



Coaching for Community

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*If you've come to change me — you're wasting your time — if
your liberation is tied up with my liberation, we can work together.*
Australian Aboriginal Woman

Many faculty members, particularly at urban community colleges, commute to their campuses from outside the community. Their idealism and enthusiasm often take the form of “helping” their students to acquire the skills and practices to lift themselves out of the community. I have come to believe that there is a flaw in this model, that we must be willing to examine our assumptions about our students and the interconnectedness between colleges and communities. My professional evolution from faculty member to director of SHARE, a campus-community partnership, is one such journey.

I joined the faculty of Bronx Community College in 1959 as a part-time member of the Health and Physical Education Department and wrestling coach. Academic activists such as Dan Dodson, Patricia Cayo Sexton, and Roscoe C. Brown influenced me during my graduate studies at New York University in the turbulent 1960s. Each of these professors saw education as the vehicle for social mobility, justice, and community building. I spent the next twenty-five years at BCC working to achieve these values as dean of students, chairman of the college curriculum committee, athletic director, and professor of health and physical education. Many of my students achieved remarkable success and reached national prominence in their chosen fields. Three alumni of one my earliest wrestling teams became physicians and two men on the same team earned doctoral degrees. They all left the Bronx to pursue careers elsewhere.

Our campus is on a hill, the highest natural point in New York City. We looked down on the South Bronx, which became, in the 1970s and 1980s, nationally known for high unemployment, the highest rates of infant mortality in the United States, and grinding poverty. It was a symbol of U.S. urban blight.

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In fact, perhaps we were doing just the reverse: creating pathways for the best and brightest to leave the community. We were the vehicle for the social mobility of future leadership to "move on up and out." This became a dilemma for me and for some of my colleagues. How could we make a difference in the transformation of the Bronx by creating and training community leaders rather than serving as a vehicle for their departure?

My own answers came from an unexpected source: running. My spouse and I joined World Runners to End Hunger, which

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conducts marathons that raise money through pledges, used to support hunger-fighting organizations. I became the leader of the N.Y. chapter of World Runners, an international network of 2,000 committed volunteers who raised \$75,000 a year to combat hunger. Through this commitment, I met Dr. Lee Stuart, a founder of Self Help and Resource Exchange (SHARE). She

transformed my views of service and community building.

SHARE is a national network located in 26 U.S. cities. Its mission is based on an idea remarkable in its simplicity — people pool their resources, purchase nutritious food collectively, and distribute it through the efforts of thousands of local volunteers. A shibboleth of SHARE: "The food is yours. You work for it; you paid for it." SHARE is not a charity. It is powered by the bold conviction that economically impoverished people can be the source of ending their own hunger. In the process, they can heal wounds in their communities. Government intervention and traditional charities have not solved economic problems. I began to see how the service-delivery model of traditional charities creates learned dependence and diminishes the dignity of the recipients. It is clear traditional service systems are frequently built on people's deficiencies. SHARE built its community-service system on people's capacities.

SHARE began as a network of ecumenical faith communities, composed of local residents who were moved by a strategy to create a new future for themselves and their communities. My goal was to establish host sites at colleges, thus forging links between them and their home communities. A host site is the location where communities of volunteers reach out to local residents and businesses, collect money, pick up food at the

SHARE warehouse, and organize food distributions. This process is repeated each month.

Clearly, the SHARE program complements the mission of Bronx Community College: "To provide a strong academic foundation for students of diverse backgrounds, preparations, and aspirations in order to further their success in their chosen vocations, their future education, and their community involvement" (*Bronx Community College Catalogue*, 1999-2000, p. 5). This was a way to make real the mission of the college.

My work with SHARE was natural for me. I coached a group of students that become a team for food distributions at the college.

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My athletic coaching experience provided me with the skills to motivate athletes and leaders. Coaches develop people and maximize their performance. As a coach I enabled commitment to become clear and empowered the players. In this "game"

the players were, in the majority, women.

