

Involving the Business Sector in Community/University Partnerships

By Marian Darlington-Hope, Ph.D.

Abstract

With support of the Council of Independent Colleges' Implementing Urban Missions program, Lesley University's School of Management (SOM) has developed relationships with corporations that are committed to making a difference in the communities where they have a presence. Our experience has shown that corporations that wish to support their local community are not limited to philanthropic initiatives as their primary instrument for community outreach; rather, greater benefits can be achieved through collaborative partnerships bringing together businesses, city government, human services agencies and community residents. This article describes the partnerships that Lesley's SOM, the local business community, and community-based organizations have developed in support of the Area 4 neighborhood in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The business community has taken leadership in bringing national attention to many of society's social problems in the areas of health, domestic violence, and drug abuse. Through sponsorships, public campaigns, and cause-related marketing, it is estimated that the corporate sector now spends approximately \$9 billion a year on social problems. At the local level, businesses have taken the traditional philanthropic approaches to support neighborhood efforts and further integrate these efforts into the company's mission, business, and strategic planning, benefiting both business and community. Communities, however, are not always quick to embrace businesses' initiatives to become more involved.

This article examines the efforts of Lesley University's School of Management (SOM) to bring together representatives from different sectors—city government, human services organizations, neighborhood residents, and business—to work in partnership with the Area 4 neighborhood in Cambridge, Massachusetts, through a variety of initiatives, including CAMP (Community Agency Management Partnership). CAMP is an initiative that brings together city government, corporations, non-profit organizations, and higher education to address neighborhood development issues. It functions as a model of collaboration by providing support for leadership development in community-based agencies, and increasing capacity for and furnishing opportunities for management students to apply management skills in community-based organizations.

Area 4, located less than a mile from Lesley's main campus, is a multicultural community of 7,500 residents. Historically, Area 4 has been an immigrant neighborhood and was once the city's seat of government. In this neighborhood, which contains the largest amount of public housing in the city, English is the second language for ap-

proximately 60 percent of the residents. The partners jointly agreed to focus on Area 4 because it is an area within Cambridge with a number of community agencies serving the needs of residents. It is going through considerable change, and our corporate partners have invested in this area and would like to increase the effectiveness of these investments.

The initial steps of this work included the identification of vital issues that face the neighborhood, the development of an asset map that identifies the resources/agents that are available to address the issues, and an exploration of the role of our partnership in addressing these issues. The partners also responded to a request from the Mayor's Office to include in these conversations Cambridge-based companies that did not yet make a substantial investment in the community, with the goal of broadening corporate participation in the effort.

The School of Management is one of six schools at Lesley, a university that specializes in education, the arts, human services, and management. In recent years, Lesley University has grown into a multi-site institution of higher education with numerous academic programs offered online, on site at campuses in Cambridge and Boston, off site in the greater Boston area, and in 15 other states. In spite of its regional and national expansion, Lesley is committed to fostering a strong local presence in the City of Cambridge. Building on the history of strong cooperation between the University and the City of Cambridge, CAMP was able to establish an advisory board, which we refer to as the Working Group, of Area 4 businesses, residents, human services professionals, and government representatives to foster community leadership and neighborhood development.

Building a Foundation for Collaboration

The Working Group was established as a vehicle to allow the community to reach out to Lesley and to help shape and direct the way SOM and the University could more effectively partner with community organizations. Unlike traditional advisory groups that come together to give advice and direction, the Working Group was expected to work together in a joint effort to brainstorm new ideas and projects that could be implemented in the Area 4 community. One of the initial activities of the Working Group was to identify the factors that promote collaboration among partners. One of the unanticipated areas of assistance that emerged as a result of the cooperative spirit of the Working Group included support from the biotechnology company Genzyme Corporation, for the Margaret Fuller House, a Settlement House in Cambridge, to offer a two-week science and technology program for neighborhood children.

In general, the challenge in creating such working groups is that individuals expect to be asked to take on a specific role when they are invited to join the partnership; they are rarely asked to participate in creating a new effort accompanied by new forms of building a relationship. The distinction that marks a truly collaborative group is that the emphasis is on the group *working together without predetermined roles*. For the CAMP project, one benefit of this approach was that, although individual roles were often unclear, the openness allowed Working Group members to contribute in ways they had

not even thought about before accepting the invitation to participate.

Naming the project and subsequently writing a CAMP Mission Statement were important steps in enabling the partners (corporations, community organizations, student participants, the School of Management, and Lesley as a whole) to take ownership of the initiative. The Working Group undertook a strategic planning process to re-frame the original goals and to determine objectives for each goal. The coordinated effort of group members working together to define these specific goals and objectives paved the way for CAMP's first and most successful project, a series of workshops entitled "Leadership Development for Nonprofit Managers."

Nonprofit organizations are increasingly under pressure to replicate the operations of their corporate counterparts. Human services professionals criticize the corporate focus on bottom line concerns, arguing that such emphasis either limits or diverts essential services away from those who need them (Herlinger 1996). Within the Working Group, discussions about effectiveness, accountability, and performance emerged as opportunities to ask and answer larger questions about management, and to share distinctions members viewed as relevant. Working Group participants continued to struggle through their diverse views. As a result, they collectively produced a series of workshops and consultations that addressed evaluation, marketing, community relations, and fundraising as key management concerns.

