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The Community
Action Scholars Program
at the University of
Wisconsin–Milwaukee
provides education and
training in organizational
design and leadership to
grassroots organizations
and neighborhood
residents. Insights drawn
from lessons learned
about university-commu-
nity collaboratives during
this experience have an
ultimate goal of empower-
ing community residents.

Education for Empowerment: Creating a Community Action Scholars Program

A Community-University Partnership Effort

The Milwaukee Community Outreach Partnership Center was created to facilitate the interface between the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee's (UWM's) substantial research and outreach capacity and those community organizations and neighborhood groups that attempt to address pressing urban problems in Milwaukee. The intent was to focus combined university and community-based resources in a designated target area to promote neighborhood revitalization through economic development, employment skills training, housing design and restructuring, and access to credit for home ownership and entrepreneurial activities. The project's targets include neighborhoods with diverse populations of whites, Latinos, Hmong, Laotians, and Native Americans.

The original proposal called for "an action-curriculum and the creation of community based action-learning laboratories that are designed and run by local residents for the benefit of residents

as well as for the personal and professional development of the volunteers and employees of local neighborhood organizations." The plan was to convene a curriculum planning team composed of university and community-based organization representatives to co-design action-learning strategies as the backbone for the program. From this conceptual beginning, a vibrant plan for community-focused organization and training was to emerge, created on the basis of community input.

Theoretical Framework

The collaborative effort that produced the Community Action Scholars Program drew heavily upon the traditions of participatory action research tradition (Tandon, 1988) and critical teaching and social change (Freire, 1973; Shor, 1980, 1992). For several practitioners (Chesler, 1991; Froderes, 1992; Bartunck, 1993; and McCaleb, 1994), the key elements within these traditions include:

- Popular control of knowledge through defining the problems and issues to be addressed as well as determining the ends for which new information and research findings will be used;

- The ability of people to create and define their own knowledge through participating in collaborative teaching and learning projects; and

- The need to break down the traditional distinction between researcher and subjects through programs that embody the principles of collaborative inquiry.

The implementation of the Action Scholars Program and the development of a related Certificate in Community Organizing and Leadership Development are exercises in participatory action research. Through these initiatives community residents and grassroots leaders are empowered to (1) conduct their own research into issues that impact Milwaukee neighborhoods; (2) encourage the involvement of other residents in framing research questions, collecting data, and analyzing findings; and (3) report their conclusions, recommendations, and strategies for change to different audiences including residents, community leaders, and policymakers.

Building and sustaining a sense of community among participants is a major goal for the Action Scholars Program. The qualities that characterize a community of learning include commitment, consensus, inclusiveness, contemplation, vulnerability, and graceful fighting (Orbe, 1995). One of the major benefits of participating in the program is the opportunity to create community among the participants and the challenge of reflecting critically on the degree to which community was created and sustained throughout the life of the program.

Learning to reflect critically on the gap between our actions and our intentions, between our espoused theories and our theories-in-use, is the hallmark of action science (Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1989). Action science provides a proactive

communication strategy that is aimed at closing this gap through dialogue and inquiry in small group settings. As members become experienced in reflective and critical thinking skills, they begin to function as a learning community. By this we mean that members share a level of trust that allows them to openly challenge their separate views and to discuss their candid assessments of issues for the purpose of shared learning, appreciation of multiple points of view, and collaborative action. The Action Scholars seminar was designed to create an environment in which proactive communication and reflective dialogue could take place. This was accomplished as group issues of attendance, completing projects, commitment to the program, receiving stipends, and related concerns were raised and discussed in an open forum among the scholars.