My growing awareness of the need for women's empowerment influenced by my long-evolving marriage fueled my personal commitment. SHARE's vision of a self-reliant community fostered a confluence of four recurring themes in my life: physicality (plenty of this in SHARE), love of teaching and coaching, women's empowerment, and community building. The blending of these themes created a powerful, personal feeling of synergy.

Encouraged and supported first by a grant from The Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), BCC's work with the SHARE program became institutionalized with the support of the president, faculty, and students. President Dr. Roscoe C. Brown Jr. used his "bully pulpit" to highlight the program at every college function and in interviews with reporters. The faculty gave fieldwork credit to students working in the program. Student government lent its support by appropriating student activity funds to cover the costs of advertisements, publicity materials, T-shirts, and other items.

Colleague Dr. Joanne Juechter, who taught in the Business and Commerce Department, joined me in creating a leadership-training program for twenty-five students each year. More than 150 students participated in the program since its inception in 1987. We have developed a successful model program in which students are coached in community building.

A questionnaire administered to alumni of the program confirmed the positive effects of the experience with SHARE on career choice, skill development, value systems, and continuing community involvement. Over the twelve years of the BCC

sponsorship, a great preponderance of student leaders in the program were women. Many went on to positions of responsibility in human service with organizations in the Bronx and upper Manhattan. It is gratifying to note that many alumni have continued their community involvement in such leadership capacities as nurses, social workers, organizers, police officers, and teachers. One alumna wrote, "I am working with a community group as a tenant organizer and now I have organized a new SHARE host site in Washington Heights (Manhattan). As a community organizer I have to identify leaders and teach them to recruit support." Another reported, "SHARE has influenced my career choice in showing me that people

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SHARE provided leadership opportunities that engaged them and made a difference in the community. Another alumna reported, "SHARE afforded me the opportunity to blossom as an assertive woman without being labeled, it allowed me to establish friendships with people of diverse backgrounds, and showed me the similarities rather than the differences among people."

The program continues now with the encouragement and support of the current college president, Dr.

Carolyn G. Williams. A new faculty member from the mathematics department directs the program and is awarded release time for one course in order to lead the training.

In this post-retirement phase of my life, as I work as an organizational-development consultant, I continue to volunteer at the SHARE warehouse each month. My wife and I initiated a scholarship for graduate study given to an outstanding student leader who seeks a community-service career.

One of the benefits of the SHARE program at BCC is the diversity among the faculty, students, and community members who work together each month. Among faculty there is the satisfaction of making a positive difference in the lives of students and the community. The weekly leadership training with the students has become a laboratory for personal growth for both the faculty and students. It produces a shared vision and the satisfaction of accomplishment after the food distribution each month. BCC and student leaders created an enabling environment for community-resident families to increase control over and improve the quality of their health and nutritional status. The partnership between the

community and the college builds on the strengths of both groups and is more likely have an impact.

The SHARE program at BCC has been replicated at four other colleges in the City University of New York system. As with all such grassroots work, the replication phase requires a clearly articulated vision, enthusiasm, tenacity, and the willingness to be stubbornly persistent.

I offer the following advice for faculty considering a similar path: Be clear about your vision and let that lead you. Tap into your highest aspirations and motivation. Let your spirit guide you and embrace the obstacles — there will be many. I have learned almost everyone wants to make the vision real — many are unwilling to do the necessary work. Develop allies among professional colleagues and life partners. Commit to being unstoppable. ■

References

Bronx Community College Catalogue, 1999-2000, p. 5.

About the Author

In his 40-year career in higher education, Michael Steuerman (M.A., Columbia University Teacher's College) has been a dean, department chairman, and athletic director. He has won numerous grants and is acknowledged as a national leader for his work incorporating community service into the college experience. For the past five years, he has worked as a trainer and consultant in the private sector. He has served on many non-profit boards, most recently serving as president of SHARE, a community development agency serving approximately 20,000 families in the New York metropolitan area.

While a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he coached the Israeli national wrestling team. He has traveled extensively in West Africa and Bangladesh as a member of the Global Investment Group of The Hunger Project.