

Capacity Building and Governance in El Cenizo

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Abstract

A service-learning course at the University of Texas at Austin (UT), with the support of HUD's Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) program, created an opportunity to explore issues of local governance in a colonia of South Texas. The Urban Issues Program at UT organized a graduate course in collaboration with the community of El Cenizo to improve the performance of its local government. Following a description of the unique development challenges of the colonias, the article describes the participatory action research model adopted in this project and explains how youth development became the mechanism adopted to promote community change and to enhance government performance. In drawing lessons from this experience, the article reflects on issues of governance and community capacity building as well as power and reciprocity in university-community relations.

Prelude

I want to begin this article with a story (Delgado, 1995a, 1995b; Bell, 1992). In fall 1978 my *jefe* came home shaken and disturbed because he had just been informed that the rent for our apartment was going to double from \$50 to \$100. This was significant because at that point my father, a farmworker and laborer, was making minimum wage and raising a family of six, with the oldest of the children in college. None of us were aware of the public policy behind this decision, but at that point it didn't matter. My parents were forced to look for alternatives to government housing. I still remember that rainy fall day when we sat around the table and discussed all options before us; at that point we had none. We talked about issues of schooling, housing, and economics as we searched for options. My parents, like most parents who find themselves in this situation, were very concerned about the education, the future, and the well-being of their children.

After several weeks of discussions and searching for alternatives, a new option appeared—to buy a lot outside of town. We were to be the second family to move into what became a *colonia*. This lot was on a five-acre strip of land with no running water, no electricity, no phone lines, and no garbage collection. In summary, this property had no infrastructure. Over the next several months, we derooted part

of the property and cleared the area where our house, and I'm being generous in calling it a house, was to be placed. The structure that would be our house for the next 4 years was a dilapidated older model trailer home. While living in this trailer, we convinced an electric utility company to run lines to the property, but for water we had to run over a quarter of a mile of PVC pipes from a canal mainly used for irrigation. We used this water for washing clothes and bathing, but the drinking water had to be hauled in a 10-gallon thermos from town. For sewage, we dug a hole and built a septic tank, agreeing that this was a better alternative than an outhouse. For the next 4 years we weathered the elements, especially the devastating freeze that hit South Texas in 1983. We stayed warm by burning mesquite wood outside and bringing the coals into the trailer home, which helped to keep the house heated as we congregated in the small common space to keep each other warm. And then there were those blistering hot South Texas summers. We survived by getting out of the house, hiding under the trees, and continuously washing off with the water hose. This of course was when we were not working in the packing shed or the fields. There were also those rainy days when we had to walk on the chalky, lime gravel road to catch the school bus; during those days the bus would never enter the colonia.

Those days were hard for my family and me, but things did improve. We eventually built a house and got running water. The road was paved, and now the children living here are picked up at their front door by the school bus. On Thanksgiving Day, 1998, we celebrated our 20th year of living in this colonia. We can sit in a warm living room and watch football on TV. Most important, we can sit around the dining room table and see, among pictures that cover the wall, college diplomas that are strategically placed as a social and political statement. To my parents, who have lived in the United States for 30 years and who to this date do not speak English, the house and the diplomas represent not only their success but also the success of the democratic society in which we live. But before I get too patriotic, however, my parents would be the first to say that they achieved their success in spite of the many challenges and hurdles that this same society placed before them. Unfortunately, many of the over 350,000 people still living in the colonias today have not been as lucky in experiencing this success.

Miguel Guajardo

Colonias are unincorporated subdivisions, built outside city limits, located on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. These communities have long struggled for adequate housing and public infrastructure. As economically poor communities, they face this struggle with very limited resources and a governmental structure not entirely responsive to their needs. This article describes the efforts to acquire housing and infrastructure and to enhance governmental performance in El Cenizo, a Texas colonia outside Laredo. The efforts in El Cenizo involve a wide range of actors, but special attention will be given to a series of service-learning initiatives undertaken by the Urban Issues Program (UIP) at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) with support of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) through its Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) program.

The UT project builds upon earlier efforts of the community in El Cenizo, which have been supported by Texas Rural Legal Aid (TRLA) and the Texas Low Income Housing Information Service (TxLIHIS). For many years, these organizations have provided legal and community development assistance to the government of El Cenizo and to

nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) located there. The COPC-supported service-learning activities were undertaken between spring 1996 and summer 1998 and included the placement of UT students on internships in El Cenizo, a policy research initiative on El Cenizo and other colonias (Chapa, 1997a, 1997b), and a semester-long community development project that will be discussed in some detail in this article. This last activity was initiated as a response to the great frustration in the community concerning the performance of its local government and the other governmental agencies involved in infrastructure provision. After a series of discussions in the community, the initiative decided to focus on capacity building and improvement in local government through youth development.

Three principal questions are explored in this article. First, how can the performance of government be enhanced in small, low-income communities like El Cenizo? Second, how can community involvement in government in low-income communities be enhanced? Finally, how can university service-learning projects and other outreach initiatives be framed to facilitate capacity building and government performance in such communities?

The article is composed of four sections. The first briefly describes the colonias of South Texas for those readers who may be unfamiliar with the setting. The second presents the conceptual frame of reference for the university-community initiative, which draws on a concept of governance defined as the relationship between civil society and government. The effectiveness of governmental action depends on the extent to which citizens are organized and politically active as well as the capacity of government itself. The third section examines El Cenizo using this framework. A brief history of the community is presented, emphasizing its various efforts to acquire local public services. Then the capacity of local government in El Cenizo, particularly in terms of municipal finance and infrastructure provision, is assessed. The final section of the article focuses on the COPC-supported initiative to improve governance. The initiative, involving UT graduate students, adopted a youth development approach to community change. Because the UIP has used several service-learning models in its university-community partnerships, these will be described as well as the process by which youth development was identified as the approach chosen to promote community change and to enhance government performance in El Cenizo. The article concludes with a discussion of lessons learned concerning governance, youth development, and service learning.

Background

The Colonias of South Texas

The Texas-Mexico frontier represents one of the most unique regions of the United States. In 1993 the population of the 43-county region was 3.9 million (Sharp, 1998). The region displays very poor socioeconomic conditions. The poverty rate among the entire population in 1993 was 29.5 percent, but among school age children (5 to 17 years of age) poverty was 38 percent (Sharp, 1998). Eleven of the counties were among the poorest 1 percent of all counties in the United States, with per capita incomes of less than \$10,840 (Sharp, 1998). Education levels and personal income are low, and the region performs poorly on a range of health indicators (Sharp, 1998). The population is overwhelmingly Mexican-American and has grown rapidly for the last several decades. The North American Free Trade Agreement has accelerated migration to the area, and by the year 2020 the region is expected to have 6.3 million residents experiencing a rate of growth exceeding that of the State as a whole (Sharp, 1998).