Through this article we offer a reflective look at our work with community partners in the Community Action Scholars Program. We acknowledge that a gap exists between what we would have liked to accomplish and what actually occurred. Our goal is to sustain the cycle of continuous approximation toward ideal goals, which requires candid and focused dialogue to assess our shortcomings and to take corrective action. Working with the partners and scholars represents a continuous struggle with negotiating time, values, professional practices, control, and responsibility among all members. The result is an action research process that evolves over time; takes unanticipated turns; produces ambiguities and dilemmas that are to be lived with, not resolved; and creates knowledge about how and why programs develop that is perhaps more important than the research findings and project outcomes that are the more tangible results that flow from our work.

The NETWORK and Its Certificate Program

The Scholars Program resulted from a year-long collaborative effort between UWM and several community-based partners. This collaborative planning group, calling itself the NETWORK, originated out of the Milwaukee Chapter of WADE (Wisconsin Against Drug Environments), a program that provides 20 community organizers to Milwaukee's central city. The Milwaukee Community Outreach Partnership Center (MCOPC) representatives began working with WADE and its education committee in the fall of 1995 in a planning effort to design a training program for community organizers. Over time this group expanded to include representatives of other community organizations, and today the NETWORK membership represents an informal gathering of highly committed individuals and their supporting agencies, mostly nonprofit organizations engaged in community development in Milwaukee.

The results of the NETWORK's efforts are impressive. During the past year and a half, this group has:

- Designed a certificate program in community organizing and leadership development that incorporates three components: a series of skill-based workshops in eight content areas; the design and implementation of neighborhood projects with tangible results; and participation in reflective seminars aimed at integrating the theory and practice of community education.

- Drafted values, vision, and mission statements:

  Values: To build communities of learning and action through the understanding and voicing of different points of view, acknowledging the cultural diversity of the community, seeking equal opportunities and justice, and practicing effective communication. These will demonstrate trust, bonding, respect, and responsibility throughout the community and empower residents to address community issues that affect their daily lives.

  Vision: An educational program that promotes viable personal growth and development, strengthens leadership and organizational skills, and fosters social change and justice in the community.

  Mission: To coordinate and facilitate an educational program through the collaborative efforts of educational institutions, neighborhood organizations, and community wide coalitions.

- Developed a proposal for Enterprise Community funding that included the collaboration of eight central city neighborhood agencies in providing funds for a project to support community organizers and scholarships to allow neighborhood residents to enroll in the NETWORK's certificate program.

- Recruited community-based membership to a Certification Board that will hold the certifying authority for its community organizing and leadership development program.

Time Frames and Real World Constraints

Collaborating with community partners necessarily takes place within time frames dictated by community issues, priorities, projects, and funding cycles that are indifferent to the constraints of an academic year. Nearly a year passed while the NETWORK members framed their certificate program, crafted their values, vision, and mission statement, and developed their own proposal for funding. This was followed by the decision to join eight neighborhood agencies in preparing a collaborative proposal for neighborhood empowerment that was submitted to the City of Milwaukee for Enterprise Community funding in July 1996. Funding approval was given in May 1997, with the actual release of funds to begin program implementation in September 1997—a full two years after MCOPC entered the scene.

How does a university outreach program function within this context? The normal lead time for a new seminar on the UWM campus requires six to eight months from conceptualization to approval through the curriculum review process. In contrast, it took nearly a year to develop the NETWORK certificate program and another year of waiting for word on funding with little or no assurance that support would be forthcoming. Clearly, this was not an exercise in designing a new university course. Rather, the energy invested in designing the NETWORK Certificate

Program is best understood as a community development effort aimed at empowering community partners.

A Noncredit Action Research Class as a Vehicle for Strategic Planning

MCOPC funding allowed the university team to continue working with the NETWORK as both partners and facilitators of a process that eventually resulted in a funded certificate program. Beginning in September 1995, a series of planning meetings was held that produced a general outline for the certificate program, but the group encountered difficulty in moving forward with its planning as new members joined the planning sessions and made it necessary to spend valuable time bringing the newcomers up to date. In an effort to move the planning process forward, the university team proposed a noncredit, action learning seminar that would run from February through May 1996. Participants enrolling in this class could earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs) while finishing the design of their certificate program. Fifteen participants signed on for the course, which was offered at no cost. This move helped to stabilize the membership of the planning group as well as to instill focus and motivation among the members.

