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Engaging Colleges and Universities as Partners in Healthy Communities Initiatives

SYNOPSIS

Colleges and universities have an important role to play in building healthier communities. In many communities, however, these institutions are viewed with mistrust and skepticism, not as partners or assets. Academics often fail to respect and value community resources; they often assume the role of experts when they approach communities, in the context of short-term projects that place a priority on their goals rather than on communities' goals. Yet, colleges and universities have much to contribute as partners with their communities, and there are many strategies that can be used to develop community-campus partnerships. Whether the leadership for such a partnership starts with the community or the campus is not particularly important as long as the collaboration moves forward in a way that honors and values the strengths and assets of each.

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At a time when they are challenged by complex issues and problems, communities must draw on the strengths and assets of *all* institutions, including colleges and universities, as instruments of community and economic development. Colleges and universities have an important role to play in building healthier communities. In many communities, however, these institutions are viewed with mistrust and skepticism, not as partners or assets. Academic personnel often fail to respect and value community resources; they often impose themselves on communities as experts, in the context of short-term projects that place a priority on furthering their goals rather than communities' goals. Yet, colleges and universities have much to contribute as partners with their communities through their curricula, research activities, and human resources, as the following examples demonstrate:

- *Through curricula.* Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation is a program of 17 schools involved in community partnerships that integrate community service experiences into required curricula for students pursuing careers in medicine, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, allied health, and public health. These service-learning experiences bring valuable resources to the community while enhancing students' competence in community settings and commitment to civic responsibility.^{1,2}
- *Through research activities.* The Seattle Partners for Healthy Communities (SPHC) is helping to bridge the gap between university researchers who want to study community problems, community organizations that want to solve community problems, and a county public health department that wants to serve in a facilitating role. This initiative is changing the way research is conducted to benefit community decision-making and strategic planning (Personal communication, Sandra J. Ciske, MN, Co-Director, SPHC, December 1999). For more information, see www.metrokc.gov/health/phnr/eapd/reports/aapart2.htm#target.
- *Through human and economic resources.* For more than a decade, the University of Maryland Medical System has deliberately invested human and economic resources in the surrounding low-income, predominantly African American community: hiring minority personnel in executive management positions and contracting with minority-owned construction and medical supply firms. Approximately 30% of its purchasing contracts are with minority-owned businesses.³

ASSETS OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

In what ways can colleges and universities contribute to Healthy Communities initiatives? There are many examples of individual faculty or staff members—often unable to speak on behalf of their institution as a whole—who are active on committees or involved in carrying out the evaluation component of an initiative. Perhaps less common are service-learning and internship opportunities for students. Even rarer are examples of partnerships involving decision-makers, faculty, and students from across the institution.

Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH), founded in 1996, is a national nonprofit organization that fosters partnerships between communities and educational institutions that improve health professions

education, civic responsibility, and the overall health of communities. During CCPH's 1997 national conference, John McKnight, a leader in advancing asset-based approaches to community development, concluded his keynote presentation by asking the audience to generate ideas for how colleges and universities can be community-building assets.⁴ Nine categories of ideas were identified:

- *Human resources.* Faculty and staff members can serve in such roles as consultants, facilitators, mentors, role models, program evaluators, board members, volunteers, public speakers, tutors, and peers and can provide technical assistance in such areas as budget analysis, community assessment, business plan development, computer instruction, strategic planning, and grant-writing. Students can provide community service as volunteers and within the context of their coursework.
- *Services.* Colleges and universities can extend campus-based services to the broader community, including language interpretation, day care, transportation, and legal aid.
- *Materials.* Colleges and universities can donate left-over food from campus events, paper and newspapers that would have gone into recycling bins, and other materials to community organizations.
- *Facilities.* Colleges and universities can open facilities such as banquet and sports halls, libraries, conference rooms, dormitories, and recreation centers to community organizations.
- *Economic support.* Colleges and universities can hire staff from the local community, contract for services with local businesses, provide low-income loans to community organizations, and include community organizations in purchasing cooperatives.
- *Emotional support.* Faculty, staff, and students can be caring and inspirational. Students in particular can bring creative insights and energy to communities.
- *Equipment and technology.* Colleges and universities can make technological resources such as audiovisual equipment and support, computer software and hardware, e-mail and Internet access, and copying equipment available to communities. Campuses can also donate their used equipment to community groups.
- *Policy and advocacy.* Colleges and universities can lend their considerable credibility, connections to federal and state policymakers, relationships with funders, and political skills on behalf of community concerns.

- *Cultural activities.* Colleges and universities can invite the broader community to participate in festivals and museum, music, and theater events.

