

Collaborative Models for Metropolitan University Outreach: The Omaha Experience

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Abstract

The University of Nebraska at Omaha enhanced its urban outreach focus under the Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) Program. Previous collaborations with governmental and community organizations expedited successful alliances (such as the U.S. Attorney's Office, Omaha Community Foundation, and United Way) in metropolitan Omaha. Stronger university-community integration and a unified approach targeted neighborhood development, youth crime prevention, and public housing issues through Project Impact, Community Fellows Program, Safety Net, and the Family Mentoring Project. Lessons learned included these ingredients for successful collaboration: a history of collaboration, good personal relationships, including high levels of trust, simple organizational structure, informality and flexibility, clear and frequent communication, shared vision, visibility of the university, and linking and integrating with university resources.

The University of Nebraska at Omaha's College of Public Affairs and Community Service (CPACS) and its Department of Public Administration (DPA) initiated a broad-ranging urban outreach initiative over the past 6 years. A direct result of the university's external and internal partnerships, the initiative aimed to address key problems in the Omaha metropolitan area. This article highlights how CPACS, DPA, and the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNOmaha) are effecting change in the community through a variety of essential collaborative arrangements. An important component in those collaborations was support by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) program. The article concludes with a summary of lessons learned from the collaboration efforts.

Historically, DPA did not focus on outreach within the Omaha metropolitan area, but instead emphasized statewide initiatives involving small local governments and communities. This reflected the department's broad mission to provide public administration education and training to areas throughout greater Nebraska. Consequently, shifting from statewide to urban outreach represented a major change for the department.

CPACS, founded in the early 1970s, traditionally embraced community outreach as part of its mission. During its first 20 years CPACs' activities can be described as reactive, based on responses to or requests from community agencies or individuals, or outside funding activities involving faculty and staff. Although CPACS' main purpose is to be responsive to the unique nature of metropolitan needs, a key difference is that the new outreach model is more proactive than reactive. This is achieved by involving faculty, staff, and students from the disciplines of social work, gerontology, criminal justice, and public administration, and an urban-focused research center in a wide variety of community-based projects.

PACT: The Genesis for a Vision for Urban Outreach

The change toward urban outreach for DPA began in 1993 when Nebraska mirrored the Nation by its concern with the reduction and/or prevention of youth violence. The Nebraska Governor's Conference on Youth had just occurred. At the same time, DPA centered attention on the issue by becoming a partner in Pulling America's Communities Together (PACT), a national youth violence-prevention initiative. Funded by the U.S. Justice Department, PACT was a partnership of the departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, Housing and Urban Development, and the Office of National Drug Control Policy. Washington, D.C., Atlanta, and Denver were the other selected sites, with Nebraska alone having statewide responsibilities.

In late 1995 the Nebraska PACT partners (representatives from DPA, the Nebraska U.S. Attorney's office, and the Nebraska Governor's office) met to develop a statewide strategic plan to combat youth violence. UNOmaha's role was to staff and assist in designing and facilitating the planning process. The overall PACT initiative included the following activities:

- Selecting stakeholders with an interest in youth violence reduction. This included a broad range of residential and nonresidential treatment providers, educators, parents and guardians, community and church leaders, business persons, law enforcement and juvenile detention personnel, and juvenile judges.
- Conducting and analyzing a statewide stakeholder survey of risk factors predicting youth violence.
- Organizing stakeholder meetings at four locations statewide.
- Compiling and analyzing data.
- Writing a collaborative plan for addressing the issue of youth violence.
- Promulgating the plan through the Governor's office and other venues.
- Revising the plan based on feedback.
- Implementing the plan through local task forces.

Primary goals, determined through surveys and meetings, focused on building safe and effective Nebraska communities, increasing participation of youth in community life, strengthening community and individual values, and strengthening families. Each goal's

subsequent objectives and action steps were evaluated on their probability of being implemented within a reasonable timeframe. The key to success was to translate plans to action.