Equally important, this class served as a pilot test of a key component of the emerging NETWORK Certificate program: the use of a university-sponsored action research class as a vehicle to facilitate strategic planning coupled with the production of concrete outcomes for the community. Accordingly, the action learning seminar had two primary goals: (1) complete the framework for the NETWORK certificate program, and (2) prepare a proposal for funding that could be submitted to the City of Milwaukee Block Grant Agency that was preparing a request for proposals for its HUD-sponsored Enterprise Community Grant program. Both goals were accomplished with the NETWORK becoming a partner in a collaborative empowerment proposal that was submitted to the City of Milwaukee in July 1997. This action resulted in a two-year, $600,000 grant awarded in May 1997.

The Community Action Scholars Seminar

With the NETWORK proposal submitted and the likely decision on funding months away, the university team suggested using its MCOPC proposal to create a community scholars program as a pilot test of the proposed certificate program. The NETWORK partners were adamant about having a program that would (1) create education and training opportunities for neighborhood residents, many of whom do not have high school diplomas; (2) provide continuing education opportunities for themselves as community organizers; (3) provide access to the university through credit courses; and (4) create an environment of learning and support that would help the participants deal with the challenges of a rigorous curriculum and the often contradictory demands of everyday life.

The NETWORK partners accepted the challenge and began designing a second action learning seminar that would start before the end of 1996. The course format was to focus on one or more action projects that would be undertaken by the

participants. A group of NETWORK partners, including the university team, met on a Sunday afternoon to frame the general components of the seminar. Armed with a supply of pizza and soda, the group engaged in an afternoon discussion on issues of community organizing, welfare reform, access to the university, and barriers to education such as child care and transportation, as well as those relating to social change and justice. The discussion was lively and at times contentious as members voiced opinions and held ground on strongly felt positions.

Eventually the group focused on welfare reform because the State of Wisconsin was preparing to launch its "Wisconsin Works" or "W2" program. The proposed changes will, among other things, end automatic entitlement to welfare benefits—after a specified period of time, welfare recipients will be eliminated from the rolls if they have not found employment. The reform is controversial in many quarters, as critics raise questions about program implementation and results. Participants thus agreed that the seminar readings, discussions, and action projects should center on Wisconsin's welfare reform efforts and the community's response to these initiatives.

The group felt strongly that the seminar must address the immediate needs of welfare families as well as larger concerns such as system change and the cultural, spiritual, and community context within which families live, as well as adult learning and human development. The group identified elements within each of three domains. *System change* included discussion of how the system works, points of access, public policies, and action strategies to affect policies and their implementation. *Cultural context* included the exploration of basic values, assumptions, and beliefs that frame the welfare debate, as well as the engagement of community residents in a process of dialogue and community action. *Adult learning* focused on issues of crisis intervention, self-help, and collective action. Throughout the discussion, the group articulated a philosophical framework that captured the tension between maintaining the status quo and achieving social change. The status quo is maintained through the socialization of unquestioned values, beliefs, and assumptions about concerns such as welfare reform and the notion that reality, like human nature, is unchangeable. Social change is possible when people begin to see reality as a social and cultural creation, and options become available as people begin to think critically about their existing values, beliefs, and assumptions, and take action based on new ways of seeing and thinking about social needs, programs, and policies.

The Community Action Scholars Program: Curriculum and Requirements

The group's discussion was translated into an action research class with the title, "Problems of Change in Community Organization: Welfare Reform in Wisconsin and the Community's Response." The class was approved by the UWM Department of Education Policy and Community Studies and was offered for either undergraduate or graduate credit, or through a separate listing, for those students who did not want to enroll in the Action Scholars seminar for university credit. Finally, The MCOPC grant provided a scholarship in the amount of $1,000 for each Community

Action Scholar to offset time and transportation costs associated with participating in the program and other related expenses.