Why would a college or university want to participate in a Healthy Communities initiative? A number of factors are causing these institutions to reconsider their relationships with communities and the content of their curricula and research agendas in light of community needs. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities cites "growing public frustration with what is seen as our unresponsiveness."⁵ The Pew Health Professions Commission points to the health care system's demand for practitioners with new skills and competencies that can be met only if students have learning experiences outside hospital and classroom settings.⁶ A recent study of academic health centers found that public perceptions of institutions, an increased population-based perspective in health care, and calls for academic health centers to be accountable to local and statewide constituencies contributed to their involvement in the community.⁷ Supportive institutional leaders, mission, and structures, familiarity with local community-based organizations, and faculty interest and incentives for participation were important internal facilitators of community involvement.⁷ Many faculty members are eager to learn new models for community-based teaching and research. And many students appreciate being involved in community-based projects that give them real-world experiences and allow them to compare theory and practice. Local colleges and universities often have more willing students than they have community placements available for service-learning and internships.

Of course, just as there are factors supporting the involvement of higher education in the Healthy Communities movement, there are also some significant barriers. These include rigid quarter or semester class schedules, faculty promotion and tenure policies that often provide little recognition or reward for community involvement, and a culture that often seeks first to define the problem rather than build on assessments the community has already done.

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN THE HEALTHY COMMUNITIES MOVEMENT

There are a number of ways that Healthy Communities initiatives can engage local colleges and universities as collaborators in their work.

- *Build on current college and university involvement.* Identify the faculty, staff, or students from local colleges and universities who are already involved in the initiative. Explore the options for their greater involvement as individuals and as links to others within their institutions. Review CCPH's principles of community-campus partnerships to inform the development of authentic partnerships.⁸
- *Assess the initiative's opportunities for faculty, staff, and student involvement.* What opportunities exist within the initiative for community service, service-learning, evaluation, and research? What initiative goals and objectives might be enhanced by relationships with local colleges and universities? Make a list of the opportunities that can serve as the basis of an action plan for building campus partnerships.
- *Assess local campus assets and resources.* Identify nearby colleges and universities that could be potential partners. Contact their offices of community service, service-learning, or outreach, their health professions degree programs, their student service organizations, and their deans of academic and student affairs to learn about potential opportunities for faculty, staff, and student involvement in the initiative.
- *Develop relationships with local campuses.* Invite institutional leaders, faculty, and students to a community meeting and use the opportunity to present the initiative's agenda and accomplishments, highlighting opportunities that could tap into the strengths of higher education and could further the institution's traditional missions of teaching, research, and service.
- *Host an orientation for new faculty at the start of each academic year.* New faculty members are often unfamiliar with the local community and the rich resources it offers. An annual orientation can serve to introduce faculty to the community and the resources available for teaching, research, and service.
- *Get connected with national networks of community and campus leaders.* Connect with Healthy Communities initiatives that have developed or seek to develop partnerships with local colleges and universities, through CCPH (futurehealth.ucsf.edu/ccph.html), the Coalition of Healthier Cities and Communities (www.healthycommunities.org/), and Campus Contact (www.compact.org).

Colleges and universities do not have to wait to be invited by a Healthy Communities initiative to become a

partner in the effort. There are a number of steps that campuses can take to connect directly with initiatives in their local area.

- *Build on existing faculty, staff, and student relationships with the community.* Identify the faculty, staff, or students who are already involved in community service, community-based education, and community-based research. Which community organizations and collaboratives are they connected to? Explore how these relationships might be strengthened and expanded. Review CCPH's principles of community-campus partnerships to inform the development of authentic partnerships.⁸
- *Assess campus opportunities for faculty, staff, and student involvement in the local community.* What opportunities exist among faculty, staff, and students for community service, service-learning, collaborative evaluation, and research? What institutional goals and objectives might be enhanced by relationships with local community-based organizations and collaboratives? How might community members and representatives contribute to policy decisions within the institution, such as serving on the admissions committee, the curriculum committee, and so forth? Make a list of the opportunities that can serve as the basis of an action plan for building community partnerships.
- *Find out if there is a Healthy Communities initiative in your state or local area and connect with it.* Faculty, staff, or students who are already involved in the com-

munity may be aware of Healthy Communities initiatives. The Coalition of Healthier Cities and Communities' website (www.healthycommunities.org/) maintains a database of state contacts.

- *Host a community opportunities fair on your campus at the start of each academic year.* Invite community-based organizations and collaboratives to campus to share information about their volunteer, service-learning, evaluation, and research opportunities with faculty, staff, and students.
- *Offer faculty development opportunities.* Many faculty members have the good intention to work with the community but lack the knowledge and skills to begin. Faculty development workshops on service-learning or community-based research can strengthen faculty skills in developing effective community partnerships.

CONCLUSION

Colleges and universities have many opportunities to contribute to the Healthy Communities movement. As with all partnerships, community-campus partnerships begin with the leadership and action of individuals. Whether that leadership and action starts with the community or the campus is not particularly important as long as it moves forward in a way that honors and values the strengths and assets of each.

References

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