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INTRODUCTION

By David Cox, Ph.D.

Dr. David Cox serves as executive assistant to the president at the University of Memphis. In 1998–99, he served as director of the Office of University Partnerships (OUP) in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Cox is chairman of the board of the Association for Community-Higher Education Partnerships and a member of the National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement.

Despite its image as an “ivory tower,” higher education can look back on centuries of partnerships and collaboration aimed at community improvement (Bender 1988). These partnerships have yielded many types of benefits for all their various partners (Cox 2000; Maurrasse 2001). The past 10 years have been particularly fruitful ones for these partnerships, due in part to the involvement of HUD and its Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) program. By encouraging and facilitating campus-community collaboration through monetary grants and ongoing technical assistance, HUD and the COPC program have enhanced the ability of institutions of higher education (IHEs) to contribute to the health and well-being of their neighborhoods and have played a critical role in advancing the strong tradition of community engagement within higher education.

This chapter takes a closer look at the role that COPC partnerships has played in launching comprehensive, system-changing initiatives in local communities. These HUD-supported partnerships are improving the way communities look, enhancing their economic security, and making day-to-day life easier for those who live and work within their boundaries. They have done this by creating communitywide infrastructures that might keep youngsters on the right track, bring decent, affordable rental housing to an area, or create a chance for economic redevelopment in urban neighborhoods that previously had no hope of any of those possibilities. They also are transforming isolated rural communities with no physical or social infrastructures into service-rich communities that now have vision and direction. In the case of my own University of Memphis, improving local communities has meant developing a model for community resource centers that can help residents of inner-city neighborhoods receive needed services and participate in local decisionmaking.

As you will read in the following pages, COPC partnerships have clearly produced positive outcomes in a range of program areas and brought valuable, tangible, physical changes and services to their communities. Other important COPC contributions to communities even go beyond the tangible.
Strong, healthy communities require affective and effective social, economic, and political networks (Putnam 2000). COPC partnerships have helped to create these networks by encouraging new patterns of relationship among community stakeholders and a new civic capacity for communities and their residents (Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett 2000). Indeed, the process of reaching outward and making local connections, which is required of all COPC applicants, has caused a powerful ripple effect on the local level and has paved the way for the kind of community-changing initiatives outlined in the following pages.

The growing interaction between campus and community that is brought about by COPC programming creates greater understanding and trust among the participating partners. In cases where IHEs already had worked in partnership with communities, COPC helps to deepen that understanding and trust. In turn, this enhanced trust helps to make partnerships more effective and sustainable. And better partnerships lead to more and broader community improvement initiatives. Clearly, the comprehensiveness and long-lasting nature of campus-community initiatives grows exponentially as trust and mutual understanding increase. Both campus and communities benefit from this growth.

IHEs have a tendency to see themselves as separate from the communities in which they are located. However, the most successful COPC partnerships operate from the perspective that IHEs actually are a component of those communities. From this perspective, recent calls for IHEs to engage more effectively with their communities should be seen as a call for these institutions to acknowledge their place within those communities (Bok 1982; Boyer 1990; Lynton and Elman 1987).

Seen in this light,
improvements to local communities almost always mean improvements to the participating higher education partners, including improvements in scholarship and physical improvements to the neighborhoods surrounding the IHE. No matter what concrete improvements result from partnership activities, there will also be an additional, intangible benefit. That benefit is the ability of IHEs to fulfill more effectively their responsibilities to their communities and to society.

As we mark COPC’s 10th anniversary, it is important to reflect on how the more than 130 COPC sites nationwide have fulfilled this civic duty. This reflection can provide us with a true sense of the powerful and positive impact that the COPC program has had on the residents of economically distressed neighborhoods and on the IHEs that are a part of those communities.

Selecting Readings
Thurman Marley has spent decades helping youngsters in the Macedonia neighborhood of High Point, North Carolina, learn the fundamentals of baseball and fall in love with the game. Marley, who is 66, says that drugs, prostitution, and poverty exert a negative influence on the youth of Macedonia; by coaching baseball, he strives to exert an equally positive influence.

