

THE JOURNEY OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY: MOVING FROM IMAGINATION TO REALITY IN NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

*Report of the
Building Bridges Between Practice and Knowledge
in Nonprofit Management Education
Learning Community Meeting
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It's the second day of the Learning Community (LC) meeting. Participants are struggling to find a common language and focus. They are coming to grips with the isolation between academe and the nonprofit sector; specifically, the fact that academic scholars and researchers and nonprofit leaders and practitioners have extremely limited professional or social relationships with each other.

Participants emphasized that the lack of contact – some called it "avoidance of contact" – has deeper implications than simply an insufficient exchange of information, wisdom, or capital. A stronger barrier to bridge-building is a lack of shared understanding of the contexts in which the two groups work. Many scholars possess an incomplete understanding of management and practice, especially as it relates to the historical circumstances, political realities, and guiding principles of practice within the nonprofit sector. Many nonprofit leaders do not appreciate the institutional (dis)incentives in higher education that discourage scholars from conducting joint ventures with the nonprofit sector.

It soon became clear that discussion content and intellectual discourse were less important to participants than the feeling in which ideas and recommendations were presented. Laughter, indignation, confusion, excitement, agreement, and disagreement were pervasive. LC members seemed to be recognizing the enormity of the collective challenges that they faced, both as members of LC and as leaders in a complex initiative in their own projects and communities.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Building Bridges between Practice and Knowledge in Nonprofit Management Education Initiative (or BBI as a shortened acronym) operates on three levels:

- ***Institutional.*** The Initiative represents the intersection between two of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's (WKKF) longstanding commitments. Specifically, BBI aims: (1) to promote reform and excellence in higher education, while concurrently, (2) developing, strengthening, and diversifying leadership within the nonprofit sector. WKKF has made multiyear investments to 20 grantees to be the foundation of the Initiative.
- ***Local.*** The 20 sites are working to build their own capacity and to improve nonprofit management education programs through curriculum development, theory and research, and community service. While each grantee project is pursuing a particular focus, project teams have also committed to an overarching agenda to: (1) bridge the gap between academia and the nonprofit sector, (2) make academic programs more responsive to the needs of nonprofit

leaders and practitioners, and (3) diversify leadership in both academic and nonprofit sectors.

- **Intermediary.** The Learning Community (LC), composed of all project teams members, as well as partners from sites in Latin America, represents this level. The LC intersects and interconnects the institutional and local levels of BBI. The LC aims to nurture the relationships and exchange of expertise on which BBI is grounded. WKKF's commitment to, and ongoing support for the LC, is witnessed by the hiring of CenterPoint Institute. This organization provides ongoing technical assistance to project teams while at the same time, ensuring that the Initiative maintains its collective focus.

The Learning Community (LC) and its Annual Meeting

The LC is the heart of BBI. Each of the 20 projects was selected because of unique demographics, strengths, and goals. Recently, representatives from six universities and one foundation in Latin America became members of the LC. Funding is being offered for four years to give ample time for the projects to set and achieve their local vision and priorities. In turn, WKKF expects each project team to actively contribute to the LC, and to help achieve a collective, national vision. Further, each project team is expected to have the same representatives participate in the LC over the life of the Initiative to establish continuity and rapport among members.

Now approximately 75 people strong, the LC is more or less divided among three groups: academic faculty (researchers and teachers of nonprofit management), nonprofit leaders and practitioners (primarily those who head up coalitions of nonprofit organizations), and "bridgers" (those whose jobs are designed to connect academe and the nonprofit sector).

The first meeting of the LC convened in Battle Creek, Michigan for three and one-half days in September. This meeting, the objectives of which were determined by LC members, was designed to:

- Deepen relationships with members of their own project team;
- Develop a more comprehensive understanding of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Building Bridges Initiative, and extend relationships with members of other teams;
- Explore multiple aspects of building relationships between knowledge and practice.

Given these ambitious objectives, the meeting days were full. There were presentations, discussions sessions, affinity group sessions, workshops, team planning meetings, and cross-team information exchanges. These were led by WKKF and CenterPoint staff, outside consultants, and by LC members themselves.

A Moment in Time: Purpose of This Report

It is important to recognize that the LC exists throughout the year, not only during annual meetings. Building relationships, sharing knowledge, and sparking institutional change are ongoing processes. Structurally, these processes are facilitated by CenterPoint Institute and by an interactive Website. Members of the LC have been challenged by WKKF to find ways to creatively support each other, and to discover ways of becoming both relational and functional partners.