The prevailing low incomes and rapid population growth have created extreme pressures on housing markets. Among the few affordable housing options available for this growing population is the purchase of a lot in a colonia. In a 1995 update of earlier surveys, the

Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) identified 1,436 colonias with an estimated population of 339,041 (Texas Water Development Board, 1995) (see exhibit 1). Some of the worst housing conditions in the Nation, however, are found in colonias (Ward, 1999). Most have unpaved roads and poor drainage, a problem compounded in the many colonias located in the Rio Grande floodplain. In 1988 half the colonias indicated that flooding was a problem (Texas Department of Human Services, 1988). The Texas Department of Human Services (TDHS) found that almost 24 percent of colonia households did not have treated water in the home and the 1990 census indicated that 50 percent of rural colonias and 20 percent of urban colonias had incomplete interior plumbing. TWDB estimated in 1995 that 428 colonias, housing approximately 81,000 people, needed potable water facilities, and that 1,195 colonias, housing 232,000 residents, needed wastewater treatment facilities (Texas Water Development Board, 1995). The inadequate housing and infrastructure services generated some of the worst health conditions in the country. Tuberculosis, hepatitis, salmonellae, and other water-related diseases were found at elevated levels (University of Texas-Pan American, 1991).

Exhibit 1

Along the Border Region of Texas

Colonias are denoted by light gray in the counties that border Mexico.



Community organizations in South Texas, particularly several associated with the Industrial Areas Foundation, helped develop and promote the adoption of the Economically Distressed Areas Program (EDAP) in 1989 by the State legislature (Wilson, 1997). This program provides financing to eligible governments for construction of water and wastewater systems. In this and later legislation, powers were given to the Texas Attorney General to enforce compliance with a variety of development standards and infrastructure provisions by developers of colonias. Today many State agencies, including the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA), Texas Agricultural Extension Service, TDHS, and several Federal agencies, including HUD, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development office, make special funding available for colonias.

Progress has occurred slowly, and the colonia problem is a significant element of the Texas policy agenda (Ward, 1999). But the intergovernmental context for responding to the colonias problems and implementing programs is very complex. Compared with other States, Texas has a decentralized and fragmented governmental system. County government is relatively weak, with very limited land-use control powers and very limited responsibility for the types of infrastructure systems needed in the colonias. In contrast, the home rule powers of city government, especially annexation powers, are quite strong. There are many types of special districts, including water districts organized to serve agriculture interests. Other than funds for public school systems there is limited State aid for local governments.

Inadequate infrastructure in colonias often results from private developers failing to fulfill their commitments. Although there are a number of alternative arrangements for the provision of water and wastewater, a variety of impediments exist for each. Agriculture-based water supply corporations have not provided services to colonias, although rapid urbanization, shifts in the economy, and difficult climatic conditions (freezes and droughts) have displaced some agricultural production. In these areas, water corporations have been more interested in alternative supply arrangements (Wilson, 1997). Another potential solution to infrastructure provision for colonias adjacent or close to cities is annexation. The expense of annexation is significant, but State and Federal authorities have tried to facilitate this solution.

These solutions, however, are not applicable to El Cenizo, and the community's choice was to incorporate. Once incorporated, the city commission became responsible for responding to community needs. The local governance process in El Cenizo will be discussed below, after a number of conceptual points concerning governance are considered.

Why Governance?

The term *governance* is frequently used in a normative sense with a concern for identifying characteristics of good governance. This article adopts a different purpose and will use a conception of governance that provides a framework for understanding the challenges to effective government action in El Cenizo. Governance is defined for purposes of this article as the relationship between the civil society and government in determining governmental action (Wilson, 1998). Civil society refers to those organized segments of society outside the public sector, including civil associations, community organizations, social movements, trade unions, and religious organizations. Governmental action is broadly construed to include public-sector investments and governmental operations. Although government or government-designated entities are undertaking the actions, decisions concerning which actions to take result from some form of interaction between government and civil society.

Organization in Civil Society

People associate for many different reasons. Common concerns or interests can originate in religion, tribe, race and ethnicity, geography, and class, among other reasons. Perhaps the most prominent associations for communal activities are religious organizations, but individuals participate in political parties, occupational associations, business groups, philanthropic and social organizations, athletic clubs, schools, neighborhood associations, and many others. Such groups or associations can connect an individual to the broader society by providing values and norms that help individuals understand and interpret society and act in it. Gatherings of individuals provide opportunities for casual conversation concerning the day's events and fostering shared values about a society. Through continual face-to-face interactions, community problems are defined, solutions are proposed, and consensus is reached.

Robert Putnam (1993) defines associations as social structures of cooperation that provide avenues for groups to pursue common objectives. Participation in these groups provides a mechanism by which individuals can engage in political life and can instill a sense of responsibility for action. In societies with large numbers of organizations, multiple membership is likely, thus creating networks of people and organizations. Where such organizations and networks are plentiful, one can speak of civil society being highly organized and having high levels of social capital. These associations and networks allow members to be more efficient and productive, just as physical capital allows workers to be more efficient.

For social capital to play a constructive role in governance, some associations must be concerned with affecting governmental action. NGOs are an increasingly common form of civil society organization and are usually very much concerned with public policy issues. An NGO in El Cenizo, *Gente Aliada Para Mejorar El Cenizo*, (People Allied To Improve El Cenizo), was organized for the purpose of pressuring local government to resolve infrastructure deficiencies. The range of NGO activities includes informing the public on policy issues, advocating in policy formation (Wilson, 1997), and even delivering public services (Smith and Lipsky, 1993). This last role has become more common as devolution brings more decentralized service delivery systems. But the precarious financial base of many of these organizations often limits their effectiveness and may even create conflicts between policy advocacy and organizational survival.

In the El Cenizo project, described below, a youth development approach was adopted. Historically, youth have been viewed as contributing little to their communities and civil society. Spending much of their time in school, youth have very rarely been considered participants in public or organizational life but rather passive recipients of change, policies, rules, and programs (Fullan, 1991). In the 1970s, Bowles and Gintis wrote, "Why in a democratic society, should an individual's first real contact with a formal institution be so profoundly anti-democratic?" (Bowles and Gintis, 1976.) In the absence of student engagement and lack of meaningful participation, young people have historically been denied the role of citizen, the "most powerful person in a democracy." (McKnight, 1997.)

