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best practices

Partnering for Social and Economic Development: Collaboration and the Practice of Democracy

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Public universities today are increasingly concerned with demonstrating their economic worth and social relevance to taxpayers. While many in higher education find the times threatening in terms of financial support and autonomy, the authors believe the current social, political, and economic context offers a unique opportunity to rethink purposes and practices of universities and their relationship to the broader community.

In particular, university/community collaborations currently fall short of their economic and educational possibilities due largely to a failure to engage participants as co-equal partners. In this best practices example, the authors discuss a mutually beneficial collaboration developed in the context of migrant/seasonal farm labor that reflects such democratic practice and serves as a potential model for university/community partnerships based not on "outreach," but on reciprocity and mutuality. This example illustrates how reciprocal learning and mutual education can be structured into collaborations so all parties recognize their social and economic interdependence.

Universities must adopt a reconceptualized notion of collaboration and partnership rooted in the practice of democracy. Jeremy Rifkin (1997) submits that the civic sector must emerge as a critical social category alongside the private and public sectors; his societal analysis is useful in rethinking the role and function of public universities relative to the broader community. In Rifkin's argument, the private and public sectors are undergoing downsizing because of many convergent and emergent economic, social, and political factors. Consequently, the civic sector, made up of educational and social-service institutions, is called upon increasingly to provide employment and serve other community needs left unattended by shrinking private and public sectors. Universities, therefore, must assist in the development of social capital in addition to market and public capital to reconceptualize "the social contract

and the kind of education we give to our young people" (Rifkin 1997, 14).

Rifkin asserts that: "(C)ommunity service stems from a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all of life. It is, first and foremost, a social exchange, although often with economic consequences to both the beneficiary and the benefactor" (1997, 15). University/community collaborations can enhance economic viability of all parties (market capital) while concurrently expanding opportunities for mutual educational benefits (social capital).

Traditional University/Community Collaborations

For universities, partnerships with community constituencies usually fall within the realm of service, with outreach as the primary service mechanism. That is, universities are seen — and tend to see themselves — as creators, repositories, and distributors of knowledge, and communities are seen as being in need of that knowledge. A secondary consideration is that communities provide sites at which universities can engage in research to generate new knowledge. In an outreach model, the expertise of the university is applied to a wide range of community problems and disseminated to the community, thereby providing service. The rationale for service being a primary function of universities is that such activity is a pragmatic and necessary way to address a variety of community problems, thereby increasing universities' market and social capital, in Rifkin's terms.

While such services are beneficial, an outreach model is limited in that it does not offer the opportunities for mutual growth and development currently necessary for the viability of many communities and of the university itself. The educational aspects of traditional university/community partnerships tend largely to be unidirectional, *from* universities *to* other communities. Often, partnerships are organized hierarchically, with universities in positions of power and privilege. The results tend to be limited: partners in such collaborations learn little from each other. The university is detached from the broader community at best and perceived as economically and socially irrelevant at worst.

However, the development of social capital linked to market and public capital might be possible if a different model of collaborative practice were used. A more dynamic, multidimensional and reciprocal model of collaboration is needed, one rooted in the practice of democracy, not just for communities that universities "serve," but also for universities themselves. Collaborative partnerships between public universities and community groups can be structurally reconceived to add significantly, in Rifkin's (1997) terms, to the store of social capital, while simultaneously enhancing the economic viability in terms of market capital and the efficacy of public capital represented in public universities.

Collaboration Amid Conflict: The Farm Labor Model

A collaboration developed in the contentious and conflict-ridden arena of seasonal/migrant labor in the agriculture industry —

a working relationship among the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, growers, and corporate food processors — has much to tell us about complex partnerships, education, and social change. The farm labor context comprises an exceedingly complex array of socioeconomic issues and interests, some of which are highly conflicting, and three different parties that came to recognize their interdependence in relation to economic, social, and educational development. Examining a collaboration constructed out of this complexity suggests ways to reconstruct university/community partnerships that not only enhance economic viability, but also create opportunities to learn about their interconnectedness.

Socioeconomic development within university partnership activities can be informed by examining Barber and Reza's (1994) discussion of the historic multiparty partnership agreement created by FLOC and aspects of the partnership including the simultaneous presence of conflict and interdependence; characteristics of the eventual partnership; and educational opportunities that emerged.

The Farm Labor Context

Historically, corporate food processors such as Heinz, Campbell, and Libby contracted with individual growers for their crops, and growers contracted with farmworkers to cultivate and harvest crops (Barger and Reza 1994). The profits of the growers were dependent on getting a price from food processors sufficient to pay wages for workers and provide them with housing during the cultivating and harvesting season. Since food processors preset prices, the only option left for growers was to minimize their own costs by keeping wages and housing costs as low as possible. As a result, farmworkers looked to growers as the main source of both their income and their difficulties. Growers in turn found themselves caught between corporate food processors and workers. Yet, all three groups were mutually dependent on the viability of the industry as a whole and had an interest in its continued operation in the region. Conflicts became so intense, however, that the existence of the industry in the Midwest was threatened.