This report examines the LC at a single point in time. It looks at LC structures, processes, and outcomes. This report represents the first of a series of reports that observe and discuss the LC as it evolves over the life of the Initiative. This is, therefore, a "baseline" report.

While the framework and analysis contained here carry implications for the future vitality and productivity of the LC, we do not offer recommendations in the report. Consistent with the principles and spirit of learning communities, the aim of this report is to offer objective information as well as interpretation to the LC. Our hope is that it will inform future deliberations, shared learning, and collaborative action.

Methods: Documenting and Analyzing the Learning Community Meeting

To capture and analyze meeting processes and outcomes (i.e., to document the story of the LC at multiple levels), we employed ethnographic rapid appraisal procedures (ERAPs). ERAPs possess great utility when the fundamental unit of analysis is a system, composed of many structures, relationships, events, and procedures, especially when the system experiences relatively rapid shifts of frame within a short duration (as with conferences).

Specific ERAPs we used were: participant observation; short, informal interviews with participants; and document review. Documents included BBI and LC fact sheets, program materials, workshop handouts, flip chart notes recorded during sessions, and action plans drafted by project directors.

Triangulating among these information sources in analysis yielded a rich picture of the LC, detailed in the following sections. Not only informative, nor simply inspirational, nor entirely consociational, the meeting intertwined numerous dimensions that make a viable learning community, one poised on the threshold of the bold vision and change the BBI hopes to precipitate.

II. A FRAMEWORK FOR CONCEPTUALIZING AND IMPLEMENTING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Building a Learning Community

Before presenting the descriptive analysis of the conference, it is useful to lay out a framework for conceptualizing and implementing a learning community. Building a learning community, where all participants have optimal opportunity to reap benefits, requires deliberate and intentional action. Because learning necessarily embodies change (knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors), the "work" of a learning community is complex. Peter Senge has designated five core "disciplines" that are critical to learning organizations: (1) systems thinking, (2) vision, (3) mastery, (4) mental models, and (5) team learning.

Systems Thinking

The popular parable of the seven blind men and the elephant well illustrates the value of systems thinking. As the men each explored a different part of the elephant, their findings, and therefore conclusions, about what an elephant is were based on empirical evidence within their own purviews. Accordingly, for example, the man examining the tail pronounced, "An elephant is wiry and wispy." The man on the elephant's back observed, "An elephant is a bony ridge." To the man on the tusk, the elephant was "round and smooth, but pointed at one end."

Because systems are bigger than our individual experience, learning to think systemically obliges us to communicate with others, and to learn to take others' perspectives. It also demands thinking simultaneously about at least four elements: (1) events, (2) patterns of behavior, (3) systems, and (4) underlying assumptions, as well as how these elements interact with one another.

The BBI represents a substantial challenge for systems thinking:

- Because BBI seeks to transform several features of the nonprofit sector -- build/enhance curricula in higher education, develop and disseminate knowledge about nonprofit practices, diversify nonprofit leadership -- it is necessary that BBI stakeholders see current systems clearly. They must be able to see the pattern of interrelationships between the structures and processes of these systems.
- Articulating the current systems will also contribute to greater clarity regarding ways to support emerging models of nonprofit management education.

This will, in turn, contribute to greater clarity concerning how to construct and support a "new model" of nonprofit management.

Shared Vision

Vision is the soul of creating durable change. When people are able to see their deep desires for a better future crystallized into a vision, they are able to garner and sustain the motivation to see vision realized. Because visions tap into the deep purposes behind an initiative, they also have the power to compel commitment.

But to be powerful, vision has to be shared. And to be shared, vision has to be authentic, drawn from the many people who join the initiative. Creating shared meaning is thus a never-ending process for initiatives seeking wide-scale change.

Mastery

Mastery involves (1) continuous clarification of what is important, and (2) continuous learning to see current reality more clearly. Mastery has no end point. It is a process that is both a *map of* past thought and action and a *map for* the future. Mastery implies a commitment to challenge viewpoints and theories about the factors -- micro, macro, personal, economic, and political -- that govern the systems we operate in. Not a definitive statement of THE TRUTH, mastery is, rather, a rigorous inquiry of "what is," and the conflicts and dilemmas in place that limit potential for desired change.

