

## **Challenges in Institutionalizing University-Community Partnerships**

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### **Introduction**

The seriousness and urgency of low-income communities' problems and the scarcity of resources available to them encourage thinking about partnerships between these communities and institutions that can offer knowledge, money, and access to these things. Community partnerships with universities represent one reasonable approach. University partnerships with community groups can be mutually beneficial. Both parties may learn about communities in general, one community in particular, substantive policy or practice issues, and their own capacities to act, singly and in collaboration with one another. Community conditions and university teaching may improve.

However, the seriousness and urgency of problems, coupled with academics' often heartfelt interests in solving them, can also encourage fantasies about how easily, quickly, or bountifully such partnerships can generate resources.<sup>1</sup> A basic challenge in developing university-community partnerships is to establish realistic expectations regarding what partners can accomplish in available time.

Partnerships may design and implement discrete planning, service, organizing, or educational projects. These projects can improve community conditions, even if they do not transform institutional structures that contribute to poverty and make escape from it difficult. Some university and community partners may work well and effectively together, discover mutual interests, and see value in sustaining their collaboration for a number of years. These latter situations encourage thinking about "institutionalizing" partnerships.

I have been involved in a long-term university-community partnership and want to reflect on that effort in discussing challenges in institutionalizing university-community partnerships.

In the early 1990s, Southeast Baltimore activists took stock of their neighborhoods. The place of first settlement for Baltimore's European immigrants, the center of the city's industrial development, and home to vital working-class white ethnic communities in the mid-twentieth century, Southeast Baltimore had fallen on hard times. Industrial firms had relocated in suburbs, and families with resources had moved to stay close to jobs. Economic decline brought physical decline in its wake. In 1992, community activists, aided by the South East Community Organization, created a planning process to envision how Southeast, now home to many African-Americans as well as upper-middle class "gentrifiers," could move in new directions. After 18 months, the South East Planning Council published the "Southeast Community Plan," with recommendations on housing, economic development, and social services.<sup>2</sup>

I had observed this planning process. In 1994, four faculty members in the University of Maryland's Urban Studies and Planning Program decided to apply for funding from the U. S. Department of Education's Urban Community Service Program (USDE's university-community partnership program) to work with Southeast community members in implementing some of the plan's recommendations.<sup>3</sup> We developed a proposal in consultation with local leaders and received funding for five years, starting in 1995. I would work with community members on a plan recommendation to improve 16 neighborhood schools. We created the Southeast Education Task Force.

I will mention three Task Force accomplishments to give some idea of its work. It developed a community plan on education, setting out educational goals for Southeast children and recommending actions to be carried out by community members and the school system. Following up on a recommendation in that plan, the Task Force developed a facility plan for Southeast schools. This plan led to agreement by the city and state to construct a new school in Southeast. When the city withdrew its commitment to build the school, the Task Force succeeded in pushing the district to rezone schools to produce a better fit between numbers and locations of students and school capacities. Another plan recommendation led to helping an elementary school become a full-service community school, adding health and social services to academic programs to support students in ways parents and community institutions could not. That project continues to grow.

At the beginning of the university-community partnership on education, I was the only university faculty member involved. I later persuaded a colleague in education to join the project for two years. Over a decade, about 15 graduate students participated in the project. Nearly a thousand community members and educators participated in various ways, from responding to surveys to attending meetings to developing plans to implementing projects. University participation was initially supported by federal funding, then private foundation grants, and, finally, wholly voluntary effort. The project flourished for ten years and then ran out of resources and steam, even though education problems remain serious and urgent. The partnership did not become institutionalized.<sup>4</sup>

From this experience, I have three observations about institutionalization of university-community partnerships. First, there is no single clear definition of “institutionalization.” The term means something to the effect that a relationship should last a long time. Beyond that, “institutionalization” can mean any number of things. The details matter.

Second, institutionalization is not the answer to all problems. The question is, when is institutionalization appropriate? Personal fantasies about immortality encourage us to talk about institutionalizing our projects, but the fantasies, no matter how satisfying, are not a realistic basis for strategic judgment. Completing finite projects may be sufficient and worthwhile.

Third, institutionalization faces significant challenges. Because time, energy, and money are limited, partners may do better to concentrate on getting work done on discrete projects than trying to institutionalize their relationship.

### **Three Fuzzy Terms**

In examining the challenges to institutionalizing partnerships, I want to discuss three fuzzy terms that must be clarified even in short-term university-community partnerships. These three things make partnerships difficult and institutionalization immeasurably harder. The terms are “university,” “community,” and “partnership.”

#### **“University”**

Rarely does a university act from the top. The university is an entrepreneurial institution. One observer has characterized it as an “organized anarchy.” Most often, university-community partnerships are initiated by an academic program, a few faculty, or even a single faculty member. If a partnership involves a grant, university administrators commonly regard it like any other, such as a grant for biological research, not a fundamental institutional policy commitment. Probably few university administrators are more than momentarily or occasionally aware of a

university-community partnership grant or project. For all practical purposes, “the university” is a handful of faculty members and associated students.

