best practices

Developing Multidisciplinary Institutes to Enhance the Lives of Individuals and Families: Academic Pitfalls and Potentials

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Too many of our faculty, in all of our disciplines, are far too insulated, too isolated, and in fact and perception are seen as indifferent to worlds other than their own . . . Our traditional faculty culture, which is built around every faculty person as an entrepreneur, a free thinker, and a free doer has much to commend itself. But it also has much to condemn itself when that individual freedom is divorced from social reality and the needs and aspirations of America's citizens and voters (Magrath 1993, 4).

America and the communities it comprises face a set of problems of historically unprecedented scope and severity. Issues of economic development, environmental quality, health and health-care delivery — and the children, youth, and families they affect — challenge the current resources and future viability of the United States.

Numerous sectors of society have worked, and continue to work, to address these issues in a comprehensive manner. However, due to a failure to integrate services, "turfism," and an inability to reach the most "at-risk" citizens, the whole has been less than the sum of its parts (Hamburg 1992; Schorr 1988). Moreover, current efforts often are based on a deficit view of communities, families, and individuals, and few instances exist of community-wide, integrative collaboration (Lerner 1995; Lerner, Miller, and Ostrom 1995). As such, most existing efforts do not build on community assets and do not create community-based capacity for sustaining effective programs.

Several visions exist for such community empowerment, however (e.g., Fisher et al. 1993; Fisher and Lerner 1994; Fetterman, Kaftarian, and Wandersman 1996; Kahn and Kamerman 1996; Lerner and Fisher 1994; Lerner and Miller 1993; Miller and Lerner 1994). One

vision, embodied in the perspective labeled "Applied Developmental Science," seeks to create caring communities through broad, multi-institutional and citizen collaborations, and acts to envision, implement, and evaluate community-based programs; to engage policy; and to build a new generation of community leaders (Dryfoos 1990, 1994; Hamburg 1992; Lerner 1995; Lerner, Ostrom, and Freel 1995, in press; Ostrom, Lerner, and Freel 1995; Schorr 1988).

Universities can have a critical role in such collaborations, acting as agents of technical assistance, knowledge development, training, and information dissemination. However, to make such contributions, universities must change from their currently perceived status as enclaves for ethereal knowledge and social elitism (Bonnen 1986, 1992) and become agents in community engagement and empowerment. To produce this change, universities need to revise their view of scholarly functions to one that creates "outreach universities" — that is, universities that generate, transmit, preserve, or apply knowledge to address societal problems, *as these problems are defined in concert with community collaborators* (Boyer 1990, 1994; Lerner 1995; Votruba 1992). To reach such collaborative definitions, universities must develop a co-learning model involving a merger of their expertise and that of communities.

The Role of University-Wide, Multidisciplinary Institutes or Centers

To create such models, many universities are establishing or reorienting multidisciplinary centers and institutes (terms that will be used interchangeably in this article), that have as their mission the university-wide facilitation or development of scholarship that serves the needs of the individuals and families who live and work in surrounding communities. Moreover, when this scholarship involves knowledge generation, transmission, preservation, and application that is directed toward addressing these community needs — as diverse community groups define and value them — such institutes or centers are pursuing *outreach scholarship* (Lerner 1995; Miller and Lerner 1994; Provost's Committee on University Outreach 1993; Votruba 1992). Outreach is a cross-cutting activity; it can engage all facets of unit and university missions in a community-collaborative, co-learning approach to scholarship. Universities can, will, and must engage in their knowledge functions in manners independent of outreach; yet, they also should integrate outreach with these functions and in doing so, create a new capacity for outreach scholarship.

Multidisciplinary centers engaging in outreach scholarship directed to individuals and families can provide for universities a means to forge problem-focused, community-valued, and community-collaborative coalitions addressing contemporary citizen concerns that cross the boundaries of disciplinary interest and expertise. However, building these institutes is difficult and involves issues of resources, faculty rewards, and disciplinary and academic "political" boundaries. Concomitant community issues include trust and mistrust of the university's agenda and commitment, and questions

about the time frame, financial and human resources, community capacity and empowerment, and political considerations locally and beyond. The culture of the academy and the culture of the community must be blended, ideally, within the context of a mutually respectful, co-learning approach to real partnership, if useful outreach scholarship and effective policies and programs are to be envisioned, enacted, evaluated, and sustained.