The 1990s brought a shift in the philosophical stance on the role of youth and their participation in civil society. Calls for including students in the planning, designing, and implementation of the change process in schools have been made (Fullan, 1991). Beyond the school yard, youth are viewed as change agents, and youth development is believed to be a critical component of community change and development (Pittman, 1996). John Terry argues that society must not look at youth as natural resources to be developed and exploited but as an element of society with which power must be shared (Terry, 1998). To John McKnight (1997), youth are "community assets" that must be invited, trained, and included in the process of developing a stronger democracy and civil society. The youth in El Cenizo proved to be very good partners for addressing issues of governance.

Capacity in Local Government

For effective governance to exist, governments must have the capacity to act. This capacity results from formally assigned competencies and available administrative, human, and financial resources. Although Texas provides extensive discretion to home rule cities, El Cenizo, as a general law city, only has those competencies specifically authorized or permitted by State statute (Texas Municipal League, 1995). But effective local government action depends not only on assigned competencies and administrative capacity, but also on the intergovernmental context in which it operates. Local governments are linked to higher

levels of government in several different ways, including through constitutional and statutory frameworks, fiscal relations, and joint responsibilities of program implementation.

The fiscal framework for Texas cities, created through State legislation, forces municipal governments to be almost entirely self-supporting, with few fiscal transfers from the State to cities. Although local decisionmaking and local control of own-source revenues are sound principles, the governmental capacity to administer local tax systems must be present. The community of El Cenizo faces the additional difficulty of having a very weak tax base, as described below. Taxpayers in El Cenizo, as others in Texas and elsewhere in the country, resist tax increases and thus constrain growth in local revenue.

Another challenge to effectiveness in local government is the growing importance of interorganizational relations (Wilson, 1998). Given the trend toward less hierarchical structures, cooperation among government agencies, or between agencies and NGOs, in the performance of a single task increases. Organizations must become adept at cooperating and undertaking tasks as an element in a network of organizations. This element of government capacity will be important in assessing governance in El Cenizo.

Linking the Citizen and Local Government

Relationships between civil society and government take many forms. Although a one-way connection between civil society and government—that is, in democratic societies, societal needs and demands are expected to induce government action—tends to be emphasized, the interaction is indeed two-way. Government action can impede or facilitate the articulation of common demands and interests in civil society. In other words, government institutions may be able to shape or limit the demands of society. The complex intergovernmental context for colonia development, for example, shapes the way in which community needs are articulated, as will be seen below.

The nature and quality of interaction between civil society and government will depend on conditions in civil society and on the capacity of government to perform. With regard to civil society, the degree of organization in a society, the so-called level of social capital, conditions governance. Weakly organized civil societies face difficulties in articulating social priorities and demands and will likely lack the means to influence government action or hold government accountability. The lack of capacity to act effectively reduces the quality of governance regardless of the degree of organization in civil society. A weakly organized society or an incapable government can constrain the interaction between the two and thus lead to ineffective government action.

Citizen participation in policymaking can take many different forms. Participation can occur in public hearings when individuals and groups consult with public officials. Through public protests and social movements, groups can communicate with officials and the broader public, even when their message may be resisted. Another form of citizen involvement occurs when officials or outcomes of agencies and programs are scrutinized and compared with previously established goals. An independent local press can facilitate this type of public accountability. In yet another form, political resources can be mobilized by groups for the purpose of placing issues on the public agenda and securing the adoption of specific policies (Wilson, 1997). For many issues, such as environmental policy, groups must acquire technical resources and expertise to be effective in the agenda-setting process.

Citizen participation can also occur as policy is implemented. The policy decisions taken by legislative bodies often leave much discretion to implementing agencies in terms of the specific actions to be undertaken. Decisions concerning siting of facilities or infrastructure

investments may rest in the hands of administrative officials. When hidden from public view and scrutiny, officials may be subject to class or ethnic biases that lead to actions inconsistent with the broader public will and, perhaps, even inconsistent with the elected governing body. Decisions on the location of infrastructure investments can result in great windfalls to private interests. When local governments award franchises or regulate businesses, the possibilities for graft and corruption are high. Public involvement in the monitoring of government practices, which may establish the legitimacy of government action, is essential to democratic practice.

Members of government are also members of society and, as a result, have multiple interests and obligations. A citizen that assumes a function in government does not lose his or her role in civil society or civil organizations. This point has particular importance for small communities. Elected officials are members of government institutions, but they may also remain members of the local community. In El Cenizo, some individuals chose to run for elected office because they felt they could effectively serve the community's interest by addressing the infrastructure problem as a member of the city commission. Sometimes more narrow interests, including the interests of a developer, may influence elected officials.

Community Participation and Municipal Capacity in El Cenizo

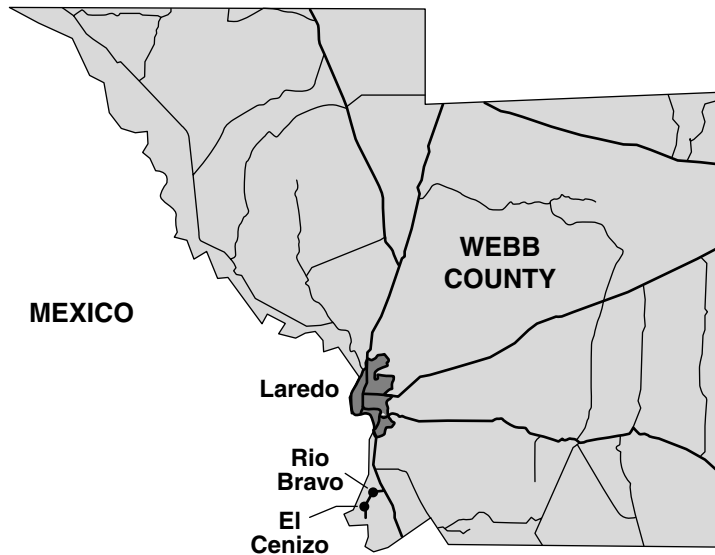
In this section, the governance concept is used as a frame of reference for describing El Cenizo. Particular attention is given to the history and nature of community participation in obtaining local services and to the ability of the municipal government to offer services. Given this assessment of governance in El Cenizo, the following section describes the university-community effort to enhance government capacity.

El Cenizo is located 17 miles from Laredo, one of the most rapidly growing cities in the country (see exhibit 2). In 1995, the population of the city was 155,877 but is expected to grow to 189,000 by 2000 and 247,000 by 2010. The low average incomes (39 percent of families are very low-income) and high housing costs produce one of the least affordable housing markets in the Nation (Chapa and Eaton, 1997a, 1997b; Ward, 1999). As in other parts of the border, low-income families have the option of locating in the 43 colonias in Webb County, which in 1995 housed approximately 17,000 residents (Texas Water Development Board, 1995).

