

# THE CHALLENGES OF AGENDA CONFLICT IN HIGHER-EDUCATION-COMMUNITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS: VIEWS FROM THE COMMUNITY SIDE

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**ABSTRACT:** *Responding to both the proliferation of higher-education-community partnerships and the paucity of studies that report the perspective of the community partners in such relationships, we interviewed community leaders to learn about their motivations for and experiences of participating in higher-education-community research partnerships. The article reports community leaders' assessments of the benefits and challenges of engaging in such partnerships, shares their advice for both community and university-based actors considering involvement in such partnerships, and explores the larger institutional and structural issues that bedevil higher-education-community partnerships.*

**T**he community development field has grown significantly over the last 30 years. The number of community development corporations (CDCs) grew from fewer than 200 in the 1980s to more than 2000 in the 1990s (NCCED, 1995), and CDCs have increasingly become major actors in community building (Sullivan, 1993). Whereas most CDCs initially focused on housing production and/or renovation, a combination of federal policy changes, shifts in foundation and government funding, and worsening conditions in inner cities have encouraged many CDCs to expand their portfolio of activities. It is not uncommon to find CDCs involved in business development, job training, major economic development initiatives, and human service programs all designed to rebuild neighborhood economies and social fabrics. Such rebuilding is a tall order for any organization and is particularly challenging for CDCs and other community-based organizations (CBOs), most of which depend on relatively small staffs, suffer high turnover, are severely

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JOURNAL OF URBAN AFFAIRS, Volume 26, Number 2, pages 241-257

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ISSN: 0735-2166.

undercapitalized, and, consequently, often lack the expertise and organizational capacity necessary to redevelop communities (Bratt Keyes, Schwartz, & Vidal, 1994; Vidal, 1996, 1997; Walker, 1995).

As CDCs and other community-based organizations have proliferated and struggled, a national system of intermediaries has developed to provide technical assistance and institutional support. The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), Enterprise Foundation, Development Training Institute (DTI), National Community Building Network (NCBN), and National Congress for Community Economic Development all provide consulting, financial assistance, management and organizational training, topical workshops and courses, information sharing, and other services (Kingsley, McNeely, & Gibson, 1998).

More recently and less formally, institutions of higher education have begun working with CDCs and other CBOs that share with institutions of higher education commitments to particular geographical places. Increasingly supported by major organizations such as Campus Compact, American Association of Higher Education, Fannie Mae, and HUD, these higher education community research partnerships include the Policy Research Action Group (PRAG), the Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization Project in Minneapolis-St. Paul, the Center for Urban Research and Learning (Loyola University), the Great Cities Institute (University of Illinois in Chicago), the University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia (Temple University), the Center for Community Partnerships (University of Pennsylvania), the Edward Ginsburg Center for Community and Service Learning (University of Michigan), some of the HUD-funded Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC), and a host of smaller efforts. Somewhat analogous to the agricultural extension efforts of land-grant universities, these higher-education-community research partnerships have taken root where problems of poverty and disinvestment pose severe challenges to neighborhoods and neighborhood organizations. In many cases, university faculty and students have provided critical research and other forms of expertise such as education and training to CDCs and other CBOs struggling to address urban and community revitalization issues.

Proliferating along with these higher-education-community research partnerships has been a growing body of literature that speaks to the perceived value of these partnerships—at least through the eyes of the higher education partner. The literature underscores the moral/civic obligation of universities to their communities (cf. Bok, 1982; Hackney, 1994; Boyer, 1994), highlights the benefits that faculty and students derive from engaging in this type of work (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Ferman & Shlay, 1997; Hill & Dougherty, 2002; Lawson, 2002; McNicoll, 1999; Stoecker, 2001; Strand, 2000) and explores the issues that confront university researchers involved in such partnerships (Bartelt, 1995; Benson & Harkavy, 2001; Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997; Nyden & Wiewel, 1992; Gilderbloom & Mullins, 1995; Harkavy & Wiewel, 1995; Hill & Dougherty, 2002; Ramaley, 1995; Stoecker, 2002, 2001; Strand, 2000; Walshok, 1995).

While quite useful and insightful, this literature is written almost entirely from the higher education perspective, leaving unanswered major questions about how community partners view and evaluate such partnerships, about why they enter into them, about the usefulness of such partnerships in supporting community development activities, and about the issues that emerge in navigating such partnerships (Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos, & Anderson, 2001; Rubin, 2000). As Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos, and Anderson (2001) point out (in their work that focuses on the community side):

much of the literature on partnerships between anchor institutions and communities focuses on the institutions rather than on the community perspective. [Thus] the role of the community, the types of community groups or organizations that are involved, and the way partnerships are institutionalized at the local level are less well understood than the roles and concerns of anchor institutions (p. 3).

