Revitalizing South Memphis through an Interdisciplinary Community-University Development Partnership

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This article reviews the unique opportunities and challenges related to establishing and maintaining a long-term community-university development partnership in a historic African American community. It highlights the significant benefits and costs generated by an interdisciplinary community development assistance project undertaken by a community development corporation and a university. The article explores a series of philosophical, methodological, pedagogical, and organizational hurdles similar interdisciplinary projects can anticipate. It discusses the specific strategies the University of Memphis project organizers devised to overcome these challenges and suggests a preliminary set of principles of good practice for interdisciplinary community-university partnership projects.[1]

The City of Memphis, a once-vibrant trading, transportation, manufacturing, cultural, and commercial center along the Mississippi River, has experienced serious economic challenges for more than forty years. Its school dropout, unemployment, poverty, violent crime, adult and youth obesity, and diabetes rates are among the highest in the United States (Hope, 2006). While evidence of the long-term deindustrialization, suburbanization, and disinvestment that caused many of these problems is visible in nearly every Memphis neighborhood, they are particularly pronounced in the older residential areas adjacent to the Central Business District. In many cities, neighborhoods such as these have often become the location for bold new community-university development partnerships designed to revitalize severely distressed communities. This article examines the process and effectiveness of employing a participatory research method to develop and implement a comprehensive community revitalization effort. Our experiences in the first two years of the South Memphis Revitalization Action Plan (SoMe RAP) Project demonstrate that understanding and ameliorating the multifaceted challenges facing urban neighborhoods requires an interdisciplinary research approach that includes faculty, students, and community stakeholders. In this article we seek, in a modest way, to fill a gap in the literature on the benefits and challenges of interdisciplinary action-oriented research and offer an interim set of practice reflections and preliminary set of principles of good practice for interdisciplinary research with an ongoing community-university partnership.

Promoting an Engaged University

Upon her selection as President of the University of Memphis nearly ten years ago, Dr. Shirley C. Raines promised to make the scholarship of engagement articulated by Ernest Boyer (1994) one of the centerpieces of her administration. During the ensuing years, Dr. Raines has strongly encouraged students, faculty, and staff to undertake research partnerships with local leaders struggling to redevelop the city's most economically challenged neighborhoods. When Professors David Cox and Stanley Hyland proposed the establishment of an Engaged Scholarship Committee to promote greater civic engagement among members of the campus community, she gave this effort her enthusiastic support.

Responding to the President's call for meaningful community-university research partnerships, faculty in departments across the University, such as Anthropology, Architecture, Art, History, Civil Engineering, and City and Regional Planning have initiated a number of community-based research projects. For example, faculty and students in civil and transportation engineering courses spent a year working with a neighborhood association to study transportation patterns and networks to determine transportation needs and methods for making the neighborhood more walkable.[2] Students and faculty in the Anthropology Department partnered with staff at a local state park and residents in the surrounding neighborhood to develop a cultural heritage program

for the park. While projects like these have had a positive impact on the community, very few have been interdisciplinary or lasted more than an academic year. Aware of the limitations of academically-siloed and short-term approaches to community-university partnerships, Dr. Kenneth S. Robinson, Pastor of St. Andrew African Methodist Episcopal Church and former state Health Commissioner, invited the University of Memphis to partner with his congregation in launching the South Memphis Renaissance Collaborative (SMRC). Drawing upon the talents and skills of local residents and leaders as well as University students and faculty representing different disciplines, SMRC committed itself to devising and implementing a comprehensive revitalization strategy for the core of the South Memphis community. Between the fall of 2008 and the fall of 2009, eleven faculty from the Anthropology, Architecture, City and Regional Planning, Civil Engineering, and Public Health departments worked together to organize eleven service-learning courses in support of SMRC's community organizing and planning efforts. Participants in these classes worked side by side to collect and analyze current conditions data and to elicit, summarize, and analyze local stakeholders' preferred development options. Collaborating with local residents, institutional leaders, and elected officials, more than one hundred students and faculty worked together to produce the South Memphis Revitalization Action Plan: A People's Blueprint for Building a More Vibrant, Sustainable and Just Community. This 223-page comprehensive development plan is designed to transform this economically challenged community into one of the region's premier neighborhoods of choice.

South Memphis Community History and Profile

Until the middle of the 19th century the area currently known as South Memphis was an agricultural district comprised of small fruit, vegetable, and dairy farms. As the end of the 19th century approached, an industrial rail line was constructed along the northern boundary of the community, attracting a number of manufacturing plants, including the South's first Ford assembly plant. In 1904, the City of Memphis commissioned George E. Kessler, one of the nation's most-acclaimed landscape architects, to design a parkway system connecting the city's rapidly expanding residential neighborhoods. The southern segment of these circumferential parkways passed through the heart of South Memphis encouraging Cornelius Clancy, a local land owner and MIT engineering graduate, to design a series of curvilinear streets emanating from the parkway. Along these streets a large number of Arts and Craftsman bungalows and small-scale apartment buildings were constructed.