El Cenizo is adjacent to the Rio Grande River in a rural setting surrounded by cacti, mesquite trees, and Cenizo shrubs, from which the town received its name. It consists of 900 lots on 306 acres, with 3,500 residents in 1997 (Texas Water Development Board, 1998). Almost all residents are of Mexican origin, and a 1992 survey found 82 percent were legal residents (Texas Low-Income Housing Information Service, 1992). The average family income in 1997 was approximately \$10,000 a year, and the average education level for the head of household was 6th grade (Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs, 1997). Despite its rural setting, the occupational structure of its residents has an urban character (see exhibit 3). The community has churches from many denominations, including Catholic, Baptist, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutheran, and Pentecostal; three retail trade stores; and an assortment of service shops.

Exhibit 2

Webb County and El Cenizo



Source: Adapted from the Texas Water Development Board Web site, <http://www.twdb.state.tx.us/colonias/index.htm>, August 1998.

Exhibit 3

Occupation of Head of Household

Industry	Share Of Total Employment (%)
Agricultural	10.6
Manufacturing	4.0
Construction	28.2
Retail Trade	5.5
Professional	7.3
Service	27.8
Other Industry	16.5

Source: Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs, May 1997.

Standard Realty Investors initiated the El Cenizo development in 1983, and most residents moved there after 1985. After several years of legal problems and bankruptcy, D&A Realty, an enterprise with which the original developer was associated, purchased Standard Realty's holdings. Quarter-acre lots were sold for \$50 down and \$85 a month on contract for deeds that would be paid in full in less than 10 years. Although the developer argued that these flexible purchase arrangements responded to the somewhat precarious financial situation of residents, the contracts often became negatively amortized, and the debt grew each month.

El Cenizo was marketed to residents of Laredo who were unable to find affordable housing in Laredo. The developer promised adequate infrastructure would be built in the future. Failure to provide a wastewater facility on a timely basis led to lawsuits brought by local residents, with assistance from TRLA, and D&A Realty was ordered to establish a trust fund that would finance the construction of a sewer plant. Completed in 1988, the plant failed to meet building and environmental standards and was found to pollute the Rio Grande.

The community voted to incorporate as a general law city in 1989. It was believed that as a legally constituted jurisdiction the community would be better able to take advantage of a number of resources and programs. For example, after incorporation El Cenizo became eligible to submit a grant proposal to the State's EDAP program.

Complaints from the city, State, and county regulators against D&A Realty continued to be filed, and in November 1990 the Texas Attorney General's Office obtained a \$1.2 million settlement against the company that would be used to finance infrastructure in El Cenizo (Office of the Attorney General, 1998). The infrastructure improvement trust was removed from D&A Realty's control. Legal actions against D&A Realty continued, and the owner filed for bankruptcy protection in 1992. The presiding judge temporarily denied D&A's motion and initiated an investigation of infrastructure provision in El Cenizo. The consultant's report confirmed the grossly inadequate provision of infrastructure, including a report on failure in the wastewater system that posed real and immediate emergency conditions (Rauschuber, 1993). The report led to a court-ordered reorganization of D&A's property in El Cenizo. A hearing on the plan was held for El Cenizo residents, who approved the plan by a vote of 500 to 4; it then became effective in 1995. The case was hailed as a model for colonias litigation (Elder, 1995).

The Texas State Affordable Housing Corporation (TSAHC), a nonprofit organization affiliated with TDHCA, purchased 576 of the 662 lots remaining from the D&A assets held in the creditor's trust. TSAHC converted the contract for deed to mortgages, and the Attorney General recalculated the contract balances, eliminating D&A's unfair charges. The lots were then resold to El Cenizo property owners with financing at below-market interest rates. Any surplus was to be transferred by TSAHC to a nonprofit organization, the El Cenizo Infrastructure Corporation (ECIC), created to administer these funds. These funds were earmarked for infrastructure improvements, particularly sewerage and street paving, and for home improvement loans. Streets and sewer lines, which backed up sewage into homes, were primary concerns of residents, while the State and county governments were deeply concerned with the near-crisis-level situation of the water systems.

The initial flow of funds to ECIC from TSAHC was far below expectation. TSAHC argued that residents were not making sufficient payments to generate any excess over expenses. The NGO formed by El Cenizo residents in 1995, Gente Aliada Para Mejorar El Cenizo, turned its attention to implementation of the bankruptcy plan. Utilizing a strategy successful in gaining access to the city's financial records, Gente Aliada, with assistance from TRLA, filed an open records request with TSAHC. In addition, Gente Aliada pressured ECIC to move the site of its meetings from Laredo to El Cenizo and to seek an accounting from TSAHC concerning the disbursement of funds. A proposal from TSAHC for a cash settlement to ECIC was rejected when it was determined to be inferior to the original bankruptcy settlement.

In 1997 a petition with the signatures of 300 El Cenizo residents requested that the bankruptcy judge intervene to help the community realize the promises of the bankruptcy plan. The petition expressed concerns about TSAHC's management of its El Cenizo assets and the seemingly excessively high administrative costs charged for lot payment collection.

A settlement was reached in late March 1998 that substantially improved prospects for the community (United States Bankruptcy Court, 1998). Its provisions included:

- A \$250,000 allocation from TSAHC to ECIC for home improvement loans for the residents of El Cenizo.
- A \$1 million allocation of HOME funds to ECIC to be used in a program to finance home improvements and new construction of single-family housing for El Cenizo residents.
- TDHCA will dedicate \$685,000 in Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to Webb County “to be used exclusively for the infrastructure improvements, specifically street improvements, in the City of El Cenizo.” In addition, the settlement commits most of ECIC’s existing funds to housing projects. With the influx of funds under the terms of the settlement, the role of ECIC has changed. Initially formed to administer the net revenue funds from lot payments to TSAHC in infrastructure provision, ECIC was not intended to have a long life. Now, however, ECIC must expand its role to administer more than \$1.5 million in home improvement funds.

Some functions performed by the ECIC reasonably might be considered the responsibility of the El Cenizo government, particularly the administration of grants for street paving and other infrastructure. Only one member of the original ECIC board was a resident of the local community, although most members were involved in public service, including representatives of the county, the city of Laredo, and the local school district. But ECIC was created under the unique circumstances of the bankruptcy settlement and represented an interlocal governmental effort to secure public services that had been ineffectively provided by a private developer. The presence of ECIC in its expanded role, as well as the county’s involvement in street paving, underscore the need for El Cenizo to seek interlocal agreements; the community does not have the capacity to provide these services itself. The community benefits from capital projects being funded and administered by other governmental agencies, including Webb County, TSAHC, and ECIC. A challenge will emerge once these projects are completed because these agencies are not likely to fund operating costs nor manage operations in the future.