Building on Fulbright-Anderson, et al.'s (2001) community-focused work and Nye and Schramm's (1999) interviews with both community partners and academics involved in COPC sites, we seek to explore and understand the roles and concerns of the community organizations involved in higher-education-community research partnerships.

Our research starts from the observation, drawn from both the university-side literature on research partnerships and our own fieldwork, that while research partnerships yield benefits to both sides, they also generate significant tensions, some of which seem intractable. To try to understand both the benefits and the tensions, and to gain some insight into the tensions that arise when two complex institutions (communities and institutions of higher education) seek to partner, we explore the partnership process, paying special attention to incentives, capacity, and institutional space. Thus, we expect that while both sides might enter a higher-education-community research partnership with seemingly complementary goals (both wanting to generate and use certain kinds of research), their individual incentive structures may well conflict and drive them apart. Moreover, even if their incentives are well aligned, their work together may reveal that one or both partners do not have the capacity to deliver on commitments. Finally, context matters: The alignment of incentives and the development of appropriate capacity are often mediated through the larger institutional context.

## METHODOLOGY

Because higher-education-community research partnerships are relatively unexplored from the community side and because the interplay between the partnerships and their context is not clear, we used an exploratory case study approach to investigate and better understand the processes, mechanisms, and relational structures that underlay such partnerships (Bergen & While, 2000; Odell, 2001; Yin, 1994). Our main unit of analysis is the higher-education-community research partnership. Our goal is to map, through community eyes, the issues involved in such partnerships. In keeping with the strengths and limits of case study research, we use our case only to describe and elaborate a coherent picture of the community experience of higher-education-community research partnerships.

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with 17 community leaders from 14 organizations, all of whom had significant experience partnering with higher education-based researchers on community development issues. The interviews were conducted during the summer of 2002. The interview data was augmented by written material about the relevant partnerships (usually taken from Web sites), follow-up correspondence, and relevant literature. The data were also supplemented by significant participant observation: Both authors have been engaged in higher-education-community partnership work for close to 10 years, both as researchers and as managers of projects involving a variety of community organizations as well as researchers and students from various universities.

In selecting respondents we sought to capture the organizational and experiential diversity that might possibly affect the picture we were exploring. Thus, we sought respondents who worked for different types of community-based organizations (e.g., CDCs, social service organizations) of different sizes, had experience with a variety of research projects,

worked with a range of higher-education partners, and were involved in various types of partnership arrangements. Our respondents came both from our own base of partners in Philadelphia and through recommendations from others in the field. Table 1 illustrates the mix of organizations.

Eight of the organizations were based in Philadelphia, two in Chicago, and one each in Tennessee, Detroit, Trenton, and upstate New York. The organizations ranged in size from very small (two staff people) to quite large (more than 70 staff people), with the social service organizations being medium or large, the CBOs small, and the others of all sizes. Most provided a broad range of services such as housing, community economic development, job training, education, health care, and day care. The constituent base of the organizations was almost entirely low income, and largely African American and Latino. Four of the organizations were faith-based. As Table 1 also summarizes, the higher education institutions with whom they were partnered also varied according to size, mission and public versus private ownership.

The partnerships themselves represented a range of possibilities including ad-hoc arrangements built around one-time projects for a class or clinic (all, notably, within the context of explicit, high-level, college or university support for community service); affiliations anchored by ongoing, independently funded but university-based centers such as PRAG and the UCCP; and partnerships formalized as part of community-led collaboratives, such as Just Connections or the Trenton Center for Campus-Community Partnerships.

Finally, the projects with which our respondents had experience all involved faculty and students conducting research that was tied to larger community initiatives such as advocacy campaigns, proposal development, program evaluation, expansion or modification, and community planning. Many also involved additional services such as proposal writing, web design, technology support, and organizational and board development.

