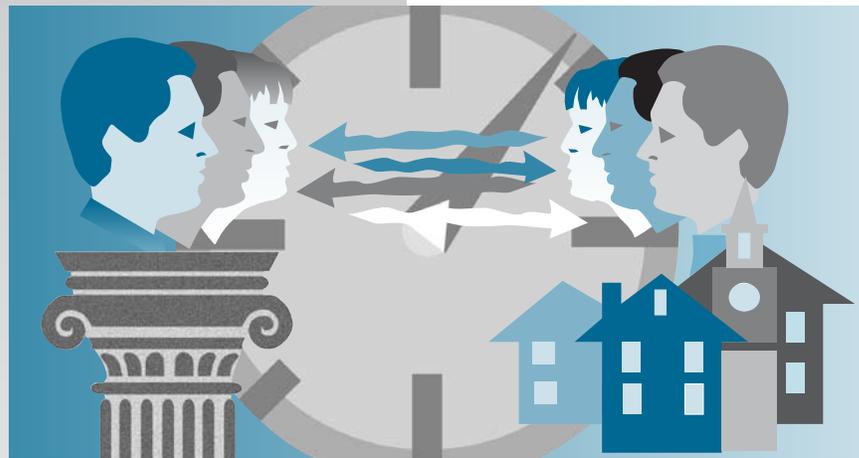# NAVIGATING THE
POWER DYNAMICS
BETWEEN
INSTITUTIONS
AND THEIR
COMMUNITIES

BYRON P. WHITE, EdD

A STUDY FOR THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

Kettering Foundation

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INTRODUCTION

A FEW YEARS AGO, I found it necessary to write a personal job description for myself. I wanted to give clarity and meaning to 20 years of career choices that may not appear to a casual reader of my résumé to follow any logical progression. My goal was to capture the thread that connected these seemingly disparate experiences and to use it as a guide for future career decisions. I wanted to describe the overarching vocation that reflected my passion and talents more definitively than the job titles I had held along the way.

Byron P. White

Here's the job description I settled on: I facilitate mutually beneficial engagement between institutions and urban communities. This description had emerged from a set of professional experiences that I liken to a three-legged stool.

The first leg was constructed from observations of urban communities. The raw materials came from my jobs as a newspaper reporter, editor, and editorial writer covering urban affairs, primarily for the *Chicago Tribune* and the former *Cincinnati Post*. They also came from graduate work at the University of Chicago, focused on a study of

black political power, and doctoral research at the University of Pennsylvania dealing with university-community relations. The second leg was comprised of several years of work with grassroots community-development organizations. I was the founding director of a coalition of churches that worked on issues of education and housing in Cincinnati's Walnut Hills neighborhood. I also assisted community-based nonprofits on Chicago's West Side and in cities across the country through my affiliation with the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University.

Most recently, I have added a third leg to my career as I've been an administrator overseeing community-engagement strategies for civically oriented institutions, first as senior manager of community relations for the *Chicago Tribune* and now as associate vice president for community engagement at Xavier University in Cincinnati.

Those experiences—as an impartial observer of community building, as an advocate working from within urban communities, and as a catalyst working from the outside—have given me a unique perspective into the dynamics of institutional/community engagement. Basically, they have left me with three overriding convictions. First, the collective work of citizens is essential to any hope of significant, sustained transformation of urban America. Second, institutions can be powerful enablers of such citizen leadership or they can seriously impede it. Third, the determining factor governing which role institutions will play is the nature of the power relationship that is negotiated between citizens and institutions.

CITIZEN POWER AND CIVIC COLLABORATION

CITIZENS CERTAINLY possess the power to act on their own behalf without any help from institutions. This reality is often overlooked by public, nonprofit, and corporate entities in their search for solutions to society's most pressing problems. Yet to those who observe collective citizen action, it has become apparent that in many communities, regardless of their demographic makeup, there exists a vibrant, citizen-driven, political activism that is organic and spontaneous and that relies on the talents, capacities, and established norms of communities. "It is driven by the energy, initiative, and civic skills that exist throughout a community rather than by the techniques of expert organizations or the resources of powerful bureaucracies" (Barker et al. 2008).

An example of this is the group of residents in a low-income Cincinnati neighborhood who tried for months to get the city's police department to do something about a vacant house on their block, which was a favorite hangout for prostitutes and their clients. Despite the residents' repeated complaints, the police did nothing that would prevent the activity for more than a day or two. Finally, a few frustrated neighbors came up with the idea of piling logs at the driveway entrance of the house to prevent anyone from driving around to the back. Prostitution on the block ceased immediately. Daubón (2004) describes such power "as the capacity to make things happen."

