



University-Community Collaborations: A Case Study of an Effective Partnership

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Introduction

Nationally, there has been a growing trend towards the establishment of unique and innovative collaborative partnerships between institutions of higher education and the communities they serve (Lowery & SuengJa Doe, 2005). Such collaborations are believed to be meaningful and mutually beneficial to both partners. A number of articles and conference presentations have addressed the growing significance and relevance of these partnerships, encompassing a diverse array of educational disciplines such as community planning, public health, psychology, education, law, occupational therapy and sociology (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Casella, 2002; Lowery & SeungJa Doe, 2005; Metzger et al., 2003; Sclove, Scammel & Holland, 1998; Taylor, Braveman & Hammel, 2004).

There is some debate on what motivates these collaborative efforts. According to Rogge & Roche (2005), this commitment to community partnerships has been increasingly motivated by the availability of federal resources and grants (such as the Community Outreach Partnership Centers funded by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development - HUD), and other philanthropic organizations (p. 104). These funding sources have leaned on educational institutions to engage more fully in inter-disciplinary, and inter-community work with significant involvement from grassroots organizations and community members. Timmermans and Bouman (2005) believe, however, that the impetus for engagement arose out of an examination of the role of faculty and educational institutions engaged in research (p. 90). They argue that in order for faculty to engage in participatory research, they need to be responsible, ethical and sensitive to the needs of the community. This current paradigm of university-community engagement is frequently referred to as the "scholarship of engagement", a philosophy outlined by Ernest Boyer (Boyer, 1990; Bringle, Games & Molloy, 1999; Lowery & SeungJa Doe, 2005; Glassick, 1999;

Rubin 1998). Boyer (1990) believed that it was the primary responsibility of faculty and educational institutions to contribute to the intellectual and civic progress of the nation by addressing the social, civic and economic problems of communities through the "scholarship of engagement" (Bringle, Games, & Molloy, 1999; Timmermans & Bouman, 2005). Rogge and Rocha (2005) argue that through university-community collaborations, educators are "challenged to enact ethical, proactive approaches that underscore knowledge and skills for advocacy and community-focused practice" (p. 104).

Educational institutions have benefited from partnerships with communities in a variety of ways. They have expanded their visibility, increased their credibility and have become eligible for additional funding opportunities. Faculty benefit too, as this process allows them to network with community members and agencies, nurture relationships and build trust, and ultimately conduct participatory research. However, the benefit of university-community collaborations is not confined to faculty and educational institutions alone. Saltmarsh (1998) believed that partnerships have helped transform the educational paradigm and validated the significance of service learning. It is through experiential and service-oriented learning, that civic engagement, social responsibility and community awareness is critically generated among students (Chickering, 2001; Saltmarsh, 1998). It is generally believed that the optimal learning experience is one that engages students in learning that is relevant to the world in which they live.

Social work as a profession is committed to the ideals of social justice, empowerment and social change. The NASW Code of Ethics states that a primary responsibility of the profession is to increase the responsiveness of community agencies, environments and social institutions to meet individual needs and solve social problems (NASW, 2002). Fundamental to the profession is the focus on

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addressing the social and environmental context that produces and/or perpetuates social problems.

Therefore, as social work educators, we must be committed to engaging students in the communities in which they wish to serve throughout their educational tenure. Not just field work, but all aspects of the education must have a basis in ground-reality and be specifically tailored to the uniqueness of the environment in which the school is located.

Participatory and grounded education emphasizes the codependence between communities and their citizens and institutions, and allows for greater consciousness-raising and mutual skill development. Engaged within the community while learning, students are exposed to the impact of organizations, institutions and individuals on social policy and the provision of services (macro-level), as well as the relevance of collective problem solving.