The university takes overhead out of a grant. It is a source of income, not necessarily an institutional commitment, regardless of the words in a university’s mission statement. One typical university president has said that the only partnerships he is interested in are with businesses, relationships from which the university can make money. He says he has no interest in partnerships with grass-roots community groups, because they are money-losers.

When faculty members are involved in university-community partnerships, university administrators rarely delegate institutional authority to them. As all other faculty members, they can invoke the university’s name, draw on university resources normally available to faculty, and exercise normal faculty authority. But rarely can they summon up the institutional resources and authority that would be necessary for institutionalizing a partnership.

### **“Community”**

We are all familiar with questions about “Who is the community?” and “Who represents the community?” A community is not inherently defined. It is pragmatically defined by leaders, often a self-selected elite, who act in a community’s name and may form or lead an organization. They may be unrepresentative of the community by virtue of their leadership, education, or occupational experience, let alone demography or interests. But pragmatically a community organization substitutes for “the community.” Pragmatically, too, university faculty seeking a partnership may have to create a “community” partner or select among alternative, sometimes competing potential partners. Thus a small number of individuals become the “community” partner for the few faculty and students who are “the university.”

And communities are constantly in flux. People move. Public participation waxes and wanes. Leaders change. Organizational agendas take new directions. One consequence is that a partnership initially formed on a solid, reasonable basis may dissolve. For these reasons, community participation needs to be continually nurtured, and community organizations must be constantly recreated. But these normal changes present the question whether the partnership that exists at any point in time is the same one that was originally established. These uncertainties provide an unstable foundation for institutionalizing partnerships.

### **“Partnership”**

The term “partnership” covers many variations in relationships. More often than not, university-community partnerships are not institutional, but personal, relationships. This is true even if institutional representatives sign documents codifying responsibilities. Institutionalization depends on personal relations. And when the persons change, the relationship changes and can dissolve.

Third-party funding, such as that of the Community Outreach Partnership Center program, makes a partnership possible but creates an asymmetrical relationship. The university has a contract with a funder; a community group rarely does. Community members, even when they were part of initial planning, but especially when they were not, feel no obligation to meet the university’s contract. Thus the university depends on community actors to fulfill its contract. There is no way, even with signed paper, for anyone to enforce an agreement with community members. Power in this relationship is complicated.

Moreover, the basis of typical “partnerships” limits commitment to a relationship and the

possibility of its lasting a long time. Partnerships may be classified as three types: altruism, exchange, and mutualism. Most university-community partnerships are one-sided altruism. The university gives things to a “needy” community, compensated by warm feelings and a grant until it ends. There may be exchange, where faculty and students learn some things and learn to practice in certain ways.<sup>5</sup> Exchange gives both parties reasons to continue together. Rarely, however, do partnerships develop into mutualism, where the parties discover they have common interests they can satisfy only by acting together and for some long period of time. Thus, often, once resources to succor altruism or reciprocal exchanges of benefits fail, relationships are likely to end.

### Conclusions

These conditions suggest three concluding observations. First, finite partnerships and projects are fine. Institutional partnerships are not marriages, where the parties vow to stay together until death does them part. It is legitimate for university and community partners to recognize that they have done something good together and then to move on, even to other partners.

Second, longer-term relationships depend on determined long-lasting individuals in universities and communities.

Third, longer-term relationships are unlikely without long-term funding commitments.

These observations lead back to a basic question: In what ways can universities and communities help one another? Various specific answers have led to a number of fruitful university-community partnerships and can continue to do so. Partnership, let alone institutionalization, is difficult, but realistic discussion of expectations, interests, and resources helps identify and address challenges.

### Notes

1. For discussion of fantasies about partnerships and resources, as well as illustration and elaboration of observations and arguments in this paper, see Howell S. Baum, “Fantasies and Realities of University-Community Partnerships,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 20, 2 (Winter, 2000), pp. 234-246; available at <http://jpe.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/20/2/234?maxtoshow=&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&andorexactfulltext=and&searchid=1&FIRSTINDEX=0&sortspec=relevance&resourcetype=HWCIT>
2. For description of this planning process, see Howell S. Baum, *The Organization of Hope: Communities Planning Themselves*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997; information about the book available at <http://sunypress.edu/details.asp?id=53562>
3. A fifth faculty member proposed to work with a community organization in Palmer Park, in Prince George’s County, Maryland.
4. For description of the university-community partnership and the Southeast Education Task Force, see Howell S. Baum, *Community Action for School Reform*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003; information about the book available at

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<http://www.sunypress.edu/details.asp?id=60769%20>

5. In instances where universities self-interestedly work with neighboring community groups to make conditions more attractive and safe to staff, students, and clients, the relationship may involve significant exchanges. Indeed, the exchanges may be heavily weighted in the universities' favor.