Pursuit of mastery provides propulsion to move forward. That is, close examination of current reality helps individuals and teams to see the gap between the vision of what could be, and what now exists. The relations between these two states are what frequently compel the resolve to change.

Mental Models

Innovation cannot occur by thinking or doing the "same old same old." The power that mental models -- deeply internalized images of how things *are* or *should be* -- exert to undermine consciously held vision, resolve, and commitment cannot be underestimated. Mental models are made up of entrenched, though typically unarticulated, assumptions, previous teachings, stories, and experiences. To be human is to have mental models; indeed, we cannot exist completely without them, for they serve to organize perception and experience. Problems occur when mental models are either not born out in reality, are harmful to our humanistic impulses, or clash with our intentions.

Team Learning

Team learning involves enhancing the capacity of the team or learning community to think and act in a coordinated, synergistic fashion. Members do not suppress their differences or disagreements, however. Instead, team learning recognizes and respects differences. Members

are able to dialogue about their disagreements to deepen understanding, and to employ these differences for strategic advantage to reap collective benefits.

Not surprisingly, team learning takes a while to develop. Learning how to learn collectively is not firmly entrenched in our society. As such, this discipline requires patient practice, and opportunities and supports to take risks without fear of incurring penalty.

Processes to Implement Learning Disciplines

Among learning communities, we have found that three primary processes encourage implementation of the five learning disciplines:

- ***Building relationships.*** Both learning and a sense of community occur through interaction among individuals. Formal as well as informal networks are needed, whereby individuals can communicate easily, freely, and purposefully. While electronic and written venues can facilitate exchange of knowledge and dialoging, it is personal, face-to-face contact that helps create a deep sense of mutual purpose and shared meaning.
- ***Engaging in collective action.*** Action helps change mental models, clarifies vision, and promotes systems thinking. When people have common experiences, they are more apt to see things from multiple perspectives and devise realistic strategies for change.
- ***Identifying and addressing issues of power.*** Where power differences and conflicts of interest prevail, it is impossible to create transformational change. People seeking such change need to acknowledge the essentially political nature of nearly all institutions and organizations and examine directly the impacts and influences of power relations and processes. If these realities are ignored, it is likely that "changes" put into place will encounter resistance, or have negative consequences.

III. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

An essential element in building any community is the formation of interpersonal relationships. Relationships drive and sustain commitment, contribution, and collaboration. Relationships form as individuals reveal their own identities, and in turn, explore the identities of others. Relationship building, therefore, is a complex, personally risky, and time consuming process. These dynamics are hard to create in a meeting lasting a little over three days!

In the BBI LC, the challenge was even greater given the diverse nature of the members' work-affiliated identities. People came from different fields and professions. Almost all had quite

different areas of expertise. On a personal level, some were already friends and acquaintances; some knew one another from previous networking or collaboration; some obviously were project team members; and others were meeting for the first time.

Fortunately, the meeting was designed to provide many and various experiences for participants to establish or deepen relationships and explore different aspects of their identities. These opportunities occurred in both formal and informal settings.

Developing Personal Relationships

As a backdrop for the meeting, professional photographs were taken of all participants and staff. These were displayed in the common meeting room. In addition, project teams brought background materials to share. These materials were also displayed throughout the week. We observed that both presentations were frequented regularly by participants, as they sought to become acquainted with the names, faces, and products of their colleagues.

Addresses by William Richardson, WKKF President and Chief Executive Officer, and Dan Moore, WKKF Vice President for Programs; daily general sessions; tours of WKKF; buffet meals; and dinner at W.K. Kellogg's summer home offered more informal times for participants to strengthen personal relationships. Our observations during informal sessions and meals, as well as during free time, revealed a great deal of cross-project team interaction. At breakfasts, for instance, many participants tended to sit with different people each day. Mingling also took place at each meal, where many switched to different tables to linger over beverages or deserts, and engage in conversation. Before, in between, and after each day's sessions, small clusters lounged and chatted in hallway chairs, or at the refreshment table. While these conversations appeared strained at times, a certain amount of that is to be expected among people who do not yet know each other well.