The objectives of the course were:

- To understand the dynamics of welfare reform being implemented in Wisconsin and Milwaukee;

- To identify specific issues and needs within Milwaukee neighborhoods that relate to welfare reform implementation;

- To design and initiate specific action projects that would address welfare recipients' needs, community issues, and/or welfare policies at the local and state levels;

- To enhance the skills, knowledge, and practice of community organizing and leadership development through action research initiatives.

Participants in the action seminar were expected to work in teams to (1) facilitate Action Learning Circles among neighborhood residents, (2) deliver written and oral reports on the design, implementation, and status of their action projects, and (3) host a summit meeting to share the results of our action learning activities with the larger community. Participants enrolled for graduate/undergraduate credit were given additional written assignments as part of the requirement for university credit.

Workshops in Leadership and Organizational Development
Community Action Scholars were also required to attend a series of monthly workshops, which provided participants with vital knowledge and experiences in skill areas directly related to community organizing and leadership development. The schedule of workshops included a focus upon computer applications (e.g., Internet, literature searches), collaboration and networking, neighborhood strategic planning, personal empowerment and developing leadership capacity, organizational development, and research and evaluation. A final workshop was a "Community Summit on Welfare Reform: Reporting Progress and Outcomes of Action Projects."

Internship Experience
Each Action Scholar was expected to participate in an internship four to eight hours per week with one of the MCOPC components and/or community-based organizations, and to complete a minimum of 100 hours of internship experience over an eight-month period. Internship assignments were coordinated in consultation with individual community action scholars, MCOPC components, and community-based organizations. In order to ensure new and varied experiences, scholars were discouraged from interning in an organization where they were employed or regularly volunteered.

Selecting Program Participants

The MCOPC and the NETWORK partners distributed widely throughout the community a program announcement describing the Community Action Scholars Program, curriculum, and requirements, and the application process. In order to maximize participation and achieve a diverse group of scholars, the program's selection criteria were designed to be as inclusive as possible. Applicants were required to demonstrate: (1) interest in and commitment to an action-learning program in a team setting where university or certificate credit was available; (2) interest in community issue analysis and action; and (3) at least one year of experience participating in community work. Applicants were informed that they would be expected to commit to an 11-month program, be available for periodic evening/weekend curricular activities, and spend four to eight hours per week as an intern with one of the MCOPC component initiatives and/or a community-based organization. Over 40 applications were received for 20 positions, and these were screened by a committee composed of MCOPC staff and representatives of key community-based organizations. The 20 individuals selected for program participation represented a diverse and fascinating group of individuals with substantial talent and energy related to community redevelopment.

Seminar Results

The results of the seminar can be summarized as responses to specific questions about the formation of effective collaborations.

What was the result of organizing a university seminar around significant community issues and engaging grassroots leaders in action research projects that unfold within the context of real world events? The focus on welfare reform and its impact on Milwaukee neighborhoods and residents provided a sense of urgency and relevance to the participants, and was also the most demanding part of the seminar. Members were expected to frame and undertake projects within real world constraints.

How does the university offer a community-oriented seminar that will include participants with a wide range of backgrounds and levels of education? The Community Action Scholars seminar enrolled members for noncredit, continuing education units as well as for undergraduate or graduate credit. The differences among the participants—in education level and course requirements—were never an issue. To the contrary, the diversity among the scholars was seen as a very strong and positive feature. The scholars voiced a high regard for the quality of discussion that occurred in the seminar and workshop sessions among themselves and with guest speakers. Perhaps the greatest value of all of the interactions was the creation of a time and place where community activists could talk with each other about the issues, challenges, frustrations, and strategies they employed as they worked in their respective neighborhoods. As the seminar progressed and attendance began to decline, the greatest concern was over the loss of continued interaction with the missing members.