In the first decades of the 20th century, South Memphis emerged as one of the city's most vibrant neighborhoods attracting working-class and middle-income families due to its central location, nearby employment opportunities, beautiful parkway, large supply of well designed homes, and conveniently-located retail services. Like many neighborhoods in Memphis' urban core, the South Memphis community's fortunes began to change in the mid-1960s as suburbanization accelerated within the region following court-ordered school desegregation and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The collapse of the city's cotton, manufacturing, and railroad industries dealt the community another serious blow prompting many long-time residents to leave in search of better economic opportunities. The impact of this history of disinvestment and suburban migration are evident today.

According to the 2000 Census, 54% of South Memphis's adults over the age of 25 years lacked a high school education, 20% of eligible workers were unemployed, median household incomes trailed those of the state by 45% and the nation by 50%. In addition, nearly 40% of families lived in poverty and more than 50% of the area's children lived in such households. Ongoing out-migration left nearly 21% of the area's building lots vacant; 18% of its residential housing stock abandoned; and nearly 40% of the community's commercial buildings unused. These problems, along with the area's growing reputation as an epicenter for violent street crime, significantly dampened public and private investment in the community, in turn reinforcing its downward spiral.

Origins of the SMRC and Birth of the SoMe RAP

In 1992, Reverend Kenneth S. Robinson, M.D., and his wife, Reverend Marilyn Robinson, accepted new assignments as co-pastors of the St. Andrew AME Church in South Memphis. In doing so, they inherited the leadership of a 120-year-old congregation that was, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, a leading force for citizen empowerment and community change. However, by the time the Robinsons' became pastors of the church, it was an ailing institution. During the subsequent eighteen years, they have succeeded in rebuilding the church's membership and leadership base by leading inspired liturgies, responding to the pastoral needs of their members, and addressing many of their community's most pressing economic and social needs.

Among their most celebrated outreach accom-

plishments was the re-organization and expansion of their nationally recognized child care center, the opening of one of the state's most successful charter schools, and the creation of a community development corporation that has rehabilitated more than 75 housing units and built nearly 100 units of quality affordable housing. Despite the extraordinary success of these programs, the Robinsons realized that the community could not be stabilized, let alone revitalized, through the efforts of a single religious institution regardless of its level of commitment. Thus, in the summer of 2008, the Robinsons invited their key community development partners, including a local foundation, minority architecture firm, nonprofit consulting organization, and the University of Memphis to discuss alternative strategies for accelerating the rate of positive change in their community.

Those assembled, as part of the SMRC, agreed that more ambitious community development efforts could only be undertaken if nearby churches, social service agencies, public schools, neighborhood associations, senior citizen organizations, and local businesses could be mobilized. At the meeting's conclusion, they decided to invite representatives of these institutions to form a Sponsoring Committee for the creation of a South Memphis Revitalization Action Plan (SoMe RAP). This comprehensive plan would articulate local residents' and leaders' vision for an improved community, identify short- and long-term projects to enable local stakeholders to realize their development goals, and mobilize local, city, regional, state, and national resources to support these efforts.

Creating the Peoples' Plan for a More Vibrant, Sustainable, and Just South Memphis

Before the start of the fall 2008 semester, Professors Lambert-Pennington and Reardon recruited five anthropology, architecture, city and regional planning, engineering, and public health classes to assist the SoMe RAP's Sponsoring Committee in collecting and analyzing the historical, demographic, economic, physical, and social data needed to prepare an evidence-based revitalization plan. Faculty and fifty undergraduate and graduate students worked closely with The Works, Inc. CDC Deputy Director, Curtis Thomas, and members of the Sponsoring Committee to develop research instruments (e.g., interview protocols), carry out a wide array of primary and secondary data collection and analysis, and draft a preliminary description of current conditions and alternative future development scenarios. The community-based research activities completed by the interdisciplinary community-university team included:

- an examination of the historical origins, socio-economic profile, and physical evolution of South Memphis using archival materials;
- the analysis of recent population and housing trends of South Memphis using 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census data;
- a visual analysis of the community's street layout, building architecture, urban design characteristics, and historical/cultural landscape and building resources via field surveys;
- an inventory of land uses, building conditions, and site maintenance levels for more than 2,000 building lots by means of a parcel-by-parcel survey;
- an assessment of St. Andrew's leaders' perspectives on the church's role in the community, their understanding of existing neighborhood conditions, and their hopes regarding the community's future through twenty-four interviews;
- an evaluation of community leaders' view of existing neighborhood conditions and their hopes regarding the area's future though fourteen local institutional interviews and six focus groups;
- a survey of residents' ideas related to the design of a proposed childcare facility, community/cultural center, senior housing complex, and mixed-use neighborhood retail corridor; and
- a preliminary analysis of the safety and design quality of the primary routes area children take to school.

