and delinquent behaviors, as well as the contextual influences of neighborhood, peers, and school. Funded by NSF, NIMH, NICHD, and the William T. Grant Foundation, her work has been published in a number of professional journals, including: *Developmental Psychology*, *Child Development*, *Development and Psychopathology*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, and *Social Development*.

• James M. Frabutt, Ph.D., received his doctorate in human development and family studies from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He is currently director of the Division for the Prevention of Youth Violence and Aggression at the Center for the Study of Social Issues at UNC–Greensboro. His primary research interests center on children's social development, parenting, and family development in racial and ethnic minority families. Recently, Dr. Frabutt has been involved in a local collaborative community-university partnership featuring the involvement of school personnel, parents, law enforcement, mental health practitioners, the faith community, and juvenile justice professionals. Together, this partnership has developed a comprehensive youth violence prevention and intervention program targeted at middle school and high school youth.