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Critical Reflections on Community-Campus Partnerships: Promise and Performance

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This article assesses a three-year Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funded Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) at Montclair State University (MSU) in Montclair, NJ. With the support of systematic qualitative analysis, it shifts attention from the *execution* of community-campus partnering to practitioners' capacities for *reflection*. Grounded in Sharon Welch's (2000) conception of "risk" as a preferable alternative to "control," this essay explores the MSU COPC project using a framework that, we hope, provides an innovative means for creating, sustaining, and, fundamentally, understanding community-campus partnerships. The essay begins with an overview of the MSU COPC, then summarizes the research methods and conceptual framework for analysis, and finally focuses on one aspect of the MSU COPC that illustrates the utility of adopting an ethic of risk in the partnering process.

MSU COPC Assessment Project: Overview

In 2000, the MSU Center for Community-Based Learning (CCBL) assembled an ad hoc MSU COPC Planning Committee composed of university administrators, faculty, and staff; and local religious and organizational leaders, politicians, and government officials. The committee's initial task was to identify the COPC target area in consideration of HUD's racial, economic, and population density criteria. The selected area comprised Montclair's Pine Street and Glenfield Park neighborhoods.

Goals of the urban education issue area included closing the achievement gap, implementing a pilot mentor program, addressing the "digital divide," and facilitating a film documentary by students of the Montclair High School Center for Social Justice.

Subsequently, the Planning Committee conducted a public meeting in the target area that introduced the COPC project and afforded over 100 residents an opportunity to define their most pressing issues. Using this input, the COPC Planning Committee drafted a proposal that was submitted to HUD in 2001. This document named three primary issue areas: affordable housing, community organizing, and urban education. The COPC project objectives concerning the housing issue area included preservation of affordable residential units and increased opportunities for area residents' home ownership. The objectives pertaining to community organizing included the promotion of local pride through heightened awareness of local history and socioeconomic issues. Goals of the urban education issue area included closing the achievement gap, implementing a pilot mentor program, addressing the "digital divide," and facilitating a film documentary by students of the Montclair High School Center for Social Justice. In 2002, with HUD's approval of these objectives, an advisory board and executive committee were formed, and the project was underway.

The project's start was fraught with challenges, such as claims of community exploitation, inconsistent faculty participation, and resentment among the target area's middle class

residents, who opposed HUD programming in their neighborhoods. A significant number of community and campus partners had different initial expectations, intentions, goal interpretations, and communicative strategies, resulting in dissatisfaction and disagreement—especially regarding monetary distribution. Given such circumstances, at the end of the project's second year, COPC Advisory Board members wanted to gauge the project's success in creating sustainable community-campus partnerships. The MSU COPC Assessment Project was designed to empirically identify barriers and threats to this project (and to partnerships in general), shifting emphasis from executed products to reflective processes. Of particular interest is the gap that appears to exist between an ideal conception—or promise—and the reality—or performance—of partnership.

MSU COPC Assessment Project: Research Methods

Designed around MSU COPC partners' various interests, the research attempts to answer the following questions: How do the complex intentions of partnership stakeholders define, limit, and/or shape the partnership? How do we effectively negotiate the inevitable conflicting interests between and among community-campus partnership stakeholders? Does and should the partnership become a public entity of its own? What are our assumptions regarding community-campus engagement and how do they affect our practice of partnership?

The research team applied the methodological standards of Guba and Lincoln (1989) to ensure the integrity and credibility of the data and findings. Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with MSU COPC campus, community, and governmental partners. Interview questions addressed the COPC's organizational structure, processes, practical outcomes, and partners' perceptions of the project. Interview data were coded and analyzed with NVivo 2.0 software.

Theoretical Framework for Reflective Assessment

The research applied a grounded theory approach, combining emerging themes with Welch's conceptual framework of control versus risk orientations (2000). For Welch, healthy and productive relationships require participants' mutual willingness to relinquish some control in favor of an "ethic of risk." Such a framework provides a useful lens through which to examine the commencement, development, and sustainability of a community-campus partnership since it illuminates some key assumptions, attitudes, and communicative behaviors that might impede the partnering process. By identifying some factors underlying the distrust, disappointment, and objectification that too often characterize community-campus relationships, we may recognize means for intervention and improvement. Here, we introduce the basic concepts of Welch's framework.

