The dynamics of institutional power need to be addressed through structural practices that support prospects for authentic, democratic partnerships.

Power, Privilege, and the Public: The Dynamics of Community-University Collaboration

Byron P. White

Scholars, practitioners, and proponents of community–university engagement insist that reciprocity, mutual benefit, and peer relationships are essential to creating truly democratic partnerships between campus and community leaders (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; Peters, 2005; Weerts and Sandmann, 2008). These same principles are seen as important to creating environments where university students learn democratic knowledge, skills, and values through civic engagement (Boyte and Kari, 2002; Creighton, 2009; Hartley and Hollander, 2005). Frequently, the effort to carry out these principles focuses on the quality of interpersonal relations. It is aimed at the way individuals—students, faculty, and administrators—interact with community representatives, particularly where cultural, economic, and educational differences are apparent.

Achieving democratic partnerships must also take into account discrepancies in power and privilege between the conditions of the university as an institution and the conditions of the community as a whole. Unfortunately, this macro-level relationship is seldom discussed in the literature on community-university engagement. It is as though campus participants believe—or hope—that positive personal relationships between university and citizen actors can somehow surmount the overriding social disparities between campus and community.

My research and experience suggest that although constructive interpersonal relationships may mitigate and even postpone inevitable conflicts between institution and community, they cannot eliminate them. No matter how personally well-liked a university representative may be to the community or how prominent the rhetoric of community–university parity exists in
the university’s purpose statement, the university almost always is richer, has greater professional capacity, controls more resources, and is more politically connected than the community. Well-intentioned university representatives may elude this reality; it is never overlooked by the community.

If universities are to be places that foster democratic practices—both in student learning and institutional engagement—they will need to implement institutional strategies that address the unique challenges created by the disparity in power and privilege between campus and community.

**Differences in Power and Privilege**

The inequity between most colleges and universities and the communities that surround them can be rather dramatic. In most cases, the residents surrounding the university would not qualify to be enrolled as students. Often, they would not be qualified to hold most of the jobs there. At Ohio State University (OSU), located in the center of metropolitan Columbus, one need only drive a block east of High Street to realize immediately that the bordering neighborhood of Weinland Park, with its 5,000 residents, pales in stature to the university community, which has eight times as many employees. As one Ohio State administrator said, “You know, High Street, it might as well be the Mississippi River from that neighborhood to here, it is such a divider” (White, 2008, p. 2).

The average household income in Weinland Park was $15,381, according to a City of Columbus report published in 2006 (p. 52). A 2010 survey by Ohio State researchers found that only 18 percent of respondents held full-time jobs (Forrest and Goldstein, 2010, p. 6). The city report found that only 9 percent of the neighborhood’s housing units were owned by neighborhood residents and much of the community’s housing was in disrepair, a stark contrast to OSU’s well-groomed 1,756-acre main campus. Although upscale stores like Urban Outfitters line High Street next to campus, a Dollar Tree bargain store is one of the most prominent businesses on the street as it runs through Weinland Park. More than 52,000 students are working on OSU degrees; however, only 31 percent of Weinland Park’s residents had attended college and 38 percent did not even have a high school diploma, according to the city report.

Such dramatic differences are not only the case where campuses border inner-city communities, but also in quaint college towns that seem to reflect the same profile of the colleges and universities that abide there. The Web sites for Cornell University and Ithaca College both refer affectionately to the city of Ithaca, New York, where the institutions are located. One site calls the city “a blend of rural practicality, urban sophistication, and international flavor . . . that produces the warmth and friendliness of a small town combined with the rich cultural complexity of places many times larger” (“The Ithaca Campus,” 2010). Yet, a 2010 report by the New York Community Action Agency, noted a more ominous aspect of life in Ithaca: It had the highest
poverty rate—40.5 percent—of twenty-six cities the agency analyzed based on data from its county affiliates (New York State Poverty Report). Median income in Ithaca was $29,236, less than the tuition for Ithaca College ($33,630) and Cornell ($39,450), according to their Web sites.

The imbalance of privilege and power plays a powerful role in shaping the perceptions of community partners. For them, the implications of this disparity are obvious and simple. As the head of one civic association in Weinland Park told me about Ohio State, “They got the resources; they can do whatever they want to do” (White, 2008, p. 89).

The Community’s Dualistic Perspective

I have found in my research of community engagement between Ohio State and Weinland Park, and through my experience working with Xavier University and the Cincinnati neighborhoods that border its campus, that this perception of the university’s overwhelming abundance persists even when individuals at the institution demonstrate their intentions to engage the community more democratically.