Several positive outcomes resulted from UNOmaha's participation in PACT. First, a high level of trust developed among the planning team members (UNOmaha, the Governor's office, and U.S. Attorney's office). The constant communication, negotiation, and coordination required by this project fostered trust, resulting in smoother operations and long-range relationships.

A second benefit was the planning team's increased knowledge of youth violence gained from stakeholders and citizens. The team discovered that stakeholders' responses about youth violence were somewhat consistent regardless of age, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and geographic location, thereby dismantling stereotypes. This awareness broadened the viewpoints of the planning team and increased its confidence in the importance of the issue and ability to work in the community. This does not imply a total lack of criticism from citizen participants about the planning team's priorities or processes, but gave the team the opportunity to use the criticism as a means of opening communications.

A third and important benefit was that UNOmaha became better known to the Omaha community through this process. Because several meetings were held on the campus and many stakeholders attended, the university became recognized as a leader in community affairs and in difficult areas such as youth violence. The university was seen as a neutral entity where issues could be discussed openly and disagreements aired peaceably.

Participation by high-profile individuals, such as the Governor of Nebraska, the U.S. Attorney, and the UNOmaha Chancellor, lent weight to the project. These individuals gave instant credibility to the project and to the UNOmaha campus, since it had been selected from four University of Nebraska campuses to participate.

As a result of the PACT process and its positive outcomes, DPA began to rethink its role in providing outreach services to the Omaha metropolitan area. Confidence and trust built through the process helped DPA form a wider vision of outreach as it began to collaborate with internal and external partners to implement PACT action steps. Many of the relationships developed through PACT continued while new ones formed. The wider vision included seeing the importance of relationships in building successful coalitions with shared resources to get things done.

The juncture between finishing planning and beginning implementation was critical because the risk of losing momentum was high. Receiving a second grant from the Department of Justice through the Weed and Seed Strategy came at the right time to boost implementation efforts. DPA saw this as an opportunity to build upon past success and expand into a new era of outreach. This vision resulted in a fivefold increase in outreach services in a 4-year period, including the funding of the COPC by HUD and fifth-year funding for PACT efforts.

An Organizational Vision for University Outreach

With the gain of knowledge, development of trust and new relationships, increased confidence, and funding, DPA could define its mission more broadly. The new direction also allowed closer alignment with UNOmaha's outreach mission, which encouraged internal and external collaboration. The following initiatives were foundational projects of the broader approach that eventually led to the COPC.

Neighborhood Builders

Strengthening communities by strengthening neighborhoods was one of the first PACT implementation efforts. This was accomplished by developing the Neighborhood Builders initiative, an ongoing leadership training program for current and future leaders of Omaha's neighborhood associations. The program continues to offer opportunities for DPA faculty and staff with expertise in community development, training, and technical assistance to assist residents at the neighborhood level.

Training consists of four Saturday mornings (18 hours) focusing on these core topics: identifying and building on neighborhood assets, utilizing community resources, planning and effective management, and neighborhood problemsolving. Other events such as city hall tours, a short course in the structure and function of local government, neighborhood tours, and Internet training are held throughout the year for graduates of the training program. Program topics are selected by the steering committee with input from neighborhood surveys and past participants. Now in its fourth year, the program has trained more than 125 neighborhood leaders. Graduation "bricks" are presented by the U.S. Attorney for Nebraska. Trainers include DPA faculty and staff, faculty from other UNOmaha departments, local experts in neighborhood issues, and other proven trainers. Interactive, adult education techniques are incorporated so participants can use their acquired skills at home, at work, and in their neighborhoods.

