

Jentleson, B. C. (2011). *Better Together: A Model University-Community Partnership for Urban Youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Review by John Byrnes

Overall, *Better Together* is a wonderfully told, tightly organized success story about the development of the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Project. It does a tremendous service for those involved in higher education outreach and engagement by providing a window into the process of developing successful partnerships in an urban setting. The author grabbed my interest right away by posing the key questions that the project hoped to address. I also found it helpful that the book was organized by issue, not chronologically. The challenges faced by those involved in this project came across as real and pressing. This opportunity to experience how the project leadership faced each issue one by one was truly a gift.

My experience as an Extension director in a large urban setting has led to a particularly meaningful appreciation of this book. My staff and I are often at a loss for words when pressed by university staff and leaders to share our experiences in the field. We have each spent many hours encouraging Pennsylvania State University College of Agriculture Sciences researchers, professors, and administrators to appreciate the need for developing partnerships first when attempting to develop projects in Philadelphia. The mantle of “expert” is not easily set aside; over time, however, we have demonstrated that truly listening and establishing trust with local, urban partners opens doors to a world of opportunity for engagement.

It was particularly fascinating to me that the author began by directly addressing the question of benefits to the university from the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership. It seems to me that this basic question formed the foundation of all that followed. I also imagine that the answers helped to quickly assure skeptics that the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership was indeed a worthwhile endeavor. This sort of “what’s in it for us?” thinking seems crass on the surface, but fully exploring such topics helps sustain energy for a project when the inevitable challenges surface. The question also leads to its follow-up: “What’s in it for the community?” Honest answers to these research questions ultimately gave all involved the opportunity to create the “bottom up” approach that Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership leadership so astutely realized was essential to the project’s eventual success.

I was also grateful for Jentleson's willingness to highlight both formal and non-formal outcomes of the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership project. Documenting concrete success in terms of school attendance and achievement, community health, and other indicators is, of course, important to a project of this magnitude. However, the hard work of making a university relevant in an underserved community can lead to "softer impacts," which are difficult to measure. For example, how does one measure trust? The leadership of the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership seems to understand that empowering afterschool program leadership, Duke students, and the youth themselves provided the oxygen that kept this project thriving. In other words, the path to the outcome is often more worthwhile than the outcome itself.

At our Extension office we live this every day. Our frustration regarding the occasional inability to bring quantitative impact data back to the university's leadership is tempered by the ongoing experience of knowing that our day-to-day work at partnership development does the community and the university a world of good. Through our relationships, our partners are often inspired to think beyond the current reality and stretch the boundaries of their vision for their organizations and operations. In turn, university staff have the chance to analyze their expertise to find the best fit for their skills and knowledge. Penn State Extension staff in Philadelphia have been told many times by students and professors alike that working with our Extension partners energizes their sense of creativity and resourcefulness; that it is freeing to be considered relevant in the world of real and present challenges and limitations. I commend the author on her ability to give life to this benefit of successful university engagement.

One of the more remarkable aspects of the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership story is the seamless and ever-deepening flow of Duke University's involvement in this project, from the early needs assessment through the eventual purchasing and development of community centers. At Penn State, we struggle to develop continuity with our on-campus partners. The contrast with Duke's experience left me wondering what parts of their story were left on the cutting-room floor. On the surface, this development of an institutionalized approach comes across as the greatest impact of the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership, but how well does the narrative reflect the origins of Duke's commitment? Has the story been polished just a bit? It would be helpful for the reader to know more about Duke's struggles. How, specifically, did Duke's leadership determine that the project was deserving of greater

and greater commitment? The book provides only brief coverage of the transition from a Kellogg Foundation-supported project to an institution-supported Office of Student Learning project. Were the decision makers at Duke all in agreement that funds for this project should be re-directed from one area of the university to the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership? If not, what were the arguments for doing so? Today, is there a sustainable funding plan for the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership?

Of course, this skepticism comes from my experience at Penn State. Here, public funding for education is questioned at every turn; university departments develop “business plans,” and—in many cases—funding for urban outreach programs is the last thing considered in budget-setting discussions. The story of the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership, as told in this remarkable book, could provide new energy to university leadership and legislators alike as they re-envision the role of publicly funded education in the new U.S. economy.

About the Reviewer

John Byrnes is the director of Penn State Extension in Philadelphia, where he works to engage university staff in Extension programs in the areas of Youth Development, Horticulture, Agricultural Entrepreneurship, and Family and Consumer Sciences. Byrnes earned his bachelor’s degree from State University of New York at Albany, his master’s degree from Teachers College/Columbia University, and his Ph.D. from Temple University.

Acknowledgment

The *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement’s* associate editor for book reviews, Ted Alter (professor of Agricultural, Regional, and Environmental Economics at The Pennsylvania State University), and editor, Trish Kalivoda thank Teachers College Press for providing complimentary copies of the book for this review.

