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Higher Education–Community Partnerships: The Politics of Engagement

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Abstract

Higher education-community partnerships can lead to fruitful rewards that are difficult to realize any other way. However, efforts to create, maintain, and sustain collaborative working relationships include inevitable tensions, the "politics of engagement." Lessons learned about the politics of engagement are presented in this paper. The lessons are drawn from dialogue that emerged from a series of interconnected dialogues—first among Kellogg Foundation higher education-community grantees working across the United States in local food systems development and, later, as the grantees expanded the circle of conversation to include colleagues attending a national food systems conference. Field-based experiences revealed the importance of understanding partnerships as relationships between inherently different parties. These differences can impede or destroy partnership development unless they are acknowledged and converted into sources of strength. Responding successfully to the politics of engagement requires mindful choice-making by creating context-sensitive and responsive strategies to highly charged community and academic realities.

It is not possible to have a conversation about higher education engagement without including the subject of partnerships. Engagement, which we define as the mutual deepening of capacity to respond and collaborate, is about partnerships. For the higher education partner it means becoming "more sympathetically and productively involved with community concerns and needs" *(Kellogg Commission 2002)*. For the community partner it means enhancing existing community capacity by accessing external knowledge resources and credible expertise.

Those with experience understand the challenges associated with establishing and maintaining workable partnerships. Amey,

Brown, and Sandmann *(2002)* suggest creating a meaningful common language; developing the ability to "hear" the other's voice; and adjusting leadership styles to align with a partnership's evolving stages. These findings lead to the question: What makes a partnership successful? The Center for Health Professions at the University of California, San Francisco *(2003)* has advanced principles of good community-campus partnerships, which include mutual trust; power, resource, and credit sharing; and open and accessible communication. Ramaley's *(2002)* interpretation suggests transformative elements—promoting a discipline of reflection; engendering a "culture of evidence" for the work; interacting so as to connect the partners in new ways; and assuming risks necessary for producing new and creative outcomes. Strand and colleagues *(2003)* resonate with this transformative theme. The authors share a vision of "tearing down of walls" between higher education and community. For higher education this would stimulate a "bottom-up process such that theories and models emerge in the context of the real world and their value depends on their relevance to it" *(233)*. For communities this would enable "building programs from the wisdom of community members and thus transforming them from recipients to participants" *(234)*.

Achieving a healthy, transformative partnership involves being able to effectively manage the "politics of engagement"—the inevitable tensions, misunderstandings, and struggles associated with engaging in a shared pursuit. Based on their collaborative research experience, Nyden and colleagues *(1997)* conclude that "anyone who claims . . . [this work] . . . is not political is just plain wrong" *(9)*. In their widely read management book, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership (1997)*, Bolman and Deal view coalitions as "alive and screaming political arenas that host a complex web of individual and group interests" *(163)*. They assert that "the question is not whether there will be politics, but rather what kind of politics there will be. Will political contests be energizing or debilitating, hostile or constructive, devastating or creative?" *(174)*.

In this paper, a group of scholars and practitioners with experience in higher education–community partnerships offers an interpretation of the politics of engagement. The interpretation shared here emerged from a series of interconnected dialogues—conversations that started among partners engaged in a W.K. Kellogg Foundation–sponsored learning community associated with local food systems development and expanded to include participants

at a national food systems conference. In taking this approach, the group affirms Barbara Holland's advice about partnership development: ". . . from time to time . . . we need to . . . lift our head up from the daily, intense, local work, and remember to share our experiences with our colleagues so that we can learn from one another" *(2003, 12)*.