Support for Neighborhood Builders comes from several sources. The Weed and Seed Advisory Board allocates funds to support operating costs of developing and implementing the training. UNOmaha, through its HUD Community Development Work Study grant, provides a graduate assistant to staff the process. The Chamber of Commerce provides supervisory staff with time and space for monthly steering committee meetings. The UNOmaha COPC also provides staff and student support. An advisory group, with representatives from UNOmaha, the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Chamber of Commerce, the Mayor's office, neighborhood associations, and other community agencies design and help carry out the training. Neighborhood Builders is a concrete example of how a metropolitan university can take the lead in developing partnerships by utilizing its faculty and staff as trainers and coordinators, and involving community residents as advisors, program staff, and recipients of training.

Omaha Family Support Program

This program was designed to meet four PACT objectives: improve support for parents raising their children, increase parental and community resources to meet basic needs, identify/solve family violence problems, and provide services to families in contact with the criminal justice system. Funded by a Title XI grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the Omaha Family Support Program (OFSP) fostered collaboration within UNOmaha and with the external community agencies providing services.

DPA provided overall program coordination and administration. The School of Social Work, also within CPACS, developed and maintained the South Omaha Family Mentoring program at the Chicano Awareness Center. Forty non-English-speaking families were enrolled in the mentoring program each year for 3 years.

Community partners played a large role in the success of OFSP. Domestic violence prevention was carried out through the Omaha Community Foundation, Domestic Violence Coordinating Council, and the YWCA. Support of a coordinator, training, counseling for children of domestic violence victims, and intervention advocates helped to meet the PACT objectives pertaining to domestic violence.

Experience Education, a nonprofit organization, developed and disseminated in-home information and education to parents about child development and prevention of violence. Materials were produced in English and Spanish. In addition, Dayspring, another nonprofit organization, provided self-awareness counseling and parenting training for incarcerated mothers.

The university served as a link for all providers under the OFSP umbrella. Regular monthly meetings were held at UNOmaha, thus keeping the university as a central player and coordinator. Monthly sharing of experiences, needs, and issues resulted in a culture of helping each other solve problems and sharing of resources. A celebration of OFSP's success with key individuals present (that is, UNOmaha Chancellor, U.S. Attorney, Dean of CPACS, and chair of DPA) added legitimacy to the program. A high-quality videotape produced by UNOmaha effectively promoted all aspects of the program to current and future participants and potential funders.

Safe Futures Consortium

The Safe Futures Consortium was established to sustain the PACT process and to keep the plan alive for the future. The mission of this overarching *collaborative of collaboratives* is to promote strong families and safe communities in metropolitan Omaha by focusing on issues of youth and youth violence. Members include existing collaborative organizations related to education, juvenile justice, human services, law enforcement, and government.

Safe Future's goals are to create a central clearinghouse for information on collaborative efforts, to develop a framework for planning and implementation of goals, to educate the community to raise awareness of issues and solutions, and to ensure that planning is dynamic and responsive to community needs. Projects implemented in the past 3 years include:

- A youth violence prevention resource center.
- A joint plan between the law enforcement agencies and school districts of the metropolitan area to create a new drug prevention and awareness training program in schools.
- A truancy reduction initiative with the Omaha Community Partnership.
- A technology training program for neighborhood associations, with Neighborhood Builders.

UNOmaha serves as the secretariat for Safe Futures and houses its staff. The consortium is funded through the Department of Justice and existing UNOmaha resources. One of the greatest benefits of such a consortium is the face-to-face communication that occurs during monthly meetings. Collaborative groups have access to a great deal of information from their own memberships, and this is multiplied greatly when several collaboratives meet on a regular basis. Information sharing is especially important when dealing with a broad initiative like the prevention and/or reduction of youth violence with its many activities.

The Omaha Community Partnership

The Omaha Community Partnership (OCP) was established in the early 1990s. Its mission was to have a safe community in which all citizens share in the responsibility to eliminate violence and the illegal use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs through a comprehensive and coordinated community response that recognizes the strengths of families and neighborhoods.

