

The Power and Difficulty of University-Community Collaboration

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I was delighted to be asked to provide commentary on these four articles. Because I was the discussant on the 1994 Society for Research on Adolescence symposium at which earlier versions of two of these articles were presented, I knew in advance how important the articles were likely to be. They were even broader and more promising than I had anticipated. The collaborative efforts described represent years of work on the part of many actors at each institution. They stand as examples that this type of collaborative work can be done, and can be done in a variety of ways to meet local needs. Having tried to put together collaborative projects on a much smaller scale, I marveled at the successes reported in each article.

But the fact that what they are doing is difficult does not, in and of itself, make the work noteworthy. The fact that what they are advocating is scientifically and politically the "right" thing to do does. As is especially evident in McHale et al. (this issue) and Weinberg and Erickson (this issue), these projects provide a model of the kinds of collaborative research-practice programs that are needed to move our understanding of human development to the next level (see also Lerner et al., 1994, for other examples). It is time that we moved out of our laboratories and studied human development in the full complexity of real world problems. It is time we listened to the wisdom of practitioners in shaping our research questions and designs. And, as Bronfenbrenner (1974) chided us several years ago, it

is time that we tested our understanding of human development by trying to change those forces that we believe undermine successful development.

In addition, it is time we tried to understand more fully the role of context as a moderating effect. McHale et al. (this issue) and Small (this issue) provide excellent examples of how social scientists are forced to take context into account in explaining the results of collaborative community-based studies. Such work will force us to refine our theoretical understanding of the links between context and human development.

Finally, as is pointed out so well in both Weinberg and Erickson (this issue) and Fitzgerald, Abrams, Church, Votruba, and Imig (this issue), it is time we adopted a problem-focused orientation rather than a discipline-focused orientation to the study of human development. The need for an interdisciplinary approach is evident whenever one moves into a collaborative study with communities focused on real-world concerns. We need to bring this perspective back into the academy by creating new interdisciplinary training programs that also involve internships in community settings. Several examples of such efforts are provided in these articles, particularly by Weinberg and Erickson (this issue) and Fitzgerald et al. (this issue).

Equally important, these projects provide a model of the kinds of collaborative efforts that are needed to salvage the image of public higher education (Boyer, 1994; Walshok, 1995). As we approach the 21st century, public universities across the country are being asked to reevaluate their mission. Particular attention is being focused on their relationship with the communities and states in which they reside. Both citizens and legislators are frustrated with the cost of public higher education, especially in light of the growing concern about the appropriate use of public funds. Citizens are asking university presidents to justify both their current budgets and their requests for increasing public funds in terms of what the university is providing in return for the citizens' investments. Education for an elite portion of the state's young people is no longer a sufficient reply, and it is not the abstract concept of the indirect economic value to a state of having a leading research center within its boundaries. Public universities are in grave danger of losing support from the citizens in their states unless they can provide more visible and meaningful evidence of their commitment to the state's well-being (Boyer, 1990, 1994). All four articles provide excellent exemplars of just how this can be done.

The authors of these articles also discuss how difficult such work is and how the academy must change its reward criteria if such work is to be sustained. Universities must demonstrate their will to achieve and sustain such collaborative programs to the members of the faculty as well as to their communities. Until the faculty are convinced that their university values

these kinds of activities enough to reward them for their efforts with tenure and promotion, it is unlikely that very many faculty will commit much of their time and energy to collaborative, community-based programs (Votruba, 1992).

Finally, these articles provide examples of how we can work to salvage the impact of social science. Social scientists have traditionally defined their collaborative role in terms of providing information. But as these authors point out, we often do not do a very good job at even this task for two reasons: First, we have not laid the groundwork necessary to make communities and policymakers receptive to the information we might want to communicate. One needs to build credibility. Unfortunately, the lack of both our credibility and our perceived relevance is painfully evident in the current political debates regarding the value of social science in general as well as the value of various policies presumably based on social science data and theory. Even worse is our failure to convince the public and the politicians that social science provides a method for finding the facts one needs to evaluate both the effectiveness of current policy and the likely consequences of policy changes. I have been struck repeatedly over the last year by the lack of awareness that issues like the role of welfare in people's lives can even be assessed using "facts" derived from "scientifically sound" research studies (for examples, see Bane & Ellwood, 1994).