Exploring Professional Identities

Participants were "broken out" in a number of ways to ensure a high degree of mixing across projects and professions. For example, participation in discussion groups, concurrent sessions, and project updates was by self-selection, while that in "affinity groups" and a networking exercise was by assignment (through designation and random selection respectively).

This approach created situations where participants were, at times, forced to move out of their comfort zones and into interactions with new colleagues in unfamiliar territory. At other times, participants could interact in ways most compatible with their own relational needs and learning styles. Examples include:

- Although project updates were compiled into a written booklet, participants could also choose to hear the oral presentations of projects if they wished. This allowed

participants to see teams together, and facilitated cross-project dialogue.

- In the discussion clusters and workshops seminars, participants gathered with those with whom they shared interests, and in so doing, could also share information that could possibly form the basis of future exchange and cooperation. (And, indeed, we observed and heard of many situations where this occurred).

Participants not only shared instrumental information. At times, they challenged each other about underlying assumptions. For example, when one faculty member explained that building partnerships between academe and nonprofit community was assisted by the fact that several of the practitioners had "credible degrees," a fellow participant pushed her to explain further what constituted "credibility" and why it mattered.

A different slant on identities emerged through the Affinity Groups Session. Instead of personal or project identities, this activity drew attention to "sector" identities as "faculty," "practitioner," or "bridger" (individuals employed in academe who have practical experience in the nonprofit sector). During this exercise, each group was asked to identify changes that should occur within academia and the nonprofit community to support effective partnerships. We observed group members reflecting on dimensions of their identities during these groups, and in the hallway after the session was over. For example, faculty largely considered their roles as researchers and teachers, but were challenged by their colleagues to broaden their identities to include practitioner and advocate for nonprofit organizations. The "bridgers" had to explore their identities. While some viewed themselves as "eclectics" or "marginals," others stressed that they were actually the most essential stakeholders in the Initiative. And, finally, the nonprofit leaders were challenged not to see themselves as simple technicians, but also as scholars with their own areas of expertise.

Relationships across Projects

It is too early to typify relationship patterns among LC members, or to know if they are broadening their professional identities. This was only the second meeting of the grantee cohort; for many participants, it was their first (because it was the first meeting of the LC). Nonetheless, it is worth noting a few trends were evident in the "Human Being, Human Doing" activity and in the written action plans of projects, both of which were completed on the last day of the meeting.

The "Human Being, Human Doing" networking activity was intended spark connections between people, with the hope that the connections would be sustained following the meeting. Each participant stated a need for assistance (personal or work-related). Then, another member of the LC volunteered to provide assistance in coming months. The groups' statements were not documented, so it is not possible to examine resulting patterns. However, we noted deep engagement in this activity among participants. Interactions were characterized by high degrees of camaraderie, humor, and genuine interest to assist one another. Esprit-de-corps of this sort is important because it foster the commitment and trust

that undergird strong learning communities.

The action plans served to formalize some of the relationships across projects. Indeed, 13 projects identified ways that they would be active members of the LC.

- Seven projects focused on being involved with the LC as a whole. These projects wrote about using the Website, networking with others on conducting community outreach, and perhaps visiting other projects.
- Six projects identified specific projects teams whom they planned to seek out for information, approaches, or consultation. Four projects hope to form a "Western region coalition," and two will explore collaborations with the Latin American partners who attended the meeting.

All in all, these plans evince good potential to solidify connections engendered at the meeting. As one Director summed it up, "Networking helped situate our program and goal plans with other projects, giving us better idea where to get or ask for assistance and where we might offer to help."

Summary

The BBI initiative has an electronic Website and a list server to keep project team members abreast of information and to facilitate exchanges of information. Throughout the meeting, participants were reminded of these resources, and the expectations of WKKF that they use them. Participant feedback was encouraged. Doubtless, these systems will strongly contribute to the development of a viable learning community.

At the same time, however, people in any community need periodic face-to-interaction so they can learn about, and respond to, one another in a more personal way. Such shared experiences probably cannot be replaced by "virtual" encounters on the Web or over the phone. Trust among individuals and groups is built in this way. Equally important, face-to-face interaction promotes community spirit. Deceptively simple, spirit is actually a complex phenomenon impossible without a sense of trust, intimacy, and sharing.