Background

In 2001 the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) launched the Food Systems Higher Education–Community Partnership (FSHECP), a cluster of grants associated with its Food and Society initiative. By creating FSHECP, the foundation seeks to enable community-based food systems that are locally owned; add social and economic value to the community; are health promoting; operate in environmentally responsible ways; and are the outcomes of higher education–community collaboration, that is, engagement:

> This program enhances the capacity of universities and colleges to work collaboratively with the nonprofit, government, community-based, and private sector on critical food systems issues with local relevance. The Foundation funds innovative models of engagement—approaches that demonstrate in theory and practice how higher education establishes, develops, and sustains mutually beneficial and transformative partnerships with constituencies. *(W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2001)*

The Community Seafood Initiative, which is designed to help build healthy and viable coastal communities in the Pacific Northwest, is an example of a community-based project funded by the foundation. The project supports innovative practices by offering a suite of products-services to local food systems entrepreneurs, including product development, research, marketing information, and capital. Project partners contribute uniquely to this venture. There is a nonprofit partner, Shorebank Enterprise Pacific, which is a Community Development Finance Institution (CDFI) that provides financial, business, and development assistance to coastal communities in Oregon and the state of Washington. The higher education partner is Oregon State University, which participates primarily through its Seafood Laboratory, a multidisciplinary research-outreach unit specializing in seafood product development and technology innovation in the seafood industry.[1]

Understanding the Politics of Engagement

Included in the set of grantee responsibilities is learning from each other on issues of common concern. The foundation has a tradition of creating networking opportunities such as this. Rather than direct the learning, the foundation encourages grantees to create a learning agenda around issues relevant to the participating projects. Typically, grantees select a group leader who facilitates the agenda-creating process with assistance from an external consultant and in collaboration with a WKKF program director. The ensuing conversations are lively, thought-provoking, and highly interactive, grounded in the conversations about the work grantees are undertaking.

In this instance, it was apparent at the first meeting that FSHECP grantees shared an interest in discussing the challenges associated with higher education–community partnerships. Grantees exchanged "stories from the front," offering insights into how partnerships are sustained and how they sometimes unravel. Recognizing a common plight, they adapted as their mantra a tag line from the film Jerry McGuire: "Show me the partnerships!" Guiding questions for the joint exploration emerged quickly: What are the underlying causes of tension in higher education-community partnerships? What are the special-critical issues? What lessons have we learned? With this framing, participants established a direction for their inquiry—exploring matters associated with what they labeled "the politics of engagement."

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When partnerships involve alternative to mainstream responses: When the grantees reassembled a few months later, they began their dialogue by acknowledging a critical contextual factor: Whereas the market-based system focuses on the efficient production and distribution of food, their work—local food systems development—seeks to transform citizens from market-sensitive consumers who seek "good food at a good price" to active, community-conscious agents of healthy living. Local food systems

development is an ethic that accentuates the importance of "place" as citizens participate in a values-driven, socially conscious form of local development designed to have sociocultural impact. For example, establishing a cooperative grocery store creates a locally owned, community-based business with the potential of offering high-quality and nutritious food. Furthermore, through investing local capital and "sweat equity," members co-own the enterprise, even to the extent of making purchasing decisions. Often this means establishing relationships with local producers, thereby facilitating community access to locally grown food. As this example illustrates, when undertaken effectively local food systems development strengthens interpersonal and interinstitutional linkages; boosts community identity and capacity; creates a stronger sense of community; and enhances personal and local quality of life.

From experience, the grantees understand that participating in an alternative expression requires nimble "boundary crossing," that is, being able to work with conventional institutions (e.g., banks), which sometimes includes a participants own institution. For example, although many colleges and universities undertake local food systems project work, higher education institutions do not always express a local food systems ethic when making institutional decisions about what food to buy and from whom. If they did, they would make (among other things) a long-term commitment to the economic vitality of local producers by purchasing locally grown food in their dining services.

That circumstance prompted an important question: How do you respond when your institution's practices do not support the work in which you are engaged? Do you accept it as an institutional matter of fact? Do you work toward institutional change? And, if change is sought, how much political capital are you willing to risk in taking action? As the Kellogg grantees addressed these questions, participants talked about how institutions, like individuals, change at certain times (and not at other times) and are more likely to respond favorably to change if certain approaches are used *(Kotter and Cohen 2002)*. Timing is critical, partly a function of the ability to recognize when the system is ready to "unfreeze," and also a matter of the scope of the change, how the change is presented, and how change agents are perceived. When alternative work is marginalized institutionally, that is, when the work is low priority and the people involved are not valued by peers and recognized as influential by those in authority positions, those involved are not likely to influence