One multidisciplinary institute that has tried to actualize these potentials and address academic obstacles — the Michigan State University Institute for Children, Youth, and Families — illustrates the possible academic pitfalls encountered in trying to establish institutes pursuing outreach scholarship aimed at enhancing individual and family life, as well as the rewards and possible contributions of such work. The authors — who served as the institute's director and lead dean, respectively, for the past five years — inform their discussion of the role of university-wide, multidisciplinary centers with an overview of social and academic challenges facing contemporary American universities and the units within them.

Societal and Scholarly Pressures on Multidisciplinary Institutes

After several decades of massive commitments of resources to America's public and private research universities, the public, government, and university governing boards are beginning to question the *raison d'etre* of the public research universities. To maintain or to increase funding, public and private donors must perceive that universities' agendas are pertinent to the needs of the diverse proximate and distal governmental, business, and "grassroots" communities within which universities are embedded, and upon which they rely for financial and political support. If such pertinence is not demonstrable, support will be eroded, if not withdrawn completely (Bok 1992).

American universities will be asked increasingly to provide knowledge relevant to community needs. Such relevance is the mandate of the American land-grant university and, today, the necessity for land-grant and state universities and public and private colleges to provide leadership for such relevance is inescapable (Magrath 1993). Furthermore, it seems clear that relevance will be defined and evaluated from the vantage point of communities and not from the perspective of universities themselves (Bok 1992; Boyer 1994). It would be sheer folly to "hunker down and ride out the storm." As the Pew Higher Education Research Program notes:

> Already there has been a steady and marked decline in the proportion of financial support that state legislatures provide their colleges and universities. . . . States tend to increasingly regard higher education as a mature industry, and the monies they accord to colleges and universities have become a prime source of 'flexible' funds capable of redirection without adverse political consequence (1992, 2A).

If universities are not accessible and responsive to the diverse communities within which they are embedded, their contribution to solving community-defined problems will be, at best, haphazard.

The Institutional "Niche" for Multidisciplinary Institutes

What is called for is nothing short of a cultural change in the role universities play in contributing to the critical issues facing society (Boyer 1990, 1994; Lynton and Elman 1987). Indeed, all of higher education is being pressed to engage more centrally in what Ernest Boyer (1990) terms the scholarship of application. Boards of trustees, legislatures, government agencies, businesses, and members of grassroots constituencies comprising the universities' stakeholders increasingly demand that public and private institutions generate accessible knowledge about community-defined issues and needs pertinent to quality of life for citizens of different ages, races, ethnicities, religions, and areas of geographic location.

Accordingly, a multidisciplinary center that has as its mission development of such knowledge to be applied to issues framed by diverse community stakeholders can serve as a model for how universities may reinvent themselves to become important collaborative resources that can make a significant contribution to the community.

Academic Structural and Organizational Constraints on Multidisciplinary Centers

However, a host of substantive and methodological issues heretofore understudied by academics must be confronted in order to productively pursue scholarship pertinent to such integrated, multilevel (or human systems) phenomena. These societal and scholarly issues provide a context for considering the role of multidisciplinary institutes in enhancing the lives of individuals and families. Such units can be: (a) devoted to community-collaborative outreach, (b) framed by systems perspectives (Ford and Lerner 1992; Lerner 1998), and, through the use of applied developmental science, (c) focused on issues pertinent to risks facing and strengths of diverse community stakeholders.

As part of the Inter-University Consortium for Applied Developmental Science, the authors have participated in the continual discussion among colleagues across the nation who are leading such units (Fisher et al. 1993). While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed discussion, the summary points below suggest that multidisciplinary outreach institutes hold great promise to benefit the university and its community.

· Communities are receptive to multidisciplinary approaches, provided communication with stakeholders is free of academic jargon.

· Academics resist multidisciplinary efforts because the department/discipline structure is tied to faculty lines, rewards, promotion and tenure, contribution to a knowledge base and a unit's

standing within the university; thus, few cross-discipline efforts win respect or reward, which particularly limits participation by junior faculty and discourages political and economic support of deans and department chairs.