OCP was reorganized as part of the PACT process to ensure a close linkage between PACT, Safe Futures, and OCP. The result was a joint collaboration between OCP and UNOmaha with staffing support for OCP provided by the university in cooperation with the U.S. Attorney's office. OCP staff are housed adjacent to the Safe Futures Consortium staff at UNOmaha's downtown facility. OCP carries out a wide range of activities focused on public awareness, training, prevention programming, and technical assistance services. Safe Futures supports OCP by helping to establish policy direction and providing research support for projects subsequently implemented by OCP staff.

A major advantage of the bridge between OCP and UNOmaha is that the OCP Board of Directors, a policymaking body, is composed of top leaders in the community. These individuals can communicate program ideas and initiatives to the broader community through their own member organizations.

Community Outreach Partnership Center

The UNOmaha COPC was initiated in January 1998 through funding from HUD. HUD's purpose in the program is to facilitate partnerships between institutions of higher education and communities to solve urban problems through research, outreach, and the exchange of information. Building on CPACS', DPA's, and UNOmaha's shift toward urban outreach and resulting programming, the UNOmaha COPC grant is enabling the university to expand its level of outreach activities and further integrate the university with the community.

A major objective is to intensify activities in Omaha's Enterprise Community (EC) while unifying the department's community service activities under one administrative umbrella. Target project areas include neighborhood development, youth crime prevention, and public housing issues, as illustrated by the following current projects.

Project Impact is a strategic crime intervention, interdiction, and prevention effort headed by a HUD-supported minority doctoral development student experienced in law enforcement. Through his leadership, a broad range of local, State, and Federal agencies are working together to target habitual offenders within the Omaha EC. Community task forces identify critical prevention strategies and resources that will offer offenders a way out of crime.

The Community Fellows program uses COPC funds to broaden the outreach of programs in individual neighborhoods. Four students (fellows) work in neighborhood-based projects: City Sprouts, an inner-city gardening project; vacant lot inventory, including research on ownership, liens, environmental conditions and concerns, and possible alternative uses; neighborhood asset inventory with New Community Development, a north Omaha housing development organization; and helping the Campus of Hope to develop intake and evaluation mechanisms, funding proposals, and volunteer recruitment strategies.

A third key project is Safety Net, a multidisciplinary team approach to developing comprehensive, neighborhood-based school safety strategies. The project seeks to develop overall environmental/policy assessment and relationship-building, review internal school climate and crisis preparedness, and define and formalize ongoing school partnerships. Safety Net is in place in seven public secondary schools serving students from Omaha's Weed and Seed Strategy area and EC.

The continuation and enhancement of the Family Mentoring Program begun under OFSP was made possible by COPC funding. This program continues to fill an important niche in Omaha's Hispanic community.

The UNOmaha COPC is viewed as a vehicle by which the entire university can become more involved in the city's most economically distressed areas. Its numerous mechanisms broaden the range of student and faculty involvement in community service and applied research activities. As it builds upon the activities and relationships developed through past initiatives, the COPC serves as a unifying force for university-community outreach.

Lessons Learned

Describing how UNOmaha's community-based outreach program was built is intended to serve as more than a compilation of accomplishments. Indeed, its most important contribution may be to impart some degree of wisdom about what was learned along the journey. Certainly not all experiences were positive, but they far outweighed the negative or indifferent. The following section describes the most important lessons learned from these experiences.

Past Collaborations Important to Funders

Funding sources are much more likely to support programs that can demonstrate a record of funding, successful completion of collaborative projects, and effective management of funds. Clearly, this was the case for UNOmaha. Without a reputation of successfully working with community organizations and government agencies, long-term funding would have been unlikely.

To illustrate, the successful implementation of the PACT project enhanced the proposal for funding from the U.S. Department of Education for the Omaha Family Support Program. It allowed UNOmaha to continue efforts and build on previous successes. Likewise, by funding Neighborhood Builders for 4 years, the local Weed and Seed Strategy board of directors had confidence that UNOmaha faculty and staff could help build and manage an effective program. Funding for the COPC was based at least partly on the fact that UNOmaha had already completed a number of collaborative projects and could enhance those projects and initiate new ones.