Will participation in an action research class such as the Community Action Scholars Program serve as a gateway to higher education among the participants? A number of scholars enrolled in the program with the intention of either returning to complete their university studies or of entering college for the first time. One participant has already entered a master's program at UWM with scholarship support organized by MCOPC through a grant from HUD. Two other participants are seriously considering a decision to pursue graduate studies. Unfortunately, at least two others who were weighing their options of beginning a college career were unable to complete the seminar, and it is doubtful that they will enter college in the near future because of personal and/or life constraints.

Will the focus on current issues such as welfare reform through action projects result in meaningful learning among the members about the nature of the problem under investigation? The focus on welfare reform proved to be challenging because the topic itself was undergoing constant change. Wisconsin was in the process of creating its policies and administrative procedures and implementing programs during the time the seminar was held. As a result, the seminar proved to be a place where the members could receive the latest information about the changing policies through discussions among themselves and with resource people who addressed the class or presented formal workshop sessions. On this front the Action Scholars were perhaps among the best informed about the latest developments in welfare changes in Milwaukee.

Will the Action Scholars, as local grassroots leaders, work collaboratively together in their action projects? Yes, but not always. The scholars quickly formed teams to address different issues raised by welfare reform, although two participants chose to work alone. Once in teams, the scholars struggled to find ways to work together. In most cases they framed a general topic and then selected their own focus, which allowed them to work independently from the other team members. One team was never able to begin working on their project and eventually dissolved because of life pressures and/or illness.

Will the class members form a support network among themselves in an effort to keep focused on their projects and avoid attrition through outside pressures such as job, family, sickness, and personal factors that may lead to dropping out of the program? Yes, to a limited degree. Participants in the program enrolled with a high degree of interest and commitment to completing the program. However, major life events such as illness, loss of job, loss of support from employers to give release time, and family responsibilities intervened in some cases and, as a result, participation in the program dropped to 12 active members from an initial roster of 20.

The issues of commitment and attendance became a hotly debated topic. As the seminar moved past its fifth month, attendance began to decline, and work on team projects suffered. This was a real concern for those who remained active, who felt that they were being cheated by not having the other members present in discussions. Worse, many who remained active in the program voiced their opinions that those who were not attending should not continue to receive their scholarship stipends.

What are the major recommendations for improving the Community Action Scholars seminar that emerge from this first year experience?

- *Requirements.* The three components of the seminar proved to be too demanding for many of the scholars. The need to participate in seminar sessions, attend monthly workshops, implement an action research project, and complete an internship proved to be more than most participants could handle given all the other pressures in their lives. As a result, internships will not be part of subsequent action scholar programs.

- *Attendance and Stipends.* The combination of low attendance among some scholars, coupled with continuing receipt of their stipends became a contentious issue in the group. Members recommended making attendance and active participation a precondition for receiving stipends in the future.

- *Commitment and Responsibility.* Concerns about commitment and responsibility were also voiced by those scholars who maintained a high level of attendance, who felt that their full time jobs, family responsibilities, and community involvement were no less important to them than to those who were not attending. The seminar and workshop sessions were offered on different days and times to accommodate conflicts in schedule, but attendance among some still declined substantially. Our recommendation, in addition to offering alternative dates for meetings, is to emphasize that the Community Action Scholars Program involves community-building among the scholars themselves, and that this requires a high level of commitment and demonstrated responsibility for members to attend even in the face of a demanding schedule.

