

The Best of Both Worlds: An Innovative University-
Community Collaboration for Organizational Capacity Building

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Faith-based organizations (FBOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) in the United States have historically provided vital services to needy populations and contributed significantly to the strengthening of many individual lives, families and communities. FBOs and CBOs are often located in regions and neighborhoods where especially needy and hard-to-serve populations live. These organizations tend to have scarce resources, yet tend to make large contributions to society. Increasingly, the federal government has begun to recognize the vital role that these organizations play in striving to ameliorate social problems and additionally, the increased assistance these organizations require to compete for funding and to enjoy organizational sustainability. This recognition is most clearly demonstrated by the Compassion Capital Fund, a recent initiative by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This initiative will provide 30 million dollars to assist FBOs and CBOs in their efforts to be competitive for federal monies. In the announcement of the Fund, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Tommy G. Thompson (HHS; 2002) commented that although faith- and community-based organizations are often the most effective groups in carrying out the purposes of HHS programs, many do not have the staff or expertise to successfully apply for federal funding. The Compassion Capital Fund serves as a new beginning in the federal government's effort to help faith- and community-based organizations receive a fair and equal opportunity to compete for HHS funds.

Although the federal government will expand its support of these organizations, many FBOs may continue to find themselves without the internal capacity needed to participate in the federal granting process. The process of seeking federal support depends on familiarity and competence with specific activities crucial to success in obtaining funds. These activities depend on skills such as locating funding opportunities, organizing the project and project team,

assembling necessary data, writing proposals, implementing and managing the program, and evaluating and measuring outcomes to understand the effects of the program and to secure data for the future funding proposals. Small and grassroots faith- and community-based organizations that do not have internal expertise in these areas often do not have the resources needed to secure external consultation and assistance. Thus, internal capacity building is compromised and the ability to develop programs, evaluate outcomes, continuously improve services, and document the effects of their programs for funders is seriously impeded. In this paper we will share a process model and lessons learned from an innovative and collaborative university-community partnership in which the applied methodological and evaluation expertise of faculty and advanced graduate students in an applied psychology department is connected with the service delivery and programming expertise of program designers, administrators, and front-line staff of faith- and community-based organizations. We feel there are important issues of internal organizational capacity within these small and often times grassroots organizations that applied social scientists are especially well-positioned to address.

Applied Psychology at Claremont Graduate University

The program discussed in this paper is appropriately housed in the School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences (SBOS) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU) in Claremont, California, which since the 1960's, has been a pioneer and leader in providing graduate education in applied psychological science. The department has developed an innovative and nationally known approach to psychology that focuses on what is called "public affairs psychology." This orientation guides the work of the students and faculty within SBOS, and many seek careers and research that applies social science knowledge, concepts, and methods to important social issues.

As part of the department focus, students who earn their master's and doctoral degrees at SBOS gain experience and expertise that make them well suited for careers in community and government organizations. They become experts in such organizational capacity building areas as program evaluation methodology, survey research, community-based research methods, and organizational development – areas of knowledge and expertise that have much to offer FBOs and CBOs in addressing their technical assistance needs. For example, the quickly growing knowledge of program evaluation is imperative to the sustainability of FBOs and CBOs. Researchers in psychology, public policy and education have learned a great deal about successful evaluation methodologies, important issues to consider when evaluating social and educational programs, specific challenges in working with community-based organizations, and strategies to train program staff to evaluate the work they are doing (e.g. Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999). All of this work can be used to empower and build the capacity of FBOs and CBOs.

The structure and socially focused orientation of the department, along with the highly trained and community-dedicated student body, has made it a perfect home for a program that seeks to build capacity and strengthen community organizations while providing students with valuable knowledge, skills, and the incentive to pursue careers in the nonprofit sector. The innovative program discussed below embodies the philosophy of the department while providing an invaluable service both to community organizations and to students.

The Community Fellows Program

In an effort to apply knowledge and methodology from applied psychology to benefit community-based organizations, and to provide students with the invaluable experience of working with nonprofit organizations, the School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences

(SBOS) at the Claremont Graduate University created The Community Fellows Program (CFP) with the generous support of the Capital Group, Inc. The CFP is an innovative program that funds graduate students to work as consultants to community-based organizations in the Los Angeles, California area in an effort to build organizational capacity and evaluate and improve the programs helping the neediest populations. Although the internships are limited in duration, the CFP focuses on providing assistance that will be certain to improve the sustainability of the organizations once the internship ends. Thus, rather than providing a “quick fix” to organizations, the CFP strives to contribute to the lasting sustainability of the organizations and to leave behind valuable tools and skills. Additionally, the CFP provides students who have interest in working with underserved populations the opportunity to do so, and has encouraged career opportunities in the nonprofit sector. Since its inception in 1996, the Community Fellows Program has been enormously successful, and the feedback from both the students and organizations that have been involved has been extremely positive and encouraging. The CFP has assisted many organizations in such vital capacity building areas as needs assessment, grant writing, program development, and program evaluation.

