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UNIVERSITY OUTREACH IN COMMUNITIES: THE LIMITS OF EXPERTISE

By Joe Summers

Introduction

WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE MOST INTRACTABLE COMMUNITY PROBLEMS MUST BE DEFINED AND ATTACKED (IF NOT SOLVED) BY THE LOCAL CITIZENS THEMSELVES.

Article Text

Until recently, the logo tagline for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System was “Your Experts for Life.” That tagline describes pretty well the traditional view of university-citizen relations. That is, we at the university are “experts” who enter a community to solve local problems—extending the knowledge and resources of the university to inform, assist, and educate. Under this traditional approach, universities have a stockpile of projects, programs, and initiatives that can be employed to solve whatever problems (often defined by someone from the university) they find in a community. There is a mostly one-way, producer-consumer relationship. Citizens, and, collectively, their communities, are viewed as customers who need the specialized expertise that only the university can provide. Despite a widespread movement toward a new “engaged” model of university-citizen relations, my guess is that this traditional model probably remains the dominant practice.

Lessons from Uniontown, Alabama

I understand this approach pretty well since I practiced it for many of my years working in outreach leadership positions at Auburn University. But my perspective changed beginning in 1999 when Auburn’s Economic Development Institute was called to assist a small, west Alabama community facing severe economic distress.

Our initial approach in Uniontown was to work through the mayor to help the community create a strategic plan for economic development and redesign a local community development organization. This was nothing new for us. Strategic planning and organizational assistance were among the cache of programs and services we regularly provided to communities throughout our state. But in Uniontown, our project was a complete failure.

The planning process never attracted very much citizen involvement. The few citizens who “participated” tended to be elderly friends of the mayor. They generally took a passive role and appeared reluctant to express their views. They tended to look to the mayor or the outside “experts” from Auburn for answers to community problems. (Of course, what we perceived as apathy might have simply reflected the fact that our customer-service approach, which put them on the receiving end of our expertise, gave participants little chance to express their own needs or affect the process used to address them.)

Our planning and organizational assistance project in Uniontown had little impact, because this community needed something more basic than a plan or new organizational structures. Uniontown needed its residents to embrace their role as citizens. We had nothing in our bag of tricks that addressed this problem. So we decided to change our approach.

Humbled by our early stumbles, we decided to take a role that focused on listening, facilitating dialogue, and responding to the needs of Uniontown citizens as they defined them. The results were extraordinary. As members of the Uniontown community discussed local problems, they began to realize their capacity for doing something about them. Talk was turned into action, and these actions led to results. For me, the most intriguing outcome was that more good things seemed to happen as we did less.

Connector and Catalyst

Based on our experiences in Uniontown, we changed our perspective on community outreach. We understand that we don't have all of the answers. We know that citizens produce and create their own fate. We understand that, like Uniontown, many communities are not really looking for technical assistance, service, or education, but rather ways to come together as a community. Expertise and specialized programs do not have much to say about that. Thus, the most fundamental community problems are not amenable to the solutions found within our usual bag of tricks.

Those of us in university outreach will have much more relevance if we substitute the role of “connector and catalyst” for the role of “expert.” We need to understand that the most intractable community problems must be defined and attacked (if not solved) by the local citizens themselves. They have the innate power and capacity to be the solution to their own problems. Outsiders' coming in to define and solve problems does not build community capacity or facilitate community ownership of problems. Indeed, it may have the reverse effect of perpetuating a continued feeling of dependency. What communities really need from us is to listen to how they define their needs, to help connect stakeholders with local assets and other resources, and to facilitate community deliberations and interactions.

Engagement, Community, and Economic Prosperity

As an economic development organization, Uniontown was a turning point in our understanding of the link between citizens, community development, and economic prosperity. Everything we say and do now reflects the basic idea that citizens are the community's most important economic resource; that community vitality is determined by the quantity of leaders in a community and how, individually and collectively, they talk, decide, act, and interact with one another; and that community development lays the foundation for economic prosperity. This contrasts with the prevailing view of economic development dominated by issues of business marketing, financial incentives, and recruitment.

The changes at the institute—now called the Economic and Community Development Institute (ECDI)—are not only reflected in new public deliberation or civic engagement programs and initiatives, although we are involved in such activities. The change is a more fundamental transformation of our organizational culture. It is a paradigm shift in how we view the field of economic development and our place in it. Civic engagement is now integrated into each of our programs and activities—whether in education, research, or community outreach.

One manifestation of our change in philosophy is a new emphasis on community leadership. ECDI is now the home of the Alabama Community Leadership Network (ACLN), which connects, and provides resources for, adult and youth community leadership programs throughout Alabama. We see these local leadership programs as having great potential for building more “leaderful” communities, increasing the capacity of citizens to address the challenges they face, and thereby strengthening civic life in communities throughout Alabama. This is the type of civic infrastructure upon which we believe prosperous economies are built.

We have redesigned our education programs to engage the Alabama economic development community in new ways—both in topics addressed and in course format. While we still address the traditional issues related to business recruitment, our focus is heavily oriented toward community development. Course formats are structured to be very interactive, employing deliberative forums, roundtables, and group exercises. This reflects our philosophy that ECDI staff and course instructors do not have a monopoly on good ideas or strategies. Engagement within our courses produces a healthy exchange of perspectives that is far superior to a lecture-only format. We also travel around the state conducting deliberative forums and roundtables on topics related to economic and community development.

Civic Mission versus Measurement and Money

One of the tensions that we have faced is between our commitment to a civic mission and the university's demand for measurable results and the generation of extramural income. While we embrace accountability and entrepreneurial strategies, the things we value most are sometimes difficult to measure or less amenable to immediate generation of income. The economist Stephen Rhodes said, "Politics and public policy are more like love than math." That sounds about right. We tend to be able to measure the things that are of the least importance. It's easier to count the number of people who attend a training class than it is to measure the impact of a rekindled sense of civic efficacy among citizens of Uniontown. It's pretty easy to make money by securing a contract for an economic impact study of a potential plant location. It's harder to earn money by sparking a community's interest in public deliberation and civic engagement. But which has the most value? Getting universities to truly align themselves around their civic mission will require finding a workable balance between the university's civic purpose, on the one hand, and the demand for accountability and funding on the other.

Not "Your Experts for Life"

To summarize, we have learned the limits of our expertise. Nobody knows or cares about a community's problems like the citizens themselves. And only they have the power and capacity to solve them. For those of us in university outreach, our most useful contribution is probably to serve as "connector and catalyst" with the goal of increasing the community's capacity to successfully address problems on its own.

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