Despite such episodes of significant achievement, it is virtually impossible for citizens to realize sustained and systemic success in transforming their communities without some cooperation from institutions. In fact, citizens often feel hindered in their efforts when they cannot enlist from institutions the resources necessary to advance their causes (Downing 2002). Inevitably, they must interact with institutions

if they are to capture external assets "for community-building purposes" (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). To do so effectively, citizen leaders must exercise a different kind of power—one that renders them interdependent rather than altogether self-determinant. In this context, power does not mean overt control, which is a popular interpretation of the term. Rather, I refer to social power or social influence as notably defined by social psychologists French and Raven (1962). It is the influence that one party, in this case a group of citizens, has over the choices willingly made by a target individual or organization.

There are new opportunities for citizens to exercise such power as both public and private institutions demonstrate increasing interest in developing collaborative strategies aimed at addressing social and economic problems, especially in urban areas. Unlike organic, community-level activity, this strategic approach is fueled by the collective expertise, resources, and data assembled by civic-minded corporations, large nonprofits, public agencies, and local governments. In Cincinnati, for instance, no fewer than a half dozen of these cross-sector initiatives—with titles like Agenda 360, Strive, and Better Together Cincinnati—have been established over the past five years to address matters, such as education, economic development, public safety, racial equity, and regional planning.

These collaborative efforts are part of a national movement around cross-sector collaboration that has emerged, in part, from institutional realization that "no one organization or institution is in a position to find and implement solutions to the problems that confront us as a society. . . . Instead, in order to marshal the legitimacy, power, authority, and knowledge required to tackle any major public issue, organizations and institutions must join forces in a 'shared-power' world" (Bryson and Crosby 1992, 4).

Yet citizen leaders, who make up what might be called the grassroots sector, often are excluded from these collaborative functions. Institutional leaders frequently express the intent of including everyday resident leaders in their designs, but find it difficult to contend with differences in style and notions of power. Citizens may be sought for their "input" into these strategic planning efforts, and later they are enlisted to endorse the plan, but they seldom have real authority in deciding what the plan will be. Without such involvement, the strategies are hampered at the point of implementation.

A well-reasoned strategy to get more youth to consider college may be based on the latest research, incorporate clearly defined outcomes, and have plenty of funding behind it. But if the people who have the greatest impact on determining whether youngsters will think about college—parents and grandparents, athletic coaches, youth pastors, barbers, peers—are not invested in the strategy, it is less likely to work.

Even when they are summoned to participate, citizens sometimes question their own capacity to contribute, in essence conceding citizen authority to professionals (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Not too long ago, I facilitated a meeting with institutional and community leaders who were discussing a project to assign a few marginalized and potentially violent youth in the community to be mentored by grassroots associations. Officials from the juvenile court system, acknowledging their own ineffectiveness at reaching these youth, were excited about the prospect of each church, neighborhood sports team, and block club focusing its attention on a single youth. Yet residents wondered whether citizen-led organizations were willing or able to handle the task and insisted the job might be more appropriate for professional social workers.

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For these reasons, efforts by institutions and citizens often seem to run on parallel tracks, in full view of one another, but never effectively intersecting. On the occasions when those tracks cross, it is usually in the context of a defined partnership between an institution and a community organization. For citizen leaders, those partnerships inevitably raise questions about how they will exercise power in the relationship. Their tactics for doing so vary, based upon whether citizens view the institution at a macro or micro level.

MACRO- AND MICRO-LEVEL PERSPECTIVES

IN 1993, Xavier University sought to create a residential green space in front of its new student center by closing off Ledgewood Avenue, a major street that ran through campus. Without seeking much input from the three surrounding neighborhoods, officials worked their connections with City Hall to gain permission to close a portion of Ledgewood. This effectively shut off a primary route between two of those neighborhoods. Irate residents responded by suing the university and the city for neglecting the public's interests. It took a decade of deliberate, community-relations efforts by Xavier to mend this rift.

In 2005, when Xavier embarked on its most recent capital project—a massive $250 million undertaking to build academic facilities, student housing, and office and retail space—officials were determined not to repeat past mistakes. Led by a new group of university leaders who had been hired to direct community engagement efforts on campus, the institution initiated an open process that involved resident leaders in every facet of the planning. Long before Xavier's board of trustees made its final decision on which buildings would go where, community leaders from the Cincinnati neighborhoods of North Avondale and Evanston and the independent municipality of Norwood—all of which border the campus—were invited to provide direction. The final version of the plan was hailed by all three communities as a positive contribution to the area.