Personal Relationships

Good personal relationships are a principal component of successful collaborative projects. They are important in two ways. First, the project proceeds more smoothly if the participants get along well. Second, the residents of distressed communities that are being served by the collaborative will gain faster and more complete access to resources if the key agency providers can work together. Without that collaboration, the level and type of resources required for change are often not available and existing resources are often ineffectively or inappropriately applied. An often overlooked component for successful coordination and collaboration among agencies is trust among leaders and staffs.

Trust and relationships played a key role in the evolution of community outreach at UNOmaha. The relationships were based on a mutual vision of community needs, a history of working well together, and a general belief that individuals could be trusted to maintain integrity and not breach confidences. It is worth mentioning here that personal relationships may be formed long before a collaborative project begins. The key players in the PACT project had a working relationship and shared vision prior to the start of the project.

Simple Organizational Structure

A flat, simplified organizational structure generally works best for collaborative activities. It streamlines implementation and fosters better relations if partners have equal or

near-equal rank in decisionmaking. Methods and frequency of communication, task delegation, and decisionmaking avenues need to be agreed upon by all parties. Otherwise, the lack of structure will be a barrier instead of a benefit.

The PACT process is a good example of how a horizontal structure can work. Partners decided early in the process how decisions would be made and who needed to be involved in which decisions. They decided that all critical process design factors required strong consensus among all since the design was the framework for subsequent activities. Logistics and other working decisions could be left to the discretion of one or two persons.

Another advantage of a flat structure is that weighty decisions will have the tone of the group's thinking rather than that of a single person at the top. A group decision is likely to be more similar to the community partnership's view than a single person's view.

Informal Process

Collaborative projects can get bogged down by a complicated structure, one that requires very formal processes and procedures. A streamlined, informal structure can enable the working team to maintain flexibility and be ready for quick changes.

The PACT team determined its process early through planning meetings. This helped the group in planning the overall PACT process which was virtually invented along the way. It also is important for team members to understand the process flow to minimize misunderstandings and frustration.

Most important is the ability of the team to maintain efficiency. It is the nature of collaborative projects to be complicated and time-consuming, making it even more critical to pare down the red tape. Operational flexibility allows the team to consider the current environment, recent project experience, and other inevitable changes. Naturally, not all projects can operate informally, but even within restricted environments, flexibility should be retained if possible.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

In a community partnering process, there cannot be too much communication among internal and external project partners. This means not only meeting together often, but making sure all participating partners are informed so they feel included, thus fostering trust. Communication can occur in a number of ways: face-to-face meetings, e-mail, newsletters, telephone conversations, regular timely minutes of meetings, etc. Communication must be continuous to sustain the collaborative.

Communication was a high priority for OFSP. The project manager met monthly with provider agencies and other UNOmaha faculty and staff to share the vision of the project, current progress toward completion of tasks, and commonalities across tasks and among agencies. Minutes and agendas were distributed prior to meetings.

Although most meetings were held on UNOmaha's campus, some were held in the community partners' offices. This gave the partners a chance to explain their operations and needed resources. The result of OFSP communications has been an ongoing effort to implement programs and activities among the original partners even though funding for the initial effort has ended.

Shared Vision

All members of a partnership must share a similar vision. Without this, the ordinary stresses of collaborative work, such as distrust, personal and political agendas, lack of common goals, and resource constraints, can torpedo a project. It is important that the vision be kept in front of the group even if it means occasional reminders of the reasons they are working on the project in the first place. Although the programs described here changed directions several times, they remained in line with the original vision.

Visibility of the University

When the university is the center of a community partnership, the community needs to be aware of it. It is important to hold meetings on campus, invite university officials to pertinent meetings of the partnership, and to speak publicly about the project and the university's role in it. This is not simply to brag about the university but to solidify the public's view of the university as an institution with expertise, interest, and enthusiasm in working with the community. Faculty and staff should be invited to facilitate meetings, report data findings, provide training, and other activities that bring them and the university closer to the community.