While relationship building touches on all the learning disciplines discussed in Section II, three appeared to be especially implicated at the September meeting:

- **Systems thinking.** Because project teams are transforming themselves from a group of discrete entities into a nationwide LC with a shared infrastructure of support, members were challenged to view themselves at this wider systemic level. By offering many different experiences and perspectives on the web of relationships inherent in the Initiative, the meeting made a significant contribution to forming such a "collective."

- **Vision.** Shared vision has a way of spreading through interpersonal contact. Throughout the conference, it was evident that participants were not only articulating the visions of their own projects, but also struggling (with some success) to find common meaning and purpose for BBI as a whole. The relationships and networks that were formed and strengthened during the meeting will facilitate future efforts to create a shared vision and mental models.
- **Team learning.** Before people can think and behave with synergy, they have to come to know one another, accept their differences, and feel comfortable to express themselves forthrightly. During the meeting, the learning was not always easy -- people had different perspectives on important issues. But clearly, a "foundation of relationships" has been created that can support dynamic team learning in the coming years.

IV. ENGAGING IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

Collective action lies at the core of BBI. Ultimately, BBI will be judged a success when groups of people are working together to bridge the gap between academia and nonprofit practice, and to develop a new cohort of diverse leadership in both environments. In this endeavor, collective action will have to occur at all three Initiative levels (institutional, local, and learning community).

Collective action does not just happen, of course. It is driven by an identified cause, shared vision, and a clear picture of current reality, on the one hand, and skill and commitment of diverse groups of individuals, on the other hand. It depends on careful planning, but also on creating conditions that allow for unforeseen events that spark the imaginations of stakeholders.

It was within this context that a major objective of the LC meeting was to facilitate inquiry and examination of aspects of building relationships between knowledge and practice. Meeting sessions were designed to support participants in their search for the vision, mastery, and mental models that would help them initiate and sustain collective action in their own communities and projects.

Sharing Perspective and Strategies for Action

Shared learning was thus the dominant meeting "pedagogy." For example, presentations of project updates and dialogue in the many Networking Discussion Clusters offered ample opportunity for such learning. During presentations, each project team provided a half-hour overview of their project and shared hard-won lessons with colleagues in other projects.

Networking Discussion Clusters focused the sharing of content-focused topics identified by

members at a previous meeting held at The Woodlands in Houston in January, 1998. Content fell into clusters of three types:

- **Instruction:** included topics such as curriculum development, distance learning, and Internet education.
- **Management functions:** ranged from fundraising to marketing to evaluation.
- **Human capital:** emphasized issues such as capacity building, outreach to communities of color, and collaboration.

"Next Step" Actions to Connect Academia and the Nonprofit Sector

Reflecting the emphasis on collective action, each project team was challenged to identify how members might use the perspective and mastery gained during the conference to improve projects back in their own localities. To promote this process, "team times" were identified towards the end of the conference. Each project met by itself -- in a relaxed setting, often a restaurant -- to discuss plans, team roles, and priorities. Then, during the second "team time" in a morning meeting, projects were asked to prepare a one-page "action step" brief. Two questions guided the brief:

1. What new knowledge about relationships between academia and the nonprofit community was gained at this LC Meeting?
2. How will that knowledge be applied when you return home?

Answers are discussed below.

Awareness. Most teams indicated they reached new awarenesses about academic-nonprofit relationships, primarily that it is important they mutually recognize and understand structures and processes (the systems) of each. Such understanding necessarily involves examination of mental models. Examples included:

"We learned that nonprofit organizations could benefit from approaching academics from a position of strength. And that nonprofits could benefit from a broader understanding of what academic institutions can help them accomplish."

"Learned about importance of both academia and practitioners learning about each other's missions and viewpoints as essential building blocks."

"Gained a deeper, clearer insight into the nature of the relationship between academia and practitioners, specifically the realization that the relationship is not simply about service to the student, but transformational learning."

Application. In addressing the application of knowledge (the collective action), almost all emphasized plans to more assertively and thoughtfully reach out to, and to include more broadly and in more roles, stakeholders in the nonprofit sector. Illustrations included:

"Use of community advisory committee to expand advice obtained from people of color working in nonprofit organizations serving communities of color."

"We will develop the courses in tandem with the churches, charge low fees, start small and learn the best methods as the courses unfold."

"We will try to be more proactive in making connections with practitioners."

"Will include nonprofit managers in Campus Director training sessions."