Municipal Government and Financial Resources

The Texas Municipal League states that the principal purposes of city governance and financial management are to determine what the city needs, to incorporate the will of the people in the decisionmaking process, to consider all possible routes of action, and to reach and implement decisions (Texas Municipal League, 1995). The El Cenizo City Commission consists of three elected officials, a mayor and two commissioners, who manage and direct all city business. A city hall secretary provides administrative support, but the commission itself must serve the roles of city manager and treasurer, two critical roles in city governance and financial management.

The small size of El Cenizo allows the possibility of direct citizen participation in the decisions of its government, but actual practice has fallen short of this ideal. Relatively few people attend city hall meetings on a regular basis, complicating the process of informing the local community about issues and decisions taken by the commission. The lack of a local newsletter or newspaper further restricts the flow of information. The members of the current city commission, elected in 1995, had little training or experience in governmental and financial management before assuming office, leading to a lack of well-defined roles in city staff and uncertainty about policy direction.

One difficulty resulted from inadequate fiscal capacity. El Cenizo's first budget was prepared in spring 1997 with the assistance of a law school student from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, who facilitated community meetings. The budget writing process is of fundamental importance in producing effective government. Through the budget process, estimates of revenues are made, and priorities are set for the use of these revenues. The budget provides the baseline for fiscal accountability of local officials. The budget for El Cenizo estimated that during the 1997–98 fiscal year, the city would receive slightly more than \$83,000 from three revenue sources, compared with actual revenues in the previous year of \$20,742 from two sources.

One source of revenue is sales tax. During the 1996–97 budget cycle, El Cenizo received \$888, remitted by the State tax collection system. During the 1995–96 fiscal year, the sales tax receipts exceeded \$1,000, but a number of businesses ceased operating, leading to lower revenues. This revenue source depends directly on the level of income of El Cenizo residents and to the opportunities for making purchases in businesses located in El Cenizo.

The 1997–98 revenue projection assumed that a second source of revenue, a property tax, would be implemented and would start generating revenues. El Cenizo Ordinance Number 008 created a property tax system, including provisions for collection of property taxes and exemptions for some classes of individuals. The city system was to take advantage of the existing county property tax system, which appraised property values and collected taxes for various jurisdictions, such as cities and school districts. The Webb County Tax Assessor's Office appraised total taxable value in El Cenizo and the commission set a tax rate of \$.715 per hundred dollars of assessed value. The commission estimated that it would receive \$58,143 in revenues from property taxes. The city had difficulty implementing the system and was not able to come to terms with the collection agent for most of the year. In summer 1998 an Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs intern successfully negotiated a tax collection agreement with Webb County. The city commission, elected in 1998, lowered the tax rate and expected collections to approach \$45,000 for the year.

The third source of revenue in El Cenizo is franchise fees that are collected from utility companies that utilize rights-of-way in El Cenizo, such as the Central Power Line (CPL) of Laredo and Southwestern Bell Telephone. During the 1996–97 budget cycle, the city received \$19,854.10 from CPL and received approximately \$1,000 every 3 months from Southwestern Bell. El Cenizo has joined other communities in a class action suit against a pipeline company, which has refused to pay for usage of rights-of-way. In summer 1998 El Cenizo considered the assessment of franchise fees from the Webb County water utility for its water and sewer systems.

During the 1997–98 fiscal year, estimated revenues far exceeded those actually collected, largely due to the delay in implementation of the property tax system. But even with the improved collection in the 1998–99 fiscal year, the expenditure capacity of the city was highly constrained by its very limited revenues. The city attempted to budget for three services—street lighting, garbage collection, and ambulance service—but inadequate revenue forced the city and other community groups to look to external funding sources and entities for providing basic services.

Provision of Municipal Service

Local governments generally have the responsibility for securing the provision of several types of services, from drainage and streets to water and wastewater and ambulance service.¹ These governments may contract for service provision or reach interlocal agreements

with other governments. Electricity is provided to every household, and most houses are on the water and sewer systems, which were deeded to the county government as an element of the bankruptcy settlement. There is no public garbage collection service, and refuse is frequently burned in El Cenizo. Once the city incorporated, it assumed responsibility for securing the services the community desired. Provision of services in El Cenizo is particularly complex as a result of the legacy of the developer's attempt to provide the services (Ward, 1999). Three examples illustrate the complexity of service provision and funding.

A 1993 report by Naismith Engineering found that the paved roads in El Cenizo, which make up roughly half the city's road surface, were substandard and deteriorating (Chapa and Eaton, 1997a, 1997b). Residents complained that the poor quality of the streets damages cars, that paved streets flood during rainstorms because of inadequate drainage, and that school buses cannot pick up students on rainy days (Chapa and Eaton, 1997a, 1997b). Residents of El Cenizo have repeatedly identified street paving as a primary concern.

The city administration contracted with Industrias Fierros, S.A., to pave the streets, but no city funds were available to execute the contract. Surveying and some grading were performed but without the appropriate county permits. The Webb County Utilities director forced the operation to stop. This example illustrates two challenges facing El Cenizo: inadequate financial resources, and inadequate administrative and monitoring capacity in the provision of infrastructure.

An alternative source of funds for street paving is ECIC, which agreed to pay \$10,000 to Industrias Fierros under the city contract. ECIC allocated additional funding, approximately \$350,000, for paving the streets, but a significant portion of El Cenizo's roads remained unpaved. The settlement with TSAHC, described above, included an allocation of CDBG funds to ECIC and allowed for approximately 80 percent of the city's streets to be paved.

A 1993 study found extensive problems in the water and wastewater systems (Chapa and Eaton, 1997a). Construction methods for sanitary sewers used by D&A Realty created very high maintenance requirements, and the location of the wastewater treatment was found to have serious equipment and structural problems and be susceptible to flooding, with resulting discharge fed into the Rio Grande. El Cenizo has a water distribution system, built by the developer but deeded to the county in the bankruptcy settlement, which serves all property within the city. The water system was also poorly constructed, and the supply line provides inadequate flow and pressure (Dannenbaum, 1996). The water system does not provide fire protection.