institutional change. However, alternative work is frequently undertaken at the institutional "margins" away from the politics and restraints associated with the institutional center *(Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja 2000)*. Enlightened central administrators understand that alternative work, although often quite valuable and even necessary, addresses issues that are frequently too controversial, novel, or radical to be undertaken in conventional organizational locations. However, work undertaken "at the margins" gives institutions an opportunity to experiment with minimal risk and threat to the status quo *(Bruffee 1999)*. This happens, for example, when local and organic foods are featured for a week at a campus restaurant or in one of the dormitories. People are able to experience an alternative reality and evaluate how if feels to them. This is a "quiet" but often powerful way to introduce alternative ideas in mainstream environments.

"Recognizing and understanding the consequences of diversity is fundamental . . ."

Power and the politics of engagement: The group's attention then shifted to the matter of internal-to-the-partnership tensions associated with the politics of engagement. The issue of power was placed at the center of this conversation: Who has it? How is it exercised? How (if at all) is it redistributed as the partnership organizes and evolves? Fundamental political issues must be addressed in any partnership, such as deciding who will be formally associated with the partnership, including who might be excluded; who manages project operations and finances; how administrative decisions are made; where the partnership is located and administered—on campus, at a community site, or in a neutral location; who speaks publicly on behalf of the partnership and with respect to what issues; and how criteria for success are defined.

Stories shared among the grantees suggest that a healthy higher education–community partnership demands that colleagues acknowledge the partners' diverse reality contexts. Higher education and community partners often have substantially different career paths; work in significantly different institutional settings; have fundamentally different position responsibilities, work schedules, and reward systems; and often frame issues differently. Status differences between higher education and community partners

are often expressed in title, salary, and position definition. Higher education partners sometimes carry the title "doctor" or "professor," frequently earn more money (sometimes significantly more) than community partners, and often occupy secure employment positions. Society confers expert status to higher education partners, which often translates into privilege and voice.

Recognizing and understanding the consequences of diversity is fundamental, the group concluded. Also fundamental is finding ways to make differences a source of strength rather than a barrier to progress. This requires that the partners move as a team to solutions that accommodate multiple (rather than single) realities. For example, an engagement myth is that higher education partners know how to engage in community partnerships. In reality, successful engagement requires "un-learning" traditional modes of academic behavior. Engaged academic partners remove the mantle of expertness by listening to and learning from community partners. They also know when to take leadership and how to engage as collaborative—not as expert—leaders.

Grantee stories suggest that partnership differences are not always acknowledged and accommodated, especially when partnerships are forming. Why? Sometimes the topic is a subtextual matter—real and present, but never acknowledged and considered. In other instances, a partner's plea to address underlying problems goes unheeded. Sometimes one partner wrests power from the other as a means to give priority to a partisan political reality.

For their part, community partners quickly learn that the campus environment is not a level playing field for engagement. They sort through faculty, staff, students, administrators, and units to find people and programs that are partnership-friendly and responsible. Grantees gave numerous examples of "being burned," that is, working with higher education partners who did not deliver on promises; overestimated what they could do and when; and left partnerships prematurely or were pulled from partnerships by other obligations (e.g., another grant). They found that some academic administrators are sensitive to these matters; others are not.

The stark reality is that community partners often have much more invested and at risk than higher education partners, including their livelihoods and reputations. Community partners are particularly vulnerable to shifts in responsibility or lack of follow-through. If the project fails, the higher education partner is likely to move to the next project, while the community partner may

lose his/her job, funding, or business enterprise. These risk differences can put additional stress on the partnership and call into question the value of engaging in partnerships with higher education. This is especially so if community partners perceive that their higher education partners view the community instrumentally, that is, only as a location to do their work rather than an arena in which to ground their engagement in an ethic of caring.