"Responsible Action" Defined

In Welch's view, avoiding the often unintended consequences of partnering requires mutual efforts to re-imagine what, exactly, "responsible" action is, taking into account potential consequences of culture-contingent definitions of "goodness," "justice," "equity," "parity," and other core values. Further, partners must notice how their interaction may reflect and reinforce this problematic ethic, and take remedial steps. To recognize such "fundamental flaws in shared systems of values and behaviors," participants must enter into "a thorough engagement

with other communities, with other systems of knowing and acting" (Welch, 2000, p. 15). Essentially, then, how "responsibility" as a cultural concept is understood and enacted depends upon participants' willingness and abilities to engage difference within and across perceived boundaries of community.

A Control-oriented Approach to "Responsible Action"

Welch observes that some cultural notions of responsible action assume "one can assure the aim of one's action will be carried out" (2000, p. 14) and "effective action is unambiguous, unilateral and decisive" (p. 25). These conceptions are grounded in an "ethic of control," defined as "a construction of agency, responsibility, and goodness which assumes that it is possible to guarantee the efficacy of one's actions" (p. 14). Throughout her book, Welch observes that the dominant Western-democratic tradition of partnership celebrates a conception of responsibility that is grounded in oppositional attempts at control, leading to relational and substantive problems. Within this assumedly homogeneous "moral and political imagination" (p. 14), partnerships inevitably experience setbacks and defeats, often resulting in exasperation and demoralization that perpetuate the control orientation by fostering self-interest. In this mindset, partners expect a shared *vision*, determined though imposition, but not a shared *agenda* that honors different value systems. Single-handedness rather than collaboration is the preferred mode for identifying and solving community problems.

An ethic of control in partnership manifests unwillingness to be accountable for (or even reflectively aware of) faulty, inconsistent, or problematic beliefs, behaviors, and systems. Although the intention of most community-campus partnerships is to function as a potent and sustainable vehicle for remedying difficult social, political, and economic problems, many founder despite their good intentions (Wiewel et al., 2000, and Mayfield and Lucas, 2000). Welch warns that good intentions are beside the point, for even well-intentioned people may base their objectives upon a control-oriented definition of "goodness" that, if acted upon, can lead to devastating unintended consequences such as objectification, oppression, gentrification, militarism, and even genocide (2000, p. 17).

A Risk-oriented Approach to "Responsible Action"

Welch advances "an alternative construction of responsible action," which she calls an "ethic of risk" (2000, p. 14). This approach shifts concern from unilaterally produced outcomes to collaborative partnership processes, entailing members' critical engagement and ongoing reflection. Throughout, participants should be reciprocally open and responsive to critical insights from different perspectives (p. 18) since solid moral reasoning can only emerge from "the material interaction between multiple entities with divergent principles, norms, and mores..." (p. 124). In this sense, healthy partnerships embody conflicts—not just coalitions. Partnership that eschew conflict for false senses of uniformity cannot adequately critique their assumptions and communicative actions pertaining to justice, goodness, equality, morality, social responsibility, etc. Conversely, partnerships that acknowledge and even celebrate their cultural differences are likely to practice and produce understandings and actions that bear long-lasting community benefits, despite periods of confusion and vulnerability.

Reflective practitioners of community-campus partnerships must monitor the extent to which different cultural systems of beliefs, values, and communicative practices advance control, power, and alienation (Welch, 2000, p. 15). Such reflection is only possible from a risk orientation, given its allowance for mutually self-critical engagement. Inclusion of multiple perspectives helps partnerships to recognize and remedy limitations across belief, value, and behavioral systems, enacting processes of exposure that Welch calls "communicative ethics." The result may be made collaboratively ("community and solidarity") rather than imposed culturally ("justification and universal consensus") (p. 15). This does not mean that healthy community-campus partnerships are devoid of inequities; power and class disparities are typical, and they create tensions that require strategic mediation rather than avoidance. Applying communication ethics, then, is especially important in such contexts because it mitigates "the dangers of isolation and self-justifying ethical systems by its involvement in political coalitions and its openness to political conflict" (p. 126).

