Building Partnerships for SERVICE-LEARNING

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Chapter Two

Developing a Theory and Practice of Campus-Community Partnerships

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In this chapter, we argue that colleges and universities that are deeply committed to service-learning should enter into authentic, sustained partnerships with the communities in which they are located. The decision to enter into such a partnership is critical, calling into question the very identity of both the institution and the community. In an authentic partnership, the complex dynamics of the relationship mean that the partners face the continuing possibility of being transformed through their relationship with one another in large and small ways.

Our argument asks institutions of higher education to rethink the traditional campus-community equation. As cultural geographer Lakshman Yappa has pointed out, colleges and universities engaged in community work typically “view the community as the domain of the problem, and the college as the domain of the solution” (Yappa, 1999). In our view, campus and community partners must come to understand that they are part of the same community, with common problems, common interests, common resources, and a common capacity to shape one another in profound ways.

We begin this chapter by presenting our case for creating and sustaining campus-community partnerships. We propose a framework for partnerships that distinguishes between transactional and transformational relationships, together with a suggestion of a typology for understanding the differing levels of depth and complexity of partnerships. We then discuss some of the challenges to developing authentic partnerships and how to address them.

A Case for Creating and Sustaining Campus-Community Partnerships

It is useful to approach service-learning, we think, by recognizing that it emerged out of a crisis of community experienced in industrializing societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Broadly understood, this crisis has led to a continuing perception that the social fabric is unraveling and that the lived experience of individual persons has become more privatized, compartmentalized, and fragmented over time. John Dewey (1927), a public philosopher and educational theorist at work in the first half of the twentieth century, captured this sense of isolation and fragmentation in an apt metaphor in The Public and Its Problems: “The planets in a constellation would form a community if they were aware of the connections of the activities of each with those of the others and could use this knowledge to direct behavior” (p. 54).

Community service initially emerged as one experimental response to that crisis in the work of Dewey (1927, 1938), Jane Addams (1899), and Paul Hanna (1936), among others. It was the growing concern that young people were coming into adulthood unaware of what connected them to the public, unaware of what connected their individual activities to a community, that drove the concept of what Hanna called “education as community improvement” (p. 41).

In the intervening seventy years, “education for community improvement” has become “community service” and “community service” has become “service-learning,” (Sigmon and Ramsey, 1967; Morton and Saltmarsh, 1997). The informing animus has consistently been the expectation that youth and community participants will learn from their joint activities how their interests and actions are connected, how their separate interests and actions indirectly affect one another, and how to increase their capacity to use this knowledge for the betterment of their shared physical and social space. The community emerges more clearly as a partner as we
identify, describe, think about, and seek to respond to the direct and indirect impacts institutions of higher education and communities have on one another. This, we argue, is a useful way of describing the underlying philosophical and strategic objectives that drive service-learning and, thus, campus-community partnerships.

If you ask community leaders in the cities, towns, and neighborhoods that surround a campus whether the institution is a good neighbor, you will likely hear equivocal responses. Residents will likely complain about excess noise and other disruptive behaviors of the students living among them. Families with lower incomes might resent the fact that student renters drive up housing costs. The parents of small children might complain about the expansion of the campus into areas previously occupied by public parks. Local elected officials often accuse institutions of receiving overly generous tax breaks while placing significant demands on local public resources, including water, sewage, waste, and fire and police protection. The owner of a local high-tech firm might lament that graduates applying for jobs lack the necessary skills. Leaders of social service organizations might tell of their relationships with faculty members who disappeared when the research funds dried up. Community residents might wonder what the university's researchers found out about their community after asking so many questions and conducting surveys over the years. In all of these responses, the community describes the university as if it were “in” the community but not “of” it.

Community residents and leaders generally believe that such institutions direct their interests and resources to matters far beyond the local community. They note, for example, that institutional participation in “urban revitalization” is often a thin veneer for the “gentrification” of a neighborhood, displacing long-time residents rather than improving their lot. And they wonder why institutions are not more broadly and deeply engaged in enhancement of public education, assistance to immigrants settling in their shadows, or building healthy communities.

It can be hard for academic leaders to reconcile such criticism with the often considerable efforts their institution devotes to community outreach. These efforts may include credit-bearing and noncredit academic programs designed to meet community needs, extension services, faculty membership on community boards, public invitations to events, and support of student community service and service-learning.