Jen Gilbride-Brown, formerly the senior program director for faculty and campus development for Ohio Campus Compact, learned this lesson during her days as a graduate teaching assistant at OSU. As a doctoral student in what was then OSU’s College of Education, Gilbride-Brown was teaching a course called Leadership for the Common Good, which included a community engagement component. Over two academic quarters, about thirty of her students worked at a nonprofit family resource center housed in the basement of a church in the nearby university district.

During the fall quarter, the resource center learned that it was losing the grant that funded the majority of its $125,000 annual operating budget. The program director asked Gilbride-Brown if OSU would provide $10,000 to help cover the shortage. Gilbride-Brown recalls that she was shocked that the program director would ask her—a financially strapped graduate student with no access to a significant university budget—to find the money. It was then that she realized that to the organization’s staff, regardless of their personal relationship with her, she represented mighty Ohio State University with its vast resources and $4.5 billion budget.

“Initially it was just laughable that she saw me as part of the university,” Gilbride-Brown says, reflecting on the situation. “I’m just a first-year doc student. We had gotten to know each other personally. We were pals. But when I thought about it, I didn’t think it was an unfair request for the institution.”

Gilbride-Brown tried to drum up the money on campus to no avail. Within six months, the organization ceased operation. I have heard Gilbride-Brown share this story with faculty from other universities and they almost unanimously agree that the community’s request was inappropriate and outside the scope of the relationship. Nevertheless, to leaders of community-based organizations, there is no such distinction. Their interactions
with the university take place, simultaneously, on two levels: There is the interpersonal level, where relationships are forged with individual representatives from the university. Then there is the institutional level, where the university’s abundance of power and privilege can be a resource or a threat (White, 2009). This dualistic engagement can lead to tensions and power struggles between campus and community.

Such tensions can be exacerbated by racial differences and the historical legacy of white oppression. In that sense, race plays a role in defining the power and privilege dynamic between predominantly white universities’ minority communities. However, I have found that cultural differences or similarities concerning race to be secondary factors to the tangible evidence of discrepancy in resources and clout. As an African American university administrator with a deep affinity toward and familiarity with the black community, I certainly possessed some advantages in relationship-building over my white colleagues. However, I was not necessarily any more effective at assuaging the community’s concerns about the university’s power. Although cultural affinity may impact the community’s interpersonal perspective, it is not sufficient to overcome the power imbalance the community calculates at the institutional level.

Navigating the Power Imbalance

If universities are to play a greater role at educating effective citizens and serving as catalysts for social, economic, and political transformation through authentic civic engagement, then they will have to learn to understand, anticipate, and navigate the community’s two-tiered perspective. Doing so will require more than friendly overtures; it will take intentional administrative actions that are built on principles of deliberative democracy, where the university places as great an emphasis on fostering self-determination and self-rule among citizens as it does on demonstrating the impact of university programs. I propose three fundamental practices for accomplishing this: (1) be transparent, (2) send the right people, and (3) share authority.

Be Transparent. It is not always what we do in higher education that most concerns the community, but why we do what we do. Higher education officials spend so much time defending what they are doing for the community that they often fail to provide a convincing rationale for what is driving their intentions. We may offer an altruistic explanation—to improve the community and help our students learn—but we avoid the more selfish motives that also are involved, such as fulfilling a grant requirement, raising the institution’s public reputation, improving our competitive advantage among other institutions, appeasing a donor’s interests, or advancing our research agenda. Of course, the community knows that we expect something out of the deal; if higher education officials are not upfront in sharing what that is, the community will invent our intentions for us.
I learned this lesson a few years ago when Xavier University (Cincinnati, Ohio) purchased a historic building in the nearby Evanston neighborhood that was to have been abandoned. In renovating the building for university office space—including offices dedicated to community engagement—the university saw itself as contributing to the community's well-being. However, neighborhood leaders saw it as a sign that Xavier wanted to buy up property in their community. The fact that the university could acquire a major structure at its will using its own resources demonstrated a level of potentially threatening power that the community could not match.

The only way to move past these underlying suspicions is for colleges and universities to be more open and transparent about their affairs: their operations, their strategic goals, their decision-making processes. Consider how much detail the university has to know about the community before feeling confident enough to engage it. Demographic data, needs analyses, and meetings with community leaders are all part of the fundamental research necessary before entering into a community partnership. Yet community members usually do not have access to comparable information about the university. They typically have no idea about the university's budget, particularly the resources dedicated to the partnership. They do not know the agendas of the individuals who authorize the project. Many never even get to see the syllabus for the course the students are taking who show up in the community, let alone read an article published by the professor teaching the course to understand her research focus.

Certainly, committed partners in the community deserve to know what goes on behind higher education's veil if they are to trust the university as an institution, and not just select individuals. Although such disclosure carries a level of risk, those who have taken this route have found the community to be far more likely to guard the privilege of being an insider than to abuse it.

