

University–Community Relationships: An ABCD Approach

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One of my first conversations as a new employee at Cleveland State University was with a senior faculty member in one of our health professions disciplines. She initiated the meeting and I soon learned why. Just a few weeks before I arrived, the department had submitted a major federal grant to launch a diabetes prevention program in the Central neighborhood near campus.

Now Central is typical of many of the residential neighborhoods that surround anchor institutions—especially hospitals and universities like Cleveland State—that are located in the heart of major metropolitan areas. It's a proud, mostly African-American community of active residents who are beginning to see signs of neighborhood revitalization after decades of population and job loss, and social decline.

It also turns out that Central has one of the highest rates of diabetes in Cleveland, which is why the faculty member with whom I was meeting and her colleagues had made it the target of their grant application. In fact, one of the features of the proposal was to train residents to possess the skills needed to care for people with diabetes, so that they could better assist their neighbors and family members.

The faculty member's request to me was simple: Given the possibility that we might actually obtain this major grant, she wanted me to help her department build relationships with residents in the Central neighborhood.

Now I know what you're thinking: Shouldn't that have been done first? In the faculty members' defense, she recognized this. She explained that the grant had come to the school's attention right around the winter holidays, and with a short window before the deadline there simply was no time to do the community organizing legwork the project deserved.

Besides, she said, even though we hadn't exactly engaged residents directly, there were several community-based organizations in the neighborhood that had relationships with residents, and we had enlisted their support. And she had the letters to prove it.

However, in my mind, compromising the relationship-building work was simply a symptom of a more fundamental concern. The high rate of diabetes in Central had led this faculty leader to the assumption that residents there needed to become better at caring for victims of the disease. She had built her proposal around this belief.

But I asked her: Couldn't you just as easily have concluded that if so many residents in the neighborhood have diabetes, then, in fact, residents in Central are more highly skilled than most other people at caring for people with diabetes. Maybe the real discovery to be made in partnership with these residents was less about their need for training, and more about identifying and multiplying what they already know.

That doesn't mean there would be no benefit to obtaining a grant for the work. But I suspect the level of innovation in determining what the community and the university might do together would be far greater if we had started from the assumption of what people already possess—

what they are able to produce without us – than what they haven't acquired and need to receive from us. Who knows, it might have produced a more dynamic proposal.

My faculty friend saw the merit in this approach right away. The irony is that if she had seen it at the beginning, she would have deemed the contribution from the community so critical that the grantwriters would have done whatever it took to make sure they had sought community participation. It would have been as essential as figuring out how to round up those letters of support from CEOs of institutions and organizations even though many were out of their offices during the holiday break. But it wasn't.

Now, before you go bashing my friend and thinking you're more enlightened than she, let me say that I do not believe the problem is about her. It is more about the institution she works for. And before you go thinking that your university is more enlightened than mine, let me clarify further. It wasn't so much about Cleveland State, but about the nature of institutions generally.

The fact is, the way our institutions operate often impede us from fully realizing the principles of the asset-based, peer-related, respectful, mutually beneficial, democratic engagement that we profess in our grant proposals, mission statements, and presentations. It's just a fact that, by their natures, institutions are averse to such notions.

The bottom line is this: Institutions don't care.

Now, if that statement is a bit unsettling for you, there's a reason why: It's because *you* care. Everyone in this room cares about the people in the communities where we are involved. You wouldn't be here otherwise. My faculty colleague who asked me for help on the grant, I am absolutely convinced cares deeply. But you are also a product of your institution. And your instincts and responsibilities as a citizen or friend, and your responsibilities as a representative of your institution are not the same. In fact, sometimes they contradict.

Institutions don't care. People care.

That's not a bad thing, by the way, even if it does create tension. However, it is time we own up to it if we're really going to "re-imagine, strengthen, and deepen our civic work" as the title of this conference suggests. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, deepening the work going forward may require that we loosen our grip on the community a bit, and take greater hold of the way our institutions operate.

Now, before I go on, let me be clear that my goal here is not to bash institutions, especially universities. I am a senior administrator of a large institution and I love what I do. I believe in our mission and I have no doubt that what we do makes a difference in our community, city and region. The potential for the social and economic impact that anchor institutions, particularly in central cities, can make on society is tremendous and largely untapped.

But I have come to realize after years of working on behalf of civic-oriented institutions that, despite our glowing presentations at conferences like these, we really do struggle to live up to our lofty aspirations for truly democratic engagement. We fall short of sharing full responsibility, accountability and authority for civic work with our community partners, especially marginalized citizens and residents of economically distressed communities.