With the completion and approval of the Dannenbaum Engineering Facility Plan for regional water supply and wastewater treatment plants, El Cenizo became eligible for water infrastructure funds through EDAP. The Webb County Utility Office received approval for an EDAP grant for a combined water and wastewater project in El Cenizo. This project will build supply lines bringing potable water to El Cenizo from the adjacent colonia, Río Bravo, and lift stations to pump sewage to the plant in Río Bravo.

Even though a portion of this funding is a grant, residents will incur an increase in utility rates and must finance significant installation fees. Thus water and wastewater provision may add approximately \$1,100 to the initial cost of a lot in El Cenizo. The net savings to the community, however, through avoiding State and Federal fines, lowering long-term maintenance costs, and improving health, are considerable.

The relatively small size of El Cenizo generates problems in other types of public services. Webb County provides emergency medical service (EMS) to the unincorporated areas of the county, but this excludes incorporated El Cenizo. Laredo-based private ambulance

companies provide service in some areas, but the companies would not provide service to El Cenizo, presumably because of the residents' inability to pay for the service. El Cenizo entered into an interlocal agreement with Río Bravo, an adjacent colonia, for EMS service. The original grant submission to TDH for EMS included El Cenizo in the service area. The city of Río Bravo received a \$35,000 grant, which had to be matched equally with local funds, for the purchase of an EMS emergency response vehicle. With the promise of CDBG funds from TDHCA and property tax revenues as collateral, Río Bravo was able to borrow the \$35,000 in matching funds and purchase an ambulance. The TDH grant explicitly states that this vehicle is for EMS in Río Bravo and El Cenizo. In addition to the vehicle, the city of Río Bravo acquired the services of EMS-trained workers through a contract with American Medical Response (AMR) (American Medical Response, 1997). As with the TDH grant, this contract included service to El Cenizo. In November 1997 Río Bravo assumed financial responsibility for the AMR service and requested a monthly payment of \$1,500 from El Cenizo for its share of the annual fee. The fee was subsequently increased and is projected to consume a majority of the city's budget.

Misunderstandings have led to disputes between the two communities over EMS, and Río Bravo has threatened to discontinue service to El Cenizo for not providing its share of the resources needed for operations. El Cenizo claims to have a right to the service, at least to the vehicle, because both the TDH grant for the vehicle and the AMR contract states that the service is to be provided for both cities. The dispute over ambulance service illustrates the difficulties of interlocal agreements. Neither community on its own provides a sufficient market for realizing the economies of scale needed to make the service economically efficient, as is evident in the participation of both communities in the grant proposal and service plan. However, the dispute is particularly complicated and has deep roots in the history of the development of El Cenizo and Río Bravo and the political strife within these communities.

With incorporation, El Cenizo's city commission became responsible for the provision of several local services. Municipal services in Texas must be financed by local revenues, and the extremely limited revenues available to the city commission restricted its capacity to act, as seen in these three municipal services. The inability of local government to secure adequate services, the result of a weak tax base, and a complicated and seemingly unresponsive intergovernmental structure led to frustration and disillusionment among residents. Credibility in local government declined, and the governance relationship weakened.

A University-Community Project in El Cenizo

The TxLIHIS and TRLA gained an understanding of the challenges in El Cenizo as a result of ongoing technical assistance and community development efforts. Based on previous COPC-supported collaboration, UIP was invited by these organizations and Gente Aliada to undertake a project to help develop capacity in city government. The project adopted a service-learning approach, involving graduate students at UT. Because UIP has adopted a variety of service-learning models in other COPC-supported activities, it is useful to place the approach adopted in El Cenizo into the broader range of approaches. Service learning has been proposed to higher education as a means to enhance citizen education for students and as a vehicle to encourage the modern university to reexamine its relationships with local communities. Ira Harkavy argues that this model is one that will help enhance the university's performance in preparing its students to be good citizens (Harkavy, 1997). Alexander Astin writes that "if we want our students to acquire the democratic virtues of honesty, tolerance, empathy, generosity, teamwork, and social responsibility, we have to demonstrate those qualities not only in our individual professional conduct, but also in our institutional policies and practices." (Astin, 1995.) Zelda

Gamson argues that “higher education, in short, needs to rebuild its own civic life. In doing so, it will learn from communities that are doing just that.” (Gamson, 1997.)

The most common forms of service learning include the student as volunteer, the student as an intern, and the student in the professional development practicum. The volunteer model has become increasingly common, perhaps invigorated in higher education by the Colin Powell-led initiative, “America’s Promise.” The semester internship model, for which course credit is given, is very popular in undergraduate programs. Many professional programs, including social work, planning, law, public affairs, and education, have extensive practicum placements as a fully integrated element of their curriculums.

In spite of the substantial variation across service-learning models, two principles, reflection and reciprocity, are common to most (Jacoby, 1996). Reflection creates an opportunity for the learner to reexamine the nature of the work performed; to examine the historical, sociological, and political context being faced; and to develop a deeper understanding of the community’s interests (Jacoby, 1996). The integration of theory and practice enriches the learning process and creates a setting for people and realities to be transformed (Freire, 1993; Jacoby, 1996; Lather, 1991). Reciprocity requires mutual ownership of projects, which occurs when the work plan is mutually determined by students and community. Open-ended conversations and joint activities can forge strong interpersonal relationships. Rather than one doing *for* the community, as in the traditional volunteer model, one works *with* the community (Jacoby, 1996; Freire, 1993).

Francis Moore Lappe and Paul Martin Du Bois (1994) call for a dramatic change in the classroom process by making the teaching process more participatory and, in their language, more democratic. The teaching method is one of dialogue rather than one-way instruction, and teachers and students are both accountable for the learning process. In service-learning projects, the community becomes a context and problemsolving occurs in the real world. Students can observe the impact of their learning in the community. Students also learn the skills of active citizenship in a culturally diverse environment.

The COPC project at UIP has itself utilized several service-learning models. Students in public affairs and community and regional planning programs served professional internships in El Cenizo in the areas of youth development, community advocacy, and city management. These internships generated specific outcomes for the community, including a Web-based community map developed by the youth, a community database used in government grant applications, and negotiated settlements on the property tax collection system and on a dispute with the Internal Revenue Service on income tax withholding for city employees. Another model involved 2-year policy research projects on colonias, conducted at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at UT (Chapa and Eaton, 1997 and 1998). These materials were used by the Border Housing Network, a group of nonprofit organizations and local government officials, in discussions with State government on colonias issues.