**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptions of Local Organizations and Institutions of Higher Education Included in Community Partnerships**

Local Organizations	
Type of Community Organization	
CDC	35.7%
Social Service	28.6%
Intermediary	21.0%
CBO	14.3%
Size of Organization	
Small	35.7%
Medium	35.7%
Large	28.6%
Location of Organization	
Urban	85.7%
Rural	14.3%
<i>N</i>	14
Institutions of Higher Education	
Type of University or College	
Large Public	37.5%
Large Private	25.0%
Small Public	12.5%
Small Private	25.0%
<i>N</i>	8

Taken together, the goal was to talk with respondents whose experiences span the range of logical possibilities in terms of organizational type, partner type, partnership type, and project type. While each informant added breadth and depth to the picture we paint, their core observations were strikingly consistent concerning the critical components of partnerships and larger issues surrounding their work with universities.

The next section briefly summarizes the forces that affect higher-education-community research partnerships as seen from the higher-education side. We then turn to our informants to learn how these same partnerships appear from the community side.

### **THE HIGHER-EDUCATION PARTNER PERSPECTIVE: INCENTIVES AND AGENDAS**

Participants from the higher-education side of the partnership bring to partnerships three overlapping agendas: Individual, professional, and institutional (Nyden, et al., 1997; Stoecker, 1999). Individual faculty or students bring personal and professional agendas to the table. Many faculty and students engage in community-based research out of political or ideological commitment to empowering communities or to social justice agendas. They may also be driven to partner with communities by intellectual interest, hunger for research data and subjects, pedagogical goals, and the need for placement sites for students in service/experiential learning and internship arrangements (Bailey, DeVinny, Gordon, & Schadewald, 2000; Hill & Dougherty, 2002; McNicoll, 1999; Strand, 2000).

Whatever their personal motivations, faculty and students' agendas are also shaped by the realities of their profession and their particular disciplines. Tenure and promotion at research-oriented universities and even at teaching institutions require a series of publications in peer-reviewed journals or books published by academic presses. In many disciplines, these venues do not support applied work, and indeed often encourage work that treats communities as subjects. Similarly, while faculty are encouraged to acquire external funding, usually in the form of research grants, these grants very often support more traditional, academically oriented as opposed to applied types of research. Thus, faculty face very concrete pressure to mold their research, or to avoid certain kinds of research such as community-based research, to fit academic requirements for rewards and advancement within their field.

Higher-education institutions mediate the professional pressures by, for example, basing tenure and promotion on academic research standards set by disciplines. But higher education institutions also shape the larger context within which research partnerships operate by promoting institutional agendas concerning housing, sports and other recreational facilities, retail service and entertainment opportunities for the university community, safety issues, and attention to the general attractiveness and desirability of the neighborhoods in which the institutions are located (Ferman, 1996; Fish, 1973; Hirsch, 1983; Rosen, 1980; Squires, Bennett, McCourt, & Nyden, 1987; Wolfinger, 1973).

### **THE COMMUNITY PARTNER PERSPECTIVE: INCENTIVES AND AGENDAS**

On the community side, there appear to be four principal incentives for partnering with higher education researchers: obtaining project-related resources, leveraging further resources, gaining access to networks, and increasing legitimacy. These interview-based findings are fairly consistent with those of Nye and Schramm (1999), Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos, and Anderson (2001), and Wiewel, Gaffikin, and Morrissey, (2000) who cite as reasons for these partnerships increased availability of intellectual and human capital, and

financial resources; improved access to key stakeholders outside the neighborhood such as funders and decision makers; and increased legitimacy conferred by partnering with the seemingly neutral and certainly powerful university.

Respondents appreciated the project-specific resources that higher education partners provided for particular projects, especially human capital. Respondents partnered with institutions of higher education to gain access to low or no cost expertise for data collection and evaluation, for staff training, for the tutoring and mentoring of youth in the community, and for concrete outputs such as oral histories geared towards community organizing or market research for business targeting strategies. For many, higher-education-community research partnerships provided windfalls. One respondent was thrilled to be able to use the services of one of the best housing development lawyers in his city for the price of managing a few students and coping with academic timelines. Another respondent described the usefulness of a curriculum development project because it produced good learning outcomes for her high school students while demanding very little management time. For another respondent, a research project on community kitchens led to a business targeting project (using faculty and students from two universities) and then to connections with university-based (i.e., free) architects.

The real significance of these projects for community partners was derived from the resources leveraged by project results or findings. For example, one respondent described a project that allowed the organization to document changes in the reasons young people run away, thus strengthening their case for funding requests. Two others were happy with market research that was conducted but commented that the real proof of its value would be whether the results helped their organizations recruit or develop locally owned businesses. In general, respondents were most pleased with research that led to new grants (e.g., a grant for landscaping and storm water treatment for a new community-based commercial development), justified existing funding (e.g., evaluations), led to new, fundable programs (e.g., a multi-year food access grant), or helped staff and community members learn new (in one instance, marketable) skills.

