

4

This chapter addresses complex dynamics and turmoil that may be unleashed when universities attempt to engage with community. Benefits and risks are examined through stories that illustrate the power and potential conflicts at the core of academic intrusions into the lives of marginalized people.

The Illusive Ground Between Town and Gown

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It was a warm summer day, the sidewalks of southwest Rockford, Illinois, teeming with mothers, children, and a few men—mostly unemployed. The grandeur of this once proud neighborhood had long ago passed into neglect. Storefronts—some boarded up, one converted into a Pentecostal church, a few still open for business—underscored the pervasive poverty of neglect. Light traffic moved through the streets, weaving around potholes—one in particular that was large enough to swallow a car whole—a sinkhole that had blighted the street for over a month.

Three people stood around the sinkhole talking about their failed efforts to get the city to take action and repair this dangerous condition. Two of them were members of a local community-based organization. I was the third, a faculty member from a state university. As we plotted the next steps, I suggested a plan of action based on work undertaken by the National Film Board of Canada in the previous decade (Vaughan, Brendan Baker, & Winton, 2010). The plan involved the use of a video camera as an organizing tool. Here is how it worked.

A week later, several residents stood around the sinkhole. One stood by a video camera mounted on a tripod, another held a microphone, and a third spoke with passersby about the neglect of southwest Rockford and used the sinkhole as an example. People, attracted by the apparent media presence, started drifting over to the scene to discover what was happening and in the process became engaged in conversation with each other and with the woman holding the microphone. One woman in the growing crowd even acted out for the camera by climbing into the hole until only her head and shoulders could be seen. It was hilarious, but also seriously engaged; at issue was the community

demanding the same city services that were provided to their more prosperous neighbors.

Everyone who joined into this make-believe press conference was given a card as they left. The card invited them to a meeting that evening at a church down the street. People who had participated in this bit of street theater were told that the video would be shown at the meeting and there would be discussion of how to take action. Amazingly, almost 50 people attended that meeting, probably to see themselves on television! So the planning committee of three was transformed to 50 people committed to demanding that the city remove the blight of neglected streets from their neighborhood. The group relived their earlier encounter on the street through the video. They collectively identified the most significant points made on the tape, which then provided the meeting organizers with a basis for editing the tape.

The most important question, of course, was what to do with the tape. To whom should it be shown? The answer was clear. The tape should be shown to the city commissioner responsible for maintaining Rockford's streets. A meeting was set up with the commissioner and two people representing the community organization—a nonthreatening, small intrusion into the life of a busy bureaucrat. However, the threatening nature of this meeting was revealed when the visitors brought with them a small monitor and video player, and became even more evident when they produced a camera and pointed it at the commissioner. What was thought to be a simple negotiation with a few concerned community members had suddenly become a public accountability session. The camera became a weapon and the commissioner its target. The response of the commissioner, or even the nonresponse, was now to be public and would be played for all southwest Rockford to see.

The tactic worked. Within the week the city took action on repairing the street, but more important this exercise in interactive media (Niemi, 1971; Ohliger & Gueulette, 1975) provided a tool for the residents of a low-income and largely silenced neighborhood to raise the decibels of their voice so it could be heard in city hall.

The University in the Background

What did the university contribute to this? It provided an idea, borrowed from our Canadian neighbors (Evans, 1991). It provided access to funding by partnering with a community organization. It provided a camera and access to editing facilities on campus for an interactive media project. But mostly it made room for the community to organize by remaining in the background. If city officials realized that the university was actively supporting the community's action, the community would have lost its credibility, and official channels would have been opened politically to eliminate the university's influence in Rockford. It's like Myles Horton said of Highlander Folk School, a social justice leadership school that played an important role in the civil rights

and labor movement in this country (personal communication, 1980), “They

New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education • DOI: 10.1002/ace

closed Highlander because they thought Highlander was running the Civil Rights Movement. It was only after they closed Highlander that they realized Highlander wasn't running the Movement. Black people were running it!"