In 1999, the new Chancellor at Indiana University Northwest (IUN) exhorted the academic community to support his "shared vision." The new mission of the school was to "interact in caring and competent ways to support individual and community aspirations and growth" (Indiana University Northwest, 1999). The university is committed to enhancing the quality of life for all the residents of the region and not just its students. IUN is located in Gary, Indiana, a city in serious decline for the last 25 years. The community has experienced an increasing concentration of poverty, racial segregation, a tremendous loss of jobs, lack of economic opportunities, and an exceedingly high incidence of crime. The Northwest Indiana region has also been beset by high rates of unemployment, loss of manufacturing jobs, an upsurge in crystal meth production and use, as well as a flight of the middle class to neighboring counties and even Illinois. In response to the chancellor's call to community service, various disciplines and departments at IUN, including the Division of Social Work, endeavored to realize this mission of civic engagement and partnerships. The Division of Social Work has had a distinguished record of establishing and maintaining

partnerships with community agencies and social service organizations. Many of our students accomplish their field work requirements with one of over 100 agencies in the region and most alumni work within the community. The faculty is encouraged to engage in community service and participatory research that benefits the community. In fact, the Division of Social Work requires that its faculty devote approximately 30 percent of their time to community service. This service component forms a significant portion of a faculty member's P&T (promotion and tenure) portfolio. It is under this context that one of the most productive, meaningful and mutually beneficial collaborations was set in motion between the Division of Social Work and the Northwest Indiana Continuum of Care (NWICoC).

The Continuum of Care (CoC) Model

The Continuum of Care (CoC) process was developed in 1994 by HUD so that communities around the country would use a single, comprehensive planning process when applying for HUDs homeless assistance funding. Most CoCs are organized either by a local government agency or a large community non-profit. The CoC membership is typically comprised of government agencies, service providers, advocates and consumers. The CoC's goal is to create an annual plan to address homelessness. To do this, the CoC must define the scope of homelessness in their community, develop an inventory of resources currently available to address homelessness, identify gaps in services, and then prioritize unmet needs. When HUD issues its annual request for proposals (NOFA), the CoCs must rank new and renewal programs in a manner that is congruent with their local analysis of unmet need (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2005).

The Northwest Indiana Continuum of Care (NWICoC)

The Northwest Indiana Continuum of Care (NWICoC) was established in 2000 and encompassed the three state counties of Lake, Laporte and Porter. The NWICoC comprises nearly

60 housing service providers, the community development authorities (CDCs) of Gary, Hammond and East Chicago, the Housing Authorities within the service region, the NWI Race Relations Council and consumer advocates. The members represent a diverse cross section of the social service and not-for-profit world, such as mental health programs, substance abuse services, shelters, group homes, youth and adolescent services, crisis centers, domestic violence services, developmental disabilities, etc. The NWICoC is led by an Executive Director and has no other staff. The local CDCs provide office space, limited access to professional assistants and some help with filing, word processing, photocopying, etc. The NWICoC is charged with the responsibility for collecting data, providing a community forum for networking and discussion of housing issues, and coordinating the application for annual HUD grants. In 2002, the NWICoC extended an invitation to the Division of Social Work at Indiana University Northwest to join the CoC. This invitation was made at the behest of some community providers who had an established linkage with the Social Work Division to provide interns.

Two faculty members embraced this opportunity to work with the CoC. One of the faculty members (author) was, previously, the clinical supervisor of a housing program for homeless, HIV-positive persons in New York. Both the faculty members were passionate about issues of homelessness and community empowerment. Since 2002, the two faculty members have devoted at least five hours each week to the CoC and its constituent members. A number of projects have been designed and implemented as a result of this strategic community partnership.

Significant Outcomes: Division of Social Work-NWICoC Joint Projects

(i) *The First Northwest Indiana Housing Summit:* One of the faculty members served on the Steering Committee that organized the first annual conference to address issues of inadequate housing and

homelessness in Northwest Indiana. The day-long event brought together nearly 500 participants, 100 vendors and corporate sponsors, HUD, IHFA (Indiana Housing Finance Authority), educational institutions, local governments, elected representatives, advocates, housing service providers and consumers. Co-sponsored by the Division of Social Work, the event helped raise community awareness about the critical issue of homelessness. Workshops, roundtables and panel discussions (a few of which were presented by faculty, alumni and current students) helped educate, sensitize and offer potential solutions. Emboldened and enthused by the success of this first event, the NWICoC is currently planning for the second summit in 2006. The NWICoC has now been approached by other CoCs within the state to assist them in organizing their own summits or mini-conferences.