In mid-December 2008, the students and faculty presented their findings to representatives of the SMRC and the SoMe RAP Sponsoring Committee who were impressed by the scope and quality of the data collection and analysis. Recognizing the need to involve a broader array of local stakeholders representing all segments of the community in the determination of the revitalization plan's overall development goal, objectives, and action strategies, the leaders asked the University of Memphis to organize a second set of classes during the coming semester to gather additional community input.

In spring 2009, forty anthropology, city planning, and public health students worked with the SoMe RAP Sponsoring Committee to carry out the following research activities to create a comprehensive revitalization plan reflective of the residents' most ambitious and inspired dreams for their community:

- face-to-face interviews with 30 additional civic leaders regarding their perceptions of the community and its future;
- interviews with 174 residents to gather their perceptions of current neighborhood conditions and future development possibilities;
- facilitation of a day-long Neighborhood Summit involving 70 local residents, as well as leaders, business persons, and elected officials to formulate an overall vision statement and seven specific development objectives to guide the community's future evolution;
- facilitation of three community forums in which local stakeholders identified and developed 46 specific initiatives to address the residents' environmental, health, economic, housing, educational, social service, public safety, and transportation vision for the community, and
- best practices research to identify innovative policies, programs, and projects from across the country that could inform revitalization efforts in South Memphis.

In June 2009, more than 50 local residents and leaders attended a public hearing organized by the Sponsoring Committee to review a preliminary draft of the plan. After fine-tuning the overall development goal, recommending the expansion of the youth development section, and arguing for the addition of an executive summary, the participants asked the University to finalize the plan as quickly as possible so it could be reviewed and adopted by the Memphis City Council.

Professors Lambert-Pennington and Reardon devoted the summer of 2009 to drafting the full plan, and in September the final draft was presented to the community for their review and approval. Following a unanimous vote in support of the plan, a resolution was passed urging the Memphis/Shelby County Office of Planning and Development to present the plan to the Land Use Control Board and City Council. Organizational endorsement forms and citizen petitions were then distributed so those active in the planning process could encourage public officials to adopt the plan and fund the implementation of its major elements. More than two dozen South Memphis organizations and more than 2,000 residents used these materials to demonstrate their support of the plan, which was passed without opposition by the City of Memphis City Council in March 2010. The combination of the comprehensive and data-rich nature of the plan, made possible by the interdisciplinary approach and the residents' input and support, contributed to this positive response.

Selective Review of the Interdisciplinary Community-Based Research Literature

Although the success of the SoMe RAP Project is in part a reflection of its interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach, this project is not the first to combine participatory methods and the scholarship of engagement. Rather it builds on a tradition pioneered by participatory action researchers (PAR). While the systems approach to organizational and community change articulated by Patrick Geddes (Stalley, 1972), Eric Trist (1979), Kurt Lewin (1946), and Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979) offered compelling arguments in support of an interdisciplinary approach to community problem-solving, it was the practice and writing of participatory action researchers such as William F. Whyte (1991), John Gaventa (1980), Chris Argyris (1985), Donald Schön (1983) and Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin (1998) that had the most profound influence on those who organized the first generation of community-university development partnerships. Early efforts to involve interdisciplinary research teams in the study and solution of important urban social problems include the work of Marie Kennedy in establishing the Roofless Women's Action Research Mobilization (1995); Ira Harkavy, Lee Benson, and John Puckett (2007) in creating the West Philadelphia Project; Wim Wiewel and David Perry (2008) in launching the Great Cities Institute; Edward Blakely and Victor Rubin (Rubin, 1995) in convening the Metropolitan Forum; Phil Nyden, Ann Figert, Mark Shipley, and Daryl Burrows (1997) in organizing the Policy Research Action Group; and Ken Reardon (2000) in developing the East St. Louis Action Research Project.

In their articles, these scholars describe in considerable detail how and why they chose to organize interdisciplinary research teams to examine urban education, health, housing, transportation, and economic development issues. In many cases, they also discussed the significant barriers faced by those seeking to create interdisciplinary research teams to investigate complex social problems and the steps that may be taken to overcome these challenges. Few of these authors, however, explore the conditions under which interdisciplinary research teams are most effective and the steps that can be taken, based upon best practices research, to insure their optimal functioning. While several of the most important books on service-learning feature profiles of interdisciplinary research projects, including those by Tim Stanton, Dwight Giles, and Nadinne Cruz (1999), Andrew Furco (2001; 2002), David Maurrassee (2005), Scott Peters (Peters, Jordan, Adamek, & Alters, 2005), and Andrew Furco and Barbara Holland (Furco & Holland, 2005), these authors also

have only given modest attention to these issues.