Colleges and universities have their own agendas and interests that at times diverge and at times come together with the agenda of community. In the best of times, for example, Service Learning aims for a balance of interests, serving the learning needs of students while at the same time addressing the service needs of the community. However, the notion of "service" suggests doing something *for* the community, with a concomitant result of fostering the community's dependence on the service provider. In actuality, Service Learning is often directed at providing learning opportunities for those enjoying privileged access to the university while ignoring the needs of the most marginalized communities (Cunningham, 1993). McCrickard (2011) speaks of three overarching categories of participation: "non-participation whereby citizens are controlled by authority, degrees of tokenism in which influencers seek to placate the citizenry into perceiving their needs are heard, and degrees of citizen's power which result in a share of control by both parties" (p. 36).

There are situations such as the one in Rockford where the desired outcome is citizen's power, independence, and voice; where the university is not an advocate but an enabler—or as has been suggested, the university is on tap, not on top. This is what I mean by the university remaining in the background. This is not easily done as many of the university's forays into community, however well intentioned, are also motivated by the political and self-promotional purpose of cementing town/gown relations. If the aim of the institution is to establish itself as a civic leader, it would not do for the university to be perceived as taking a stand for one constituent (the citizens of southwest Rockford) and against another constituent (the city managers). As Cunningham (1993) has noted, higher education is not insulated from concepts of dominance, authority, and influence.

The question for us to ask ourselves as members of the academy, members who wear that "gown" either as armor against conflict at the core of our cities or as an invisible cloak that allows us to move surreptitiously among the demons of oppression—the question is: Whom do we choose to serve, especially when the interests of the university and the interests of the community are in conflict?

Gentrification and the Growth of a University

In the 1950s Hyde Park in Chicago was caught between two blighted areas plagued by poverty and gang violence. The University of Chicago was the largest landowner in Hyde Park and maintained an undisguised interest in protecting its investment from the largely African American neighborhoods of Kenwood and Woodlawn. As Arnold Hirsch (1998) argues, the university wielded tremendous financial and political muscle, sufficient to make Hyde

Park–Kenwood one of the first “urban renewal” projects in the country. In an

New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education • DOI: 10.1002/ace

effort to avoid “white flight” and retain a professional class critical to an expanding academic institution, the university began an aggressive campaign to tear down the residences of low-income people and left acres of barren and desolate land. The plan resulted in the demolition of 20% of the buildings in Hyde Park and the relocation of 20,000 residents, mostly low-income African Americans (Hirsch, 1998).

Having succeeded in Hyde Park, the university announced its South Campus Plan—a design that would expand the university into Woodlawn, a predominantly African American neighborhood to the south across a stretch of parkland called The Midway. Gradually, over a period of 10 years and the destruction of hundreds of buildings, the university built its south campus in the open spaces created by “renewal.” This put the university on a collision course with three Protestant ministers and a Catholic priest from Woodlawn who later, with the assistance of Saul Alinski, founded The Woodlawn Organization—a grassroots organization whose purpose was to combat the bulldozers and halt the gentrification of their community (Horwitt 1989; Nadeau, 1996). The Woodlawn Organization managed to slow the pace of university expansion, but the South Campus across the Midway now stands where hundreds of Woodlawn residents used to live.

This story is but one of thousands that can be told in which the interests of a university and the community clash in sometimes violent and destructive ways. Given the high stakes of managing the business of the university, one might well ask whether a higher education institution can provide a platform for anyone to work with the marginalized, impoverished, and silenced. Colleges and universities will not engage in such work when it is patently in conflict with its interests, as was the case of the University of Chicago, this despite the fact that the scholarly wisdom of the academy has much to contribute to the development of communities from the bottom up. For example, the work of University of Chicago sociologist Julius Wilson was based on studies of Woodlawn and Kenwood and has served organizers and urban planners in efforts to better understand the effects of race and class on maintaining a culture of poverty (Wilson & Taub, 2007). Since I have spent much of my earlier academic career trying to bring academic insights and wisdom into situations that the university would rather avoid, a critical lesson for me has been to keep the university in the background.

City Colleges vs. *Universidad Popular*

That lesson was learned in the early 1970s when Paulo Freire was first published in the United States (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). I want to take you back to that time in a story that exemplifies both the best and the worst of the ivory tower’s potential for working with communities.