(ii) *Needs Assessment:* A critical mission of a CoC is to explore and document the nature and extent of homelessness in their community. To meet this goal, the NWICoC undertook a community-wide Needs Assessment. With limited resources and expertise, the NWICoC requested assistance from the Division of Social Work. Two faculty members who are responsible for teaching Research Methods and Application in the MSW program offered their services. In coordination with three graduate students (MSW), a service learning project was initiated. The study team worked in collaboration with constituent members of the NWICoC to design the survey questionnaire. The survey was administered and the data was collected and analyzed by the study team. Costs for conducting the Needs Assessment were shared by the partners. Overhead costs such as printing, stationary, postage, etc. were paid for by the NWICoC, while the faculty members donated their time. The students received independent study credits equivalent to one elective course for their efforts. This was a unique and interesting project for the students, who had the opportunity to participate in a research project that was closely linked to the community in

which they lived and worked. The study team is now working on an article for publication to highlight their experiences.

(iii) *Program and Resource Manual*: One of the persistent complaints of member agencies of the NWICoC was the lack of knowledge about the services and resources available within the community. Several members reported that their staff were unaware of specific programs and were unable to inform or refer their clients effectively. The NWICoC decided to create a resource manual for service providers and consumers. A project committee was formed that consisted of representatives from various member agencies and a faculty member from IUN. The initial design and layout of the manual was accomplished by this project committee. But it was felt that more time, expertise and effort was required to successfully accomplish this project. A member suggested collaboration with the Division of Social Work. This faculty member (author) offered to lead the project. A service learning opportunity was created for students and five graduate students (MSW) volunteered to participate. The students met weekly with the faculty member for six months, helped collect the necessary information and prepare a draft of the Resource Manual. The draft was shared with the project committee, and after minor modifications, was approved for publication. This resource manual was distributed to community service providers, community advocates, religious organizations and libraries. In addition, the manual was made available online at no cost. The students expanded their knowledge of the range and diversity of social services and housing programs available in our community, and are witness to the impact their efforts have had on the community. This manual has been widely distributed and appreciated, and as a result of this effort, several agencies and organizations have approached the Division of Social Work for technical assistance. Finally, the students will present a workshop on their experiences, entitled "University-Community Partnerships," at the

2006 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) conference in Chicago.

(iv) *Grant Writing*: Each year the CoC reviews grant proposals for the annual HUD-administered NOFAs. The CoC is required to educate and inform members about the grant opportunities, invite specific proposals, evaluate their level of congruence with their strategic mission, and rank them in order of priority. The prioritized list of proposals is then forwarded to the state department of HUD which uses the information provided by the local CoCs to create their own prioritized list of grant applications before they are forwarded to the national HUD office. HUD reviewers attach significant relevance to CoCs' recommendations in their determination of grant awardees. Many member agencies had limited information and wherewithal to prepare grant applications. Additionally, several members inquired about nationally recognized, "best practices" models of services that they could adapt for their needs. One of the faculty members of CoC undertook a trip to New York (financed by a grant from IUN) to meet with and learn from housing service providers about their nationally-recognized models of service. A partnership of three community agencies (members of NWICoC) proposed a similar model for housing in our region and was funded by HUD in 2004. This information was then shared with member agencies. Another faculty member designed and conducted grant writing workshops for interested members. As a result of both these endeavors, a record number of grant proposals were received by the NWICoC in 2004 and 2005. A moving testament to this collaborative effort is that local agencies have received nearly \$6.5 million in HUD funding in the last three years alone.