“You need to have a hope and a heart for kids,” says Marley, who received an award for outstanding volunteer service from North Carolina Governor Mike Easley in 2001. “Not only do you have to love them, but [you have to] reach out and help them with their problems. If we don’t do that, we’re in trouble. Kids have so much to go through nowadays. We just have to . . . show them there is another way. Over the long haul, that’s what’s going to pay off.”

Marley has done his best to fulfill this objective even in the face of financial difficulties. In 1998, when those difficulties forced the Macedonia Youth Baseball League to close down, Marley did not walk away from the baseball diamond. Instead, he stepped up to bat for his players.

Unwilling to let even one summer pass without organized baseball in Macedonia, Marley set out to convince High Point’s mayor, local business owners, and friends to help finance another league. They complied, as did the COPC at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), which provided planning support and funds to purchase baseball equipment. Marley was no stranger to COPC staff: he had been involved with the COPC from its beginning, having helped to write the original COPC application.

The first pitch of the new Macedonia youth baseball league was thrown out in spring 1999. Since that first season, the baseball league has continued to expand. (In 2003, more than 300 young people participated in the league compared to 50 in 1999.) The increase was due to the addition of teams for older players and to the construction of a new baseball field. Citing the poor playing quality of the old field, Marley convinced the city to build a new field in 2002, despite some local opposition. “People didn’t want to hear it,” says Marley. “Some people just don’t want progress. I petitioned city hall myself for this field.” Marley again achieved his objective by gaining the support of then-mayor Becky Somers and other members of the community.

“There is always a need for quality programs for young people, and particularly ones that offer role models and the opportunity to work with adults from the neighborhood,” says Somers. “Thurman was one of the first folks to say, ‘Our kids need help.’ He’s been a strong advocate for both the community and young people. His tenacity and passion is so genuine that it certainly attracts support.”
In addition to teaching the basics of baseball, Marley works hard to teach his players other lessons that he hopes will endure. He chooses coaches who are qualified both as teachers of the game and as role models for young players. As a volunteer tutor, he stresses the importance of doing well in school, and he tries to instill a sense of discipline in his players.

“Discipline is the game,” he says. “If you don’t have any discipline, you don’t make it as an athlete. And, without a good education, you cannot be successful these days.”

Despite his tendency to be a tough coach, Marley says he tries never to forget why he continues to invest so much time and money in this program. “I love the kids,” says Marley. “The game is for the kids.”

For more information, contact Thurman Marley, 808 East Russell, High Point, NC 27260, phone (336) 887–7336.
Kermit Black has rarely been at a loss for words, and he’s hardly ever had trouble spending public money to improve the lives of people in need. But in 1991, when the state legislature gave Texas A&M University (TAMU) $950,000 to work in the colonias, Black admits that, at least for a while, he was stumped.

Of the 2.5 million people living along the border between Texas and Mexico, one in five, or a half million people, live in colonias. These unincorporated rural communities spread out along a 1,200-mile expanse of southwestern Texas between El Paso and Brownsville. They often lack water, sewer, paved roads, or surface drainage sufficient to prevent flooding. Many colonias are further challenged by dilapidated housing, low levels of education, and high unemployment.

Bringing water and sewer to the colonias had been on the agenda of several Texas advocacy groups before the state increased TAMU’s 1991 budget, but no one had figured out a way to address the overwhelming social infrastructure problems that plagued the area. Unsure where to begin, Black and three other staff people from TAMU’s Colonias Program decided to have a look for themselves. “It was going to take $700 million in 1992 dollars to bring water and sewer to the colonias, which consist of 1,800 communities,” recalls Black. “It was going to take another $800 million or so for road paving. Housing would cost about $3 billion. We had $950,000 per year for 2 years. With that kind of money, we decided nobody was even going to know that we had been there if we worked on physical infrastructure problems.”

Determined to make the most of state funding, Black and his colleagues decided to ask local residents how they thought the money could best be spent. They discovered that colonias residents were most concerned about ending the terrible isolation they felt. Lack of transportation had been a perennial problem for them but residents’ sense of isolation went much deeper than a dearth of cars and buses, says Black. Even when they could get to a town, they found it almost impossible to access the services that their families needed. A lack of understanding about local service systems, combined with poor English language skills, caused many to simply stay at home. Black could relate personally to their plight.