The communicative ethics process requires what Welch (2000) terms mutual "accountability" and "respect." Accountability begins with the "recognition of wrongdoing and imbalances of power and leads to self-critical attempts to use power justly" (Welch, 2000, p. 15). This kind of moral accountability is integrative rather than distributive; participants assume and practice action that is collaborative rather than unilateral. The outcome is a willingness to interact with and empathically understand others, to better know not just one's partners but also oneself. Respect, which is Welch's second requisite of communicative ethics, is defined not as sympathy for others but as "an acknowledgement of equality, dignity, and independence" (p.15).

Appropriateness of the Framework
In summary, Welch's theory asserts that social relationships rely on how partners may variously conceive and practice responsible action, according to ethics of control or risk. Whereas a control orientation is traditional in Western-democratic contexts, a risk orientation is preferable given its requirement of participants' mutual accountability and respect. This theory provides an appropriate framework for describing, evaluating, and prescribing community-campus partnering. As "action on issues of justice *with* (not for) members of another community, and *serious* attention to the history, art, literature, ethics, and philosophies of other communities" (Welch, 2000, p. 16), the approach helps practitioners to move from shortsighted and inadvertently divisive "service" to reflective development of engaged and sustained community-campus partnerships.

Discussion: An Emergent Paradigm for Reflective Community-Campus Partnerships
Toward the reflective development of community-campus partnerships, this discussion begins with the identification of three interwoven themes emerging from the data, then evaluates the assumptive origins of such themes, and finally prescribes a shift from a reactive to a reflective approach to partnership. This reflective analysis is derived from rich and revealing interviews conducted with COPC partners.

Emergent Themes: Gentrification, Identity, and Interest
Within the context of community organizing, the MSU COPC experienced the challenge of managing divergent social identities and civic interests, as well as conflated objectives. Such themes are reflected in the assessment project's interview data.

During the project period, a new train station was constructed within the COPC project area, as part of a direct rail link to Manhattan. This resulted in gentrification that fragmented the community along economic lines, pitting landlords against tenants and homeowners against renters. COPC community organizing efforts began to continually overlap with its affordable housing efforts as community organizers' roles shifted, with newfound concern for preserving affordable housing. Some area residents organized to contest rent gouging by advocating the enactment of rent control. COPC organizers were challenged to navigate the competing interest groups and their political tactics during this phase.

As a backdrop for the formation of affordable housing interest groups, the COPC target area comprised at least two demographically distinct neighborhoods with conflicting class interests. As Table 1 illustrates, 1990 census data show significant demographic disparities between the target area (including both the Pine Street and Glenfield Park neighborhoods) and Montclair Township in general. However, it is important to note that the target area's two neighborhoods differ significantly in terms of racial composition and poverty level. Also, each neighborhood features internal diversity that is not recognizable in the census data, including both middle class and poor residents who respectively resisted and welcomed MSU and HUD interest and involvement; supported and despised their area's gentrification; and felt included in and alienated from the local political process.

Table 1: 1990 Census Data for Montclair and Areas Comprising the MSU COPC Target Area

Geographic Location	Size (sq.mi.)	Pop.	Pop. Density (sq.mi.)	% White	% Black	MHI	% Below Poverty
Montclair	6.3	37,729	5,983.6	66	31	52,442	6
"PineStreet/Glenfield Park Neighborhood"	.36	4,403	12,231	26	70	*	16
Census Track 167 Pine Street/surrounding neighborhoods	.19	2,135	11,237	41	54	28,125	6
Census Track 171 Glenfield Park/ surrounding Neighborhoods	.17	2,268	13,341	11	85	26,658	26

* Undeterminable

Considering the different demographic and social facets of the COPC target area, it is not surprising that the rent control initiative sparked intense town-wide conflict, splintering the COPC "community" along lines between landlords and tenants, and homeowners and renters. Many middle- and upper-income property owners resisted a rent control proposal, which was generally supported by moderate- and lower-income renters.