What will it take for partnership risks to be distributed equitably? The majority of community partners work with limited budgets and staff support. On the other hand, higher education partners typically work in more sophisticated organizational environments. These differences mean that partners do not always come to the table as organizational peers. To level the playing field, higher education must become more partner-accommodative in how it operates. Rather than demand that community partners fit higher education's systems, higher education's systems must change to accommodate community partners' realities. This will require reforming structures and protocols in higher education so that it is more pliable and capable of crossing boundaries into the community. For example, recently a university almost refused a community service grant because it did not have a mechanism for transferring grant funds to neighborhood associations. Last-minute intervention by a top university official compelled the university's budget office to create an allocation system, thereby making much-needed funds available to the community.

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For their part, higher education partners can have difficulty working within the reality contexts of community life. They are not always adept at responding to the dynamics of community politics and the myriad challenges that emerge whenever local projects take place, especially when diverse community partners and/or grant funds are involved. Faculty, staff, and students can feel disoriented when project plans (including time-sensitive research agendas) are redirected—even compromised or diminished—for political and/or practical reasons. In addition, higher

education partners may not feel that their community partners fully recognize or appreciate how difficult it is for them to juggle community work among multiple academic responsibilities, especially if they are told that they are not as nimble or as available as community partners would like. All of this can blunt faculty, staff, and student enthusiasm for engaging in partnerships.

Yet, community partnerships represent an enormous portal to understanding if higher education partners are able to set aside these concerns and focus, instead, on the possibilities accorded by working collaboratively in community settings. Reframing higher education–community partnerships as a form of multidisciplinary scholarship may help in this regard. Successful multidisciplinary projects require openness to learning, as well as a desire to create something important, innovative, and relevant that cuts across the contributors' domains. Multidisciplinary prospects are blunted if one partner dominates the table or if there is not a shared sense of responsibility and commitment. Partners must be enthusiastic about being at the table; have active listening skills; draw ideas from multiple perspectives; and be committed to creating something together.

Higher education-community engagement as border crossing: Higher education–community partnerships can evolve in multiple directions: as a destination, mapped as a route; and/or as a pathway of discovery, undertaken as a journey of discovery *(Fear et al. 2003)*. Partnerships undertaken with a predetermined destination tend to focus on matters of execution. There is a discrete agenda, as partners decide on means and ends, and then work together to get the job done in a task-oriented manner. Grant-funded work is often done this way. At issue are the transformative prospects of partnerships mapped as a route, which our grantees see as limited. Stretch learning—learning that takes one or both partners "to a new place" in how they think about and/or engage in their work—is more likely to result when partnerships are undertaken as a pathway of discovery.

When partnerships are considered as a journey, the learning is not always pre-planned or even anticipated. The partnership has value beyond what is accomplished in project work. Discovery comes from being at the table—by interacting with people with whom they do not typically come in contact; by collaborating on joint projects that they might not undertake otherwise; and by facing issues, dilemmas, and obstacles that require joint analysis

and resolution. In other words, partners find themselves in new circles, new situations, and sometimes in new roles that stretch them. This is not to say that a pathway of discovery is automatically transformative. For example, partnership work may represent an introduction to collaborative forms of inquiry for some higher education partners. They may reach out to community members—heretofore viewed only as research subjects—inviting them to become collaborators in designing a community study. What impact might this have on future endeavors? For some, it will have little or no effect. For others, the experience may prompt questions about the fundamental nature of research and how it should proceed, with the ensuing answers leading to transformed scholarly practices.

One way of thinking about engagement as a pathway of discovery is to consider it as a boundary crossing into the domain of "the other"—into the higher education culture for community partners and into the community culture for higher education partners. Being involved in a border crossing is as important for institutions as it is for the individuals involved. It is not uncommon for institutional leaders to take note of what is happening, affirming it publicly. When that happens, the threshold of awareness is raised institutionally as the spotlight shines on engagement. This is especially helpful as a means to alleviate adjustments for partners who re-engage in their home institutions as "new people," having been transformed by their partnership experiences. For example, higher education partners may start thinking differently about core academic matters and contest issues with conventionally inclined colleagues. Community partners, who introduce in agency work what has been tried successfully in partnership work, may find resistance—even hostility—among colleagues and administrators.