- *Action Projects.* The projects undertaken by the scholars incorporate a range of activities such as (1) collecting and distributing information on the changing status of W2 rules and regulations as the September 1, 1997, implementation date approached; (2) organizing interventions aimed at meeting the specific needs of individuals and families who were struggling with this transition in their lives; and (3) facilitating dialogue among residents and community leaders on broader policy level issues associated with W2 reforms. The topics presented at the final seminar summit included the following:
  a. Community Information and Advocacy. Organize a series of community forums on the changing policies and regulations of welfare reform, coordinate self-help advocacy programs for

women affected by W2, and assist in creating a clearing house
for information on W2 strategies at the local, state, and national
levels.

b. Changes in Welfare: Four Decades of Experience. A series of
life histories of women who received aid during the 1960s, 1970s,
1980s, and 1990s. Focus is on the role welfare assistance played
in the lives of these women and their families and the advice
these women have for those facing changes in the welfare pro-
gram today.

c. Resource Directory. A compilation of programs and services
that are available to assist women and families who are facing
the transition to employment and its associated challenges.

d. Supporting Children through Family, School, and Community Col-
laboration. An effort to organize school-based planning groups
composed of teachers, administrators, parents, community resi-
dents, and children that will identify and address the needs of
students that stem from W2 implementation and can best be
addressed from a coordinated school, family, and community
perspective.

Lessons and Implications

Our work with the NETWORK and the Community Action Scholars Pro-
gram has several implications regarding university-community partnerships.

* *Time:* Substantial time and energy were invested in creating an at-
mosphere of trust, shared values, common goals, and mutual ben-
efits. Creating this kind of environment is a *precondition* for effec-
tive partnerships and collaboration.

* *Sharing Power:* A university-community partnership is a partner-
ship between unequals. From the community's point of view there is
risk in collaborating with a university, which comes with its own
agenda and position of prestige, privilege, and authority. University
partners must recognize this unequal relationship and be willing and
able to share control, authority, responsibility, and accountability in
collaborative projects.

* *Participatory Action Research:* The literature on participatory action
research provides a theoretical and practical framework in which
university and community members co-generate knowledge and share
in the funding, design, implementation, and reporting of results. Our
work with the NETWORK is consistent with this literature. For

example, (1) the certificate program is a joint product of the NETWORK members, (2) a community board will coordinate the program, (3) funding will be administered through one of the participating community-based organizations, and (4) the delivery of training programs will be through a network of educational providers.

- *Teaching and Learning:* The NETWORK Certificate program and the Community Action Scholars Program represent a commitment to an adult education model of teaching and learning. In this approach, teaching and learning is a *joint* venture in which everyone shares in designing a learning experience and functions as both instructor and student. Professors have much to learn from community members, and adult students have significant knowledge and experience to share within a teaching and learning exchange.

- *Critical Self-Reflective Learning for Individual, Community, and Institutional Change:* University-community partnerships must necessarily include an opportunity and a challenge for both to learn and change from the experience. Critical self-reflective dialogue is a vehicle for change. This can happen when jointly initiated projects create the opportunity for university and community partners to invent programs that challenge existing values and assumptions about the relationship between the university and the community, between teachers and learners, between researchers and subjects, and between academic knowledge and indigenous knowledge, between professional ways of knowing and those of the lay person.

Conclusion

The NETWORK certificate program and the Community Action Scholars Program provide examples of learning at multiple levels. Individual participants learn about strategic planning, collaboration, curriculum development, and the administration of educational programs. Participants in the scholars' seminar serve as agents for community learning by creating and disseminating new knowledge about Wisconsin's welfare reform efforts as seen from the vantage point of grassroots organizers and other community activists working for social change. Finally, the university learns that in sharing its control and authority over research and classroom instruction, it can produce innovative educational program delivery systems that not only respond to the needs of nontraditional students but also foster new collaborative relationships with a variety of education providers and funding sources.

this paper: Muhammad Abdullah, Paul Bloyd, Tracey Carey, Vela Coggs, Sandra Curtis, Karen Dotson, Russell Graham, Victoria Hutchins, Paul Kinsley, Ray Mendoza, Daniel Lopez, Lauren Stevens, Anita Nash, Carmen Pitre, Iria Rilley, Ann Wilson, Craig Wroten, and Santiago Zarate.

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