“I grew up in Mississippi in a small town,” says Black. “A lot of people were poor. We were poor, too, and most of all, we were isolated. It’s been really rewarding to me to help build this program to address the kind of isolation I felt as a kid, and to see that we are actually helping people who were isolated to become less isolated.”
TAMU accomplished this mission by bringing a plethora of services to the colonias and by making those services easily accessible to residents. In the past 13 years, the Colonias Program has used funds from the state of Texas, federal agencies, the university, and private foundations to establish 19 community resource centers in Texas along the Mexico border. The centers are built in collaboration with local partners, such as a county government or a school district, that donate the land and maintain the buildings after they open. Most centers offer health, education, human services, job placement, youth, and elderly programs as well as transportation and child nutrition services. Several centers run Even Start educational programs, and some offer substance abuse prevention programs. The U.S. Department of Education funds a general equivalency diploma program for migrant and seasonal farmworkers that operates at four sites.

To supplement and publicize these and other services, the Colonias Program enlists the help of promotoras. These peer educators are colonias residents, mostly women, who are trained to promote local services among their neighbors. The promotoras make thousands of home visits a year to find out what is going on in the lives of their neighbors, inform them of available services, and determine what additional information and services colonias families need. Originally paid with COPC funds, the promotoras are now supported by state agencies, foundations, and the VISTA program.

“They speak for us—they vouch for us, if you will—at church, at the grocery, and across the fence,” says Black, who maintains that the women have done more for the Colonias Program’s credibility than any staff person could. “Once we hired border people, things changed in terms of the trust local residents had in us and our effectiveness in serving those residents.”

Black has also been instrumental in building trust between TAMU and the community partners who must make a financial investment in each community center before it is built. Nowhere is that trust more obvious than in the relationship between Black and Mercurio Martinez, a former county judge in Webb County. As a result of this strong working relationship, Webb County has become the place where the Colonias Program has piloted most of its new initiatives. The Larga Vista Colonia, located east of Laredo, was the site of Webb County’s first community center, which now serves between 5,000 and 7,000 residents every month. The program’s first transportation service also started in Larga Vista, and that’s where the promotora corps began.

“Whenever Kermit would come up with something that was new or different, he knew that he always had my support,” says Martinez. “I would say that’s what makes the difference, the friendship that we developed. Besides, he is very persistent.”

**Breaking the Ice**

Despite the number of community centers now operating in the colonias and the many services being provided, no one is ready to say that the university’s work there is done. “We reach about 150,000 to 160,000 colonias residents,” says Black, “but that leaves 350,000 that we’re not reaching. We don’t want to quit now.”

Black admits that he’s seen tremendous physical change in the colonias since he first started working there. Not all of the change can be directly credited to TAMU, he says, but Black likes to think that the university’s commitment to the community helped spur others to get involved. Martinez agrees.

“The quality of life in the colonias has had a dramatic improvement,” says Martinez. “Texas A&M was the role model, they were a great example to others. As a consequence of what they did, other agencies started to come to the colonias to provide help, but A&M was the one that broke the ice. A&M made a major difference in improving the economic life, the quality of life for all of these families, from Brownsville all the way to El Paso.”

For more information, contact Kermit Black, phone (979) 862–2370, e-mail kermit@tamu.edu.
University of Minnesota
Family Benefits From Rental Housing in School’s Neighborhood

Last year, Xavia Tidwell was having difficulty paying her $1,300-a-month rent because she lost her job. To make matters worse, the owner of the house she was renting in the Midway neighborhood of St. Paul, Minnesota, refused to make needed repairs and restricted her ability to have guests visit her home.

Tidwell now is much happier living in 1 of 16 new rental townhomes in the Dayton’s Bluff neighborhood of St. Paul. The 3-bedroom, 1-bathroom unit provides enough space for Tidwell’s family, which includes her 14-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son along with her 16-year-old sister and her baby. Tidwell also likes the fact that the unit is located in a safe area and is close to the Dayton’s Bluff Elementary School. Her son walks to school each day and participates in afterschool recreation programs.