The differing ways in which campus and community perceive their relationship goes to the heart of higher education's construction of itself, in Yapp's terms, as the “domain of the solution” and the community as “the domain of the problem” (1999). Walzer (1984) proffers that members of a community have a right to make claims on the goods and services of that community and that balancing these claims is called justice. A community is arguably under no obligation to share its resources with others outside it. When nonmembers make claims on those goods and services, a community's decision about whether to share them is a decision about charity, a sharing of its surplus. The essential question, then, is where one draws the boundaries of membership. The neighbors of colleges and universities, we believe, are asking for justice and receiving charity (Morton, 1997). That is, they perceive colleges and universities as being in, rather than apart from, their communities, even as the institutions view themselves as separate and distinct from the community. From the community perspective, campus and community are one domain, and this shared identity gives the community a right to influence the allocation of higher education’s goods and resources, particularly those that directly affect their quality of life. Institutions must not enjoy the community’s resources while holding back on their own.

Toward a Theory of Partnership Development

Much has been written of late proposing standards or benchmarks of good partnerships between higher education and the community (see Chapter One). To address the myriad issues and considerations that surface in campus-community partnerships, we offer a theoretical perspective as a lens through which to examine the developmental practice of relationship building. What we provide here is a way of examining partnerships as they move from transactional to transformative relationships. Adapting theories that have been used to examine leadership (Burns, 1978), we will show how partnerships have the ability not to just get things done but to transform individuals, organizations, institutions, and communities.
The differences between transactional and transformative relationships are shown in Exhibit 2.1. Transactional relationships are those that are instrumental, designed to complete a task with no greater plan or promise. The parties engage together because each has something the other finds useful. The relationship works within existing structures. No change is expected, and little disruption occurs in the normal work of the organization and its players. Individuals leave the transaction satisfied with the outcome but not much changed. Commitments are limited and, perhaps, project-based. On the other hand, transformative relationships proceed with less definition, with an openness to unanticipated developments, with a deeper and more sustained commitment. Individuals question or reflect deeply on their institutions and organizations and examine how they do business, how they define and understand problems. Here, there is an expectation that things may change, that the order may be disturbed, and that new relationships, identities, and values may emerge.

Using this framework, we suggest that most of our service-learning and community service efforts can be characterized as transactional. Our commitments are limited, and we work within existing frameworks. Partners bring needs to the table and engage in mutually rewarding exchanges, although some would suggest that students benefit more from service than do community agencies or clients (Gelman, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, and Connors, 1998; Ferrari and Worrall, 2000). Our identities as members of institutions survive intact. For example, although our students have been involved in after-school programming in a nearby school, our interest in that community terminates with the end of the semester. We may not feel that we are members of that community, nor will that community claim us as a member. Our community service and service-learning projects may be well managed, we can track and document service hours, and we can guarantee agencies that students will appear semester after semester for assignments. This is not to say that these transactional relationships are not important, but we can expect that little or nothing will be changed by them over time.

Too often, then, we think of campus-community partnerships as linear, transactional relationships between or among representatives of institutional interests. Community partners are interested in serving their clients and advocating for their cause; higher education institutions are interested in learning. From our experience, we know that campus-community partnerships have the potential to be far more. They can be dynamic, joint creations in which all the people involved create knowledge, transact power, mix personal and institutional interests, and make meaning. We also know from experience and observation that it is difficult to predict how partnerships will develop. When viewed as transformational relationships, however, this unpredictability is perceived as exciting, full of promise, and worthy of nurturing. In this sense, relationships have the potential and complexity of human beings.
A Preliminary Typology

With this framework in mind, we think it useful to advance a concept of partnership development, and so propose the following as a point of departure for further conversation about campus-community partnerships. We offer this concept tentatively, as the literature of service-learning has paid little explicit attention to the development of campus-community partnerships over time or to how the relationships of the partners change and why. Although this typology does represent our experience, we believe that it needs to be tested against the experience of many partnerships, described in more robust ways, and likely modified before it can be accepted as generally accurate or used for long-term planning.

Figure 2.1 indicates that campus-community partnerships can be sustained over time (the horizontal axis) and described by their complexity and integrity (the vertical axis). It suggests, too, that campus-community partnerships are not developmental in any linear way, but are perhaps better understood as accretions that are layered over time. In addition, it implies that the increasing depth and complexity of a partnership does not bring a halt to simpler, less complex service activities. Instead, this figure calls us to critically differentiate the types of service we are doing, to accurately project and assess their learning potential and outcomes, and to make deliberate choices as we move from transactional to transformational relationships, whether at the individual or institutional levels.

