Trust Building: The Secret to Highly Collaborative Partnerships

By Julie Simpson, Giselle Mercier, Tony Streit, and Lott Hill

Abstract

How can universities engage in a strategic learning collaborative that advances their "urban mission" in such a way that its community partners participate as equals? How can this vision of equity be achieved and harnessed to work toward a unified vision? Can this articulated vision and plan of action then strengthen both community and campus capacity? This article seeks to illustrate how Columbia College Chicago approached the implementation of its urban mission, and how other universities might also play the role of facilitators while being inclusive, trustworthy, and respectful to community partners.

Over the past three decades, Columbia College Chicago has participated in an aggressive transformation to become an educationally-engaged campus with a strong and committed urban mission. Since the early 1960s, Columbia has grown from a struggling 200-student technical school to the country's largest arts and communications college. Columbia strives to create a teaching/learning environment that is progressive and self-critical, since its mission is "to educate students who will communicate creatively and shape the public's perceptions of issues and events and who will author the culture of their times." For this reason, our mission adds that "Columbia conducts education in close relationship to a vital urban reality and serves important civic purposes by active engagement in the life and culture of the city of Chicago."

To strengthen Columbia's efforts to nurture and develop this urban mission, which is integral to its core educational mission, the institution became involved with the *Implementing Urban Missions* initiative sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges. Through this initiative, the Office of Community Arts Partnerships (OCAP) was established to create an infrastructure unit that would enable faculty and students from a variety of Columbia's departments to engage in meaningful partnerships with neighboring community-based arts organizations (CBOs). OCAP is entrusted with the challenging task of developing a strategic plan to harvest the knowledge and unique experiences of members of a partnership committee or learning collaborative. This collaborative is guiding Columbia's efforts to institutionalize the practice of service-learning in the college's liberal arts curriculum. To advance the work that will support the infrastructure and teaching environment of both the CBOs and Columbia, OCAP and its partnership committee identified the following areas for development:

- Increasing the support of senior staff at the college and CBOs,
- Re-examining reward systems for college faculty participation and preventing burnout among CBOs' teaching staff,
- Emphasizing inter-departmental collaborations and a commitment to an interdisciplinary approach to quality and complex projects,
- Supporting reciprocal community involvement within our campus through carefully co-planned artistic projects to encourage curriculum reform,
- Empowering CBOs to identify and serve their own needs by strengthening their capacity to house sustainable cultural programming,
- Defining measurable outcomes and creating assessment tools and methods that would permit extensive documentation and reflection on lessons learned.

Every partnership member has embarked on a unique journey to achieve our self-defined goals. It has been a long process in which OCAP has often assumed the role of knowledge broker and catalyst. As we approach our third year of implementation, we look back to the motivating factors that brought us together, the progress experienced, and our collective destiny.

Only Fools Rush In

By Lott Hill

When Randy Albers, chair of the Fiction Writing Department, asked me to represent the department at the first meeting of the Office of Community Arts Partnerships, neither of us had any idea of what to expect, or how big of a role our department could play in an initiative to link Columbia College to community-based organizations. The Fiction Writing Department had a history of supporting a few outreach programs that sent teachers into settings outside Columbia, such as area middle schools and the city-run summer jobs program Gallery 37. Though several faculty members were involved, these outreach efforts were mostly developed program-by-program and not organized in a formal way as to have a consistent impact on the faculty and students from our department. To put it simply, no one in the department had enough time to coordinate outreach programming, and the college did not have a formal structure to support such efforts or to disseminate information about these programs. I was a graduate student in the Fiction Writing Department, a part-time faculty member, a teaching artist for Gallery 37, and like Professor Albers, had a strong interest in exploring more avenues to connect the college with the community.

The first planning meeting with OCAP was both encouraging and overwhelming. There were representatives from six CBOs and six departments in attendance. It was immediately obvious that everyone at the table had a strong artistic background and that we all wanted to further our efforts in providing high-quality arts programming for youth. I was impressed by the simple fact that OCAP considered the organizations and departments present and their representatives to be equals in this planning process and that they had gone to great lengths to conduct an asset-based resource analysis of what each partner brought to the planning committee and to disseminate that information. It was

clear that we were departing on a long and important journey, but at the time none of us knew how arduous and productive our efforts would be.

OCAP understood that if the individuals of this diverse group were to work together we would need to develop a sense of trust, mutual respect, and equality. Our first several meetings were centered on building team dynamics and decision-making practices. To develop a genuine sense of trust, this process could not be rushed; to create true equality, all voices had to be heard and with more than twelve leaders in the arts education community, there were plenty of strong voices at the table. In the beginning, it often felt like we were making new friends and there was a genuine sense of enjoyment in the bounty of ideas and possibilities we discussed.