At the outset of the COPC project, all partners shared an interest in ensuring housing affordability and economic diversity in the target community and Montclair overall. Partners were divided, though, on how closely the COPC should be associated with community organizing efforts around affordable housing, especially pertaining to rent control. The COPC Advisory Board struggled to balance multiple spheres of local influence. A few partners, who were also Montclair residents, became community leaders, but beyond the aegis of the COPC project. This resulted in conflicting roles and resources. Other COPC partners vehemently protested such actions, claiming these partners were out of bounds and damaging fledgling relationships. The COPC itself never took an official position on the rent control issue, and ultimately experienced severe interpersonal and ideological rifts.

The Consequences of a Control-based Ethic of Partnership

A willingness on the parts of both university and community members to give up some ideological and behavioral control involves taking risks in the form of moral accountability. All partners are accountable not only for successful outcomes and innovative strategies, but for the assumptions, behaviors, and policies they support and/or condone. These assumptions, behaviors, and policies perpetuate the very social problems the partnership seeks to address by maintaining the ideologies that underlie and support structures of injustice and discrimination. The COPC Assessment Project's research findings identified many barriers and challenges to the partnership that resulted from a risk-averse control orientation among and between partners. Such behaviors included the exclusion of controversial entities/personalities, the avoidance of conflict, a lack of willingness among partners to create and be accountable for an independent partnership identity, an imbalance in governance and decision making, and unclear communication between partners regarding partnership goals, intentions, expectations, and limitations. This conditional embrace of mutual accountability caused partners to perceive each other as untrustworthy, to view control-oriented behaviors as disrespectful and insincere, and to generate reactive behaviors that perpetuated the cycle of competition and alienation.

> *In defining community identities and issues, the illusion of simplicity prevented real opportunities for project partners to speak candidly about their confusions.*

The MSU COPC organizers had authority in identifying the target community and its pressing issues. It is important to note that the designated "community" was not as discrete and homogeneous as initially presumed. As described above, it was a combination of at least two socially and economically distinct communities, aware of each other but socially, politically, and economically divided. Treated as a bounded entity, the target area was a product of convenience and contrivance. Furthermore, the issue of affordable housing, although responsive to area residents' input, was a product of HUD-defined criteria.

In defining community identities and issues, the illusion of simplicity prevented real opportunities for project partners to speak candidly about their confusions. Nearly all respondents in the COPC assessment research mentioned experiencing internal conflict about affordable housing issues, but, in lieu of means for coordinated discourse, chose their own ways of dealing with such issues. COPC partners on either side of the issue became reluctant and, at

times, unwilling to share information supporting or opposing rent control. Additionally, some partners became unwilling to work together on any COPC-related issues.

Welch's theory of responsible action (2000) provides a means for evaluation. Community-campus partnerships are typically assumed to involve two entities: a university and a community. This construction obscures the existing diversity in both the university and the community. A community is not the same as a geographically or demographically defined neighborhood (Peterman, 2000). If a university uses geographic, social, and economic variables to define the "community" with which it wants to partner, it will learn that such an area includes any number of distinct, interwoven, and shifting "communities." Although individuals within an identified geographic area may live in proximity and appear similar based on social, racial, and economic measures, they are self-assembled into multiple "communities" with both shared and conflicting interests. These self-defined "communities" overlap and divide geographic areas in terms of the various issues or interests that have been used to define them. Barriers and rifts may result from social and public policy questions that pit interest groups against each other over scarce resources (such as whether to invest in senior housing over school renovations) while overlaps may occur when issues apply commonly to various interest groups (such as a proposed park closure or cuts in community policing resources).

The tendency of universities to use such determining categories is motivated by the fundamental assumption of a bounded community, which is never much more than a statistical construction meaning little to those residing within the so-called "community." The notion of an exogenously defined, bounded community is consistent with an ethic of control as it allows for the identification of both an easily defined "problem" and the subsequent development of a unilateral solution, the aims of which can be satisfactorily assured. This assumption has been institutionalized through the expectations of funding agencies, which typically require grantees to identify community needs in simplistic, quantifiable terms.