Suggestions for Addressing the Politics of Engagement

The learning community dialogue described and interpreted here served as the backdrop for hosting a session on higher education–community partnerships at a national conference. Three tandem teams of FSHECP grantees—higher education and community partners on each team—organized "Power and 'The Table': Dynamics of University-Community Partnerships," a session held in conjunction with the 2003 W. K. Kellogg Foundation Food and Society Networking Conference in Houston, Texas.[2] Over three hundred persons attended the conference—scholars

and practitioners from across the country working in local foods systems development—with about forty conferees participating in the grantees' session. Observations from the session are re-expressed here in the form of recommendations for addressing the politics of engagement.

Understand what you do well and what you need from a partnership: Partnerships are transactions. What is to be transacted? When? How? At what cost in relationship to what anticipated benefits? All too often the transactional lens focuses on evaluating a potential partner's transactional qualities without engaging first, if at all, in a transactional self-examination. There are fundamental questions that need to be answered in transactional self-examination, such as: Do you know what your organization does well? The answer represents the value you bring to partnerships—what makes you valuable to others. Alternatively, there is the matter of what you do not do well. These attributes can impede developing-sustaining relationships or might be attributes you seek in a partner. Transactional self-examination also includes a benefits analysis. What benefits do you require? At what pace are the benefits required? In what magnitude should the benefits accrue? Partnerships are often threatened when benefits ensue at an inappropriate pace—quickly but unsustainably (unless a "quick hit" buys time) or slowly, such that great expectations turn into despair. In vibrant partnerships, benefits appropriate to each partner accrue in the appropriate amount, at the appropriate time, and at the appropriate pace.

Clarify joint expectations and obligations: All too often partners work together for the first time on funded projects. There is a honeymoon period followed by the inevitable realities of "partnerhood." Clarifying joint expectations and obligations—"commitments with teeth"—comes not only from planning, but more importantly from establishing working relationships that are grounded in faith and trust: knowing from experience that your partner means what she says and will behave accordingly, especially under trying circumstances. Rather than rushing into a partnership when funding is possible or available, it often means easing into a relationship—"clearing the road" for the future success—as partners learn how to work together in real time, doing the necessary "spade work" in the community and on campus. An imprudent approach, akin to getting married after the first date, is

saying yes to a virtual stranger and signing on as a partner. A more reasonable strategy involves working with known entities, either persons with whom you have had direct experience or people who have worked successfully with colleagues whose judgment you trust.

Build a healthy culture of engagement: From the very first encounter, partners begin creating their unique culture of engagement. Characterized by high degrees of openness, sharing of responsibility, and progress toward meeting shared goals, a healthy culture of engagement has a magnetic quality: partners enjoy working together and look forward to spending time at the table. Healthy cultures grow, mature, and are sustainable. An inevitable challenge comes when a significant or critical issue is faced for the first time. How that circumstance is handled will go a long way toward defining how the future will evolve. Another potential hurdle is moving from talk to action. In some partnerships, an inordinate amount of time is spent talking about possible actions. If there is limited follow-up, ensuing meeting time will be spent replowing old territory. Entrapped in a do-loop of talking or a do-nothing loop of inaction, these partnerships engender a culture of ineffectiveness that threatens the credibility of all involved and militates against future funding prospects.

Reframe conventional roles, relationships, and ways of thinking: Conventional wisdom says that community partners bring local knowledge and higher education partners bring expert knowledge. The reality is that community partners often bring significant subject-matter expertise, and experienced campus partners bring considerable wisdom from having worked in diverse community settings. The danger of falling victim to stereotypical roles, relationships, and ways of thinking is that it reinforces the status quo, thereby restricting transformative possibilities. Being willing to reframe conventional modalities requires faith; trust; an openness to learning; a willingness to question conventionally held attitudes and practices; humility; and a commitment to taking risks, even when it means looking different. It also requires administrative champions on both sides of the table, persons in the community and on campus who understand that moving the envelope of change requires engaging in "business unusual." In one partnership, for example, savvy grassroots leaders befriended a young professor, new to community work, helping him redesign a community

study that was otherwise destined to receive tepid community reaction. The adjustments resulted in a win-win situation—the study was undertaken successfully, and the professor gained insights into how to design a scientifically sound, community-relevant study. He also gained credibility with community residents.

