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Campus-Community Partnership: A Stubborn Commitment to Reciprocal Relationships

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I recently came across the syllabus from my first service-learning course. As a student I had never taken such a class, but as a brand-new assistant professor in 1993, I joined a small group of faculty willing to take the pedagogical plunge. We met regularly for a year, first to conceptualize and develop projects and syllabi, and then to share, troubleshoot, and support each other as we offered the college's first set of service-learning courses. It is striking to compare the rhetoric in that early syllabus with the language routinely used today to articulate the purposes and priorities of community-engaged learning and civic engagement. The former was long on "service" and "needs," the latter on "collaboration" and "assets." The journey I and many other civic engagement professionals have taken is the same one we wish for our students and our colleges or universities—a journey from paternalism to partnership.

Partnership is both the norm and an aspiration within higher education civic engagement practice today. Books, journal articles, organizational mission statements, and student learning outcomes routinely feature the language of partnership, collaboration, and co-creation in descriptions and discussions of civic work. In the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification, partnership functions as a core value and is presented as a defining attribute of the publicly engaged institution. While service-learning practices have evolved over the past few decades,

on many campuses, the very language of "service" has fallen out of favor because of the asymmetry it implies, the lack of full and equal partnership it connotes. At my institution, for example, what was once the Office of Service-Learning was transformed over a decade ago into the Center for Community Partnerships—a shift that included not only a new name, but also new ways of seeing and relating to the off-campus community and of allocating staff time and other resources.

Partnerships as Relationships

Even as partnership, collaboration, and the co-creation of programs and knowledge are increasingly embraced as best practices for college-community engagement, they are only ever partially achieved. Notwithstanding the best intentions, the smartest program design, the most committed collaborators (among faculty, staff, and community colleagues), the best institutional support, and so forth, partnership is an essentially elusive thing. Why? Because rather than being primarily an exchange or an agreement, partnership within the context of civic engagement is fundamentally relational, and a relationship is always a work in progress. Much like deep friendships, partnerships need ongoing cultivation and care. They require sustained attention, stubborn commitment, flexibility, empathy, humility, patience, imagination, and a generous sense of humor.

Unlike many friendships, however, campus-community partnerships

typically span significant differences, bringing together individuals and institutions from (sometimes dramatically) divergent contexts with the expectation that they will work together toward a shared vision. This is a strikingly ambitious expectation because in most cases, the differences to be navigated are many and complex. At the organizational level, there is the college or university, where a civic engagement mission and program require negotiation among and support from a range of diverse stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, staff, and students. No less complex is the off-campus community, with nonprofit, for-profit, and governmental sectors, each of which comprises a complex array of organizations, policies, and personalities. A typical partnership involves a college or university civic engagement staff member, a faculty member, one or more undergraduate and/or graduate students, one or more staff members from a community organization and, either directly or indirectly, the constituency whom that organization serves. These individuals may embody myriad differences such as age, life experience, education, employment history, race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual identity, physical ability, language, religion, politics, citizenship status, and so forth. How can such differences be navigated so that authentic and life-giving relationships are forged in their midst? Much depends on how the partners conceive of themselves and of the other(s) with whom they will connect.

If we take Jewish philosopher Martin Buber ([1937] 2010) seriously, we will aspire to establish I-You rather than I-It partnerships. Instead of seeing the other as an "it"—the object of our will; the means to an end; the recipient of our benevolence, curiosity, guilt, activism, or entrepreneurial zeal—we can open ourselves to the realization that the other is, in fact, also a subject: the author of his or her own story and

the bearer of a complex host of intentions, experiences, strengths, desires, needs, vulnerabilities, and possibilities. To share work with such a one is to be a partner. To commit and apply oneself to that shared work over time is to participate in a partnership. Differences do not fall away in partnerships; but instead of being sources of division, domination, or diminution, they function as points of encounter and differentiated strength. Thus, when prospective partners come together for shared work, they intentionally look for the assets that each member brings, and they develop strategies and programs or projects rooted in those assets. Where an I-It orientation produces instrumentalist, asymmetrical relationships, an I-You orientation fosters genuine recognition of each other and, ideally, reciprocal, mutually transformative relationships.

One of the most important things we can do to develop and sustain authentic partnerships across differences, then, is to contest dominant narratives and practices of social value and hierarchy by cultivating I-You relationships. This cultivation can take many forms—for example, asset mapping, in which the experiences, strengths, and wisdom of one's partner are identified and acknowledged as valuable; privilege walks or circles, in which unearned advantages or unseen expertise are surfaced and reflected upon; storytelling and deep listening; meditation and mindfulness exercises; journaling and reflection activities. While some practices may take place only occasionally, others can be folded into weekly class assignments, monthly meetings, or even daily routines.

