

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 428

JC 940 201

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 TITLE Catalyst for Community Change: Helping To Address Critical Issues.
 INSTITUTION League for Innovation in the Community Coll.
 SPONS AGENCY Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, Mich.
 PUB DATE May 93
 NOTE 3p.
 PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
 JOURNAL CIT Leadership Abstracts; v6 n5 May 1993

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Citizen Participation; *Community Action; Community Change; Community Colleges; Community Coordination; *Local Issues; *Partnerships in Education; Problem Solving; Program Development; Program Implementation; *School Community Programs; *School Community Relationship; Two Year Colleges
 IDENTIFIERS *Community Forum Concept; League for Innovation in the Community College

ABSTRACT

As the issues with which individuals and communities struggle on a daily basis have become more urgent (e.g., unemployment, increasing crime, and overburdened health care), the tensions inherent in the relationship between college and community have become more apparent. Despite criticism that their missions are already overextended, some community colleges are seeking to respond to critical community needs. In 1991, the Hitachi Foundation funded the League for Innovation in the Community College to develop and pilot test a process that could be replicated by community colleges nationwide to build the capacity of local citizens to address critical community issues. One of the intended outcomes of the project is the development of guidelines describing how to plan and conduct community forums. The second major objective is to build the capacity of the nine pilot colleges and communities to deal with real problems. One of the pilot projects was a community forum conducted at Delta College, in Michigan, that focused on unemployment, the major problem facing the Tri-Cities area. Over 400 area residents attended a forum entitled, "Now That You've Lost Your Job, How Are You Going To Get One Back?" After all of the pilot projects were completed, the participating colleges shared the insights they gained in conducting community forums and found that they had common problems, including the difficulty of focusing on a topic and the tendency to underestimate the work involved. In spite of such concerns, the colleges all reported that their forums helped their local communities confront wide-ranging and controversial topics. (ECC)

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CATALYST FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE: HELPING TO ADDRESS CRITICAL ISSUES

Nancy LeCroy and Barbara Tedrow

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From its inception, the community college has fashioned its mission through a symbiotic relationship with the local community that has been fundamentally influenced by proximity and need. In its brief history, these colleges have solidified first transfer, then occupational, and finally community service and support roles through a give and take with local constituencies. However, as the issues with which individuals and communities struggle on a daily basis have become more urgent, the tensions inherent in the relationship between college and community have become more apparent.

Communities struggle with drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, the breakdown of the family unit, environmental depletion and risk, deteriorating infrastructures, and crippling realities associated with economic stagnation—unemployment, underemployment, and declining living standards; increasing crime, violence, and homelessness; overburdened health care, social service, and education systems; and volatile tensions associated with race, culture, and class that have stretched the fabric of communal life to dangerous limits.

Adding to the urgency is the general sense that the nation's political institutions have failed to address the problems that trouble people most. Too often, public debate is adversarial and unproductive. Too often, there is little agreement about what to do to make things better. Too often, even when decisions are made, solutions are ineffective because they lack sufficient public support.

Tension in Mission

Given this reality, it should not be surprising that some community colleges are seeking to respond to critical community needs, despite a chorus of criticism that argues that their mission is already dangerously overextended, that they should stick to their knitting and concentrate on improving educational performance. Community colleges have been criticized not for the failure to broaden the mission, but for the failure to perform established roles effectively. Thus, the most important task is to ensure strong transfer, technical education, and support for primary academic missions.

On the other side is an equally fervent group warning that a strictly academic posture is too static and unrealistic given the pressures facing their students and communities. Both by its placement and its history, the community college movement has created an expecta-

tion—virtually a psychological contract—that it will help communities meet their most pressing needs, needs that cannot be satisfactorily addressed through regular academic programs. To fail to keep this underlying promise now, when the urgency is so obvious, is an abdication. The tension is between continuing education and community development; between academic expectations and constituent needs; between traditional disciplines and instructional methodologies and process-related skills and community-based learning strategies.

Guidelines for Conducting Community Forums

Although the debate is far from settled, a number of major foundations have embarked upon program initiatives to find new educational mechanisms to help communities draw upon their own resource to address their own problems. Under the rubric of community "capacity building," they have funded a variety of projects, including a two-year effort by the League for Innovation to explore the role and potential impact of community colleges in helping to solve urgent community problems.

Developing Guidelines. In 1991, The Hitachi Foundation funded the League to develop and pilot test a process that can be replicated by community colleges nationwide to build the capacity of local citizens to address critical community issues. One of the intended outcomes of the project is guidelines describing how to plan and conduct community forums on such issues. Included in the guidelines are planning tips and suggestions for supporting follow-up activities to ensure that the forums have lasting impact on local communities.