Emerging Opportunities

As the Working Group continued to meet during the next 18 months, it became apparent that new areas for university/business collaboration were emerging. Early in the project business members articulated the difficulty many businesses experience when attempting to forge a partnership with a neighborhood organization. They expressed the need for tools to assess the readiness and skills necessary for effective community partnerships. Following the Working Group's recognition of this need, the director of SOM's Information Technology program met with the Cambridge Funders Group, an affiliation of businesses and small foundations that regularly fund agencies in the City of Cambridge. Similar to the needs of businesses, this coalition of funders from the private sector was also disappointed with traditional evaluation measures, and was interested in exploring an evaluation framework that would build in indicators of accountability that were acceptable to all partners. As a result of this meeting, SOM faculty agreed to help the Cambridge Funders group produce guidelines that would encourage funders and community organizations to jointly develop evaluation criteria.

Meeting Educational Goals

Lesley University is committed to service learning as a strategy for preparing students for active, effective citizenship. The School of Management seeks to graduate managers who know that it is possible for companies "to do well while doing good." In SOM programs, students learn both how to make the best use of a company's human assets and how to make sure that these human assets retain their value in the future. In other

words, we teach students how to take care of a company's most valuable asset—its people. This emphasis and teaching philosophy reflects Lesley University's institutional commitment to help develop communities that nurture and sustain people. In addition, SOM's commitment to promoting advocacy for good corporate citizenship is in tune with the commitment of the College to graduate good citizens.

The *Implementing Urban Missions* program gave us opportunities to create service learning opportunities for our students. We knew that about one-third of our students were interested in doing some of their course work in community settings. However, we currently lack the infrastructure to support our commitment and their interests. Through the grant project, faculty worked with a few SOM students in order to better understand how to place working adults in service learning experiences. In one situation, a student and the *Implementing Urban Missions* project director assisted Neighbors for a Better Community (NBC) with an analysis and presentation of focus group data that NBC had gathered from community residents. The student presented the data to the Working Group and community leaders. Based on the feedback, modifications were made in preparation for a community meeting, where the final analysis was presented.

Within the School of Management, the ultimate use of the learning emerging from our involvement in the grant program is manifested in the education programs we offer our students. A graduate course in business ethics, for example, was recently approved. In addition, the undergraduate faculty are revising "Business and Society," a required course for undergraduate management students. Faculty members developing new courses are working with corporate members of the Working Group in shaping these offerings. The CAMP program has also had an influence on our curriculum in the Institutional Development and Fundraising Program intended for managers of nonprofit organizations. The "Managing Nonprofit Organizations" course was completely revised. The course now includes greater emphasis on accountability, collaboration, and the use of tools for improving agency practice. The experience we have had in redesigning these and other courses serve as a model for future work and will help to ensure that our programs remain connected to the real needs of communities and companies with whom we work.

Lessons Learned

Three key lessons can be taken from Lesley University's experience. While the learning outlined here is not limited to partnerships that only involve businesses, greater focus on the needs of groups—especially businesses—who join partnerships with limited exposure to broader community involvement will help to ensure that all participants have an equal opportunity to participate fully.

1. Participants Need Shared Experiences. Although the participating business representatives were familiar with the neighborhood through their companies' foundations and their participation on community boards, they had little understanding of the community as a whole. Working Group members sometimes engaged in "talk about the

community” in ways that showed a lack of understanding and experience. While this should have been done at the outset of the CAMP project, the Working Group spent a day visiting the Area 4 neighborhood and eating lunch in the local health center. The experience brought about a common language that led to more effective communication among Working Group members as individuals. Unlike community agency directors or city department officials, business representatives are not likely to be involved in a range of community activities, so they are often more limited in their appreciation of neighborhood complexities.

2. Participants Need to Articulate Role and Boundary Limitations. The openness of the Working Group produced the greatest result in terms of the quality and scope of the management workshops that were developed and offered in the community. It also formed the basis for changes made to the School of Management’s nonprofit management curriculum and offered a rich experience to Lesley students who completed their required internships by participating in CAMP as members of the Working Group. Working Group members struggled with limited autonomy (and self-interests) to bring to fruition small projects that required approval from their respective institutions. While some of the barriers of funding guidelines and jurisdiction could be overcome with great effort, the financial benefit to the community was too insignificant and the required effort threatened to erode the Working Group’s energy and goodwill. The Working Group became so engulfed in its own efforts that it failed to assess its ability to carry out projects without outside institutional support.

3. Partners Need to Build a Foundation for Sustainability. The opportunity to think about the community in new ways fostered a desire among Working Group members to think about and try a different approach to community involvement. This approach emphasized dialogue and discussion as a precursor to building and producing activities. The pressures to deliver products and workshops (institutional pressure) and develop strong relationships were often at odds. This tension stemmed both from the project’s time limitations and from the Working Group members’ respective institutional demands for results. In brief, laying the groundwork for the CAMP partnerships and maintaining these connections has been both arduous and rewarding.

Conclusion

Time, cooperation, and mutual respect continue to serve as the basic principles that guide the work of the School of Management’s partnerships. The strength of the relationships developed among the partners is best shown in the informal contacts that they have outside of our regular meetings. The partners think of each other when they have an idea they know would mean something to another member of the group. The partnerships formed with local businesses have helped to illuminate the many ways in which corporations can support their community, integrating financial support with the development of personal relationships that transcend the typical corporate model of philanthropy. While financial support is needed, the stability and quality of the relationships formed are based on a shared understanding of community needs and interests. The Working Group created a forum for much needed discussion and helped the

partners understand that the success of our collaboration was dependent upon the unique strengths of all partners.

Reference

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