Proximity to the elementary school is an important characteristic of the housing development where Tidwell lives, which was built by the Dayton’s Bluff Neighborhood Housing Services (DBNHS). The housing project is part of a comprehensive community effort to provide a more stable learning environment for neighborhood children at Dayton’s Bluff Elementary School. The school has recently been designated as an Achievement Plus (A+) School, which allows it to provide a wide range of services to school families, many of whom are African American, Hispanic, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong. School personnel connect these families with community resources such as housing assistance, parent education classes, and other assistance.

Partners in the A+ initiative include DBNHS, the Dayton’s Bluff’s District Four Community Council, the Community Stabilization Project, the University of Minnesota’s Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, and the Wilder Foundation. As one of the initiative’s partners, DBNHS works to address the community’s housing needs. A recent study conducted by the COPC at the University of Minnesota made a connection between the lack of adequate housing in Dayton’s Bluff and high student mobility rates at the neighborhood’s elementary school, which reported a student turnover rate of almost 100 percent in 1997. Educational research has shown that frequent moves disrupt students’ abilities to settle into a school environment, make new friends, and keep up with their studies.

“A student [working on a COPC study] interviewed parents who had kids attending Dayton’s Bluff, particularly those who had moved,” says DBNHS Executive Director Jim Erchul. “One of the primary reasons that people said they left the school was because they faced issues with their housing, whether it was substandard housing, poor relationships with their landlord, or crime that occurred around the housing.”
Need for Rental Housing

DBNHS initially focused its housing efforts on offering homeownership opportunities to families with children enrolled at Dayton’s Bluff Elementary School. These efforts helped improve the housing stock, but DBNHS soon realized that not all families were ready to own a home, either for financial or personal reasons. These families still needed rental housing that was decent and affordable. Both were lacking in Dayton’s Bluff where most rental housing was built between 1880 and 1920 and was in poor condition.

With so much deteriorating rental housing already in the neighborhood, the plan to build new rental housing could have been controversial, says Erchul. “But the initial ground work that . . . COPC reports created, the connection [between] the university and the elementary school, and our partnership with the district council made it happen,” he says. The townhome project opened in May 2003.

DBNHS designed its rental units with families and students in mind. Many of the townhouse units have three bedrooms and a den so they can accommodate larger families. The den, which is generally located in a quieter part of the house, was intended to serve as a space where children could study and complete their homework. DBNHS actively recruits tenants from among the school population.

It is too early to tell if the new DBNHS rental housing and homeownership efforts have had an impact on student mobility rates at the elementary school. Student turnover rates have decreased, says Erchul, but it is unclear if the housing projects are the cause. “There are a lot of other things that have gone on at the school including [the fact] that they have a stellar new principal,” he says.

The Impact on One Family

Like many of the low-income families moving in and out of Dayton’s Bluff, Tidwell found it difficult to find quality, affordable housing to meet her family's needs. She now is very happy with her new home. “This is a brand new place and I love it,” says Tidwell. “The thing I like the most is that they are willing to work with you. It is so hard to find a good landlord.”

To qualify for her new housing, Tidwell paid a $25 deposit, passed a reference check, and demonstrated that her income was 30 to 50 percent of median. At $867, her current rent is more affordable than what she paid for her previous home. The lower payment enables her to concentrate on the needs of her family and keeps her from worrying each month about how she is going to pay the rent. She also likes the fact that DBNHS offers a payment plan for tenants who have difficulty paying their rent. Tidwell, who is a childcare provider, has not had to use the plan but she likes knowing it is there.

There's no question that the new rental housing is making a difference for Tidwell's family. Her daughter and sister were able to stay at their previous schools, and her son is doing well at his new school. The teachers and staff keep Tidwell informed about how her son is doing with his studies.

“When you are under a lot of stress and strain, it really takes a toll,” she says. “I don’t have to worry and the children sense that and are not worried. Now everybody is happy. Of course there are still stresses and strains of everyday life, but [they are] a lot easier to handle now.”