As the number of interdisciplinary research projects have expanded, in large part, due to the increasing complexity of the urban issues being addressed by today's community-university partnerships, the number of scholars focused on this topic has dramatically increased. Karen Tokarz (2003) of Washington University and Myra Strober (2011) of Stanford have provided us with a clear definition of interdisciplinary research, a detailed rationale for its use, and an extensive inventory of the faculty, student, and community benefits emerging from this form of engaged scholarship. More recently, a number of journal articles, including those by Connors, Seifer, Sabastian, Cora-Bramble, and Hart (1996) and Royal, Sasnett, and Greer (2009) have investigated many of the most visible rural and urban interdisciplinary research projects, verifying many of the benefits identified in the above initiatives. However, little effort has been made to transform lessons learned from the most successful of these efforts into a preliminary set of best practices. The remainder of this article begins to address this gap based on reflections from the first two years of the SoMe RAP Project.

The Benefits of Interdisciplinary Community-Based Research Projects

The interdisciplinary team that crafted the research design and scope of services used to prepare the Revitalization Action Plan was highly skilled in the use of a wide range of quantitative and qualitative research methods, which enabled them to generate highly reliable and valid data upon which to base their final recommendations. Additionally, the participation of multiple classes representing different disciplines provided the team with a large number of "boots on the ground," making it possible to collect impressive amounts of data and develop a highly refined profile of community conditions. While faculty differed on how iterative, inclusive, and sustained our research strategies needed to be before we could move from describing current conditions to making planning and design recommendations for improving future conditions, students trained in different data collection techniques often complemented each others' skill sets in the field.

The anthropology and city planning students and faculty came to the project with a shared commitment to participatory action research (PAR), which focuses on process as much as product (Greenwood & Levin, 1999) and requires students, faculty, and community members to collect and analyze data on an on-going basis, constantly responding to new directions and ideas that emerge during the research process. Architecture and engineering students were more accustomed to building socio-economic and population profiles based on quantitative census-type data sets and making one or two trips into the field to document the physical environment. One benefit made possible by our interdisciplinary team was evident when teams of students collected current land use, building conditions, and site maintenance data. The architects and engineers were highly effective in making quick and reliable exterior assessments of the structural integrity of individual buildings, while anthropology and city and regional planning students took the lead in explaining the rationale of the project and eliciting residents' views on key aspects of the emerging plan.

Another benefit of drawing from multiple data sets was revealed during a preliminary review of Census data regarding educational attainment levels. Initially members of the research team suggested the need for additional GED programs; however, as we sought to validate this preliminary finding by carefully reviewing the resident and leader interviews, we quickly discovered that a very significant number of those who dropped out of school did so in the early days of their freshman year after struggling in school for many years. In this situation, the interview data made a strong argument for the need for both Pre-GED and GED classes. As these examples suggest, by using a mixed-method data collection strategy and triangulating data across typical disciplinary boundaries, students were able to significantly expand their command of various data collection techniques by observing and emulating the most skillful performances of their disciplinary counterparts. Moreover, the team produced a plan backed by rich and reliable data.

The differing theoretical, analytical, and policy frameworks individual faculty members brought to the project surfaced many "taken for granted" assumptions regarding local residents, housing stock, school performance levels, and public safety threats that could be publicly tested as part of the ongoing data collection and analysis process. This analyze-and-test approach, made possible by the quantity of data, strong relationships in the community, and interdisciplinary research design, created an opportunity to bring theory and practice into conversation with each other. Further, it helped ground programmatic and policy recommendations in the local Memphis context rather than in research and theories based in other parts of the country. For example, the broken windows thesis of law enforcement developed by former New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton argues that broken windows, graffiti, and/or abandoned cars are early warning signs of neighborhood decline (Wilson & Kelling, 1982; 1989). While many of the anthropology students rec-

ognized that this does not appear to adequately explain many of the paradoxes evident in South Memphis, they were unsure of what other factors to consider as counter evidence. In response, planning students pointed out that the land use survey showed that many well-maintained houses, reflecting obvious owner investment, co-exist with vacant lots and damaged/boarded up houses.

Students also were able to see how varying theoretical and practical frameworks can lend themselves to particular program designs and development policies. For instance, students familiar with Oscar Lewis' culture of poverty (Lewis, 1996) initially hypothesized that the high incidence of multi-generational households represented the systemic handing down of adaptive strategies and mindsets to cope with chronic poverty. Unsure if the culture of poverty adequately explained household dynamics in South Memphis, anthropology students drew upon their analysis of resident interviews to demonstrate that the intergenerational make up of the households was rather new, as middle-aged children and their families returned to their natal homes to care for aging parents. In another case, architecture students who read the recently completed Greater Memphis Neighborhoods Plan were attracted by its typology of communities, based upon physical distress, which was being proposed as the basis for allocating scarce public resources (EDAW, 2009). Coming from another perspective, City and Regional Planning students versed in the criticisms offered of Roger Starr's (1966) "urban triage" approach to public investment in New York City advocated alternative public investment schemes that did not reinforce the uneven pattern of investment already evident in South Memphis. Importantly, the research and analysis processes provided students with a window into the real world, neighborhood-specific implications of their work.