At least as important as project-generated resources was the possibility of reaching deeper into the university for purposes of leveraging additional resources such as equipment, facilities, labs, and access to events. For many CBOs and CDCs, and indeed anyone on the outside, universities are complex, confusing, and intimidating structures. Thus, it is not surprising that one of the major benefits mentioned by respondents is the higher education partner's willingness to provide maps, translations, introductions, and even support in negotiating the delivery of specific university resources. Several respondents commented that they did not know where to look for something in the higher education institution until an individual higher education partner started to explain the structure and make calls on the community's behalf.

Beyond concrete access to funds and institutional resources, our respondents appreciated how partnering with university researchers opened doors to broader networks and possibilities. One respondent described the excitement of meeting others who had been working on her issue—food access—for years. Another discussed how the higher-education-community research partnership meetings created opportunities to work with similar community organizations serving different constituencies in various neighborhoods of the same city. Two others commented on the usefulness of both learning about and meeting similar organizations in other regions of the country. In short, these networking activities allowed community partners to share information and build common cause with their counterparts in their city, region and even the nation, developments that are critical to advocacy and policy-oriented organizations.

Finally, some respondents cited as a benefit the legitimacy that accrued to their organizations and programs through their association with an institution of higher education. Again, their concerns were very practical: Respondents described situations in which corporations listened more closely because the university was in the room, in which funders entertained proposals they would not have otherwise, and in which governmental representatives responded to organizations they had previously ignored. Similarly, Nye and Schramm (1999) identify numerous cases of CDCs mentioning the legitimacy and credibility provided by their higher education partners. As a CDC director in Chicago commented on her partnership with DePaul University, “We said that partnership involves money, but it goes beyond money. We want you [the university] to help us improve credibility/visibility and access of the CDC. Help us to get in to see the Commissioner of Planning. They did” (Nye & Schramm, 1999, p. 3). Another CDC director also recognized the legitimacy provided by a higher education partner, albeit grudgingly:

it looks good when we collaborate with the university and it helps us get funding from other sources. It shows that we can get along with others, and *I hate to say it*, [italics added] but it legitimizes the CDC efforts since CDCs are perceived by others to need help (p. 3).

### AGENDAS AND INCENTIVES IN CONFLICT

Even though our respondents were all involved in partnerships with university researchers that they found useful for leveraging resources, networks, and legitimacy, they all also reported tensions stemming from conflicting incentives and agendas. For instance, approaches to, and definitions, understandings, and expected uses of, research can vary significantly between higher education and community partners. Typical was one director’s contention that some academic researchers enter the community just to experiment or to observe residents—or worse, to offer student help, only to use the entrée to study the community on the sly. Similarly, several CDCs in the Nye and Shramm (1999) study complained about universities asking them to provide support for grants and then not sharing the funds with the community when the grant is secured.

A perceived lack of respect often reinforced concern over the failure of the university to share grant funds. Some respondents complained about researchers who don the guise of the expert and ignore the fact that expertise comes in many forms, one of which is knowledge of the community. Issues of respect take on particularly complex and problematic dimensions when the researchers are white and are working in communities of color. As Axel-Lute (2000) reported:

DePaul [University] had an opportunity to get \$500,000 and needed a community group to work with and we were picked. They didn’t think through the community participation part at all. I think they expected to breeze in and help the poor little black folks get their neighborhood together. The perception by all of these academics was that neighborhoods are poor because people don’t do what they need to do, and residents have given up and they need to come in and save them (para. 8).

Similar findings were reported in the Nye and Schramm (1999) study: When the university was getting ready to enter the community it had a pre-conceived notion that the community knows nothing and they know it all . . . the whole academic attitude. There was this whole white population converging on Black community. And it used demeaning names for its programs, like “Urban Plunge” (p. 7).

Indeed, in many communities, it is almost impossible to overstate the amount of distrust community leaders feel towards academics—in large part because of the persistent experience of having their reality reinterpreted, devalued, ignored, or otherwise disrespected. For example, one respondent described the frustrating experience of talking with an agricultural extension agent for six months about her community's desire for organic food, only to have him recommend chemical fertilizers for a farming project. Less dramatic, but equally troublesome, were experiences with arrogant faculty, unprepared students requiring more oversight than their work was worth, incomplete projects, and lack of data sharing.