For more information, contact Xavia Tidwell, 212 Bates Avenue, Unit A, St. Paul, MN 55106, phone (651) 340–7463; or Jim Erchul, executive director, Dayton’s Bluff Neighborhood Housing Services, 823 East Seventh Street, St. Paul, MN 55106, phone (651) 774–6995.
When Cynthia Sadler and Venessa Spearman first ventured into the Uptown neighborhood of Memphis to do community-building work, they were initially stymied because there was no central organization that tied people in the community together. There was little interaction between residents and no general consensus on issues affecting the neighborhood. Although neighborhood associations existed, they functioned independently. Few residents were civically engaged in the community and young people seemed especially isolated. In addition, the resident population was dwindling due to the demolition and subsequent redevelopment of the neighborhood’s public housing communities through a HOPE VI grant.

“Uptown residents may only know the people on their street,” says Sadler, who is studying for her master’s in anthropology at the University of Memphis (UM). “We were really looking at building community block by block.”

Community-building activities became particularly important to Uptown when the neighborhood started experiencing a major revitalization. At the center of that revitalization is the community’s HOPE VI project, which has transformed two of Uptown’s former public housing sites into mixed-income housing developments. In addition, the expansion of St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital is starting to spur outside interest in the neighborhood.

“There is an enormous amount of private and public investment going into the area,” says Spearman, who administers the UM COPC. “There was a chance that residents would be left out of the revitalization effort or pushed out.”

Uptown Resource Center
Through their community-building efforts, Sadler and Spearman created the neighborhood focal point that they had found missing when they first came to Uptown. That focal point is the Uptown Resource Center, a hub of information and activity that offers local residents an opportunity to reconnect with their community, prepare for the changes that promise to accompany the neighborhood’s redevelopment, and face the many challenges that still exist despite that redevelopment.

“Gradually, industry has left the area and unemployment is high,” says Sadler.

“Through HOPE VI everyone is concentrating on those residents moving into the community. Very few services are available to those who still live in the community and will likely remain there. We are trying to do something that is inclusive.”

The Uptown Resource Center opened in 2002 in an old funeral home across from St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. Residents come to the center to receive information about the HOPE VI project and to apply for housing in the new development. They also come to search for jobs...
in the center’s computer lab, receive service referrals, find out about employment and skills-training opportunities, and attend computer repair classes sponsored by the YWCA. The center has also hosted training on lead abatement and asbestos removal for residents interested in working on the HOPE VI construction site.

The resource center was established through the collaborative efforts of the university, the hospital, and the city of Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development (HCD). Spearman serves as the center’s director, and Sadler is working as an intern on the project. Center programs are based on a model, created by Spearman and Sadler, that allows residents to play a key role in deciding what services are offered. In addition, city agencies and nonprofit organizations work together to address residents’ needs. HCD hopes to implement the model in seven other city neighborhoods.

“We wanted a place where residents could come for information,” says Spearman. “There was a lot of misinformation going around the neighborhood, especially among residents who did not live in public housing. The center was an opportunity for residents to have a role in their own destiny.”

**Laying the Groundwork**

Spearman’s and Sadler’s years of experience working in Memphis’s neighborhoods proved helpful in establishing the resource center. Before returning to UM to pursue her master’s degree, Sadler spent 20 years working for various Memphis nonprofits and knew community members and service providers who could help her meet the needs of center clients. While Sadler provided the community connection, Spearman lent her historical and organizational knowledge to the center’s development process. She has been involved with COPC projects since receiving her master’s degree in public administration from UM in 1995.

The Uptown Resource Center developed under much different circumstances than UM’s first COPC projects, says Spearman. The first projects were set in Memphis enterprise community, where the university had a very defined role and a structure for creating community partnerships. That structure allowed the COPC to focus on such partnership priorities as mapping community assets, she says.

“This time we [had] to tackle several questions,” says Spearman. “How do you support community building when there is limited organization in the neighborhood? How do you . . . prevent residents from being displaced by gentrification? And how do you sustain the partnership between the community and university, especially when there is no lead group to work with?”