(v) *Student Practicum*s: One of the practice concentrations offered at the MSW level at IUN is referred to as "Leadership." The goal of this concentration is to identify potential leaders and innovators in our programs and help nurture them and instill in them a devotion to the ideals of social justice and community empowerment. The students in

this concentration are generally interested in community practice, advocacy and organization. For their field internships, the students are provided opportunities that allow them to engage in community building, social action and civic engagement. The NWICoC now provides significant fieldwork opportunities for our students from the "Leadership" concentration. Students can either be placed with individual member agencies or directly work with the NWICoC. In this capacity, they are exposed to community collaborations, strategic planning, innovative partnering, housing issues, and learn the significance of community awareness and pooled resources. Each semester, at least two students can be placed with the NWICoC and are directly supervised by a professional social worker. For the NWICoC, which has only one paid professional staff member (the executive director), the availability of two student interns provides much needed support. It has helped strengthen the CoC and allowed it to engage in several new innovative community-related endeavors.

(vi) *Technical Assistance:* The NWICoC is moving into the digital age and is currently engaged in creating and maintaining a website. To this end, plans are underway to collaborate with the Department of Computer Science and Technology, to create and maintain a website for the NWICoC and the upcoming Housing Summit. Additionally, a need for financial and accounting expertise has also been expressed by member agencies of the NWICoC. To this end, the Department of Business Administration has been approached for technical assistance. Both these projects are envisioned as service learning projects for students and faculty members from these respective departments. Finally, the Center for Sustainable Regional Vitality, an affiliate of IUN, provides annual grants to faculty members who are engaged in community-related research and/or service. A partnership with a community agency is an essential requirement for eligibility. A small grant was awarded to this author to evaluate the challenges faced by homeless LGBT

youth in the community. Another proposal that will evaluate the incidence and nature of homelessness among first-generation immigrants has been submitted for review. The NWICoC is also working on a larger grant application in conjunction with the Division of Social Work for the coming year, which may be combined with other community grants.

The Benefits of the Division of Social Work— NWICoC Collaboration

The benefits of engaging in community partnerships are varied and several. A review of research articles and relevant literature reveals that such collaborations help build capacity in organizations and communities, influence social policy, increase the knowledge and service efficacy of social service organizations, provide program evaluation and grant writing assistance, promote social action and advocacy, allow for sharing of resources, and inspire faculty and students (Bland, Starnaman, Hembroff, Perlstadt, Henry & Richards, 1999; Harris, Henry, Bland, Starnaman & Voytek, 2003; Kaufman, 2005; Small, 2005; Rogge & Rocha, 2005; Suarez, Harper & Lewis, 2005). Additionally, collaborative endeavors enable universities and educational institutions to "give back" to the communities in which they exist. Frequently, educational institutions are considered "elitist" and viewed with hostility and suspicion by local communities (Kaufman, 2005; Van der Eb, Peddle, Buntin, et al., 2004). Strategic alliances that enhance the general welfare and well being of communities and seek to invest in the social capital of a community, generate a great deal of goodwill for a university, as well as provide for a mutually beneficial alliance. These alliances enable students to perceive civic responsibility and the need for social awareness as life-long and integral to being an inherent part of the social fabric.

With respect to the specific Division of Social Work-NWICoC collaboration the diverse benefits can be evaluated separately for all the constituents:

(a) *Faculty:* The faculty has gained a greater awareness and knowledge of local problems and

social issues. This has enhanced their teaching and instruction within the classroom. This enhanced classroom content, opportunities for experiential learning by students and reflective processes have served as critical pedagogical tools to make the courses relevant and "real." For instance, classes like Applied Research, which can be rather "dry" and lack student enthusiasm, can be significantly enhanced by engaging in "actual," community-based research. The faculty has also made significant inroads into the local community and helped establish a relationship based on mutual respect and trust. These strong relationships have created greater opportunities for faculty to engage in participatory research and partner with service providers to identify potential avenues for cooperation.

(b) *Students:* Students who have participated in the service learning opportunities have gained a tremendous amount of knowledge and professional experience from their endeavors. They have learned about the nature of grassroots organizing, community practice techniques, group dynamics, social action and advocacy. Working closely with NWICoC, they gained an "insider's" view of how community coalitions function, their benefits and challenges. Students have gained increased awareness and knowledge of the social problem of inadequate housing and how various factors within the environment including other social problems interact with one another. Working on the Resource Manual they discovered the nature and scope of social services in the region and the service deficits and inequities that exist. Also, engaged in this community practice process, students learned the importance of asking questions and raising issues that may otherwise be forgotten. However, the most important benefit was that the projects inspired the students. In their course evaluations, students discussed how their experiences had given them a new outlook on community social work practice. Some of the students described their interactions with the community as "eye-opening," "reality-testing," "moving," "hands-on learning," and "motivating."