The invitation to work with El Cenizo on governance issues led to a series of meetings between UIP staff and El Cenizo residents, public officials, and service providers. The outcome was a decision to formulate the project as a graduate-level class. Given the complexity of the governance question in El Cenizo and the substantial distance between Austin and El Cenizo (4 hours by car from Austin), a relatively small team of advanced and experienced graduate students, who had bilingual capability and who were prepared to commit substantial time to the project, was recruited. The bilingual ability proved to be very important for overcoming language and cultural barriers. Because a physical presence was needed for the community-building process, students traveled several times to El Cenizo to gather information and to help develop the skills of the residents. The seven

students in the class were drawn from the programs of public affairs, community and regional planning, and Latin American studies.

The class adopted several distinctive features not found in the traditional internship or policy research project form of service learning. First, a participatory action research model was adopted in which the teachers became the facilitators of the learning process and the students became researchers, learners, and trainers (Park, 1993; Lather, 1991).² Community residents were invited to be partners in the research process. Including local residents facilitated the research because these residents had knowledge of government performance in El Cenizo. In developing the final report, the partnering residents ensured that the findings were accessible to other residents, city officials, and professionals from the community. Second, the service-learning model required the students to assume a major decisionmaking role in the development of the class. The syllabus created a framework for the semester, but it was reviewed and evaluated on a weekly basis and modified as project needs dictated. The teachers, as facilitators, created an environment in which the students identified the topics to be addressed, developed their plan of action, and identified the resources needed to complete their tasks. Literature and professional expertise were drawn upon during the semester as specific needs emerged. The weekly meetings were used for reflection, debriefing, information and resource sharing, and monitoring and adjusting work plans. As the group became accustomed to this process, the meetings came to be used as an opportunity for students to hold each other accountable for completing assignments. The students defined the final product of the project after considerable conversation and negotiation with the community partners. Although this element may seem unlike the real world where clients generally specify products, the initial uncertainty of goals and expected outcomes frequently exists in community development.

Youth Development and Community Change

Initial meetings with the El Cenizo community revealed great frustration. Years of serious effort to improve conditions in the community had led to modest progress, but serious deficiencies in public services remained. Legal remedies, such as taking legal action against someone or some institution, had produced the most visible results, but this approach did not enhance governance capacity. Some El Cenizo residents argued that even a small success of the local government, in which its own actions led to some concrete improvement, might help rebuild confidence in the community and its government. Furthermore, the recent bankruptcy settlement had resolved the most pressing legal issues, and attention needed to turn toward issues of electoral and government capacity. In a series of community meetings and discussions, three priority areas were identified for the project: infrastructure development, municipal budgeting and finance, and youth development. Because youth development emerged as the framework in which the other two groups worked, further discussion of youth development and community change is appropriate.

UIP has come to embrace the concept of youth development for community change in its university-community partnerships (Urban Issues Program, Youth Development Web site). The role of youth in community change, however, is a fairly new concept in the literature, though it has been used by community organizations for years. Karen Pittman (1996), for example, argues that youth development is important because traditional schooling and youth services, focused on prevention and treatment, are inadequate or incomplete in certain respects. In particular, youths are not exposed to a broader set of citizenship skills, values, and commitments needed to succeed as members of a community and society. Furthermore, families, neighbors, and communities are best able to make the investments necessary for youth development. Active youth should be considered community assets and potential agents of community change or, in other words, a form of social capital.

The UIP approach in youth development is based on the belief that although young people are experts on their own community needs, they lack the political strength, standing, and experience to articulate these needs effectively and to advocate for them in the existing political system. To use the earlier terminology, youth make no contribution to associational life or to social capital. The UIP approach strives for a partnership between youth and caring adults in which they collaboratively construct plans, strategies, and vehicles to learn and grow as partners and as a community. Together, youth and adults create community change, working in partnership with mutual accountability. This perspective and approach to youth work radically shifts from the old models of service delivery where a dependency of youth on the professional service providers was often created.

The issue of youth, especially idle time and lack of resources, emerged as a concern in El Cenizo during the first UIP staff meeting with community residents and public officials. The importance of the issue was reinforced when the class members made their first site visit to El Cenizo and the history of organized youth activities came to be understood. A number of youth previously had worked with two COPC interns on a computer-based community mapping of El Cenizo. In addition, a youth group had conducted a public debate on the adoption of the city's property tax system. Even though the youth felt the El Cenizo adults had not demonstrated a proper respect for their efforts, the interest of the youth for engagement in community life became apparent.

As the class members assessed the needs of the community and the skills and interests of its own members, three working groups were organized—youth development, infrastructure provision, and budgeting and finance. Consistent with the UIP approach to youth development, the students in the class formed a partnership with the El Cenizo youth, and together they became researchers, trainers, learners, and friends. The accomplishments of this project are largely attributable to the strength of the relationships built between the class and the community youth and adults.

About 20 youth participated in the initial rounds of visits and meetings. Ten to 12 youth, mostly of middle school and high school age, became full participants in the project. The principal leaders of this group, however, affected a larger number of youth as a result of their leadership roles in the schools and other community activities. As the project progressed and the action plans set, the work of the other two working groups was integrated into the youth development framework. This transition was not anticipated, but the youth shared with the adults the same frustration over the ineffectiveness of the city government. The interest in government had been nurtured in their schoolwork.

The youth were surprisingly knowledgeable about mundane topics, including the role of the budget in city government and the problems of local service provision such as street paving. The adults participating in the youth development activities were also committed to examining these problems and exploring solutions. Youth were incorporated into the working groups that generated much of the information presented in the preceding section of this article. In order to share research findings with other youth and adults, the working groups, composed of youth and UT students, made presentations using simple, nonthreatening methods. The traditional educational format of formal presentations was abandoned for a participatory format, which included drawing maps, acting, role-playing, and simulating television game shows. This process created space for youth and community members to present and exchange information, but it also allowed for them to develop their skills in public speaking, presentation preparation, and meeting agenda development. They were also encouraged to consider their community's issues in a systematic way, while also providing positive alternatives to some of their most pressing issues. Through various participatory methodologies, the youth assisted in collecting the data and training their peers and adults.

The project used several strategies to develop the skills and capacity of youth, ranging from exposure to new information and concepts to creating an opportunity for youth to share their work with their fellow residents. In terms of specific activities, the youth helped interview individuals on infrastructure provision, helped develop a leadership training conference on local issues, and visited institutions of higher education in Laredo with the UT students. Two strategies were used for disseminating the group's findings in the El Cenizo community. The first strategy was *La Voz*, a community newsletter established with COPC support, which published articles reporting the project's work. The newsletter focused on El Cenizo issues and was distributed at the local community center and grocery store. The second strategy was the development of a bilingual handbook, *Desarrollando nuestras capacidades: Juventud, calles y recursos en El Cenizo*, which focused on issues of youth development, infrastructure, and governance (Urban Issues Program, 1998). The intended audience for the handbook was government officials, local residents, and small businesses. Another effort in dissemination occurred several months after the class concluded, when members of the El Cenizo youth group participated in a UIP-sponsored retreat in Austin and presented their work to youth groups from other cities.