Given the apparent success of Xavier's newfound transparency and purposeful efforts to give the community a voice in its development, I was caught off guard during the summer of 2008 when community leaders in Norwood began criticizing the university for being secretive about its plans to acquire property in the community. Critical letters were written to Xavier's president, negative blogs were posted online,

and word on the street turned decisively anti-Xavier. As a Xavier administrator responsible for maintaining positive relations with our neighbors, I initiated a lunch with a few Norwood residents with whom I had developed a positive working relationship. They candidly shared with me the source of their frustration: a wildly inaccurate rumor about the university's actions. I immediately moved to restore trust by making arrangements for our senior executives to attend a West Norwood Neighborhood Association meeting to answer questions. After a few weeks, the negative sentiment subsided and the capital project once again received public endorsement.

Looking back, it was rather frustrating that months and months of goodwill and trust between my institution and the community could have been threatened by an occurrence as seemingly trivial as an unfounded rumor. However, the episode was a reminder of what I have seen many times in my work and research in facilitating engagement between institutions and communities: citizens have a dual perspective of institutions as being threatening and, yet, potentially friendly. It is a mind-set directly tied to citizens' inherent desire for self-determination. Most residents —especially those in communities that have undergone social and economic distress—long to gain control of their community's well-being. Institutions, while potentially potent allies in the pursuit of such well-being,

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vie with citizens for control—sometimes intentionally, sometimes unwittingly.

Chaskin et al. (2001), in their analysis of how urban communities build capacity, note that community members view their engagement with institutions in both macro-level and micro-level terms. At the macro level, the institutions' dominance appears overwhelming and the community feels vulnerable. However, at the micro level—that is, within the context of specific partnerships—there is opportunity for

the community to exercise its will through personal interaction. That is why our neighbors in Norwood found it necessary first to challenge our institutional strength when it seemed that it might, once again, threaten the community's objectives and then to sit down with me and talk it over.

I saw evidence of the same dual perspectives during extensive interviews in 2007 with community leaders in the Columbus, Ohio, neighborhood of Weinland Park. The subject was their relationship with The Ohio State University (White 2008). Although the immense campus sits just northwest of Weinland Park, Ohio State virtually ignored this economically distressed, predominantly African American community for decades. However, since about 2002, the university has sought to engage in ways that are mutually beneficial to the campus and to the neighborhood. Still, every resident I interviewed was emphatic in his or her assessment of Ohio State as an all-powerful, dominating force.

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With its 1,756-acre campus, 39,000-person workforce, and $4 billion budget, it not only has the political, professional, and financial clout to do just about anything it wants, residents said, but what it wants to do is primarily motivated by its own self-interest.

"You know, these are people who are mighty. This is Ohio State," said Julius Jefferson, a Weinland Park native who since our interview has become vice president of the Weinland Park Civic Association. "You know, [Ohio State is] the richest entity in Columbus, maybe the richest in the state. They have the power. They have the money. They don't really have to listen to me." Lynn Michaels, a community activist who moved to Weinland Park in 1996, concurred: "I mean, it's their game. . . . No, the residents do not have any say-so over this. I mean we have some input, but that's a whole different thing."

And yet, when these same leaders were asked about specific partnerships with individual faculty and administrators from Ohio State, their perspectives often softened. Those partner-

ships have ranged from an art program for adolescent girls to the construction of a $10 million early childhood research center that Ohio State built onto a local public school with private funds. Jefferson, for instance, was glowing in his assessment of Susan Colbert, an OSU Extension educator who has helped create several workforce development programs in Weinland Park:

> You can see Susan doing things off the clock. Let's say someone is in the computer [class] and they needed some Christmas toys, for example. She made sure Christmas happened, you know. [If someone] needed some food, she made sure you had food. Real genuine things, where it's not just like, "Oh, I'm doing this because it's in my job description," but [instead] "I really have relationship with you. I'm really invested in your future, your kid's future. So if you need something, see me and I'll work outside of the bounds of the normal programming of what I was told to do. The monies that I was given, you know, there's other ways to get things done." And that's the type of thing that Susan does. People know her. People like her. In other words, she has respect.