The story began with a grassroots center called the Latin American Coalition of Lakeview, a Chicago organization that sought to move beyond the

more typical service-to-individuals model by collective organizing and direct

New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education • DOI: 10.1002/ace

action. One focus for action was the disruption of the English language program provided by the City Colleges for hundreds of Latin American immigrants. The program was deaf to community concerns, which were not limited to English as a Second Language but included gentrification, discrimination, unemployment, and political voice in an increasingly Caucasian ethnic neighborhood. Here is what was amazing to me. The coalition's organizers had read Freire before most members of the academy had—in fact, they introduced Freire to me. I was working at the City Colleges at a center that had helped the coalition set up a series of workshops on local issues. The coalition wanted a new center that would replace the City Colleges program—a center they eventually came to call *Universidad Popular*. That new center would be democratically controlled by and responsive to the community, and it would employ teachers who were committed to improving the living conditions of Latinos. They knew that when people learned to read words that were charged with political significance, and when those words reflected their own experiences in community, then learning would inspire action and democratic change. They learned that from Freire.

So several of us from the City Colleges began working with the coalition to create an alternative to a citywide program run by our own higher educational institution. Amazing, since creating an independent, grassroots program would run counter to the interests of the City Colleges! Nonetheless, we succeeded in getting grants and state funding—the grants went to the coalition, but unfortunately the state funding went to the City Colleges. On the positive side, *Universidad Popular* was up and running with a community board, teachers who were from and committed to the community, and a growing realization in that community that this program was committed not only to students, but to changing conditions in their neighborhood.

That was the positive side. But on the negative side, the involvement of the City Colleges in the development of this new program brought with it the crippling demands of a multicampus, citywide bureaucracy, which was the recipient of federal and state dollars on behalf of the program. We were *not* in the background. We, who represented the City Colleges in the program, were not just providers of support and behind-the-scenes counsel; we were a fiscal agent. Even the most fundamental assumptions of those of us who planned the program had to be renegotiated with City College policy makers and also the chancellor. For example, the coalition wanted full-time and committed teachers. However, City College policy required that *their* “training specialists” not teach more than 12 hours a week—a policy that made these teachers ineligible for union membership.

Universidad Popular was about to lose its independence. The *Universidad's* board demanded that the chancellor honor earlier commitments and be accountable to the community. They organized a community-wide meeting with the chancellor to make their voices heard. Over 200 students and community residents attended. The chancellor and his entourage were amazed to

see such an outpouring of interest in a 4-month-old adult education program.

The *Universidad's* board controlled the agenda, allowing students and local leaders ample time to voice their concerns before the chancellor was given the podium.

A Design for Failure

As formidable as the chancellor was, he seldom allowed himself to be seen as the community's adversary. He preferred the role of patronizing benefactor, strengthening a dependency that tied "his" program to him. He feigned impatience with the shortsightedness of the college presidents and vice-chancellors who he brought in tow whose missteps required his intervention. He acceded to the demands of the community, promising that the community "advisory" board would guide him. He used a ploy that I had seen him use on other occasions. He observed the direction in which the people were moving, and then ran to the front to be seen as leading them in the same direction.

You can see how none of this inspired affection on the part of City College bureaucrats, either for the program or for those of us in the City Colleges who had given birth to this headache! Unfortunately, this meeting became a recurring pattern for the next 9 years. Annual crises induced by bureaucratic, administrative decisions required additional meetings with growing numbers of community residents, politicians, and public officials in attendance. Crisis management was in the hands of the chancellor who resolved the immediate issues but in the end left policies and procedures unchanged, which led inevitably to further conflict after the current conflict seemed to have been resolved. Besides, the chancellor's management by intervention heightened the hostility of lower-ranking administrators whose decisions were more likely to affect day-to-day operations at *Universidad Popular*.

Despite the ongoing tensions, the work of *Universidad Popular* prospered. In addition to the English as a Second Language and other basic education classes, the program offered workshops on family planning, the prevention of child and spouse abuse, the elimination of drug abuse, and health care. A theater group presented plays about life in the community and another program offered free legal counseling. Spanish classes were also offered for Anglo-Americans, many of them professionals who would help the program through the difficult years ahead. There were frequent fiestas that made Latino culture a source of pride and joy for many racial and ethnic residents of Lakeview.