Evident in all of these examples is a mismatch of incentives, driven by the layers of relationships that characterize and shape each partner's environment. While community partners sign onto joint research projects for concrete resources, additional access to the university, expanded networks and legitimacy, their higher-education partners very often approach the same projects with both the best of intentions and a heavy baggage of professional and institutional priorities and assumptions that can skew their partnership behavior. Thus, academics driven by professional needs to publish might use community-provided access to individuals without enough regard for their points of view. Academics responding to institutional pressures to provide service-learning placements for students might provide less than well-prepared students for a project. And, academics responding to both institutional and professional pressures might well take a grant to fund a center that provides relief from teaching that enables their research. The point is not to excuse poor behavior but to note how the very institutions and wider networks that make higher-education partners attractive to community partners also stoke incentives that can and do undercut the mutuality of the partnership.

By the same token, several respondents pointed to their own conflicting incentives, noting how their responsibilities as leaders often pulled them away from active management of partnerships to engage with other priorities, such as fund raising, the latest community crisis, or an impending fight at city hall. As with academics, community leaders' incentives to partner can be overruled or skewed by conflicting, or simply additional, sets of incentives.

### **Capacity**

Also undercutting partnerships is the lack of adequate capacity on one or both sides to deliver on commitments and so realize the full potential of the partnership. Respondents expressed frustrations with researchers, and in particular students, who leave when the semester ends or are otherwise hamstrung by the confines of the academic term.

Interestingly, respondents also critiqued their own management of research projects, commenting on how little attention they paid due to other pressures, and pointing out how more active management on their part would have improved the results. A recurring theme was that adequate research is seldom done and high quality research is close to a luxury. While CDC and CBO directors understand and appreciate the need for research that supports their programs, and while many feel pressure from funders to provide data analysis in their grant proposals and reports, research remains secondary. However useful research may be, it represents an investment in the future and is seldom as pressing as the next item on the agenda. Like the small business owner who knows that some market analysis could enhance her business but is too busy running the business to acquire and use the research, community partners find themselves putting their higher-education-community research partnerships on the periphery of their daily work.

Further contributing to the project management challenge may be the fact that the higher-education-community research partnerships in this study did not involve any financial costs to the community organization. The higher-education partners provided research services free of charge, and, in some cases, provided financial support to the community partner to commit staff time to the project. The lack of an explicit cost may cause the community partner to assign both a lesser value to the product and a lower priority to the project.

Limited capacity within community organizations also results in an under-utilization of university resources. As one CBO staff person commented,

Our organization's staffing is not adequate to utilize all that the university has to offer. I don't have a basket big enough to catch it! It is difficult for me to utilize everything he's throwing into my community because the staffing is strained (Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos, & Anderson, 2001, p. 12).

Contributing to the community partners' lack of capacity to absorb what the higher education partner has to offer is the higher education partners' difficulty in communicating and packaging its services. Due to the sheer complexity of universities and even small colleges, many respondents remain frustrated about the organizational impediments undermining access to resources as well as finding the time to learn how to navigate the higher education bureaucracy.

### **Institutional Space**

Even when incentives are aligned and capacity adequate, the larger institutional contexts within which faculty researchers and community organization staff operate do not always provide support for higher-education-community research partnerships. On the university side, would-be partners often have to fight both their institutions of higher education and their disciplines for space to conduct community-driven research (Nyden & Wiewel, 1992; Strand, 2000). While certain disciplines (Anthropology) and institutions (such as the University of Delaware with its revised tenure and promotion guidelines that support community involvement) do support such activities, many of the more successful efforts (noted in this article's introduction) seem to be linked to centers in which interested faculty create the necessary space by raising outside funds and developing their own organizational buffers.

But even partnerships buffered by centers have to contend with the institutions of higher education's multiple and often competing agendas. For example, a community-driven research project might encounter community resistance generated by the actions of another branch of the institution. This happened in Philadelphia when a CDC director demanded that her university partner stop conducting a community survey that she had requested after angry residents complained about her association with the very university that was trying to close off a public street. Similarly, at the University of Illinois in Chicago (UIC), long-standing community-higher education partnerships were threatened when the university administration took over the remaining section of Maxwell Street for university use. This annexation of what had once been a thriving outdoor market extending for many blocks on Chicago's near West Side and the consequent ousting of African American and Latino vendors, continued (from the community's perspective) a long history of real estate expansion by the university.