One-time events and projects, such as cleanups, painting, and fundraisers, are sometimes useful to community partners. In the short run, one-time events are typically a drain on an organization’s resources, requiring more effort in planning and coordinating than is generated in return. On the other hand, they can also serve as a way of discovering potential for continuing to work together: identifying one another’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; highlighting potential leaders; and learning how missions and interests align. Before embarking on one-time events, it is important to discuss with the community agency whether the objectives are only short-term or if the possibility exists to create momentum for other, more sustained, work. It is unusual for one-time events to have any transformative element. They require part-

ners to reveal relatively little about themselves, the definition of the work to be done is seldom contested, and there is rarely any opportunity for the creation of new knowledge. Conflict and discord with “powerful others” is generally absent or minimized. As a result, the public dimensions of such events are typically celebratory and affirming of a common perspective rather than open, diverse, and contested. Accountability is circumscribed, and risks are kept to a minimum.

Service-learning programs based on short-term placements, typically of a semester’s duration, generally provide direct labor to a community partner sustained over a long enough period to justify the efforts associated with training and supporting volunteers. In addition, this type of partnership is likely to generate simple problems for the partners to solve, such as what to do when a volunteer fails to show up or how to handle the transition of a supervisory staff person. Much can be learned from how these problems are handled. However, it is important to note that managing placements of relatively short duration puts significant stress on the resources of both campus and community partners. Preparing and training students, designing and facilitating reflection on experience, supporting them, and developing and assessing the results of placement require time and resources. A one-semester commitment is generally just long enough to make use of these
resources worthwhile. Thus, the cost-benefit ratio of such relationships may enable the partners to sustain them, but it is unlikely that they will generate new resources or knowledge. Like one-time events, short-term placements make relatively few demands on the status quo of institutions. In this type of arrangement, faculty more often use the service experience to illustrate or affirm existing academic knowledge. Quite often, short-term placements position the faculty member and students as sympathetic but politically neutral observers of the public issues that affect the service site. Although there is some indication that students who serve at a site for two to five hours per week or for a total of thirty or more hours in a semester may reap educational benefits, such learning is not likely to be transformative (Eyler and Giles, 1999). At least the potential exists that the students’ curiosity to inquire further will be stimulated (Dewey, 1938). Accountability is limited by time, formally concluded with the end of each semester.

Ongoing placements and mutual dependence describe what happens when short-term placements are sustained over time, so that the costs of maintaining the campus-community partnership decrease without loss of benefit to the parties involved. Dependable resource commitments are made by both sides, a depth of understanding of the missions and interests of all parties is established, and the continuity of partnership often leads to deepening personal relationships between the principals responsible for brokering the relationship. It is likely that partners will begin to gain some understanding of how their respective institutions function around issues as mundane as calendars or as complex as priority setting or funding. Expectations for accountability begin to increase incrementally. The partners contend with the ways in which their interests and their perceptions of the “situation” that led to the partnership are similar and different, setting the stage for mutual learning and the creation of a shared definition of the work they are doing. And it is in this type of partnership that the partners will likely begin to appreciate the powerful others with whom they each contend, the various constituencies they each serve, and the ethical and existential dilemmas with which each of them grapples. All of this creates the potential for significant learning, as the partners describe their common experiences to one another, discuss what their experience means, and arrive at provisional conclusions that allow them to strategize, plan next steps, and develop their capacity to carry out those steps.