One of the dividends of being a good friend to the community is that the community holds the university in high esteem, often matching loyalty with endowments. Other rewards include prestige, respect, pride, and trust.

Linking and Integrating University Resources

One of the key issues facing CPACS and UNOmaha as it began to assess its increased role in community outreach was how to capitalize on its strengths as an institution and only attempt activities that were consistent with its mission or within its abilities. This assessment led to a clarification of what roles the university is best suited to play.

First, the key was to engage students into various aspects of the outreach efforts. As a result, graduate assistantships were seen as a primary area for funding. In this way students could help pay for their education and gain valuable experience in public and nonprofit agencies. The agencies themselves gain staffing support they otherwise could not afford.

Second, CPACS approached its involvement in a way that integrated faculty and staff in projects. They acted as project directors, project managers, facilitators, experts in project design and strategic planning, to name a few. When possible, these personnel would be paid directly for their efforts. At other times, their salaries were part of the project match. This type of integration takes a dean or other official who knows the kind of expertise available in the college, as well as knowing who has time and interest in becoming involved in the project. Not every faculty or staff member is interested in working in community partnerships.

The location of initiatives within the academic units (that is, the Department of Public Administration) worked better than in a separate institute or center because of the assumption that the departments are closer to their faculty and staff than a center would be and coordination is less cumbersome. There is a higher degree of understanding and enthusiasm within a department if the entire project is contained within, with the exception of external partners.

Third, staffing for the outreach efforts drew heavily from recent graduates or current students in the Masters of Public Administration, and the Masters of Urban Studies programs, and from doctoral programs in public administration and criminal justice. More than 30 students have been involved in outreach activities since CPACS expanded its efforts in this area. Their involvement with a host of community partners has been as community consultants, program assistants and coordinators, technical assistants, trainers, and researchers. In addition, over 100 students have been engaged in service-learning projects such as program evaluation, survey research, and tutoring. This involvement provides a strong linkage among the service agencies, students, and the university.

Finally, it was the view of CPACS that facilitation, management, and research were much more appropriate activities for the university than were direct program delivery efforts. For this reason, where program delivery was needed, efforts were made to identify and collaborate with existing provider agencies who had both adequate capacity and appropriate orientation for the task at hand. Omaha Family Support was the best example of this approach. CPAC's School of Social Work provided faculty support for design and evaluation for the Family Mentoring Project while the Chicano Awareness Center did the actual project delivery. Similarly, UNOmaha contracted with the YWCA for the domestic violence intervention advocacy and Experience Education for parenting education components. Actual project management and facilitation was carried out by the university. Safe Futures has a similar approach using UNOmaha faculty and staff to carry out facilitation, project management, design, research, and planning support while various community agencies deliver program services.

UNOmaha is viewed by many in the community as a willing and able partner in community efforts. This partnership is one where the university can truly contribute to the community in ways other than providing education, its primary mission. Community involvement enables the university to enrich its students and faculty by providing expertise and service on the one hand while receiving knowledge and experience from the community on the other.

The Future of Outreach at UNOmaha

Projects described in this article comprise a progressive effort at community outreach. The past 6 years have been valuable opportunities for university faculty, staff, and administrators to see just what community outreach is, what it takes to do it well, and where the university fits in the partnership. With a new emphasis on service learning in higher education, universities with experience in their communities should have a distinct advantage in developing programs. In a climate where taxpaying citizens are asking for greater spending accountability, universities need to strengthen their relationships with their citizens as they are dependent on the citizenry for students, tax support in the case of public institutions, and endowments.

The College of Public Affairs and Community Service and the Department of Public Administration have a shared vision of community service and a record of community partnerships. It will be well-positioned for the future community relationships proposed in UNOmaha's strategic plan.

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