On the community side, while the organizations themselves are often relatively small and transparent, they are embedded in both highly complex communities, replete with multiple alliances, relationships and history, and multi-layered institutional contexts including the community, the foundation world, government, and the larger political system. Divided in ways that may or may not parallel the racial, ethnic, and class differences, communities are often notable for their contested agendas, competing factions and organizations, and varying political allegiances to internal as well as external political leaders (Bartelt, 1995; DeLeon, 1992; Ferman, 1996; Goode & Schneider, 1994). Politically savvy higher education partners walk cautiously into such minefields, lest the projects they work on stir up more resentment between factions.

Worse, in many communities, higher-education-community relations are tenuous at best, suffering from long histories of bitter land struggles, neglect, lack of access to university resources (from students to space to investment), and the experience of being used as a laboratory. Thus, even when the community leaders do commit to higher-education-community research partnerships, they must contend with distrust in the larger community and even risk their own credibility with key constituents. As Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos and Anderson (2001) elaborated: "The community saw institutions as large bodies that destroy neighborhoods and displace residents and take away local jobs and gentrify the area. They knocked down homes to create businesses" (p. 6). And as Nye and Schramm (1999) found in New Haven, "Working with Yale University you can become a victim of their reputation. Others assume that Yale is initiating everything (even though they have only two seats on the board)" (p. 9).

### **MAKING IT WORK: KNOW THYSELF AND THY PARTNER**

As we have seen, higher-education-community research partnerships are often forged out of the conflicting agendas of different individuals operating in highly complex and, at times, contradictory organizational settings. The fact that so many partnerships exist and that they seem to be increasing in number is indeed a hopeful sign that resolutions can be reached (Rubin, 2000). Our respondents reinforce this optimism with their confidence about the usefulness and potential of higher-education-community research partnerships, despite the hurdles of conflicting incentives, inadequate capacity, and lack of institutional space.

Unfortunately, these hurdles are very real barriers to realizing the benefits from higher-education-community research partnerships. Issues of trust and respect, stemming from prior faculty, student, and university involvement in the community are ever present and can derail even the most well-intentioned efforts. Project management and resource utilization issues, particularly on the community side, can diminish the potential gains from such partnerships. And the conflicting agendas and actions of different branches within both institutions of higher education and communities can undercut even the most promising partnerships.

Given the many opportunities for and pitfalls of higher-education-community collaboration, we suggest a seemingly straightforward but often overlooked exercise. Potential partners on both the university and the community side should ask themselves if they have the desire, capacity, and institutional support to successfully engage in meaningful research partnerships, where success is defined as the ability to deliver on commitments. Each partner should strive to understand, as well as possible, the incentives, capacities, and constraints of the other partner. The remainder of this section elaborates on each of the three components of this framework: desire (incentives), capacity, and institutional space.

### **Primacy of the Personal: The Role of Incentives**

Just as all politics is local, all partnerships are personal. They begin with, rely on, and are nurtured by, personal contacts. Thus, it is critical that individual incentives mesh so that partnerships are not derailed by incongruous motives between the two parties.

When asked what types of attributes they look for in higher education partners, community respondents were quick to request higher education partners who understand that community-based research means community-driven research. Respondents particularly appreciated higher education partners who were willing to share control, data, results, and resources. Positive signs included “the ability to listen,” “sensitivity to the organization’s objectives,” and the commitment to finish projects even when they do not match academic calendars. Even more important, respondents look for capacity beyond research: technical and planning assistance, quick answers to immediate questions, proposal writing, person power, access to higher education facilities, and other such tangible items that may be more useful than research itself.

Community respondents also want higher education partners who are willing to share resources. Some described higher education partners that independently identified requests for proposals or unilaterally approached foundation and government grant programs on which both partners could then work. Others respondents reported with approval that some university partners actually wrote grants that routinely included the community partners. One informant described a particularly well-worked-out partnership in which a community-university team co-defined research projects that made use of the university’s and CBO’s complementary skill and knowledge sets. This latter arrangement always included a direct service as well as a research component, and featured a commitment to find and share the necessary resources. In another instance, a respondent noted approvingly how their higher education partner offered to run the grant through the community organization as opposed to the university if that would better serve the organization’s needs. Finally, several respondents gave examples in which their university partners had written proposals for funding that went entirely to the community organizations. Given the realities of undercapitalized community organizations and highly competitive funding environments, joint proposals, university funding for organizations, and other types of resource sharing assume both symbolic (demonstration of respect for the organization) and material (organizations need the resources) significance.