An important precondition of I-You relationships between campus and community members is cultural competence—basic knowledge of the historical and cultural context of one's prospective partner. Such competence can develop organically over time,



Bates Bonner Leader Mary Osborne, a volunteer for the Somali Bantu Community Association of Maine, tutors a youth at the Lewiston Public Library. (Photo by Phyllis Graber Jensen/Bates College)

but opportunities to build it can also be intentionally front-loaded so that students and faculty can be as knowledgeable and thoughtful as possible in their initial encounters with prospective partners. At Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, where a growing minority of residents are recent immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers from various parts of Africa, opportunities to develop cultural competence include presentations about (and sometimes by members of) the local community as part of new faculty, staff, and student orientations; facilitated walks for all new students through the city's downtown; readings, films, community speakers, and/or cultural competence trainings as part of community-engaged learning courses and civic leadership programs; and on-campus and/or site-based orientations for community work-study students and volunteers. For those wishing to establish partnerships across significant differences, activities such as these lay a foundation for understanding and self-awareness that can be built upon

through continued study, ongoing reflection, conversation, and deep listening.

Deep Listening

Civic engagement is usually cast in activist terms, but authentic partnership requires receptivity—attentiveness to the distinct experience and embodied specificity of the other, an openness to being moved and even changed by the other. According to Jay McDaniel, philosopher and theologian at Hendrix College, an essential ingredient of authentic relationships is "deep listening," which occurs when we listen to others "on their own terms and for their own sakes ... without trying to change them according to preconceived purposes" (2006, 26–27). When it comes to the cultivation of effective campus-community partnerships, such listening is both vitally important and surprisingly difficult, not only for students but also for faculty and staff. For those who are accustomed to being heard or attended to by others, it is especially important

to create institutional structures and practices that support deep listening to community partners. Mechanisms for such listening might take the form of community advisory groups or boards, focus groups, listening circles, community partner surveys, and community institutional review boards or community representation on the college or university review board.

At Bates, we find that some of the deepest listening and relationship-building across difference happens not only in formal structures like these, but also as faculty, staff, and students simply participate as fellow citizens in the quotidian realities of off-campus community life. For students, this has included becoming active fans of the

researching, and collaborating, campus-community partnerships have the best chance to grow.

Sometimes, deep listening can be disconcerting. When community partners feel at ease to speak the truth, confident that doing so will not jeopardize their relationship with the college or university, their truth can be hard to hear. Earlier this year, an encounter with a valued partner that began as a friendly chat turned into a long exchange that exposed a significant blind spot in my thinking about immigrant youth development in our community. That conversation inspired our staff to take a fresh look at our assumptions and practices and to develop new priorities. Formal assessment mechanisms can

a reevaluation of assumptions and norms that can be both unsettling and emancipatory. Even at a small, collegial institution like Bates, community-engaged courses often require students to team up with fellow students with whom they ostensibly have little in common. Because their shared work will have real-world impacts, students are especially motivated to figure out how to collaborate effectively. A case in point is the environmental studies major, where seniors in a required semester-long capstone course work together in small teams to complete a range of community-engaged research projects for real-world partners. Among this year's projects, one team researched dam relicensing provisions and related water recreation opportunities for the city of Auburn, another worked with a grassroots citizens' group to explore the feasibility of creating a community kitchen in a downtown mill, and another partnered with a local farm to address waste and recycling challenges. In each case, students had to navigate not only differences among themselves, but also those between themselves and their community partners.

Collective work across differences is rarely easy, but the growth it propels can be impressive. An analysis of the nearly two hundred anonymous evaluations completed by Bates students who took at least one community-engaged learning course last semester showed that after oral communication, the skills or capacities most often enhanced by publicly engaged academic work were collaboration, self-awareness, problem-solving, cross-cultural understanding, and empathy. Reflecting on her thirty-hour experience in a special education classroom, one student wrote, "We need to expose Bates to the non-neurotypical world. This program is so *crucial* to our community's understanding of difference." A student from a history course that included a community-engaged