The Process Model

Each year, advanced graduate students in organizational, social, developmental, and cognitive psychology in SBOS are invited to apply for a consulting internship with a community organization. To qualify for an internship, the student must have a strong academic record, a demonstrated interest in working with underserved populations, and the possession of skills and knowledge that would be utilized and valuable to a community organization. On average, five students are chosen to be CFP consultants each year. Once students are selected to be Community Fellows consultants, they are matched with a local community-based organization

that is serving Los Angeles' most underprivileged populations, and that has a clear need for technical assistance. The CFP also seeks to place students in an organization that fits the consultant's research and community interests, areas of expertise, and applied skills.

Highlights of CFP Projects

Many types of projects have been completed through the CFP, and the consultants have addressed many technical assistance and capacity building issues of the CBOs they have worked with. Because the CFP receives a large number of requests for assistance on grant writing and program evaluation, many projects have focused on these two areas, however other internships have focused on such tasks as needs assessment, strategic planning, and program development. All of the projects that have been completed have sought to leave the organizations with knowledge and training to continue sustainability-building once the internship has ended.

The need for grant writing has been a large focus for many organizations that the CFP has worked with, as many have voiced both the lack of time and expertise needed to identify potential funding sources, write grant proposals, and collect all of the required documentation to support the proposal. Part of this reality was echoed by the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Tommy G. Thompson (2002), who pointed out that although FBOs and CBOs understand the needs of those they serve, it is much harder for these organizations to understand the numerous rules they must follow to qualify for federal grants. To address this issue, some internships have focused on the writing and submission of grant proposals, while one in particular worked with a community arts center to develop a grant database that identified appropriate funding sources and cycles, along with each funder's area of focus. In many cases, these grant-focused projects have been extremely beneficial for building the capacity of these organizations. For example, not only do the completed and submitted grants provide an

opportunity to sustain the organization through increased funding, but they also leave the organization with a “boilerplate” or model that they can work from when submitting future grants. In addition, the collaborative nature of the work between the consultant and the staff encourages valuable training on the grant writing process. The consultants thus leave the organizations with something they can build on for their continued sustainability after the internship ends and the consultant is no longer there.

Program evaluation has also become a large focus for the CFP as many organizations we work with request assistance in this area. This comes as no surprise because while both the government and private foundations are increasingly requiring organizations to evaluate the programs and services for which they receive funding, many staff members do not have the time or expertise to complete many of the required tasks. For example, the evaluation and measurement of program outcomes are often not part of the explicit training that staff in faith- and community-based organizations receives. However, with the help of the CFP, many organizations have completed program evaluations, have gained experience in measuring program success, and have learned how this information can be used to demonstrate program effectiveness to future funders. For example, one student consultant worked with an organization to assess the evaluation capacity of over 45 AIDS prevention organizations in Los Angeles County. The program evaluation expertise of the student-consultant was most welcome, and many prevention organizations benefited from training on the design and implementation of program evaluations. Another student completed her internship with LA's BEST, a program that seeks to provide a safe and supervised after school education, enrichment, and recreation program for inner-city children in Los Angeles. The student assisted the organization in improving their data collection and database management practices, and worked with them to

develop a system for disseminating information and evaluation results, both internally and externally.

Although grant writing and program evaluation make up the majority of technical assistance requests, many other types of projects have been completed through the CFP. One consultant worked with the Los Angeles NAACP, an organization that works to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of African Americans and to achieve equality of rights and the elimination of racial prejudice among citizens of the U.S. Many projects were completed during this internship, including board development and strategic planning, the creation of personnel guidelines, and the development of a new job-training program. Another consultant worked with Five Acres, an organization that is dedicated to helping children become caring and productive adults by building on their strengths and those of their families and communities. Specifically, the consultant's internship involved the Neighborhood Strengthening Project, a community-based initiative, aimed to empower the community to support and nurture families and children. The consultant reviewed literature on similar programs and completed a community demographic and needs assessment. The projects described above are just a few examples of the many ways in which the collaborative effort has impacted the internal capacity and sustainability of organizations and the knowledge and experience of students participating in the CFP.