Faculty, students, and community partners join together in learning about their relationship so that the situation is experienced and interpreted with sufficient complexity to be engaging in its particulars and also representative of broader issues or arguments. As these relationships progress over time, claims of academic expertise may be challenged by the collective experience of students or community partners. Academic neutrality may be a more difficult stance to maintain as the partners learn to empathize with one another. Transformation becomes a possible, if not sought-after, outcome as the partners begin to challenge their initial assumption that the community is the domain of the problem and the campus the domain of the solution, and to examine the possibility that they share a common domain. This is a critical stage in the development of a partnership, as the partners may also retreat from this new understanding, choose to remain within conventional definitions of their roles, and resist changing the institutions of which they are a part. For example, partners working together on low-income housing may begin with the belief that the core problem is poverty: the absence of resources in a category of persons known collectively as the poor. Over time, they may come to understand that it is not a problem of poverty at all but rather a problem of wealth. A focus on fund-raising and “sweat equity” as ways to build houses (transferring economic resources from the domain of the solution to the domain of the problem) may expand to the consideration of ways in which powerful institutions (including colleges and community-based organizations) gather, secure, and control access to economic resources. In another, perhaps more common, example, a tutoring program that is organized by a partnership between a college and a middle or high school to improve literacy among adolescents may initially define success as improved test scores, a drop in absenteeism, and improved rates of graduation. Gradually, it may expand its perspective to ask how many of these students are applying to and being accepted at the college, or how many of these students are offered and accept meaningful opportunities to stay in or return to their community, slowing the steady drain of talent created by “up and out” strategies.
Core partnerships extend and deepen the energy and synergy of ongoing placements. The partners are able to empathize and accurately represent one another's interests. Their interests are likely to extend to understanding the extensive context in which each of them operates, and interpersonal relationships are often deepened. Significant risks can be taken as institutional relationships are tested. The objective of this type of partnership is mutual learning. This is what Freire (1981) described as learning that enables "people [to] develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; [and] come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p. 64). What distinguishes core partnerships is that this type of learning is one of the implicit or explicit objectives of the partnership.

As the partners come to believe that they share a common domain, that each contributes experience and knowledge, their relationship becomes based on interdependence rather than mutual dependence. The true test of their common learning is the capacity for action based on the learning. Knowledge is held to the test of whether it works in both campus and community arenas. Will the people who matter to our organizations believe and trust what we are telling them? Will they be willing to act on the knowledge generated? If not, how is it useful knowledge? What will compel them to action?

Transformative partnerships do not necessarily evolve naturally from any of the other types of partnerships. Rather, they are a matter of campus and community partners recognizing and inviting the possibility that their joint work is likely to transform them both. There is a mutual redefinition of the issues on which they are joining energy to work, an understanding that they are working out of a shared context and that they are interested in what transformation means for both individuals and institutions. Institutional power is engaged in their joint work, as a resource and as a challenge. At this level, institutional change is an explicit possibility, and as a result, the nature of the organizations emerges as a matter of significance.

We believe that truly transformative partnerships would not only transform individuals involved in that relationship but also extend their influence into other parts of the organizations and the community at large. For faculty members, we envision the development of expanded roles and the weakening of disciplinary boundaries as the campus confronts complex social issues that do not lend themselves to specialization. We see teaching transformed in a manner that moves not from teacher-controlled content units to those enriched with problem-centered and student-focused learning. For students, college would no longer be a place where they were filled up with facts forgotten as soon as the blue books were handed in, but rather a series of rich, active learning opportunities—experiences in service, citizenship, knowledge construction, and community building. Community members would increasingly look to higher education to mobilize resources, create social capital, and engage in work currently referred to as civic renewal. Although some may suggest that this vision flies in the face of economic realities and market pressures, we suggest that it reflects significant changes already in progress on many campuses that are transforming the ways students learn, the ways campuses engage with communities, and the ways in which faculty do their work.

Challenges to Developing Campus-Community Partnerships

As the previous sections show, our theory and typology of campus-community partnerships are based on learning about and from relationships and acting upon what is learned to improve the relationships and the shared public world in which they exist. However, although service-learning is fundamentally about relationships, even the use of the terms campus and community creates a dichotomy that suggests isolation. In fact, the very nature of higher education presents significant challenges to the development of campus-community partnerships and to their evolution toward the depths and complexity of transformative relationships.

The Loosely Coupled Nature of Colleges and Universities

It has been argued that it is very possible, and indeed very likely, that some domains of the university may be involved in excellent partnerships with the community while other relationships are foundering or nonexistent (Singleton, Hirsch, and Burack, 1999).
This is not simply a management deficit, a lack of planning, or a result of limited vision. More often, it is the result of the "loosely coupled" nature of higher education. A loosely coupled organization is one in which units are relatively autonomous and not dependent upon other parts of the organization to accomplish their work. A failure or lack of performance in one unit does not mean that other units will suffer the same fate. Loosely coupled organizations, in fact, have the advantage of being very adaptable to their environments. Members of the organization may be connected to multiple and divergent sources of information, stimulation, and networks and can adapt programs and resources to changes in these disparate environments.