Since the project concluded in May 1998, a new city commission has taken office. The youth group remains active, and it has assumed responsibility for maintaining the entrance to El Cenizo. The youth painted a mural on the walls at the entrance (one of the COPC-supported activities), and more recently has worked on introducing street lighting. It now maintains the grounds surrounding the wall. In the terms used earlier, the youth group has coalesced as an association and has enhanced the community's social capital. It has become an asset to the community, and the entranceway stands as a symbol of the emerging community spirit.

The new city commission recently generated much controversy over the adoption of a city ordinance that established Spanish as the official language for city business, although translation is to be available for English-only speakers. The adoption of this ordinance embodied a precept of good governance: citizens must be able to understand the language of government if they are to participate in public discussions and decisions. Some adults in El Cenizo are Spanish-only speakers, and the ordinance had the effect of codifying actual practice. The youth involved in this project, in contrast, were almost all bilingual and showed no hesitation in moving between the two languages. Again the youth serve as an asset to the community by facilitating communication between English-only and Spanish-only speakers.

Governance, Capacity, and Service Learning: Lessons Learned

The small size of El Cenizo created an opportunity for examining governance issues in a direct and immediate way. Inadequate performance of local government in El Cenizo was found to originate in several factors. Local government had inadequate capacity, especially in terms of fiscal capacity, but was also severely constrained by its intergovernmental context. The local elected officials, regardless of intentions, have had great difficulty in mobilizing the resources necessary for effective action. After some difficulty and with the assistance of external collaborators, the community was able to secure very substantial revenues in ECIC. The resources made available through ECIC, representation of the El Cenizo community on its board, and improved communication between the board and El Cenizo residents become important enabling factors for improved governance.

The complex intergovernmental context made way for opportunities for El Cenizo. The State housing agency provided the administrative apparatus for securing the funding for

home purchase loans and for the community infrastructure. Nevertheless, this system moved slowly and even appeared unresponsive, if not occasionally discriminatory, to residents of El Cenizo. Without help from nongovernmental groups outside the community, the responsiveness of the system would have likely been even slower. It is curious to note that actions of the State government helped create a context for the infrastructure development that the colonia developer was unwilling or unprepared to undertake, but at a later point, the perceived unresponsiveness of the State was considered to be the problem.

Another potential source of difficulty, according to the governance framework, is that civil society may not be able to articulate interests and demands in an effective manner. The El Cenizo residents freely participate in elections and, as a small community, had direct access to elected officials. Nevertheless, the lack of accomplishment by local government led to citizen frustration and then apathy. The size of El Cenizo should, in principle, facilitate communications, but the complexity of the intergovernmental context and lack of an accessible, easily understood plan of action (as would generally be expected in a city's budget document) meant that most residents did not understand the city's initiatives. In more technical terms, governmental initiatives were far from transparent. When citizens have no expectation of local government, the question of governance becomes moot.

Although many residents had limited expectation of the government, most had very high expectations for their children. The youth could ask the simple but direct questions of their parents and other adults. Why does the colonia next door seem more successful than El Cenizo? Why can adults in El Cenizo not act effectively? The experience in El Cenizo stood in stark contrast to what these youth were learning in school. The action research and training activities led by the UT students helped clarify the problems in El Cenizo. Although working groups of this project had limited avenues for direct action, the group did develop a sound understanding of problems and the confidence to raise the correct questions. Engaging youth in the community development process may be critical to long-term leadership development and capacity building in El Cenizo.

The success of this project and the other related community initiatives should be evaluated, in part, in terms of the quality of civic discourse. This project should have helped legitimize the responsibility of local residents to take the initiative and to participate in discussions of local problems. This discourse should help prepare residents to compete for elected office and encourage citizens to hold elected officials accountable. It is premature to conclude the city government has improved based on the positive developments under the recently elected city commission, but progress clearly can be seen. The involvement of youth enhances the community's social capital and helps shape governance as an idealistic, but feasible, endeavor. Organized youth can play a direct role in the quality of government action.³

The role of educational institutions in this university-community project was encouraging. The youth in the project brought a set of expectations of government formed in part from their classes in public schools. The practice of politics and government are addressed in civics classes, but this project provided the students an opportunity to deepen their understandings of these topics through the examination of governance in their own community. One should expect that the youth's participation in El Cenizo project would lead to greater involvement in their schools.

The El Cenizo project revealed important roles for higher education in community development. First, involvement in the El Cenizo project provided an exceptional learning opportunity for this group of graduate students. The examination of the budget and municipal services in El Cenizo provided immediacy to concepts of transparency, accountability,

and management not available in textbooks. Furthermore, the students had the opportunity to observe the effects of their efforts. The student who negotiated the contract with the tax collection agency observed the dramatic increase in city revenues. The attraction of learning from actual community settings was powerful, but students were also attracted to the opportunity to put their knowledge and expertise to work in a community struggling to develop through its own initiative. In their reflections on the experience, the UT students reported that the class had a profound effect on their own understanding and attitudes toward community development and the nature of citizenship in a disadvantaged community. The positive impact on professional training of students and a deepened appreciation of citizenship are among the goals of university-community initiatives supported by COPC.

In spite of concrete advances, the work of the El Cenizo colonia is far from over, and the long-term impact on capacity building remains uncertain. The true burden and responsibility of effective governance rests with the residents of El Cenizo, and this burden should not be underestimated. The active participation of responsible and effective residents, who persisted in spite of the complexity of the local solutions, was inspiring. Their stories reinforce the principle that effective government action is a responsibility civil society shares with government itself. But only politically organized communities have the ability to hold governments accountable. If the unorganized and disenfranchised are also poor, the challenge is even greater. The El Cenizo project suggests that youth may well be an untapped asset for improving governance and that universities, through carefully crafted initiatives, can support the development of community capacity.

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Notes

1. The county government provides most social and welfare services. Texas A&M University constructed a community center in El Cenizo, and many of the county-sponsored social services are available there. This article focuses principally on infrastructure services.
2. In his edited publication, Park and others present the history of Participatory Action Research and its connection to social movement and community change. PAR can be characterized as a paradigm that challenges the dominant structures by giving the power and title of expert to the grassroots people. PAR has its origins in the critical theory with liberation as an ultimate goal, while also providing an assault on the assumptions provided by the positivist paradigm.
3. One city commissioner was 18 years old.

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