Finally, community respondents desire higher education partners who demonstrate awareness of and respect for the assets community partners bring to the partnership, despite any cultural, racial, and class divisions. Respondents pointed to the importance of translating such respect into democratic structures such as shared control, agreed-on procedures, and joint communication with funders and policy makers. One respondent noted how their higher-education-community research partnership did not launch their first project until the parties had spent more than a year getting to know each other and working out governance and communication procedures, including procedures for ensuring equal air time and for counteracting academic tendencies to slip into the expert role. Another respondent described in detail how shifting the location of meetings from the university to the community shifted the power dynamics and improved trust. When the meetings were held on the university campus, community attendance was reduced (due to time-consuming and expensive parking or lengthy and complex public transit commutes) and community partners were somewhat intimidated. By contrast, holding meetings in the community reduced some of the social inequities by putting the community partner in the

host seat, reinforced the message of respect for the community (because academic partners were willing to travel and share community food and space), and saved much time and money on parking.

In short, many community respondents viewed the higher education partners' willingness to listen, meet on community turf, "hang with the staff and clients," honor community assets and expertise, share resources and credit, follow through, and commit to the long haul as central to the workings of the partnership. Such signs of respect are necessary for any healthy and productive relationship, but are even more important for higher-education-community research partnerships because of the deep distrust many community partners bring to the relationship.

Developing trusting and respectful relationships also requires that both parties understand the incentives of the other. Community groups must understand that faculty are often under severe pressures to publish their research in peer-reviewed venues, to secure external funding for research that often is not of an applied nature, and do not typically receive rewards for community service activities. In short, faculty engagement in community-driven research activities often involves sacrifices on the part of the researcher. Similarly, academic researchers need to understand, as many of our respondents noted, that community organizations survive on their ability to obtain grant money and build political support, that they are often understaffed and poorly resourced, and that research, particularly of the more academic kind, is almost a luxury.

### **Taking Stock: Capacity**

It is critical for both the researcher and the community leader to know their respective capacities and limitations. The inability to deliver can sour a relationship and undermine future possibilities for partnering. Large imbalances in abilities between the two partners can also damage relationships and future possibilities by reinforcing pre-existing negative stereotypes of "self-serving academics" or "incompetent communities." Faculty should seriously consider how the constraints of academic life (tenure and promotion requirements, their views of and approaches to research, academic calendars, quality, and preparation of students, etc.) will affect their ability to deliver in a timely fashion the product desired by the community organization. Similarly, community organizations should consider the capacity to manage the partnership, the work, and the results of the project. Both should consider the level (from simple, short projects to complex, long-lasting series of projects) at which they can partner successfully.

Community respondents suggested that more formal structures would help them manage partnerships more effectively while ensuring the survival of the partnership beyond individual projects and inevitable personnel changes. As part of this formalization, several respondents emphasized the need to state, up front, the objectives and expectations of the partnership and even suggested specific checklists. Others suggested rather detailed structures, complete with rules of engagement, participation, and decision-making. As Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos, and Anderson (2001) recorded,

I think it's important to get the expectations of each partner down in writing, to have a clear action plan of what the community group is going to bring to the table, what the institution is going to bring to the table and that's something to hold each group accountable for... You have to be clear about what's going to happen, when, and how we're going to get there. It's simple, but it doesn't happen enough (p. 12).

Other suggestions for formalizing and strengthening higher-education-community research partnerships included inviting higher education partners to serve on community organization boards, thus making it more likely that the community organization will remember and use the partnership and the access to wider university resources. Others went so far as to recommend strengthening connections and common ground (not to mention saving money) by sharing staff.

This formalization of partnerships also begins to address issues of equity and democracy by creating deeper notions of obligation on behalf of all the partners. Structures that democratize while institutionalizing higher-education-community research partnerships might well go a long way to reducing the inherent power imbalance between large, wealthy, legitimacy-rich institutions such as universities and smaller, less well resourced, less legitimacy-rich organizations such as CDCs and CBOs.

No matter how good the structure, respondents underlined the importance of active management of relationships and the projects. Just as managing consultants or any large project takes time, attention, and skill, so does managing a team of faculty and student researchers—especially given their relative independence from the organization. Respondents were very prescriptive, recommending top-level commitment, designation of a point person or connector to work with the higher education partner, initial interviews with faculty and students, careful project definition, clear written agreements (specifying responsibility, ownership of data, timelines, etc), regular monitoring of progress, and definite end points.