With that enjoyment came a certain amount of frustration at the amount of time necessary to build such solid relationships. Everyone wanted to get to the work of collaboration as soon as possible and at times it felt as if we might never get to the task of working together to create new programs. OCAP understood that a solid foundation for collaboration could not be built without detailed planning and that the process of developing this foundation would result in much stronger working relationships in the future.

The initial planning process took nearly nine months of becoming acquainted, brainstorming, discussing, arguing, agreeing, imagining, and finding our way through uncharted territory. The result was not simply a structure for collaboration between the college and CBOs, but an evolving organism that has the ability to develop and grow as it learns from its mistakes and successes.

For the Fiction Writing Department, the Urban Missions project has enabled us to create an organized structure for collaboration with other Columbia departments and community organizations, which provide venues for faculty and students to teach and learn in nontraditional educational settings and put into practice the skills they have developed at the college. We are currently involved in a number of ongoing collaborative programs with community-based partners. One such partnership is with Free Street Programs. Our first collaboration was a five-month program set in two Chicago-area public middle schools. Teachers and students from Fiction Writing and Free Street worked with seventh and eighth graders to co-develop a curriculum in reading and writing skills and to create an anthology of student writing that came from the program. This was a true collaboration since the curriculum was mutually developed and the teachers created a cooperative teaching approach from two very distinct pedagogies. More than 100 middle school students were part of this project, which resulted in a beautiful volume of creative and uniquely written work, and a public reading at the college where many of the participants read their writing in front of their peers, families, and students and faculty from Columbia.

Though the first collaboration was a success, it was not without difficulty, as Free Street Programs and the Fiction Writing Department were just beginning to learn to collaborate. The structure and process developed by OCAP and the Urban Missions

partners ensured that we would have the benefit of learning from our experiences, allowing the collaboration to evolve in a mutually productive and sustainable way. By its second year, the project had been lengthened to ten months and had a much stronger buy-in from the teachers and administrations of the schools with which we are working.

Work of this nature has also begun to have an influence on the rest of Columbia. Other departments and programs such as Senior Seminar, which serves as a Capstone course for undergraduates, are becoming more involved with the philosophy of service learning through opportunities with the Urban Missions program. Not only has OCAP increased the opportunities for students to serve in the community, but my work with the Urban Missions program has aided me in co-developing the curriculum for a number of sections focused on art and community, where students are working directly with many of the same community partners I met at that first planning meeting.

The influence OCAP and the Urban Missions Program has upon Columbia continues to evolve. Scholarships for constituents of the CBOs recruit more students from the community; the increasing number of collaborative partnerships creates more venues for faculty and students to work outside the college; the community has more access to the resources of the college; more departments from the college and more organizations from the community want to become involved with OCAP and Urban Missions; and Columbia is better able to realize our own urban mission of influencing and being influenced by the community in which we find ourselves.

Mission Nearly Impossible

By Tony Streit

As a young arts organization with a fairly targeted participant base, Street-Level Youth Media was initially quite apprehensive about partnering with Columbia College. From past experience, we have witnessed how a major institution can dominate a relationship and push smaller agencies to commitments beyond their means or mission. We were equally concerned about perceptions of Columbia's approach to higher education. Right or wrong, the school had developed a reputation for being insensitive to the needs of urban youth. The fact that there were no scholarships for low-income youth indicated to us an unwillingness to serve our constituents.

Street-Level is a fairly distinctive organization, though, in that almost everything we do is collaborative. We have partnered with almost every museum, many of the schools, colleges and universities, and numerous youth agencies across the city to develop collaborations that enable all partners to contribute their best efforts to the service of Chicago's youth. Rather than shying away from partnerships with agencies larger than ours, we have learned that a healthy, successful partnership can be possible as long as there are clear goals and objectives that ultimately fit within the mission of all partners. Larger institutions may have greater access to financial and physical resources to support our work. We provide our own unique expertise that partners value and benefit from. As long as we are appropriately and equitably rewarded for our involvement, the collaboration thrives.

In building a partnership with Columbia, we used the lessons of past collaborations to shape our expectations and boundaries for the Urban Mission Project, so that the best interests of our organization would be met throughout. We sought a partnership that gave us appropriate authority over activities, in both program design and administration. We were very impressed, and a little suspicious, to see that this was the model proposed by Columbia's Office of Community Arts Partnerships (OCAP) to structure our Urban Missions partnership. Even more surprising was the fact that OCAP agreed with us that integral to the partnership was the immediate development of full scholarships for low-income youth.

Through our partnership by-laws, developed by our shared college and community advisory board, each of the ten community and college partners in the project is given both authority and responsibility. We continually struggle to define the balance of power, but we are all engaged in that struggle. This is a method very similar to Street-Level's method of operating. With five co-directors who share the executive decision-making duties of the agency, we are always working to build consensus. While not always a clean process, group decision-making guarantees that many voices have influence, and this dynamic promotes self-assessment, diversity, and evolution.