Michaels spoke in similar terms about Andrea Bowlin, a special projects coordinator from Ohio State's College of Education and Human Ecology, who was the liaison to the community on the early childhood center project. "She wanted to listen to your concerns, you know, to know what was going on," Michaels said. "Andrea just has done an amazing job."

Joyce Hughes, president of the civic association, who lives in the house she first moved into when she was six months old, has witnessed Ohio State's muscle for more than half a century. But she has developed a measure of confidence in the individual representatives who have interacted positively with community residents. "Yes, they [Ohio State officials] have power. Yes, there are things that they can do," Hughes said. "But I really don't believe that Ohio State's mode is that of running over communities. The Ohio State University is trying to include the community and its leadership. I can tell you that if I let it happen, they'd have me working day and night, seven days a week."

EXERCISING CITIZEN POWER

THESE TWO PERSPECTIVES on the role of the institution in the community necessarily impact the way citizens interact with institutions, particularly how they exercise power in the relationship. When the community engages the institution at the macro level, it tends to employ confrontational methods of social power. Faced with a sense of the institution's dominance—and the fear that the institution will trample the community's needs in achieving its own interests—the community usually tries to gain leverage by disrupting the institution's efforts. The authority to do so typically comes from a third party. For instance, community members seeking to confront the institution's desire to tear down an historic building may appeal to their elected officials to thwart the institution's plans or to the news media to embarrass the institution. It is the kind of power displayed by Norwood's letter-writing campaign to the president, spurred by years of watching Xavier follow its own agenda even when it was contrary to the community's goals and activated at the very hint that the institution might once again be planning actions detrimental to the community.

Relational social power, on the other hand, is released from within the community when engagement takes place at the micro level. It is focused on affecting the institution's actions through interpersonal persuasion and is activated when the institution expresses appreciation of the community's capacity or authority to influence the relationship. And it is exercised in the informal ways that usually define community processes: verbal commitments, face-to-face communication, and peer relationships. In this interaction, often between two individuals— one representing the community and one from the institution—the community is on a more equal footing with the institution. It is the reason why my friends in Norwood were willing to meet with me and candidly share their concerns. Our relationship over time had given them a sense of confidence that I would be influenced by our conversation and that it might ultimately lead to favorable action by Xavier.

The community's use of both forms of power often appears to be in conflict and downright illogical to managers of institutions who are seeking strategic focus and, above all, efficiency. ("Why," I wondered in frustration in the midst of the Norwood controversy, "couldn't my community friends simply call me for answers instead of getting the president all riled up?") The back-and-forth often creates tensions between representatives of institutions and communities. In fact, the inability of institutions to effectively navigate both these forms of power is one reason for the disconnect between emerging institutional initiatives that address challenging social and economic issues, and citizen-led efforts that do the same.

The correlation between macro-level and micro-level perspectives of institutions, and confrontational and relational forms of power—and the tensions they bring—was affirmed for me in my own dealings with the Evanston community, a moderate-income, mostly African American neighborhood that encompasses part of the Xavier campus. When the university secured a Community Outreach Partnering Center grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in part to assist Evanston in developing a plan to refurbish neighborhood housing, resident leaders were adamant in wanting to know what role the community would have in determining how the funds were spent.

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At one point, Sharon Muyaya, the former president of the Evanston Community Council, and other community leaders confronted me with a demand to govern a portion of the grant that focused on marketing the community. The responsibilities had largely been given to a nonprofit organization that had not done the job well. After rounding up residents who had some housing expertise, including a realtor who lived in the neighborhood, the community council asked for the contract to complete the work. I initially resisted, concerned primarily with the university's fiscal responsibility for administering the grant and our commitment to

delivering measurable outcomes. Muyaya has since explained the community's interpretation of my resistance at the time:

> We made a suggestion. We wrote out the whole plan and everything. But he was reluctant to give us that particular power to allow the community to go ahead and do its thing and prove that it had the capability of handling the housing portion of the grant. I really thought we had a grant where we would be able to control and do the things we wanted to do in the community. I really thought that we would have the ability to do that, and yet I learned later that because Xavier is the institution, they felt that Xavier should have more rights or responsibility to say what would happen with that grant money. So basically, Xavier is kind of in control of it and my goal is to really try and get the community more involved in all the decision-making that's going to happen for the community. It should be community-driven and not Xavier-driven and it's been hard to separate that line (White & Muyaya 2007).