Toward a Risk-based Ethic of Partnership
Our data suggest that MSU COPC goals were obstructed by a lack of communicative ethics, not as a result of the participants' divergent perspectives. According to Welch's theory of responsible action (2000), the discernment of norms and strategies requires mutually reflective interaction within and across communities' cultural identity-groups. In Welch's words, "genuine communication has not occurred until we become aware of the flaws in our culture that appear quite clearly from the vantage point of [other cultures]" (p. 127). The notion of a segmented community, inclusive of multiple and diverse units, exposes various, and often conflicting, interests, intentions, attitudes, beliefs, and communicative behaviors. Handled with unilateralism, community life is subjected to the convenient assumptions and intentions of empowered interests. With an ethic of risk, however, problems may be reasonably and justly addressed and, if not tidily resolved, at least managed effectively.

The problems of the MSU COPC, including the hardening of social identities and positions, could have been mitigated by fostering the process of communicative ethics, as conceived by Welch (2000). Such an effort would have allowed the partnership itself to become a transformative agent, providing all partners with the lens of the "other" and allowing

questioning of the community's various assumptions, logic, beliefs, and behaviors in a climate of mutual accountability and respect. However, partners within the COPC framework did not (and institutionally could not) ask if their beliefs and behaviors were perpetuating some level of injustice, and, if so, what could be done to right that wrong.

Controversy and conflicting interests were identified by nearly all interviewees as obstructing MSU COPC goal achievement. Interviewees mentioned numerous conflicting interests among partners, many of which reflected distinct partner perspectives regarding economic justice, political persuasion, and resource allocation. It is not unreasonable to expect community-campus partnerships to be rife with conflict and setbacks. Such a condition presents a challenge requiring communicative ethics, but does not predispose a partnership to failure. If engaged with an ethic of risk, conflicting perspectives could serve to transform partners and lay the foundation for sustainable, responsible, and just partnerships. In the case of the MSU COPC, conflicting perspectives became problematic due to lofty, unrealistic, and unilaterally imposed goals, such as the attainment of a shared *vision* toward rectifying problems rather than a shared *agenda* working toward the achievement of short-term goals in the expectation of maximizing the opportunity for future action toward justice.

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It is unrealistic to expect any partnership to anticipate all potential challenges prior to planning and embarking upon programs and initiatives. MSU COPC partners never anticipated the affordable housing and community organizing efforts to overlap into a community movement for rent control. If organizers and participants had enlisted an ethic of risk from the onset, there would have been a flexible process for mitigating emergent challenges through communicative ethics, yielding genuine responsible action. Prior to embarking upon collective strategizing and action, partnerships such as the MSU COPC must develop a cultural foundation solid enough to absorb, digest and respond to arising circumstances, yet flexible enough to allow the involved entities independence and room to develop their identities and relationship within a dynamic community.

It is equally unrealistic to expect partnership to be successful—much less possible—in all situations. When prospective partners are unwilling to engage in the process of communicative ethics around an issue, such an issue may not be appropriate for that particular partnership to take on. Within partnership processes, some issues will simply have to be left off the table due to irreconcilable perspectives or interests. This is not to be seen as a weakness of the partnership, but rather as a reality of partnerships in general; no one partnership is a cure to all ills. Such issues can and should be dealt with outside the partnership within or between individual community groups.

The notion of risk versus control, when applied to community-campus partnerships, provides a model for both developing an effective partnering process and assessing the partnership's process and outcomes. Additionally, if implemented in the development of partnership, a risk orientation should close the gap between the historical performance and yet-unrealized

promise of partnership. A critical aspect of the implementation of such a model requires reflectively confronting a few thorny questions: Is it possible that our historical and cultural understandings and expectations of partnership are fundamentally flawed? Is it possible that a primary outcome of partnerships, especially those between universities and communities, should be the ideological transformation of partners, meaning that all participants emerge from the experience with newfound understandings of both themselves and one another? Is it possible that without such an experience, genuine and sustainable partnerships for social change will be an unrealized goal?

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