· University support of the importance of economic and political viability of these institutes must generate from and be articulated by central administration; university and center administrators also must indicate to chairs, deans, and high-quality faculty how the multidisciplinary effort will enhance individual units, provide rewards outside those offered by the traditional system, and provide services sufficiently attractive to merit their commitment to the center and its work.

· Administration must indicate how the institute will find and maintain sufficient funding to support overhead and faculty services and inducements (e.g., travel), as well as how deans or chairs can creatively earn credit for their respective faculty's collaborative involvement in the institute.

· Unit/department leaders must continually articulate the unique benefits to the university — political, economic, social, and others — of a multidisciplinary effort, providing empirical support of its "value-added" nature, in order to obtain and maintain support of the institute from the university, community, and funding institutions.

· Unit/departmental deans and chairs must commit to a joint-appointment faculty structure administratively and in recruitment.

· Each multidisciplinary institute must identify its productive and unique niche to distinguish its community-university collaboration's initiatives and significant social contributions from those of other centers and institutes across the country.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To build a successful — i.e., productive and useful community-collaborative — multidisciplinary center aimed at enhancing the life chances of individuals, families, and communities, both general and specific systems change must occur in American universities (Lerner and Simon 1998; McGrath 1998). First, it is clear the reward system must be altered (Beaulieu, Mullis, and Mullis in press; Boyer 1990, 1994; Lerner et al. 1994; Lerner and Simon 1998; McCall et al. 1998; Votruba 1992, 1996). Indeed, incentives must be created to provide an exciting and attractive basis by which the work of established scholars is reoriented and outreach scholarship among junior faculty is rewarded.

Moreover, educators in each of the disciplines involved in the outreach scholarship pertinent to a given institute should be presented with a vision for beginning to train their students differently (see also Birkel, Lerner, and Smyer 1989; Fisher et al. 1993). For instance, in regard to outreach scholarship aimed at enhancing the life chances of diverse youth, families, and communities in America, future graduate education must have as its cornerstone an appreciation of systematic change, context, and human relationships (Lerner and Fisher 1994; Lerner and Simon

1998; Miller and Lerner 1994). Furthermore, undergraduates should be involved — for instance, through service-learning opportunities that are made a core part of their educational experience — in the faculty and graduate-student programs of outreach scholarship. In this way, community service and community collaboration will become a part of the fabric of the academic life of all members of the university.

In short, to create such system-level change in the academy, we must reward system changes that promote multidimensional excellence (e.g., focus on unit-versus-faculty member assessments of performance in outreach); pursue graduate training that creates outreach scholars for the twenty-first century; and promote undergraduate service learning, thus making education relevant to community needs. These emphases are central points stressed in the growing attention being paid among members of scholarly societies and universities to the importance of training in applied developmental science for future scholars and professionals in fields associated with human development and education (Fisher and Lerner 1994; Fisher et al. 1993).

Furthermore, it is crucial that university merit, tenure, and promotion committees evaluating faculty engaged in outreach scholarship must be urged to begin to consider the relative value of multidisciplinary collaborative, and hence multi-authored, publications in comparison to within-discipline, single-authored products. Publication in outlets that fall outside the boundaries of those traditionally seen as "prime" within a given discipline must also carry scholarly weight. Academic policy discussion must address university review committees' consideration of and response to the sort of contextual and collaborative research associated with developmental-systems approaches to outreach scholarship. The issue to be debated here is whether the academy can train future cohorts of outreach scholars to engage productively in the multidisciplinary, multiprofessional, and community collaborations requisite for advancing understanding of the basic process of development (Lerner 1995) *and* for producing knowledge of applied significance to the community, and then not reward and value them (e.g., *vis a vis* promotion and tenure) for successfully integrating these tasks.

If we follow a systems orientation that leads to the synthesis of research and outreach, it would seem we must devise means to assign value to, and reward an array of collaborative, multidisciplinary, and multiprofessional activities (Votruba 1992, 1996) disseminated (e.g., published, presented, or archived) in both traditional and non-traditional ways. For example, if we are to take seriously the role of outreach institutes in addressing the problems besetting America's youth, it is clear there is a need for change-oriented (and hence longitudinal), multilevel (and hence multivariate), and multidisciplinary research. In turn, we must recognize the need to educate government agencies and private foundations about the time and financial resources that should be given to such collaborative activities (McLoyd 1994).