They talked about how working "hands-on," which sometimes is not possible in all fieldwork opportunities, and observing the direct impact of their efforts, as well as networking with community leaders and consumers, has changed them inherently. They are inspired, motivated and passionate about the potential of our profession. Additional evidence of their changed perspectives is that three out of the five graduate students who worked on the manual, have decided to enroll in the community organization/leadership concentration, even though they originally identified their interest in the clinical/mental health concentration before their community experience.

(c) *Division of Social Work:* The Division of Social Work has gained greater credibility, visibility and respect within the community. Community members and organizations have appreciated the efforts of the division faculty in enhancing the well being of the local region. Several organizations and coalitions have approached the division to provide technical assistance, guidance and expertise. Some staff members from member agencies of NWICoC have actually enrolled in the MSW program, directly enthused by their experiences with the social work faculty. In addition, community members who have not trained in social work, or are considering their continuing educational options, have participated in workshops and trainings offered by the social work faculty. An accrued benefit of this collaboration is the increased interest in *continuing education*. Many alumni have requested additional training in areas of community organization and advocacy. One of the faculty members offered courses on "cultural competency in the workplace" and "supervision" which was open to current students, alumni and community members. These courses required the participants to interact with member agencies of NWICoC and provided opportunities for guest lecturers and "in-field" experiences. Both these courses proved to be quite popular and shall be offered again next year. Many of the member agencies of the NWICoC have also

offered to create fieldwork opportunities for students of the Division of Social Work. This has expanded the division's field agency network and offered innovative opportunities for students enrolled in the "community organization/leadership" concentration.

(d) The Community: The community has experienced several significant social problems and challenges. This joint collaboration has helped to draw attention to a critical issue—the lack of safe, fair, and affordable housing. Homelessness or inadequate housing affects a significant proportion of the local population. By organizing the housing summit, applying for grants, offering technical assistance, helping design and evaluate programs, conducting a needs assessment and enhancing the capacity of local organizations, this university-community collaboration has had a tremendously positive impact on the community. This collaboration has helped enhance the capacity and abilities of the community itself and its residents by offering information, policy analysis, free workshops and training on community organizing and advocacy within the community. The \$6.5 million in housing (HUD) funds have helped to provide scatter-site and other types of supportive housing for homeless individuals and families within the community. The clients who have benefited from these projects are generally low-income and may be HIV+, developmentally disabled, victims of domestic violence, formerly incarcerated or suffering from significant mental health and/or substance abuse issues. As in any community development program, the process of initiating and sustaining progress or change is slow and deliberate. But the ongoing collaboration has made significant strides and provided tangible benefits for the local community.

Lessons Learned—The Challenges of Collaboration

While the benefits of university-community partnerships are many-fold, such alliances are also fraught with significant challenges. (Bland, Starnaman, Hembroff, Perlstadt, Henry & Richards,

1999; Harris, Henry, Bland, Starnaman & Voytek, 2003; Kaufman, 2005; Small, 2005; Rogge & Rocha, 2005; Suarez-Balcazar, Harper & Lewis, 2005). The successful outcome of any collaboration requires the identification and prompt resolution of any issues that may pose challenges. Issues such as poor leadership, lack of trust, competing interests, cultural insensitivity, incongruent working styles, lack of resources, and lack of interest are frequently identified as major obstacles to productive and meaningful community engagement (Lowery & SeungJa Doe, 2005; Kaufman, 2005; Van der Eb, Peddle, Buntin, et al., 2004).