It is this reality—that when the rubber meets the road, my institutional priorities are likely to trump the community's priorities, no matter how friendly I may be—that community people understand with perfect clarity and that institutional leaders are often unwilling to admit. This is why they keep their finger on the trigger of the weapons of confrontational power. At the same time, community leaders are always hopeful that relational power will prevail. Muyaya's primary objective for our meeting was to convince me that the community was fully capable of participating in the work as a producer, rather than just as a client. Nevertheless, I also left the meeting fully aware that the Evanston Community Council could raise their concerns with Xavier's administrative vice president and cause me a great deal of trouble. I eventually acquiesced to the community's proposal and entered into a contract with the community council. In the end, the contract was managed quite capably.

STRUCTURING ENGAGEMENT ON TWO LEVELS

WHILE I WAS SENSITIVE to the community's desire to govern itself, I was careful not to appease that desire at the expense of my obligations as an administrator responsible for protecting the university's interests. And, it seems, I am not alone in those convictions. In their study of civic and public organizations, Creighton and Harwood (2007) found that institutions are not really set up to engage with communities in a way that truly shares power, despite their best intentions. The researchers reported that although the institutional leaders they talked to "consistently expressed deep and passionate concern for the communities in which they work and for the people in those communities . . . their intent and operational focus [were] not in alignment." The fundamental discrepancy was that the "health and vibrancy of their organizations was the dominant focus in their work," which inevitably conflicted at times with the public focus required for effective community engagement.

One consequence of this "organization-first" perspective is that many institutions traditionally have failed to recognize the need to invest the time and energy to engage communities more informally at the micro level, although, increasingly, they have expressed a greater desire to do so. Indeed, a growing school of thought in institutional/community engagement calls for practices that build peer-related exchanges and mutual trust with citizens in order to legitimately engage them. In higher education, particularly, a literature has emerged espousing such principles. For instance, Walshok (1999, 85) insists that "the relationship between campus and community must be a genuine dialogue between two equal parties." Similarly, the 2004 Wingspread report, entitled "Calling the question: Is higher education ready to commit to community engagement?" (Brukardt et al. 2004, 9), argues that "true partnerships are spaces within which the questions are created, there is genuine reciprocal deliberation, and the work to find the answers is begun."

Such visions of parity are laudable but not necessarily realistic. In my experience, notions of "reciprocal deliberation" and "equal partnership" are far-fetched concepts to community leaders who are fully aware of their own underresourced capacity in comparison to the institutions' abundance. More than "getting along," leaders from these communities want to make sure they have a say in what happens. As David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, remarked at a roundtable discussion on democratic community engagement, "These are not citizens who just want to be revered. They are people who want to gain control of their community" (White 2008). So, while they long to influence institutions through informal, relational forms of power, they feel compelled to use more confrontational forms of influence because of the discrepancy in power between community associations and institutions. Both strategies are seen as necessary.

Institutional leaders, on the other hand, do not easily operate in both these dimensions, according to Creighton and Harwood. One executive director with whom I recently consulted is facing this very dilemma. As the director of a coalition of educational institutions in the center of an urban metropolitan area, he has worked hard to build relations with the resident-led civic associations in the adjacent communities, some of which are economically distressed. Recently, however, when he and the head of one of the civic groups disagreed over a development project, the resident leader went to City Hall to complain. The exasperated administrator asked me for assistance, disillusioned that the work of relationship building was not enough to prevent what amounted to an exercise of heavy-handed power. The conflict threatened to derail the partnership.

As I examined partnerships at Ohio State and observe the nature of our success and challenges at Xavier, it appears that it is certainly possible for an institution at least to structure its community-engagement functions so that it can *manage* in two dimensions. Doing so requires a more sophisticated framework of institutional/community engagement than the rhetoric readily allows for. In reality, institutions and communities do not really engage as all-inclusive entities. Each is a complex unit made up of diverse functions, groups, and stakeholders. Within an institution, a specific office typically takes responsibility for engaging a target organization or group within a community. Generally, that engagement takes the form of a partnership between the two entities. Even when several functions or organizations are involved, two groups generally emerge as the primary partners.

Chaskin et al. (2001, 126) call the community representatives "brokering organizations." Their purpose is to "mediate and foster relations" between the community and the partnering institution. Typically, the function is filled by a group led by volunteers who live in the community, although sometimes a community-based nonprofit serves the role. Whichever the case, they are "necessarily *in* [emphasis author's] the community, operating as a kind of bridge to information and resources within and beyond the boundaries of the community, but fundamentally seen as part of it." While Chaskin and his colleagues do not assign a comparable term to institutional functions that serve in this representative role the job description would be similar: one department, office, or function emerges to mediate and foster relations with the community brokering organization. In essence, they are brokering organizations for the institution.