Simply, American universities must do more than provide a model for the integration of multiple academic disciplines and multiple professional activities with the community. They must embrace fully — by rewarding behavior consistent with—the ideal of multidimensional excellence, that is, of high-quality contributions across the breadth of the academic missions of research, teaching, and outreach. In other words, if universities are to advance to a significant degree, the integration of research and outreach for the diverse communities of America, sustained efforts must be made to build and maintain — through a revised academic reward system — a new, community-collaborative scholarly agenda.

Specific actions may be taken to create and enact such an agenda through the aegis of a university-wide institute:

• Within the context of the university's mission, envision a precise and (relatively) unique niche for the unit — at the university, state and region, and national levels. For example, it could develop programs to address and inform policies about the reduction of youth violence through the promotion of youth community leadership. Thus, a center could create a focus that would prove its value to the university and to community stakeholders and, as a consequence, would serve as a magnet for other faculty and for potential funders.

• Obtain broad administrative "buy-in" for the concepts involved in articulating its niche. This buy-in should include (1) assignment of faculty time to the center (because raising money to buy faculty time is a slow process that has a low probability of success with conventional funders); *and* (2) discussion about and subsequent provision of a set of services to deans, chairs, and high-quality faculty. Moreover, agreements for buy-in must include — in order to assure that the unit will be accountable — stipulations regarding "buy-out" as well; that is, unit leaders must stipulate how the center will be evaluated over time and how it will be scaled down or eliminated if its goals are not reached; and

• Develop a strategy to involve a selected group of faculty to choose and work on a precise substantive problem area and become the "sample case" for demonstrating the viability of the unit.

This strategy should include an assessment that the case is valued by (a) academic colleagues across the nation (because they comprise peer reviewers of grant applications and publications and may provide collaborative opportunities to a new, strongly constituted center); and (b) community stakeholders, because they are the ultimate audience of the outreach scholarship the center will produce and, also may be members of groups that provide non-conventional sources of funding or even may be potential donors to a future development campaign to endow the center.

In other words, the unit should not try at the outset (or perhaps ever) to be "all things to all people" — faculty, administrators, and community stakeholders. The experience of the authors and their

colleagues across the country who have been involved in founding and developing a similar center or institute (e.g., Beaulieu et al. 1998; McCall et al. 1998; Erickson and Weinberg 1998) report that several elements are essential for success:

1. A precise and stakeholder-valued substantive focus, one which is reviewed and up-dated periodically;
2. Up-front and broad administrative buy-in, from the highest levels of university leadership;
3. A strategic plan for the involvement of a critical mass of high-quality faculty;
4. A system of evaluation and accountability;
5. A collaboration with other comparable centers and institutes; and
6. The maintenance of a means to keep state and national colleagues and community stakeholders invested in the success of the institute.

Committing to Systems Change

Given the great societal and scholarly significance for a unit focused on the issues of at-risk populations, it is essential for developers of such units to consider the criteria for success discussed in this paper. Universities have an important opportunity to provide distinctive and needed scholarly leadership pertinent to enhancing the life chances of Americans. A carefully crafted and executed plan to provide such leadership will ensure that efforts to make visible contributions to local, state, national, and international efforts to improve the lives of people across the life span will be valuable and significant.

"Business as usual" in our universities and in our communities has failed America, and will continue to fail America, unless a sea change in the university system occurs. If we value the future of the United States, we cannot afford to let this failure occur. We must form community-wide collaborations among all institutions. If universities are not part of these collaborations, we predict they will not be viable entities in twenty years. Indeed, when we take off our hats as academics and put on our hats as citizens, we do not see it as feasible or desirable to support institutions that do not contribute to allowing our children and families to have a decent chance in life.

The enactment and refinement of a plan to create the systems change we envision will constitute a means for American higher education to create a university system predicated on the integration of cutting-edge scholarship grounded in the needs and problems of the people of the community. In this way, then, multidisciplinary institutes can enhance our present and provide a productive path for our future.

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