The NWICoC-Division of Social Work partnership experienced some challenges as well. However, both parties were invested in the successful outcome of this endeavor and worked together to problem solve and find mutually satisfying solutions to any inherent issues. Some of the issues that required creative solutions were:

(a) Trust and Territorial Boundaries: This was a major issue for both parties, especially the member agencies of NWICoC. Although the faculty was invited to the table, there was a general concern that they may take over the process or seek to control it. This was further exacerbated because some members felt intimidated by their limited educational backgrounds. The faculty members spent a great deal of time observing the participants interact and learning about the intricacies of their personalities and expectations. They allowed the members to lead the processes and served as advisors and facilitators initially. Only once trust was gained, the faculty members began to interact more fully and equally in all proceedings.

(b) Time Commitments: Although the faculty members agreed to allot a significant amount of time to work with the NWICoC, in the initial phase, they were required to contribute an even greater amount of their time and efforts. This conflicted with other responsibilities of teaching and research. But we realized that although being flexible was necessary, setting limits and time management skills

were equally essential. Conducting meetings at the school itself and/or the use of multi-media technology greatly reduced the level of stress and minimized the feeling of being pulled in opposite directions simultaneously. Also having two faculty members meant that the work could be divided and shared.

(c) Conflicting Expectations: This issue has come up for discussion on many occasions. The faculty members felt at times that they were being viewed as sources of "free expertise" or as the conduit to fiscal resources. On the other hand, few NWICoC members felt that the school's sole aim was to place more students in field, or to use their clients as research subjects. This issue comes up frequently when faculty members have suggested joint applications for research grants, or when faculty are "expected" to provide free technical assistance to agencies on a regular basis. Continuing dialogue and frank discussions have allowed these opinions to be aired and potential conflicts resolved. As the level of trust has grown, this process has become more conducive to dialogue and forthrightness. Over time, the NWICoC members have come to realize that although the faculty members are committed to the progress of the coalition, they have other professional obligations and neither their expertise nor the demands on their time can be taken for granted.

(d) Fiscal inequities: At times, the individual agencies of the NWICoC have expressed the opinion that the school has greater fiscal resources at their disposal than they are willing to share with the community. Also, members have expressed dismay that faculty members have "not done enough" to wrangle greater financial support for the NWICoC. On the other hand, the members also want to be independent and self-reliant, and do not want the school to become a financial sponsor and overseer. The faculty members have done their best to connect the NWICoC with financial and material resources such as technical assistance, field interns, meeting spaces and conference facilities, multi-media services, and financial sponsorship for the

housing summit. As the relationship has matured, the NWICoC have begun to value the role of the university and the school of social work in facilitating their progress and mission. But we believe that this issue will be up for debate consistently due to the large inequity that exists between a state school and an under-funded community coalition.

(e) Cultural Disconnect: Both faculty members are not originally from the Northwest Indiana region, although one has lived here for more than 10 years. Most of the agency administrators, community advocates and consumers are from the local area and had known each other. It was quite disconcerting to work with a group that had established bonds and set ways of working. One interesting example of the cultural disconnect for this author was how integral the role of the church and religious leaders was to the community. Another example was the frequently cited distrust of large institutions and the "white man." On the other hand, many members of the NWICoC had limited experience with conducting meetings and committee structure, of which educators are only too keenly aware! However, as the NWICoC grew its membership, it became more diverse with respect to types of community organizations and members' ethnic backgrounds. Thus, it worked to the benefit of the faculty members to have entered into the partnership at this important time. The partnership has invited speakers to discuss the issues of cultural sensitivity and competence within the context of community coalitions.

Conclusion

The Division of Social Work-NWICoC partnership has matured and prospered over the last two years. This collaboration has been mutually beneficial to both entities, and is a case study of an effective partnership. While there were a few hiccups along the way, commitment, communication and openness have been key to facilitating the process. Both parties have realized the importance of effective leadership, commitment of faculty,

complimentary missions, adaptive curriculum that mirrors community practice, and flexibility with established norms in nurturing this meaningful relationship. The Division of Social Work believes that it is fulfilling its commitment to the community to foster social justice and empowerment, and thereby helping to build a strong, self-sustaining

environment. On the other hand, the NWICoC has achieved significant gains in the course of a short time and continues to grow in strength and capability. We are proud of this collaborative effort that has profoundly changed the perspective of the role and responsibility of an educational institution in our community.

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