Yet even that does not fully describe the structure of the partnership. Each brokering organization is typically represented by an individual—or agent—who serves as the point person, interacting with his or her counterpart from the other brokering organization. The partnership, then, amounts to an interaction between two agents, with the backing of their brokering organizations, who represent the institution and community, respectively.

The interplay of these components within the institution determines its proficiency at managing confrontational and interpersonal community power. The most effective arrangement, in my view, is that in which the institution's agent is both sufficiently engaged in the community to genuinely acknowledge and respond to relational forms of social power, and at the same time carries enough clout and credibility within the institution to directly respond to confron-

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tational displays of power. Such an agent not only recognizes the community's expertise on an issue but is also able to marshal the institutional resources to respond to it. Most important, the agent understands and respects the community's dual perspective of the institution and is neither naïvely optimistic when the informal engagement is going well nor overwhelmingly discouraged when the confrontational power plays emerge.

While this *balanced model* of institutional behavior best positions the organization to effectively manage the complexities of community engagement in a genuine, authentic way, two less effective modes of institutional behavior often prevail. One is what I call the *sheltered model* of engagement, where the institution's agent is sheltered within the brokering organization and has limited personal interaction with community agents. Exchanges are formal in nature and tolerance for community influence is minimal. While the institution might achieve its objective, it leaves the community no option but to exercise its influence by means of coercive power. This inevitably invites ongoing confrontation and virtually guarantees the community will not be pleased with the end product. John Kucia, Xavier's administrative vice president, acknowledges that he operated in this way when the university closed Ledgewood Avenue in 1993, inviting a long contentious battle culminating in a lawsuit against the university. At the other extreme is the *freelance model* of engagement. Here, the institution's agent is not restricted by the brokering organization and is able to take greater risks by interacting with the community. Relational power is generated. However, the agent lacks the institutional authority and credibility to marshal resources to act on behalf of the community in any significant, sustainable way. In this scenario, the agent often distinguishes herself from the brokering organization in order to act in a manner that has credibility in the community. University faculty members, sometimes dismayed by a lack of institutional support for their engagement efforts, are sometimes guilty of this approach. They build meaningful community relationships but have little capacity to leverage significant university resources on behalf of the community.

The balanced model requires the institution to be purposeful in developing and enabling agents who are both free to fully engage the community at an interpersonal level and fully empowered to act on the institution's behalf. Under this arrangement, interpersonal power is generated and confrontational power can be effectively leveraged.

CONCLUSION

INSTITUTIONS CANNOT TAKE the friendship of their neighboring communities for granted and they must work diligently to be considered partners. From the perspective of those living in, and advocating for, poor urban communities, even civic-minded institutions, such as universities, are viewed as part of the same alliance that includes mass media, local government, and downtown corporations—all of which have been guilty over the years of abandoning and ignoring the most troubled communities and, consequently, the nation's most disadvantaged citizens. The experiences of those in Columbus's Weinland Park neighborhood, Cincinnati's Evanston community, and in Norwood suggest that even as those institutions seek to make amends through a renewed focus on community engagement, their overtures are viewed suspiciously.

Institutional leaders are right to believe that if they can find a way to forge productive partnerships with communities, there is indeed new hope for declining urban neighborhoods. They are naïve, however, to imagine that they can bring about such transformation simply by pursuing respectful, even trusting relationships with individual community leaders. The scales of power are tilted too much in favor of the institution to presume that friendly advances are enough to lure communities into productive partnerships.

Citizen leaders are not demanding a seat at the institution's table; they want to set the table. They want to influence the research that defines their communities' problems and devise the solutions right alongside the experts who march into their communities, claiming to know the answers. These citizens are committed to mobilizing themselves through neighborhood associations to regain control of their communities, though they seldom have all the money or volunteers they need, or all the required technical expertise. They certainly welcome those resources from the nearby university or any other institution, but they want to determine where those resources go.

For decades, local government, national foundations, corporations, and universities have tried to devise solutions to save urban America—largely to no avail. Now they are wisely working together. They will continue to fail, however, unless they concede that the full investment of the citizenry is essential to resolving community problems. Positioning and equipping institutional representatives to operate in a way that recognizes and responds to both confrontational and relational forms of community power—rather than trying to avoid either—are essential to finally getting it right.

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