Conclusions

Successfully navigating political waters seems to be contingent on having a solid feel for the nature of the work and responding appropriately to changing social, economic, and political conditions. It also requires contouring the work to contextual realities. Fear *(1994)* contends that degree-of-fit—"timely and relevant knowledge that is highly applicable" to the nature of the circumstance *(115)*—is critical for outreach success. He speculates that degree-of-fit may be enhanced when those participating in outreach acknowledge the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities (that is, embrace a relativist ontology); engage in collaborative inquiry and meaning-making (that is, affirm a monistic-subjectivist epistemology); and adopt an iterative, nonlinear approach to planning and action (that is, prefer a hermeneutic methodology) *(117)*.[3]

"The reality is that community partners often bring significant subject-matter expertise, and experienced campus partners bring considerable wisdom from having worked in diverse community settings."

This engagement stance would seem to enhance the quality of work done in what Rosaen, Foster-Fishman, and Fear *(2001)* call the engagement interface:

> The engagement interface is a dynamic, evolving, and co-constructed space—a collaborative community of inquiry—where partners work together with an activist orientation to seek transformative ends for both the community and the academy. Participants in the engagement interface make choices about change that are intended to make a difference in people's lives and, at the same time, to generate ways of knowing and acting. *(10)*

The concept of the engagement interface represents a useful placeholder for reflecting on the experiences shared in the Kellogg grantee learning community and at the national conference. The framework reinforces the importance of mindfulness in choice-making: politically sensitive partners are attentive to choice-making, from negotiating benefits-laden joint purposes to recognizing the importance of creating outcomes that are highly valued by diverse stakeholders—in the community and on campus. The consequence of being mindful in choice-making is the partners' ability to create workable, context-appropriate models that satisfy local expectations and meet academic obligations. These partners, to adapt Bolman and Deal's words, are "artful negotiators able to design elastic strategies . . . who can adapt to changing circumstances . . . people who are simultaneously architects, catalysts, advocates, and prophets" *(1997, 380)*.

Endnotes

1. In addition to The Community Seafood Initiative, the other collaborators funded by the Foundation in conjunction with The Food Systems Higher Education–Community Partnership include: The Community Food Resource Center with Teacher's College, Columbia University and Hunter College, collaborating; The Chicago Food Systems Collaborative with The Policy Research Action Group (PRAG) at Loyola University of Chicago, collaborating; The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the H.A. Wallace Chair for Sustainable Agriculture, Iowa State University, with Practical Farmers of Iowa, collaborating; North Carolina State University and North Carolina A & T University with the North Carolina Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Eastern Foods, Rural Advancement Foundation International—USA, Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, and Save our State, collaborating; The University of Wisconsin-Madison and The Friends of Troy Gardens, collaborating; The Farming and Environmental Partnership with Washington State University; and The Center for Food and Justice, Occidental College with its partners—Davis, Winters, and Ventura Unified School Districts, Community Alliance with Family Partners, Community Food Security Coalition, Center for Ecoliteracy, the University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, Cornell University, The Pennsylvania State University, The University of Southern California, Healthy School Fund Coalition, Blazers Youth Fund Foundation, Esperanza Community Housing Corporation; Los

Angeles Children's Hospital, The LA Food and Justice Network, and the California Food and Justice Coalition.

2. Presenters represented local food systems projects located in Chicago, Iowa, and Oregon: the Chicago project—Danny Block of Chicago State University and LaDonna Redmond of the Institute for Community Resource Development; the Iowa project—Gary Huber of Practical Farmers of Iowa and Rich Pirog of Iowa State University; and the Oregon project—Mike Dickerson of Shorebank Enterprise Pacific and Michael Morrissey of Oregon State University. Frank Fear and Sherill Baldwin, Michigan State University, served as session moderators.

3. Alternative philosophic stances include believing there exists a single reality (a realist ontology); being detached in stance (a dualist-objectivist epistemology); and seeking to neutralize contextual influences that impede "objective" discovery (an interventionist methodology). See Guba and Lincoln *(1989)*.

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