At a minimum, working with higher education partners on research projects requires a commitment of enough time and resources in the short term for management and, as others have found (Baum, 2000; LeGates & Robinson, 1998; Rubin, 1998), enough over the long term for forging relationships and building trust. Perhaps most important, effectively managing and utilizing such a partnership requires commensurate levels of organizational capacity, a factor underscored by several of our respondents and noted in other studies (cf. Maurrasse, 2002; Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos, & Anderson, 2001). For example, maximizing the benefits of having a student intern requires that the organization have a staff person who can commit time to training and monitoring that intern. Similarly, developing databases or other technology-driven resources for an organization requires first that the organization have the equipment needed to maintain the database, and second, to have trained staff available to tend to these processes.

Institutions of higher education can help address the resource utilization issue by introducing measures that render the institution more transparent. Several respondents suggested that higher education partners compile inventories of university resources and activities complete with contact information. Others suggested that higher education partners systematically notify community organizations about relevant, and often free, university events that they can publicize among their community constituents.

### **NIMBY: Institutional Space**

The suggestions for ways to develop trust and respect, to cultivate personal relationships while grounding them in more formal structures, and to improve project management and resource utilization, should help improve the effectiveness of higher-education-community research partnerships. However, the impact of these suggestions is likely to be limited by the thorny issue of institutional space. Higher education and the community, as institutions, are multifaceted, confusing, and feature highly complex and layered institutional formations with varying incentive structures, priorities, agendas, and interpretations of history. The lack

of familiarity across institutional structures complicates the partnerships immeasurably, confusing expectations, understanding, communications, and obligations. Worse, despite shared commitments to specific geographical places, institutions of higher education and communities are often separated by deep-seated tensions over land and other space issues.

Given the depth and persistence of these tensions, it is tempting, if not entirely satisfying, to suggest that potential partners may be well advised to follow the “not-in-my-backyard” principle and avoid engaging in partnerships between universities and neighborhoods that share the same geographic space. Carrying the baggage of the university’s relationship with the community can break the back of even the most well intentioned researcher. Similarly, community organizations may want to steer clear of universities that have very negative reputations lest they lose legitimacy with their community constituents.

As unpalatable as this suggestion may be, it reflects the fact that the institutional space issue is the most difficult aspect of higher-education-community research partnerships and the one over which individual partners have the least control. In the short run, caution may be the better part of valor. In the long run, more targeted research may shed light on measures that can be taken to address some of the incongruities between individual incentives and agendas and those of the two primary institutions: the university and the community.

### FURTHER RESEARCH

This exploratory investigation of the community perspective on higher-education-community research partnerships attempts to sketch the different layers of incentives, capacity, and institutional contexts that shape these partnerships. Our preliminary investigation points to three critical areas of additional research.

First, it would be extremely helpful to map the structures of the university and the community to understand the complexity of each and how that complexity shapes interactions and partnership efforts. This empirical exercise would involve a systematic identification of the key actors and varying agendas, priorities, concerns, incentives, and disincentives that shape interactions between the two entities. This article is, we hope, the first step in a more systematic mapping exercise.

Second, once the structures are mapped, there is a need for more focused research on whether and how the varying and sometimes conflicting incentive structures might be aligned to support meaningful and effective higher-education-community research partnerships. Presumably, such research would explore both internal alignment (how different layers of the university might work together to support community development, how different interests in the community might pull in the same direction), and external alignment (how university and community interests and incentives might coincide). Again, this article provides the beginnings of such an analysis.

Third, it would be useful to answer the critical but uncomfortable question of long-term effectiveness. While our respondents were all cautiously optimistic about the potential of higher-education-community research partnerships, several wondered just how effective they are in strengthening long-term organizational capacity and in supporting measurable improvements in community development. Clearly, a large-scale evaluation could be quite beneficial, especially if it is sensitive to process and product outcomes, employs appropriate indicators for community improvement, considers the impact of the larger political economy within which a particular partnership operates, and incorporates both long-term and short-term measures (Rubin, 2000).

As more higher-education-community partnerships emerge there will be greater opportunity to experiment with and learn from different ways of addressing these larger issues. And, we believe, more and more partnerships will continue to form, despite all the challenges, differences, and tensions, because universities and communities share a fundamental bond: In an increasingly placeless world, both universities and communities are geographically based entities with very strong incentives to improve their shared places.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:** We wish to thank Bernie Mennis, Avis Vidal, and Dennis Keating for comments on earlier drafts and the two anonymous JUA reviewers. We also extend a special thanks to the community partners who graciously shared their time, experience and perspectives to inform our analysis.

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