Karen Hutzel, an art education professor at OSU, instructs her community partners on the purpose and process of the university's institutional review board so that there is clear understanding in the community of the guidelines for her research related to their work together. In doing so, her partners have played a role in designing research procedures that meet both scholarly and community objectives. At Xavier, we established the Evanston–Norwood–Xavier Community Partnership—with eight members from each community—to serve as a kind of sounding board for sensitive university information that could affect the community. Through the exchange, community participants have contributed critical guidance to several of the university's strategic initiatives. Others have called for collaboratively written guidelines for community–university partnerships that allow community partners to negotiate the details of the partnership.

Choose the Right University Representatives. Harwood and Creighton (2009) suggest that leaders of civic-serving institutions, such as universities, though committed to principles of community engagement, are sometimes...
reluctant to practice it in part because of their misgivings about selecting the “right” partner who truly represents the community. However, institutions tend to be far less particular about who represents the university. Typically, the person managing the project becomes the representative by default. Beyond that, many would say that an ability to engage interpersonally across educational, economic, cultural, and racial barriers is important. However, given the community’s dualistic view of the relationship with the university, having the right interpersonal skills is not enough. The best representative also would have a level of institutional authority to adequately respond to the expectations of the community. To have one capacity without the other can be problematic.

For instance, faculty members who engage community partners sometimes operate in a kind of “freelance mode,” separating themselves from the bureaucracy of their institutions to operate more freely as part of the community. It feels good from a relational standpoint, but when they are called upon to satisfy the demands made on their home institutions, they are ill equipped to do so. In other cases, the university representative might be an administrator who has enough authority to address real concerns with institutional power, but who lacks the appropriate interpersonal skills—or may be reluctant to use them. They adopt a more “sheltered mode” of engagement, choosing not to extend themselves too intimately into the community and relying on more formal methods of interaction (White, 2009).

The ideal candidate to represent the university in a partnership, then, would operate in a “balanced mode,” possessing both these qualities: sensitivity to community and a sufficient level of authority. Such roles do not typically exist in higher education. They usually have to be created intentionally with strategic foresight on the part of the university. Even if such an ideal person is not available, institutions can be deliberate about linking the interpersonal capacity to institutional authority by making sure faculty and others on the front lines are working collaboratively with an administrative structure on campus, whether an academic department or an office devoted to community engagement.

**Share Authority.** At a three-day summit hosted in 2006 by Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCHP), experienced community partners from across the country agreed that authentic community-university partnerships require there to be “shared resources, power and decision-making” (CCHP, 2007, p. 7). They also acknowledged that this rarely happens. Universities and colleges may ask community residents what their needs and aspirations are in the partnership. They establish advisory boards to allow for a “community voice.” They set up interviews and focus groups with community leaders to gain their input.

Nevertheless, advice and input are not the same as authority. More often than not, such overtures amount to gathering insider information so that the real people in power can use it to make final decisions. Shared authority
exists when a partner has the certainty—not the hope—that its desires will impact the actions of the other partner. There is a litmus test for telling who holds it in greater abundance: the party that decides how money is spent and how individuals’ time is deployed. As the CCHP summit report bluntly noted, “Whoever holds the purse strings, holds the power” (CCHP, p. 11).

More often than not, such power falls into the hands of the college or university. The grant that funds the project typically is given to the institution of higher education. The personnel deployed to work on the project—staff or students—are usually under some direct supervision of a university employee. It seems perfectly rational that this would be the case given the university’s ordinarily superior fiscal record of accomplishment and staff capacity. However, the “fiscal agent” defense does little to reconcile the community’s sense of being dominated.

I was once confronted by a group of community leaders who questioned the way my university was spending grant money that was dedicated to a community partnership. They argued that the performance of a nonprofit organization, with which I had contracted as part of the grant, was underperforming and that another community-based group, which the leaders favored, would do a better job. In that moment, as the one who authorized the checks, I held all the power in the so-called partnership. It took a tense conversation and some soul-searching on my part to concede that the community leaders were right and to allow them to oversee that aspect of the budget. If we are serious about bridging the gap of power and privilege, then community partners must have some means to exercise direct authority in dictating the allocation of resources involved in the partnership as a fundamental part of the decision-making structure.

Conclusion

Institutions of higher education can never really even the playing field with the communities with which we engage. Even the best interpersonal relations between university and community representatives cannot overcome the power and privilege that favor higher education. However, by engaging communities more as peers at the institutional level, colleges and universities can come closer to approximating democratic partnership that has the potential to lead to sustainable transformation of both the community and the academy. Moreover, by operating in this manner, universities set an example for their students to follow and create a constructive platform for them to work from as they are formed into citizens who are equipped to make a difference in the civic life of their communities.

References


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*Byron P. White* is vice chancellor for Economic Advancement for the University System of Ohio.