As our team's work with local residents shifted focus from data collection and analysis to program development, the specific policy knowledge and skills of students and faculty representing varying disciplines came into play. For example, residents involved in the plan's environmental enhancement element found that civil engineering and landscape architecture students and faculty, drawing on their academic training, were able to provide concrete answers to questions regarding proposed streetscape improvements, site control of vacant lots for community gardens, and re-zoning of an area to promote rather than prohibit urban agriculture. Anthropology, city and regional planning, and public health students contributed to the development of the plan's public health and community wellness elements. Students listened for different things, depending on their discipline, as residents discussed their concerns regarding obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Public health students mentioned the benefits of exercise in combating these conditions and asked residents if they might consider organizing walking groups as a no-cost solution. Residents explained they were concerned about the poor sidewalk conditions that could be especially precarious for older residents or individuals with physical limitations. Planning students asked residents to identify blocks where the sidewalks and streets were particularly bad so information regarding these "hot spots" could be relayed to the physical improvement group. Finally, anthropology students suggested that the community building benefits of having regular walking groups would not only provide mobile eyes and ears in the community but if their routes and start times coincided with school hours, the walkers could serve as informal escorts to ensure student safety to and from school.

The various professional, civic, and political networks participating students and faculty could tap for information, political support, and basic resources were also important. For example, as residents began to discuss the creation of a local farmers market to provide residents with access to high quality, low cost, and culturally appropriate foods, the planning faculty brought in a visiting lecturer from Cornell University with expertise on urban food systems. On another occasion, when residents were considering the potential benefits a charter school might provide, an anthropology professor drew on her experience as a board member of a high-powered new charter school group to facilitate a sharing of information regarding the benefits and costs of such institutions. Finally, students' familiarity with best practices and emerging trends within their fields enabled them to contribute to residents' discussions regarding programmatic and funding approaches to specific community development opportunities and challenges.

In addition to providing students with a rich research and learning opportunity, the plan's strong empirical foundation explains, in part, the speed with which the municipal government in cooperation with local foundations has taken decisive action on several of the plan's most important short-term recommendations. It may also explain why senior officials from the City of Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development have repeatedly referred to the South Memphis plan as the kind of document, in terms of quality and scope, they would like to see replicated in neighborhoods throughout the city. Finally, it may provide insight as to why the founder of one of the Mid-South's largest foundations described the plan as "an outstanding analytical and prescriptive document that our foundation would like to support."

The Costs of Interdisciplinary Community-Based Research Projects

Mobilizing seventy-five undergraduate and graduate students from academic units without a history of working together often presented unanticipated challenges for those coordinating the South Memphis project. While the five faculty involved in teaching the fall 2008 courses had agreed to work together, they had not done so early enough to allow their classes to be scheduled during common times, which would have enabled their students to spend class time together working on specific research designs, field preparation, and data collection and analysis. Thus, much of the cross-disciplinary exchange and diffusion of skill sets occurred in the field and outside class.

Despite the goodwill and camaraderie existing among the faculty and students within the project, it took significant time each semester to create functioning interdisciplinary teams. Moreover, while PAR-based strategies are capable of producing highly reliable data analysis and inspired planning and design solutions, they require considerable time and patience. As Edith Penrose (1959) emphasized in *The Theory of the Growth of the Firm*, even the most talented members of a team require significant amounts of time working together to achieve a reasonable level of productivity. About half of the 75 students participating in SoMe RAP worked on the project as part of at least one class each semester during the 2008-2009 academic year. While continuing students were invaluable mentors to the project's new students, it took several weeks each semester to establish a shared understanding of the project's long-term goals, a common language to describe everyday features of the project, and a set of shared problem-solving techniques to address recurring problems. In contrast, those students who were not able to continue with the project from one semester to the next sometimes left not knowing the impact of their contributions despite their respective contributions. At the same time, by the end of spring 2009, some of the students who had been working on the project from the beginning were struggling with project fatigue due to the project's ambitious data collection efforts and increasingly intense outreach and meeting schedule.