This insensitivity to sound evidence is particularly true in the discussions regarding policy for adolescents (cf. Lerner, 1995). Because they often focus on "sellable stories," newspapers in this country have seriously distorted the public's perceptions of the extent of adolescents' involvement in serious crime, particularly the involvement of minority and immigrant adolescents. Consequently, stereotypic notions regarding the behavior of, and the dangers associated with, adolescents abound. Facts are rarely introduced into the policy discussions. Information derived from good social science studies using sound scientific methods is simply not considered relevant to the decisions being made. And, as a result, we have seen an increase in the number of heavily punitive policies against adolescents being put into place in communities across the country with little scientific basis for predicting that these policies will ameliorate the situations being considered (Lerner, Bogenschneider, Wilcox, Fitzsimmons, & Hoopfer, 1995).

The projects described in these articles provide a model for how we could better build the trust needed for the public to turn to us for information in public policy debates. The techniques described by Small (this issue) are particularly useful in this effort. By working directly with communities to help them frame their concerns about their adolescents in terms of data-related questions and then to help them gather the kinds of information they need about their own situation, Small and his colleagues are able to achieve

multiple goals—not the least of which is building a base of trust and providing the citizens with a good example of how social science methods can be important public policy tools.

In addition, however, the techniques described by Small (this issue) can also be used to help combat the prevailing negative stereotypes that the public has of adolescents at the community level. Although he did not describe including measures of positive characteristics of youth in the community, the techniques he did describe could include such indicators along with comparable indicators from other communities, particularly communities with high proportions of minority and immigrant youth. By so doing, people in a variety of communities might develop a more accurate image of both the problems and the strengths of adolescents in their state (cf. Pittman & Zeldin, 1994). The techniques described by McHale et al. (this issue) can play a similar role. The policy seminars they describe are a good example of how we can both help politicians understand the needs of adolescents and counteract their often overly negative stereotypes and faulty explanatory systems. Such efforts could increase the probability of better social programs for adolescents at the state and community levels.

Second, as pointed out so eloquently by Weinberg and Erickson (this issue), we are not organized well enough to provide the appropriate information when we are asked for it. Two limitations are clearly discussed in these articles. We often have not asked the relevant questions in the settings needing the information and we are often so poorly organized and disconnected from one another that we have difficulty finding the necessary information. This latter limitation becomes quite evident when a university decides to create the types of systematic programs described in these articles, particularly Weinberg and Erickson (this issue) and Fitzgerald et al. (this issue). Weinberg and Erickson (this issue) illustrate nicely two critical points: First, they make clear how little organization existed at the start of their effort to create a systematic, integrated program. Second, they document the powerful set of synergistic activities that can be created when there is a strong commitment to getting the university community organized around implementing and sustaining such a program.

Before closing discussion it is important to note that the four institutions described in these articles share one common institutional characteristic: All are land-grant universities with active agricultural extension programs. I am neither an historian nor someone familiar with the number of other institutions that have tried to create and sustain such programs. Consequently, I do not know whether land-grant universities have a better track record than other types of public and private universities. They certainly do have a history of success at putting together similar type programs in

the field of agriculture science (Bonnen, 1986, 1992). I do know how difficult it is to create such programs for the developmental sciences. In fact, we have not been able to create and sustain such a program at my university despite repeated initiation efforts on the part of several different faculty members. Perhaps the time is right to try again. Certainly, the presidents of many different types of public universities are now acknowledging the importance of better university-community relationships (Bok, 1990). It would be very useful to know if and how having an active extension program facilitates this kind of effort. The authors of each article make clear just how difficult creating such programs is. Is it going to be more difficult without the infrastructure of an existing extension program? And what is needed in its place? Answers to these questions could help the rest of us move in the directions outlined in each of these four excellent articles.

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