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local high school soccer team, some of whose team members began playing together as kids in a Kenyan refugee camp; joining a grassroots affordable housing initiative; and choosing a downtown park over the campus quad for afternoon study sessions or friendly games of Frisbee. For faculty, staff, and a growing minority of recent graduates, it means choosing to live in or near the city of Lewiston, where the majority of the college's community-engaged work takes place, and becoming full participants not only in the growing arts and cultural scene but also in efforts to combat poverty, racism, Islamophobia, addiction, and other social challenges. When an institution's students, faculty, and staff tether their own fates and the fates of their families and neighborhoods to the fates of the community partners with whom they are volunteering,

also invite deep listening. While surveys of community partners typically elicit plenty of praise for the college or university, they can also articulate constructive criticism. In recent surveys partners applauded the "thoughtful approach to making sure that students build the organization as well as learn new skills," and the "open and honest communication" that has enabled a "long-standing and cherished partnership," but they also voiced a desire for improved tutor training and "more direct communication with faculty." Within a context of mutual respect and reciprocity, such feedback offers significant opportunities to reevaluate practices and fortify partnerships.

Students, too, are challenged by community-engaged work to listen deeply to both self and other. Working across differences frequently prompts

project with immigrant youth wrote, "Being able to share insights about the same topic with people who come from such a different background put things into perspective for me, not just as a Bates student but as a human being in general." Still another student from a different class reflected, "The most valuable takeaway from my community-engaged experience was a growth of my own self-awareness and a greater love and understanding of the wider community."

Layers of Connection

Once a partnership and the relationship at its heart have been established, cultivated, and fortified by practices of deep listening, what is the secret to sustaining mutually transformative collective work over the long term and across differences, even as the individuals involved in particular initiatives may change? At Bates, we have found that there are two key ingredients. First, sustained partnerships demand stubborn commitment. Not unlike a longstanding marriage, a connection maintained over the long haul is often less a matter of sentiment than of will. When commitment to the well-being of the other is certain and steadfast, partnerships can weather change, allow for valuable risk-taking, and stand the test of time.

The other key to sustained collective work is not attitudinal, but programmatic. Community partners need, and often struggle to get, connections that are reliable throughout the year, from year to year. Consistent connections are hard to establish for understandable reasons: for example, student schedules change each semester, courses may be offered only once a year or once a decade, students may go abroad or graduate, the college calendar may not align with the K-12 calendar, or a dedicated faculty member may not get tenure or may take a research leave. Whatever the reasons, community partners can

easily find themselves without the kind of sustained and reliable higher education relationships they want and need. Sometimes well-intended but inconsistent partnership is more trouble than it's worth. The solution is to develop layers of connection between campus and community—what engineers might call redundancy structures or what health services professionals know as a continuum of care—so that partnership gaps can be avoided or reduced.

At Bates, this looks like a nimble network of curricular and cocurricular efforts organized to ensure sustainable partnerships and projects over time. At the core of the network are more than fifty community-engaged learning courses offered in any given year that connect students to projects identified as important by the off-campus community. Radiating out from this core are numerous strands of additional or redundant connection. Some of these strands are constituted by faculty members like sociologist Emily Kane, who offers a series of courses that successively build students' capacity for partnering with a local organization to understand and address the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and the health and social problems of adults. Another strand is the Short Term Action/Research Team, a small team of students with diverse research skills who spend the five-week spring term working on community projects that could not be addressed during the rest of the school year. Still other strands are constituted by participants in our multitiered civic leadership and outreach programming, including Bonner Leaders, who participate in sustained community work and reflection during their four-year college experience; Community Outreach Fellows, who recruit and train fellow students for connection with particular community organizations or projects; Bates Civic Action Team members, first-year students who volunteer throughout

the year in local literacy programs; and students in the Community Work Study program, who receive federal or college funds for their work in off-campus nonprofit organizations. Additional network strands include participants in our summer fellowship and work study programs, who help maintain campus-community partnerships when school is not in session; community liaisons who mobilize student clubs and athletic teams for both one-time and longer-term volunteer projects; and residence life student staff, who build participation in the off-campus community into every student's experience. With these interconnected strands, Bates attempts to weave a web of sustained support for our community partners.

Sustaining partnerships and collective action over time and across differences is important and rewarding but also challenging work. While a coordinated network featuring layers of connection and built-in redundancies is one way to approach this challenge, the key to any model's success is the care with which it establishes and continuously stewards I-You relationships that are fueled by practices of deep listening and an attitude of stubborn commitment to the well-being of the other. As I reflect on my own experiences over the past two decades, I have to admit that the multitudinous community-engaged projects, courses, and initiatives with which I have been connected are a bit of a blur. However, the relationships undergirding those efforts come easily into focus. In community-engaged work as in life itself, it is ultimately the quality of our relationships that defines us. ☐

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