Free of a Strangling Embrace

But 10 years of struggling with the City Colleges had taught *Universidad Popular* the dangers of co-optation and dependency that can result from partnering with an academic institution. And with this realization came the inevitable conclusion; to be free the program had to leave the strangling embrace of the City Colleges. After 10 years, the program shut the door on close to \$250,000

in annual funding and became what it had sought to be from its beginning: an

New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education • DOI: 10.1002/ace

independent, community-based organization. That was 1981. I recall that story today, because in May of 2012 I participated in the 40th-anniversary celebration of *Universidad Popular*, sharing memories with many of the staff from 4 decades ago about this amazing, long-lived program and the college system that almost destroyed it. I have continued to both support and learn from *Universidad Popular*, while the two universities with which I have been affiliated after leaving the City Colleges have remained in the background.

The Limits of University/Community Partnerships

Universities and community colleges claim to value community service and employ a number of strategies to reach out beyond the academy. The question we need to ask, however, is which communities is it in the interest of the university to serve? In addition, the interests of community are as complex as the interests of the university. A college or university can provide language or literacy classes for Latinos, but the interests of the Latino communities that are engaged in struggles with immigration, unemployment, police harassment, and gang violence include language and literacy—and also include so much more. Involvement in such communities frequently requires taking sides in conflicts where powerful interests are at stake.

Can a university stay in the background and take sides at the same time? The story of the interactive media project with which I began suggests that it can. However, when community service takes the form of public relations, then the university is foregrounded; it must be circumspect in its encounters with the community, measured in its response to latent conflict, and balanced in its allegiance to factions with a divided community. The university maintains an abiding interest in controlling the content it provides through its programs and initiatives. It is drawn to a service model for that very reason. But communities that seek control over the decisions that affect their day-to-day welfare and over their own learning are not likely candidates for community services of the university.

A university can take a different approach to community partnership, and at times has done so. It can assist, without controlling, communities that seek to organize locally controlled education, cultural events, or resident-managed housing. There were faculty members at the University of Chicago in the 1960s who supported The Woodlawn Organization in its efforts to halt their university's planned gentrification (Hirsch, 1998). Although a university can do these things, such efforts are unlikely to be official initiatives or administratively sanctioned. Such an approach is more likely to be taken by socially committed faculty and students who operate on their own and in the background.

Contrasting Approaches

Several years ago I was working with a group of residents of Dearborn Homes,

a public housing development on the south side of Chicago. The residents

New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education • DOI: 10.1002/ace

were organizing to take over the management of their development, and the Chicago Housing Authority required that they first complete a feasibility study. They asked for my help. Together we decided to turn the task into a participatory research project, with the residents learning from residents like themselves who had successfully developed resident management in other cities—Boston, Newark, and St. Louis. They documented what these residents had done, planned the steps they would take at Dearborn, developed a timeline, and identified the resources and skills that would be required. Individuals volunteered to be trained in accounting, management, security, and maintenance. When they were finished a year later, they had established the feasibility of their project and had a blueprint for its implementation.

I contrast this with the more typical consulting practice of a faculty member at a neighboring university. He too was asked to assist with the development of a feasibility study for another public housing development, Wentworth Gardens, a mile distant from Dearborn Homes. However, unlike the participatory process that fully engaged the residents and left them with a document owned by the community, his approach was more academic. He and his staff wrote the feasibility study for the residents. The study was sufficient to gain the nod from the Housing Authority, but the residents had not learned from the process or acquired the skills they would need to move ahead. They could read the document of course, but the words were not theirs. Two years later, Wentworth Gardens was “resident managed,” although in actuality the residents had hired a managing agency to run their development, whereas the residents of Dearborn Homes employed fellow residents in key positions. At Dearborn, the feasibility study was kept up-to-date and remained their blueprint for action.

These two contrasting approaches demonstrate a potential role for nurturing agency and change in communities of poverty and neglect. In the first example, the interaction of university and community is participatory and the university remains in the background. In the second, a more traditional consulting relationship between university and community foregrounds the university as the purveyor of expert knowledge. Only in the first is the community itself the agent of social and political change. Honoring the independent agency of democratically controlled communities is the only sustaining gift the university can bring to its neighbors. And it is in many instances the only way that the institutional interests of the university can be maintained.

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New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education • DOI: 10.1002/ace

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