A disadvantage of this design is that there may be little communication and coordination among the units; a lack of common understanding about mission, direction, and goals; and competition for resources that does not address the key issues facing the organization. Loosely coupled organizations are difficult to transform or change deeply because separate units have maintained independence for so long and because there are multiple sources of leadership and vision (Weick, 1976; Orton and Weick, 1990).

This loosely coupled nature complicates partnering and engagement between and among campuses and communities. Some campuses that would not be characterized as highly engaged by any measure take pride in faculty deeply committed to community, yet do not reward them in any significant way. Community involvement is often considered an individual faculty member's personal interest or pet project. Although this work may be recognized, there are no plans to deepen or broaden it across campus. In other instances, programs, institutes, or centers engage with communities as the central feature of their work. While these units may be respected on campus, they also may face considerable competition from other units for funding and support. They may become isolated and fragmented as the balance of the campus considers this work secondary—"nice to do," perhaps, but not essential to the campus mission and not integral to faculty reward structures.

Individuals in higher education who are interested in significant partnerships with the community must become organizationally literate, which is to say that they must understand how their institution works, how it makes decisions, how resources are allocated, what problems and issues are important to leaders, and what opportunities exist for innovation and change. As noted above, one advantage to the loosely coupled organizational form is that it has the ability to respond quickly to issues that arise in the surrounding environment. A faculty member needs few resources or approvals "from the top" when she first experiments with this pedagogy. A historian who sits on the board of a local arts organization can mobilize the students in his seminar course to assist the agency in developing an organizational history. Members of an academic department can work on a service-learning project with a newly appointed commission studying race and police-community relations without a mandate from the institution. Individuals who learn to navigate loosely coupled institutions can enhance their capacity for building rewarding partnerships by recognizing and using the advantages of such organizations.

Risk and Trust

Service-learning partnerships exist along a continuum of risk and benefit from what can be characterized as low-risk, lower benefit to higher risk and higher benefit. Low-risk might be exemplified by service work in soup kitchens that may teach students about homelessness while also serving the hungry, but that fails to get at the political and social issues that are the root causes of hunger or potential solutions to the problem of homelessness. In the mid-range, a service-learning program may begin working with a local community development organization by participating in the cleanup of a vacant lot and, over time, add the shared responsibility for a full home renovation, development of a community garden, and research on the social, political, and economic interests that shape the choices of those served by the organization. At the other end of the continuum are partnerships that have potentially great benefit but pose higher risks, such as investigating local patterns of land use, home ownership, absentee landlords, and economic discrimination.

Without doubt, such partnerships entail considerable risks to all parties involved. The creation of a new partnership, the entrance of a new partner, or an old partner taking on a new role can
shift the social and political ecology of the partners' respective interests, often with unintended consequences. For example, the university's involvement in land use, housing, and economic issues could lead to transformation that changes the institution's political stance regarding these issues in ways that may benefit the community but that may inadvertently lead to loss of political support for the university by state or local officials who oppose the direction of the transformation. On the other hand, there is the potential that disturbances in the existing social and political ecology could unfairly affect the community. If, for example, the partnership leads to increased dependency by the community rather than mutuality, the risks to the community may be greater than intended.

It is because of these risks to both parties that trust is required. In the context of campus-community partnerships, trust can be understood as a mutual understanding of the interests of the partners, together with some faith that the partners will stay with the relationship despite obstacles or difficulties that will surely arise. Nyden, Figert, Shibley, and Burrows (1997) emphasize that trust cannot be "signed off on" in a contract, that it emerges gradually as a working relationship develops: "Collaborative relationships are not created from the top down. They usually involve a number of steps that start with smaller, limited projects to test the waters and then build into larger projects" (p. 5). Torres (2000) agrees, stating that "partnerships may be seen as a series of interpersonal relationships built one on top of the other to create a bond between institutions" (p. 14).

Neutrality of Scholarship and Expertise

As described in Chapter Nine, the purpose of most faculty research is to contribute to the knowledge base of the faculty member's discipline. Using the terminology proposed by Boyer in *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990), the "scholarship of discovery" is the most highly respected and rewarded by the academy as far as promotion and tenure and the likelihood of receiving research grants and prestigious awards. Traditional, discipline-based research is more likely to appear in refereed journals and in books from the most widely regarded top publishers. Such research is generally charac-

terized as "pure" research rather than "applied" in the sense of the "scholarship of application" promoted by Boyer (1990). Traditionally, pure research is also likely to be more neutral than research designed to meet community needs.