With any large institution, and even some small non-profits, there is a degree of bureaucracy that challenges stakeholders. This is true for both Columbia and Street-Level, and we continue to work to resolve these conflicts. The fundamental goal of the partnership is sound, though. We believe that we are changing the culture of the college in a way that will permanently validate community-based art and engage future generations of artists in the exploration of our field as a valid, highly rewarding endeavor. Central to this understanding are the close bonds that have developed between the artists in each institution. Many of Columbia's faculty are deeply committed to community development, and many more are being influenced by their colleagues' examples. Our staff, too, is gaining considerable professional development through their exposure to the academic environment, with its boundaries and benefits. Most importantly, our young people, for the first time, are engaged in a consideration of higher education as a reality in their lives. For far too many urban youth, a college degree seems impossible for both financial and social reasons. Through our partnership, our youth are shown a different path. We hope that this collaboration and others like it will demonstrate to our youth that real opportunities are available to them and that the pursuit of intellectual and creative advancement is integral to a healthy, hope-filled future.

Final Thoughts and Reflections

Engaged campuses are committed to increasing social capital—"social networks and the bonds of trust and reciprocity that facilitate collective action"—by creating a learning environment where the student interacts with external communities and constituencies through a reciprocal exchange of applied knowledge and informational exchange. Columbia College continues to grow and push its educational boundaries by supporting initiatives that encourage faculty and students to apply their artistic passions in mutually-beneficial relationships with our current urban reality.

Learning how to partner has been the most challenging feat. Many of us plunge into personal and professional relationships intuitively, with best intentions in mind, but with very little preparation. We often learn as we go and, if lucky, manage to learn from our errors and failed attempts to do better next time around. Time is of the essence; successful partnership building depends upon process, and it takes time. Balancing our many responsibilities and commitments both personal and professional can often impede the natural flow of this process. Recognizing and honoring this fact has been OCAP's main focus in trying to facilitate and create an environment among all partnership participants that fosters open knowledge exchange and reciprocal learning to ensure capacity building.

One strategy OCAP is currently implementing is working with existing Capstone college classes to incorporate sections that specifically address building the skills necessary in partnership development. In these class sections we explore personal and group dynamics through group exercises. Some of the concepts explored are:

- Understanding your capacity, interests, skills, and talents. Considering all of my other commitments, how much time can I offer to the partnership building process? How will I set aside this time?
- Getting to know your collaborators. What are some effective ways for me to get to know people in the group? Why is this so important?
- Learning to collaborate and compromise. What is the most difficult aspect of collaboration for me? What are my strengths and weaknesses as a collaborator, leader, and/or facilitator?
- Developing mutual goal setting and joint planning. How are we going to function as a group—how do we develop a structure?
- Forming personal goals for yourself as you learn from the joint planning experience. How do we develop a mutual set of goals for our project? What are some strategies to ensure participation from all collaborators? How do I meld my interests and desires with the goals of the group? Where is it difficult for me to compromise and how will I handle this in a collaborative project situation?
- Determining roles and responsibilities in a group. What is my role in the group? What are my natural inclinations/passions? What does it mean to be a responsible participant within a group?
- Developing a system for evaluating and measuring processes and outcomes. What are some ways that I can map my thinking during the process of the collaboration? What are some ways that the group as a whole can chart their development and their success at attaining their goals?

Columbia College's Urban Mission has at its core a vision of long-term partnership and development with its community partners. By approaching the CBOs and inviting them to become equal partners in the planning process for its *Implementing Urban Missions* grant program, Columbia College sought to move beyond the outdated model of community engagement, whereby academic institutions decide what services communities need and then deliver those services with no community input, and with no impact

on the institution. To overcome the initial resistance by CBOs, wary that Columbia College's interest in outreach might be along traditional lines, the project began with a getting-to-know you period of interaction and trust building. This was not an easy task or brief endeavor, as it lasted several months and resulted in the development of internal codes for working together that ultimately became Partnership By-Laws. In the end, however, this familiarization process created an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect that became a necessary tool for the long-term work ahead. As a result, community arts programming has been strengthened, and significant capacity and infrastructure building has taken place. In addition, a road map is being developed that can be adapted by other CBOs and educational institutions seeking to create similar types of relationships.

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Julie Simpson, Director of the Office of Community Arts Partnerships of Columbia College Chicago, is leading the college's efforts to create infrastructure to support faculty, staff, and student engagement in reciprocal learning relationships with external community, educational, and cultural institutions. She was previously Executive Director of the College's Dance Center and was chair and faculty member of dance at several other colleges. She is also a co-founder and current Producing Director of the DanceAfrica Chicago Festival.

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