Program Challenges and Lessons Learned

Over the seven years that the CFP has been in operation, various challenges have arisen, and along with them, many lessons have been learned about the best way to coordinate a program of this nature. One challenge that the CFP has continued to struggle with is the ability to identify the organizations that are most in need of technical assistance within our target area. Our

aim has been to provide services to organizations that are working on pressing social problems. However, determining which organizations are most in need of technical assistance has been a difficult task. In an effort to better identify those most in need, the CFP recently formed a relationship with a local United Way agency that is connected to more than 1,200 FBOs and CBOs in the area. Because of the close connection that the United Way has with the community and these organizations, they have ample knowledge of the most pressing problems in the area, the organizations that are working to address these problems, and their need for technical assistance. We believe that this collaboration with the United Way will allow us to make the best decisions on where to focus our valuable services

Another challenge we have faced in identifying organizations to participate was rooted in an early assumption we held - essentially, that any community-based organization that was offered free consulting services would be thrilled to participate and would do so eagerly. Over time we have found that this is not always the case. Many times, community organizations have more pressing issues such as service delivery, staffing issues, or other organizational problems that are not obvious or clear at first, and adding a consultant to their organization can be seen as more of a hassle than a needed addition. Although we maintain that many needy organizations would benefit from our services, we have learned that it is best to work with those organizations that see the value in what we offer, have clear technical assistance needs, and are eager to participate in the CFP. It is not beneficial to the student or the organization if the internship is viewed as an unwelcome and added responsibility on top of delivering valuable services to their clients and communities.

Lastly, the CFP is facing its own struggle to secure and maintain funding for continued sustainability. Funding is needed not only to keep the CFP operating at its normal capacity (i.e.

approximately five consultants per year), but also to address the reality that there are more organizations that need our assistance than there are consultants that we can fund and provide at this time. As previously mentioned, many federal and foundation grants require FBOs and CBOs to evaluate their programs; however they are not always given technical or financial assistance to accomplish these tasks. In light of this, it seems extremely appropriate for the federal government to begin to fund the types of collaboration described here, especially because of the numerous benefits to the organizations, the students, and the clients and communities they serve.

Program Benefits

From the beginning, the Community Fellows Program has received feedback from both the participating community organizations and students indicating that the CFP has been extremely successful in providing technical assistance and building the capacity of the organizations they have worked with. The Director of Development of the International Rescue Committee, Los Angeles, said the following of their experience: “IRC-LA benefited tremendously from this Program. The consultant made it possible for us to actually start grant writing and research of funding sources in the community. Thanks to the CFP, we were able to apply for grants to support our early employment programs for refugees and expand our volunteer corps...Simply put, none of these things would have been possible without the benefit of the Community Fellows Program.” Yusef Omowale, from the Community Based Learning Network shared: “The consultant provided us with another staff position that we would not otherwise have had. Her experience and skill in working with students helped us to develop a strong student internship program. That led to the initiation of new programs that were not previously possible.” Dr. Harry Udin, from Tri-City Mental Health commented: “Your program has enabled our agency to “take a good look” at the children who receive mental health services

from us. Because of your program, we can increase the effectiveness of our treatment delivery and provide better and more culturally-competent services.”

Although the benefits to the organization are a vital part of the CFP’s story, it is equally important to note the benefits to the students who participate. By working with CBO’s, students gain knowledge of the structure and process of these organizations by working closely with staff members who can act as both mentors and teachers. Students become part of the staff for a short period of time, and learn first hand about the challenges and problems that face these unique organizations. In addition to learning about the organizations, students also experience the rewards of working with a FBO or CBO that has a great impact on their community. Many students report that their internship experience has played a large role in their later career decisions, and many former consultants have gone into careers assisting community-based organizations – some with the same organizations in which they completed their internships. Ultimately, the CFP provides excellent learning experiences for consultants, and encourages students to go into careers that depart from the traditional academic track and that are extremely rewarding outlets for an applied social scientist’s skill set.

In sum, as the funding opportunities change and as the role of FBOs and CBOs becomes more vital to the quality of life within our communities, we feel that the connection between the unique but complimentary resources of service providers and applied social scientists should be encouraged and facilitated. The Community Fellows Program at Claremont Graduate University embodies a beneficial collaboration between organizations serving their communities and graduate students with the expertise to assist them, and has allowed for great success for its participants. We believe this model can bring equal success and value to other students and community organizations across the nation.

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