Given our different community-based research paradigms, it was no surprise that participating faculty often struggled over the types of data to be collected. While anthropology and city planning faculty generally pressed for a balance of quantitative and qualitative data, the architecture, engineering, and public health faculty stressed the importance of quantitative data. Each class quickly identified the specific data they believed was needed to develop a comprehensive redevelopment plan responsive to community needs. For instance, students in the architecture studio wanted to use the Census-based neighborhood profile and land use data collected for their final projects; however, the data was not analyzed in time for them to incorporate this information into their site plans. Anthropology students were deeply invested in documenting residents' stories and capturing the neighborhood's socio-cultural context. Planning students were concerned about residents' evaluation of city basic services and concerns regarding possible adaptive re-use of vacant buildings. As a result, the length of the interview schedules, focus group protocols, and survey instruments grew significantly to accommodate competing data needs. When the preliminary draft of the residents' survey included 98 questions, the participating faculty and students became alarmed: Would residents be willing to spend forty-five minutes to complete a very long survey? As it turned out, 174 residents were willing to do so, sharing their stories with the students that interviewed them.

Finally, the mix of junior and senior faculty involved in the project proved to be an asset; senior faculty members' experience and mentoring blended well with junior faculty members' enthusiasm. However, differing interpretations of departmental, college, and university-wide promotion and tenure policies related to what constitutes scholarly excellence occasionally led participating faculty to have differing project priorities. In departments such as architecture and city and regional planning, where professional reports are viewed as examples of serious scholarship, faculty felt empowered to devote considerable amounts of time working on the production of the South Memphis plan. In anthropology, engineering, and public health, where such publications carry little weight, particularly for junior faculty, participating faculty experienced pressure to focus their efforts on the production of more traditional peer-reviewed journal articles.

Lessons Learned in South Memphis

Those participating in the South Memphis project learned a great deal about community-university partnerships, interdisciplinary community-based research projects, and community development in an African-American community. At the end of each academic year, local residents and University students and faculty participating in the project met to reflect upon their experiences working together, establish project priorities for the coming year, and determine participants' interest in continuing their involvement. In June 2010, the leaders of the SoMe RAP Advisory Committee, SMRC, and faculty reviewed information gathered and processes used

during these prior meetings and identified the importance of the following.

Earning our license to operate. Many of the most experienced South Memphis leaders viewed the University's initial efforts as another example of campus paternalism. These grassroots leaders knew that a long-term economic and community development strategy was required to turn their community around. Since they had never seen the University undertake a sustained community development project outside of its own University District, they were skeptical of the project. It was only when they witnessed students and faculty engaging in community organizing, planning, and development efforts during several consecutive semesters that they willingly embraced the partnership with the University.

Supporting the development of new grassroots leaders. While the formal leaders of the neighborhood's churches, social service organizations, and civic associations attended our Sponsoring Committee meetings, these were not the individuals who performed most of the hard work that supported the neighborhood's community organizing and planning efforts. Over time, a small but formidable group of neighborhood women, most of whom had never held formal leadership positions, emerged to do the door-to-door canvassing, telephone calling, and petition collection upon which SoMe RAP came to depend. Their collective knowledge regarding how to reach out to others, and their tenacity in dealing with criminal activity, exploitative landlords, and children lacking basic access to quality after-school programs, not only served as the backbone for SoMe RAP planning efforts but also set an example for others in the neighborhood. When local residents had to choose four individuals to present their plan before the Land Use Control Board and the City Council, they chose from among these women.

Overcoming a culture of silence. From SoMe RAP's earliest days, representatives of the city's planning and community development agencies attended its meetings. At several critical junctures in the planning process, these representatives indicated their agencies' strong support for the plan and provided participants with useful advice regarding how to craft and present certain potentially controversial elements of the plan. As the team approached completing the plan, the city representatives were asked to help them arrange a joint meeting with the directors of the city's planning and development departments. When SoMe RAP representatives met with these officials, they were told that the neighborhood would have to wait a considerable length of time before the city could consider their plan because the city was already involved in a major revision of its municipal land use control ordinance—a process that had already lasted more than four years. Unwilling to accept such a delay, local residents organized an Alinsky-type direct action organizing campaign to pressure City Council members to adopt their plan (Chambers, 2008). Local residents collected petitions and organizational endorsements, scheduled small group meetings with City Council members, submitted pro-plan letters to the newspaper editor, and organized large numbers of people to attend critical public hearings when the plan was being discussed and/or voted upon.

Identifying a coordinator. As SoMe RAP's size and complexity grew, it became apparent that the project required a coordinator to convene the participating faculty, their graduate assistants, and our community partners to discuss the project's evolving needs. We were able to hire a part-time recently furloughed county planner with considerable planning and project management experience. Even after her initial contract was finished, she continued to serve as our project coordinator on a volunteer basis. She improved our project planning, pre-field preparation, team communication, work documentation, and monitoring and evaluation activities. Realizing that this is an essential part of sustainable success, we are currently seeking funds for a full-time coordinator.