Academic neutrality is easily maintained when scholars and academics are at political arms length from a thorny problem. Substantial challenges arise when faculty and others engaged on the scene face situations where conversations, discussions, and actions reveal issues that are public and political. In our classes, for example, our students have seen fourth graders summarily neglected during school hours and placed in classrooms where some supervision but very little teaching is occurring. We have had students working in court settings where individuals charged with child sexual abuse are seated in the same waiting areas as families and children victimized by such defendants. In cases like these, we can place the burden on students to examine these situations critically. We can also suggest ways for them to address the problem by taking some action, but our knowledge of these conditions poses a more difficult question. How should we be involved? As faculty members with an aim to educate, we could simply leave the situation as is and make a note to consider this when thinking about next semester's assignment. Or we could contact the program administrators, write a letter, or request a meeting. It is just these kinds of situations that make some colleges wary of community involvement. These instances become conflicted, as well, when as individual actors we are uncertain about, or in disagreement with, the stances of our institutions on controversial issues.

Expertise is easier to maintain when it is not challenged by application. Increasingly, advocates of service-learning, community-based research, and participatory action research are arguing for recognition, support, and reward of research that meets community needs and that results in shared production of knowledge. Here, investigators move from positions of experts to those of organizers and facilitators of research. Too often, higher education faculty and students reserve for themselves the authority to name an experience or situation and to determine what is or is not meaningful. That is, they get to tell the story about what happened without the community playing a lead, or even an active, role in the telling. In such cases, the campus "experts" determine
how the community is to be interpreted and understood by defining the community’s problems, the likely strategies for response, what resources exist, and the ways in which those resources will be allocated.

We believe that campus-community partnerships are about the democratic process of arriving at an agreed-upon description of a situation, a description in which both partners are actors and both are changed, dramatically or subtly, by their inclusion in the story. As a result, they challenge and transform traditional roles.

Many institutions are not comfortable renegotiating faculty roles to support campus-community partnerships. Similarly, faculty members deeply engaged in service-learning are likely to experience a changing self-definition, moving from a core identity of pedagogue to that of community member or citizen or servant. There may be false starts, confusion about objectives, battles over research protocols, conflicts over time frames, and other issues with which to contend. Academic researchers and teachers accustomed to maintaining center stage in their work open themselves to untold risks in subjecting their work and views to nonacademic community-based audiences.

Institutions can support faculty moving out of traditional roles and into community-focused work in a variety of ways related to faculty recruitment, development, and assessment (Bringle, Hatcher, and Games, 1997). Redefining the criteria that determine how funds and release time for research are allocated to include community-based research is a critical first step. Similarly, institutional recognition and awards processes can be broadened to showcase outstanding community work by faculty and students. However, the most important and most difficult means for institutions to support community-based research, as well as teaching and faculty service, are embedded in the promotion and tenure process. Changing or expanding the faculty reward system requires a fundamental shift in campus culture and so is, by definition, a difficult and incremental journey. It is encouraging that the American Association for Higher Education, the New England Resource Center for Higher Education, and other national organizations—including disciplinary associations—are addressing this challenge.

The Problems of Accountability

As a result of higher education’s view of itself as the “expert,” accountability in service-learning, together with what defines success, is all too often stated in terms of students and institutions. Consider this example. One of the authors of this chapter previously worked as executive director of a community organization whose programs included a buddy program for fourth- to sixth-grade students from an economically poor, urban school system. Over a four-year period, two directors built the program into what was considered a clearly successful model. It matched 140 college student volunteers with a like number of younger students, it had a retention rate of volunteers over three years of 98 percent, its student volunteer staff of ten was in demand by other youth-serving organizations in the area, and its reflection process was considered exemplary. However, at a year-end picnic, the mother of one of the children in the program approached the director and told her that she had some concerns. “I don’t like it,” she said, “that a school social worker selected my child for this program. It meant I couldn’t say no without having her and the teachers think I’m a bad parent, and as a black, single mother who is out of work, they already think that about me. Don’t get me wrong. My son likes his buddy. But the problem is that I have three children, and you have given one of them something the other two can’t have. So my other two children think it’s unfair and they fight all the time. It hurts our family. If you want to help, why can’t you do something to help our family, rather than one child? Why didn’t you ask me what I wanted?” (K. Johnstad, personal communication, May 1991).