Building Community Capacity. The second major result of the project is building the capacity of the nine colleges and communities that participate in the pilot project to deal with real problems. Each forum is the first step in identifying community leaders who can assist in solving local problems, in creating liaisons among community groups to work toward common solutions, and in establishing a process for local issue resolution. Each college will engage in follow-up activities to ensure that tangible benefits result from the project, and that some problem-solving capacity is added to the community.

Conducting Forums. To achieve the purpose of the project, the League sponsored nine community forums by community colleges across the nation on a variety of critical local issues. The experiences of these colleges

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were used to field test a process and draft guidelines to be used by community colleges and citizen leaders in planning, designing, organizing, managing, and following up on community forums on critical issues.

Delta College Community Forum

One college illustrates how the community forums were conducted as part of the funded project.

The Issue. The major issue facing the Tri-Cities area in Michigan (Saginaw, Bay City, and Midland) is unemployment. General Motors, the primary local employer, faced an economic downturn in the 1980s when auto sales slumped as a result of increasing competition from foreign markets. Much confusion and blame followed, which seriously hampered any coordinated strategy to counter the economic downturn.

The Forum. On Thursday, November 5, 1992, at the International Centre in downtown Saginaw, Michigan, more than 400 area residents attended, "Now that You've Lost Your Job, How Are You Going to Get One Back?" The event, directed by the college's Global/International Education Office, included a career information fair supported by the college's Career Planning and Placement Office. Cosponsors were the Michigan Employment Security Commission (MESC), the League of Women Voters, and Saginaw Valley State University. The participants included those underemployed, unemployed, or seeking a career change from the three counties that make up the college's service area.

The goals of the forum were the following: 1) to create an awareness about the issues surrounding the current economic downturn, 2) to identify strategies to promote the community's economic development, 3) to identify strategies and skills needed to help individuals find jobs in the current market, 4) to offer opportunities for networking with local employers, and 5) to provide feedback to all cosponsors and participants.

After six months of planning, the daylong event unfolded in four phases. First, a keynote was presented by Walter Adams, a noted economist from Michigan State University. He summarized the reasons for the economic downturn in this country, describing the deregulation of business, which led to big business mergers rather than the research and development that tends to provide job growth. Adams used the automobile industry, specifically General Motors, as an example of "bigness" that did not work.

The second phase of the program began with panel presentations by local business and industrial leaders, each of whom had seven minutes to respond to Adams' remarks. The panelists represented a regional economic planning office, a small business, the Michigan Employment Security Commission, General Motors, a training agency, and a chamber of commerce. Work attitudes and skills were stressed as major factors in job security by the panelists whose comments were followed by questions.

The third phase was a brainstorming session which addressed two questions: what can the community do to

deal with the economic downturn and what can individuals do to help themselves deal with this reality? Forty small groups developed and shared ideas in a process that took ninety minutes. The event ended with a career information fair in an adjoining conference room. Over 50 local businesses were exhibitors, and 200 forum participants attended the fair.

Evaluation and Follow-Up. The forum was a success and a large cross-section of the community attended. The brainstorming session generated ideas for assisting both individuals and the community. The level of community support and the quality of collaboration among sponsoring groups developed the groundwork for future projects. An example of follow-up forum activities included a joint communication from the forum sponsors to the participants summarizing the suggestions generated through the brainstorming session.

Insights from Experience

The nine participating colleges shared the insights that they had developed in conducting community forums, including a list of common problems: the difficulty of focusing the topic; the special effort required to build the necessary support in both the community and the college; the tendency to underestimate the amount of work involved in hosting the event; the difficulty in reaching closure, sometimes creating the feeling that nothing was accomplished by the forum; and the corollary difficulty of designing appropriate follow-up action.

In spite of these concerns, these colleges, without exception, reported that their forums helped their local communities confront wide-ranging and sometimes controversial topics, increase their understanding of these issues, and create at least the beginnings of a framework for problem solving. Equally important, it is clear that host colleges were perceived to be appropriate conveners and catalysts for such community-building undertakings. They were able to bring the necessary players to the table and create a safe environment in which the risky business of conferral could begin. This success bodes well for the future of community forums and suggests that the convening function can become an important strategy in community development.

Nancy LeCroy is assistant to the chancellor of the Dallas County Community College District and consultant to the League's Hitachi Project. Barbara Tedrow is director of Global/International Education at Delta College, University Center, Michigan, and forum coordinator at the college.

The document that resulted from this project, Catalyst for Community Change: Guidelines for Community Colleges to Conduct Community Forums, will be distributed free to all registrants at "Leadership 2000," sponsored by the League for Innovation and The University of Texas at Austin, July 18-21, 1993, in Washington, D. C. For registration information or copies for sale, contact the League office, (714) 367-2884.

Volume 6, number 5

May 1993