Compensating for media bias and neglect. One of the most serious barriers facing community activists in South Memphis and their allies was the extreme difficulty in securing basic media coverage. During the project, residents, various institutional partners, and the University tried unsuccessfully to use their contacts with local news outlets (radio, television, and print) to cover SoMe RAP activities. Only once did the local newspaper write a substantive story regarding the residents' community change efforts. This lack of media attention can discourage those involved in a long-term revitalization process from sticking with the effort. It also complicates the project's community outreach and recruitment efforts; a project that rarely garners press attention has difficulty arguing for its importance. This news "whiteout" denies potential donors basic information regarding the significant charitable giving opportunities that exist with the project. We have attempted to address this problem by exploiting the local press' current fascination with urban food deserts and food security issues as a step toward eliciting their interest in other aspects of our work.

Crafting a winning development/fundraising strategy. While the University's leadership articulates a strong commitment to Boyer's scholarship of engagement (1994), it has not been a priority in either of its most recent state budget requests. It also has not asked for such support during annual meetings with the region's largest corporate giving and philanthropic

foundations. Similarly, support for the campus' public scholarship efforts has not been included in the University's capital campaign which is seeking to raise $250 million on the occasion of the University's 100th anniversary. With faculty access to local funding institutions mediated by the central administration, the project has had to depend upon its community partners to pursue funding from these sources. Participating faculty recently met with a representative of our region's largest family foundation to discuss support for our ongoing neighborhood revitalization efforts. This meeting took place because our community partner shared our financial needs with the principal benefactor who, in turn, asked our President's Office to prepare a statement of our future funding needs. Without the behind the scenes intervention of our community partners, this request and our subsequent meeting would not have occurred.

Balancing community impact, student education, and faculty scholarship. One of the thorniest challenges confronting faculty engaged in long-term community-university partnerships is the question of how to balance their scholarly research, student education, and community engagement responsibilities. This situation is even more complicated in an interdisciplinary project where expectations regarding scholarly output in each of the disciplines can be quite different. The project sought to manage this challenge by acknowledging these tensions and encouraging individual faculty to discuss exactly what they needed from their effort to ensure positive departmental reviews. Armed with this information, participating faculty attempted to undertake project responsibilities in a manner that did not place individual faculty at risk. Aware of the tendency for the contributions of junior faculty, especially women, to community-based research efforts to be overlooked, the participating faculty chose a female anthropology professor making critical contributions to the effort as our Project Director. Conscious of the ever-escalating publication expectations facing the junior faculty, senior faculty made concrete plans for the publication of a minimum of three jointly-authored papers featuring project work. Participating faculty also have made a conscious effort to ensure that the contributions of junior faculty are recognized by giving them equal time as spokespersons on all University produced and distributed project videos and featuring them before local and regional professional and academic meetings. For example, the HUD Regional Office recently asked us to provide a speaker for a regional Sustainable Communities Conference. We responded by having an assistant professor and one of our community partners discuss our work at one of the conference's major plenary sessions.

Addressing inevitable academic push back. Faculty participation in interdisciplinary projects can generate concerns among administrators about recognition for their respective academic unit. Administrator criticism of interdisciplinary work can create hardships for non-tenured faculty, and, in times of scarce resources, departmental leaders can become territorial of their faculty, particularly if they are accustomed to mono-departmental, semester-only projects. Therefore, the involvement of faculty and their classes in multi-semester community-based projects may be interpreted as exploitative or as threatening to a home department's requests for additional faculty resources. In the case of the South Memphis Project, a senior chair voiced the concern that the project might be taking advantage of faculty and students by engaging them in multiple semesters of fieldwork in the same community. Likewise, a long-time senior faculty member who supported the project raised a question regarding the scale of the effort in South Memphis in light of the city's many other needy neighborhoods. A consistent effort had to be made by participating senior faculty to address these legitimate concerns raised by these influential faculty members. For example, constant effort was directed at making sure all participating faculty and units were given credit for their work on the project. In addition, as discussed above, senior faculty worked with junior faculty to translate their community-based research into scholarly and professional publications.

Principles of Good Practice for Interdisciplinary Community-University Partnerships

The following preliminary principles of good practice for interdisciplinary community-university partnerships have emerged from the SoMe RAP participants and SMRC leaders' reflections in spring 2010. These principles currently guide the University's ongoing work in South Memphis as well as its recently launched interdisciplinary partnership efforts in the Vance Avenue district of Memphis and in the nearby community of Brownsville, Tennessee. These principles are offered to stimulate academic discussion on interdisciplinary community-university partnerships in economically challenged communities.

Encourage faculty doing community-based work to work together. Most campuses have a significant number of individuals engaged in community-university partnerships. However, these individuals are often working in isolation from others working in the community. Maintaining such an academic practice by oneself is exhausting. These individuals can be encouraged to join a collective community-based

effort where student recruitment, course development, class instruction, community liaising, media outreach, and fundraising can be shared and where they can benefit from the intellectual exchanges such projects necessitate. This may be an especially welcome opportunity on campuses lacking a centralized office offering such faculty support services.