Like all organizational forms, higher education seeks to place some boundaries around itself to minimize and control demands from the environment. Its self-proclaimed neutrality can, in this regard, be used to reserve its expertise and to define the scope of its accountability. In our arguments to engage with community, we suggest that the high walls between campus and community be broken down or at least that some doors be opened and partners be invited in. Accountability should be made a topic of broader public dialogue, including accountability for telling the story from the community’s perspective. This “dialogical process,” to borrow
a phrase from Freire (1981, pp. 68–75), seems to us a fundamental dimension of accountability. This invitation should include ongoing assessment of the community’s assets and issues, careful assessment of how the community benefits (or does not benefit) from the partnership, assessment of what the community can teach, evaluation of what can be offered and exchanged, and an agreement about what the partners are accountable for. We have discussed how faculty members of higher education institutions are typically accountable to professional disciplines and to a lesser degree to departments and programs. Accountability in the academy most often does not focus on the tangible and local impact of our work.

Even in service-learning, the research focus has been on assessing learning and to a lesser degree on institutional and organizational change. As difficult as these dimensions are to measure and evaluate, determining community impact and the quality of partnerships is even more elusive. The problem of accountability is thorny enough that it can drive faculty and students away from service-learning. For example, we have just achieved our semester-long goal of cleaning up a park and creating a garden. What are we accountable for here? If we publish an article about the experience, are we accountable to report our research back to the community? If the community requires additional assistance in maintaining the garden after students have completed the course, are we accountable for organizing follow-up work? Are we willing to expand our circles of accountability as partners? To what extent can this challenge traditional ways and means of measuring and evaluating the quality of our work?

The issue of accountability also calls particular attention to the networks of which the partners are a part and asks the partners to understand more deliberately the significance of those networks. A community partner might want, for example, to learn about the accreditation process that colleges and universities undergo, or how the promotion and tenure process works. Likewise, a campus partner might want to know who is on the board of a nonprofit organization or who are the official and unofficial neighborhood leaders. These networks can be viewed as forces that hold the partners accountable, influences that shape their perspective and potential. Such networks may be invaluable as we seek to broaden the scope of our work—from the faculty member’s perspective to other colleagues or disciplines and from the community partner’s perspective to other agencies or neighborhoods.

Conclusion

Service-learning has provided an important opportunity for colleges and universities to reimagine their roles and missions in communities. In some instances, this has happened “through the back door,” almost by accident. We have made an argument for the value of campus-community partnerships grounded in what we believe to be a crisis of community on the part of higher education. As we have discussed, there are multiple challenges to extending and deepening our current practices. These challenges cannot be adequately addressed without considering profound changes in how colleges perceive themselves and the concept and practice of service-learning.

Our hope is that service-learning will not become something educational researchers document in a historical review published in 2030 as a passing fad, an innovative pedagogy, that disappeared as corporate influences remade the modern university into an efficient vehicle for delivering standardized education in a low-cost, but highly profitable, fashion. When we speak of campus-community partnerships and transformation, we mean significant changes in how universities understand the world. Disciplinary specialization is not well suited to dealing with the complex social problems we may encounter in partnerships. Is inner city poverty an economic problem, a sociological one, a psychological one, or, perhaps, a political one? For which academic department is the problem of failing schools the appropriate domain: education, public affairs, urban studies, government and politics, or business? The problem of disciplinary fragmentation surfaces quickly in the real world, and it is here that transformation becomes critical. Transformation promises a more holistic and coherent understanding of our common situations. This requires a more interdisciplinary view of the world than is customary in higher education. There is a danger that we may lose some of our core identities as political scientists or sociologists, for example, but there is also a potential that our disciplinary affiliations will be
enriched by revitalizing our sense of why we chose our fields in the first place.

There is an important role for higher education in the global society, but the exact nature of that engagement is contested. Higher education's future and best self, we would argue, can be found by engaging community partners in mutually transformative work that allows us to reimagine, in ways both creative and practical, sustainable communities. Our choice of partners and our visions of what may be accomplished together create opportunities for us to become members of communities and of a world of which we would like to be part.

References