UM’s previous partnerships with HCD and its involvement in the successful HOPE VI grant application helped the COPC position itself as a coordinating agency in the Uptown Resource Center, says Sadler.

“We want the Uptown Resource Center to be something other than an office building,” she says. Instead, both Sadler and Spearman hope the building will become a centralized place that truly serves as a resource for residents and eventually becomes a one-stop shop for community-based services. Robert Lipscomb, executive director of HCD, shares this vision.

“Neighborhood resource centers are a means of linking neighborhood needs to outside resources and a way for all of us to be involved in improving the quality of life and the economic future for all Memphis citizens,” he says.
A Resident-Focused Model

Spearman and Sadler want their resident-driven model to serve as a prototype for other neighborhood resource centers in Memphis. Therefore, the model needed to be flexible and able to meet differing resident needs. The model does not dictate specific services that should be provided in every center; these can be decided locally. However, it does call for all centers to provide a direct linkage among the city, the community, and an IHE. This interaction provides residents with easy access to support, referrals, and information on city and community programs. It also demonstrates the commitment of IHEs and the city to a neighborhood’s health.

“Before, [UM] never had a physical presence in the neighborhoods and the relationship could really be described as temporary,” says Spearman. “This [Uptown Resource Center] was an opportunity to build trust with the neighborhood by having a constant presence.”

The involvement of a neighborhood association or nonprofit agency is also important to the model, says Sadler. These community organizations provide programming and ongoing linkages with residents. IHEs can help build the capacity of these associations or agencies in neighborhoods where that capacity is limited. For example, UM is providing technical assistance to the Uptown Alliance, a newly formed community development corporation that wants to offer employment training and create a community land trust for affordable housing. UM has helped by researching properties, collecting neighborhood history, and providing connections to other city agencies and service providers.

Finally, the resident-driven model is not dependent on UM. In fact, the university hopes that other Memphis colleges and universities, such as historically black Lemoyne-Owen College, will become involved in the development of new centers.

Responding to Resident Needs

Both Spearman and Sadler agree that the key to creating a successful community resource center is consulting residents about community needs. The
 process of asking and responding to resident
needs helps build a better understanding of
the neighborhood and create more relevant
programming, they say.

“As an anthropology student, I thought I was
prepared to look at the whole picture, but I
am finding that this is most important,” says
Sadler. “The whole picture involves asking
people what they want and need.”

The center’s computer lab is a prime example
of how resident feedback has affected
programming and partnership development,
says Spearman. Prior to the center’s opening,
the COPC held several community meetings
during which residents voiced their need for
a computer lab that they could use to find
information about jobs. Once the computer lab was
in place, Sadler and Spearman observed that many
residents with marginal reading and comprehension
skills had trouble using the computers to create
resumes or search for jobs. In response, Spearman
and Sadler developed partnerships with
organizations that could work with residents
to improve their literacy skills.

Engaging residents as partners is also important to
the success of the center, notes Sadler. Based on
requests from parents for more youth activities,
Sadler and Spearman organized a mural project to
help the community develop a shared neighborhood
history and to recognize young people as
community resources. With the help of UM
students, local young people interviewed past and
current residents to uncover the neighborhood’s rich
history. These interviews are now being transformed
into a historical mural that will be painted by
community youth and displayed outside the center.

“In addition to building the kids’ artistic and research
skills, we are providing a voice for youth in their
community,” says Sadler. “Parents are becoming
more involved because their children are involved.”

Engaging residents through projects such as this
will be especially important as new residents move
into the neighborhood.

“The center will be pivotal once [the new Hope VI
project] is up and running,” says Arlene Hinson, an
associate with Abt Associates and consultant to
the HOPE VI project. “It will provide a point of
connection for all residents no matter whether
they are new to the area or have lived in Uptown
all of their lives.”

For more information, contact Venessa Spearman,
COPC program administrator, or Cynthia Sadler,
graduate student intern, Uptown Resource Center,
314 Auction Street, Memphis, TN 38105, phone
(901) 576–6980, e-mail vspearma@memphis.edu
or csadler@memphis.edu.