Allow sufficient time for scholars to form a well-functioning team. While the benefits of an interdisciplinary research project may be readily apparent, the costs of such an effort may be more difficult to identify. One of the most significant of these costs is the additional time required to adequately plan an interdisciplinary research effort. Scholars trained in different disciplines bring their own theoretical frameworks, conceptual constructs, research methods, and policy ideas to their community-based research work. Additional time is required to enable faculty and students participating in interdisciplinary projects to form teams that can develop and share a set of basic core values, project objectives, research methods, and communications strategies.

Create opportunities to establish and build trust amongst all stakeholders. The history of community-university collaboration has been fraught with many false starts and missteps. Grassroots residents and leaders representing economically distressed communities are unlikely to invest significant time and effort cooperating with higher education until the latter can demonstrate their ability to listen and develop research agendas responsive to community concerns.

Identify resources needed to hire a coordinator. Those participating in a participatory community research process must be prepared to constantly re-evaluate their plans based upon new information or the addition of new community or university participants. Thus, they require a great deal of communication and coordination among participating students, faculty, and staff from differing academic units and the community. A skilled coordinator can inform participants of new developments, seek new campus and community partners, and identify and help resolve conflicts. Identifying resources to hire such a person will facilitate such multi-pronged, interdisciplinary university-community collaborations. This recommendation follows findings by Holland (2000) and Furco (2001) regarding the institutional support present on campuses with the strongest civic engagement programs.

Devise course schedules to enable sustained faculty and student involvement. The majority of the neighborhoods requesting assistance from the University have experienced decades of disinvestment, physical deterioration, and out-migration. A serious effort to stabilize and revitalize these communities requires a long-term commitment from the University. The academic units participating in such an effort must find ways to create sequences of courses that allow their students and faculty to remain engaged in the community in a manner that allows the efforts of new students and faculty to build upon the contributions of those who have come before them. In this way, academic units can make significant contributions to the redevelopment efforts of local residents over what Myles Horton referred to as "the long haul" (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998).

Design a website to store, track, and share work. The South Memphis Project generated vast amounts of data for analysis by various team members. This information played a crucial role in shaping the neighborhood's comprehensive revitalization plan, and continues to be used by both university and community partners. Not only are these data being used to craft funding proposals to support the successful implementation of the plan's major elements, but students and faculty also draw on it to make presentations and publish scholarly articles on various aspects of the project. Without the University's ability to host, track, and provide asynchronous access to these data, the community's implementation efforts would be greatly undermined. As the University initiates new efforts in nearby communities, the availability of these materials enable students and faculty laboring in these areas to spend less time designing original instruments, training materials, and basic communications strategies.

As trust builds among community and campus participants, students and faculty are being asked to undertake increasingly complex and challenging participatory action research projects. These requests will encourage us to recruit students and faculty from an ever-widening set of departments and undertake increasingly challenging mixed-methods research. These experiences will present participating faculty with novel research, teaching, and learning situations that will inform and challenge our customary research protocols. Similarly, our need to develop and implement what William F. Whyte called "social inventions for human problem-solving" will result in significant accomplishments and failures (1983). The experimental nature of such research will require us to regularly and critically reflect upon our practice so as to advance the quality of our research and enhance our skill in creating and managing increasingly complex community-based research collaborations.

Epilogue

The success of the University's South Memphis Project recently led to the launch of a similar community-based planning effort in the Vance Avenue district of downtown Memphis. Joining the University of Memphis anthropology, architecture,

and city and regional planning students and faculty in this effort are medical students from the University of Tennessee Health Sciences Center, urban studies students from Rhodes College, and an interdisciplinary group of Alternative Spring Break students sponsored by Virginia Tech and Notre Dame Universities. The City of Memphis has recently invited the University to partner with it on a Choice Neighborhoods application submitted to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for work in the Vance Avenue neighborhood. Leaders in one of the city's oldest African American neighborhoods, Orange Mound, have also asked the University to work with them to prepare a comprehensive revitalization strategy for their area similar to the SoMe RAP Plan. Finally, University of Memphis students, faculty, and staff have recently initiated a resident-led planning effort in Brownsville, Tennessee, where the mayor and city planner were deeply impressed by the collaborative University-community work in both South Memphis and Vance Avenue.

Notes

[1] Our understanding of interdisciplinary research follows the definition provided by the National Academy of Science, "interdisciplinary research is a mode of research by teams or individuals that integrates information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of specialized knowledge to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of research practice (Stober 2011).

[2] The walkability project was funded through the Strengthening Communities Initiative (SCI), which represents a partnership between the University of Memphis Research Foundation, the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis, and the United Way of Memphis. SCI provides capacity-building grants to community leaders and university faculty engaged in community-based research that is cooperatively conceived and executed. For a full discussion of the SCI grant program and its contribution to engaged scholarship at the University of Memphis see Norris-Tirrell, Lambert-Pennington, and Hyland (2010).

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