At this point FLOC called on farmworkers, growers, and corporate food processors to convene to address working and living conditions. Resistance by growers and processors, coupled with a history of farmworker abuse, precipitated a strike in 1978 against Campbell and Libby tomato operations, the most visible companies in the area. The strike was coupled in 1979 with a nationwide boycott of Campbell and Libby products and lasted until 1986, when FLOC signed an historic three-year contract with Campbell and its growers.

This historic multiparty agreement, orchestrated by Baldemar Velasquez, president of FLOC, was created to ensure equal participation and mutual benefit. According to reports by parties, changes arising from this partnership have had a significant positive impact on their socioeconomic and educational needs (Maya and Barger 1997; Barger and Reza 1994). Workers reported that they learned to enhance productivity, increase their pay, and help to make farms more profitable. They also gained greater appreciation for concerns and difficulties of growers and processors by working in

partnership with them. Growers, initially fearful of the agreement's effect on farm profitability, found that higher wages and improved working and living conditions actually increased their profits. Food corporations also reported the value of this agreement to their own existence and viability in the Midwest (Maya and Barger 1997; Barger and Reza 1994).

This partnership enhanced economic development through recapitalizing an industry for an entire region of the country. Further, this economic development was wedded to social improvement and educational opportunities, in that the agreement provided a structure within which people could learn how to live together more democratically. Are these achievements not also goals of universities? It is clear that this is a model from which universities can draw when establishing partnerships.

As stated earlier, universities already partner with community constituencies through outreach activities. However, the critical difference in the FLOC model consists primarily of what is *learned* in the process of living by and through the multi-party agreement. With the emphasis on equal participation and mutuality of interests, participants must learn where interests intersect, where all parties have a stake in making changes. *The FLOC multi-party agreement provides the structure and opportunity to see these intersecting interests in a way that is absent in an outreach model.* The agreement was more than a procedural means to resolving labor/management problems; it was and is also an end in itself, a way of living democratically that promotes growth and learning in all of its participants.

A New Model of University/Community Collaboration

The notion of partnership structure that provides social and educational opportunities was put into practice with the creation of Partnerships for Community Action, an effort to coordinate existing campus/community collaborations at Bowling Green State University and to create new, innovative partnerships. The intent was to look more closely at the needs of groups external to the university and to conceive of new ways BGSU might help to meet those needs. In so doing, PCA would work toward redefining the traditional relationship between the university and the communities it serves and also help faculty integrate teaching, research, and service through their participation in community collaborations.

What follows is a scene from one of the first PCA partnerships, a reading and science literacy program, that emerged from the authors' work with FLOC and involved BGSU, The Toledo Zoo, and FLOC representatives.

In a shaded and grassy area provided by a grower, farmworker children and parents are in small groups sharing in Spanish and in English what they know and have discovered about insects. University tutors, paired with zoo staff and FLOC representatives, are reading stories and insect guides with the children to validate and

broaden their experiences. A zoo curator is circulating among groups with animals and insects indigenous to areas from which the children's families originated. Others are constructing insect models from art supplies, and several groups are roaming the adjacent woods looking for examples of insect communities. A university faculty member is using bilingual CD ROMs on insects and animals with older children, who are also taping and transcribing interviews of participants regarding their impressions of the day's activities. Later, they compose stories for a newsletter documenting their experiences.

The partnership that gave rise to this scene was constructed not only as outreach — a way for the university to help children of migrant workers — but as a way to address needs and concerns of all parties involved. FLOC saw the activities as both an organizing tool and a way to improve farmworker family life. The grower saw this activity as an extension of his commitment to improve farmworker living conditions, which paid both social and economic rewards. The zoo was able to reach a new constituency by linking its educational efforts with the university. BGSU reached an historically underserved population, and partnership activities became sites for faculty to integrate and reinvigorate their teaching and research by drawing on resources and experiences of communities usually outside the focus of academe. In addition, BGSU student tutors had unique opportunities to ground their classroom activities in real life experiences, which added depth and breadth to their professional studies.

This scenario and partnership illustrate that PCA is committed to the concept that all sectors of society — public, private, and civic — can interact to enhance economic development, social awareness, and education. PCA is creating reciprocal and collaborative partnerships with diverse community groups in which all partners have equal voice and opportunities for mutual benefits. Projects are structured such that parties must consider how they influence and affect one another, including what each party might learn from interacting with the others. Consequently, reciprocal learning becomes an explicit purpose of every partnership, and the organizational structure of the partnerships reflects that purpose.

That structure requires a co-equal relationship among parties, with the knowledge, experiences, and interests of each relevant to partnership activities. This structural arrangement is a significant departure from traditional university models, replacing the unidirectional and hierarchical characteristics of outreach with reciprocity, mutuality, and the practice of democracy. This reconstructed partnership arrangement parallels the FLOC multi-party agreement and offers a significant opportunity to link market, social, and public capital of universities. In so doing, all parties enhance their economic viability as well as their opportunities for education and social action.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Beatriz Maya, director of the Farm Labor Education Center, and the many other members of the FLOC staff for their generosity and time in helping the authors understand the context of migrant/seasonal farm labor in the Midwest. They also thank Ken Barger for discussing their ideas, Sidney Ribeau in laying the foundation for rethinking the relationship between universities and the larger society, and Baldemar Velasquez, recipient of a MacArthur Award for his effort to craft the first multi-party labor agreement of its kind, for his continual assistance.

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