Changing Higher Education. It is noteworthy that none of the teams spoke of reaching out to new or broader constituencies in academia. Only a few teams explicitly identified actions to bring about changes in institutional structures and in power balances between academia and the nonprofit sector. Examples of planned action include:

"More aggressive recruitment of students of color to graduate degree programs."

"Develop a plan of action for the extension courses for African-Americans, and for Protestant Groups."

"Expand roles for nonprofit professionals beyond advisory role."

The apparent lack of attention to academic institutional change in the action step brief does not mean that systemic change in higher education was not a central issue during the conference. It was. But the strategies to bring about such change were not a frequent focus.

Several factors could account for this pattern. Most simply, the BBI is in the early stages of development, as are projects. If nonprofit management education programs are to be created and strengthened, a basic first step is to include nonprofit leaders and practitioners in the planning. In addition, changing the culture of institutions of higher education is a formidable task. As participants in the Affinity Groups noted, change in many structures would be involved, such as ways that institutional mission and scholarship is construed, ways that faculty are rewarded, and ways that nonprofit leaders are compensated for adjunct teaching and participation in campus committees and activities.

Further, the LC (as a collective or as individual project teams) has not yet reached a developmental stage to be begin effecting such change. Collective action for the purpose of deep institutional change is dependent on a prior history of relationships and success, at both the local and national levels. Participants are currently focused on building these relationships and experiencing early successes. The points of entry and the long-term strategies for institutional change are not yet clear. We suspect that such issues will become even more salient to the LC as team learning increases and the BBI moves into its later years of implementation. Such a perspective was highlighted in one action plan:

"There is concern among practitioners that Academia may not be in touch with the needs of the community. This being the case (assuming so), a revision of the vision and mission of the University's relationship with the community must take place."

Summary

Nothing quite so galvanizes a learning community as does collective action. While it is important to plan and discuss, experimenting with action forces clarity on issues, deepens understanding, and suggests possibilities for improvement and progress.

Action hones the learning disciplines of mental models and team learning. When people enjoin in common experience, their worldview has a tendency to change. When people engage in new experiences, comfortable old paradigms slip as others begin to take their place. It is likely that faculty, nonprofit leaders, and bridgers will experience such shifts -- at times in profound ways -- as the work of their projects and the initiative develops.

A similar expectation concerns team learning. As LC members perform work together, it is likely that a special ambience will take hold and permeate the LC culture. Deep understanding of one another often results from the opportunity to tie ideas to concrete, common experience. And such understanding helps pave the way for the type of team learning responsible for innovations.

V. IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING ISSUES OF POWER

Initiatives of the scope and ambition of BBI have to confront issues of power. It is all but impossible not to, given that BBI operates within, and concurrently, aims to build partnerships and begin to change the balance of power in at least three arenas: (1) public, private, and nonprofit sectors, (2) institutions and communities, and (3) academic and nonprofit leadership.

Not the least of what makes this a strenuous challenge is that the nonprofit sector has historically tended to be invisible. The sector is neither well defined, nor strongly supported

with financial or cultural capital. Consequently, it is not surprising that nonprofit management, as a program of study or as a profession, is far less developed than its counterparts in business or the public sector. Within this larger frame, power differentials between academia and community organizations exist. Institutions of higher education, almost without exception, have greater status and influence than any single community organization or coalition. The status spectrum also operates within the realm of higher education. Due to a host of factors, certain colleges and universities enjoy more status and command more resources than others. Finally, dimensions of racial/ethnic oppression and multiculturalism are fully embedded in each of these issues. Fundamentally, BBI is about developing and supporting a more diverse pool of scholars and nonprofit leaders. To do so, many facets of power must be considered and addressed.

Barriers to Bridges

Power differentials influence individuals and their interpersonal relationships. Participants agreed that the current extent of social and professional relationships between individuals in academia and the nonprofit sector is limited. Consequently, there are relatively few opportunities for faculty to learn, first hand, about the knowledge, perspectives and wisdom of nonprofit leaders, and vice versa. Also, nonprofit leaders have relatively few, formal ways of locating and accessing the expertise and resources of faculty.

Participants emphasized the lack of full contact -- some called it the "avoidance" of contact -- has deeper implications than simply an insufficient exchange of information or social capital. Indeed, a stronger barrier to bridge-building is lack of shared understanding of the contexts in which the two groups work. Many scholars possess incomplete understanding of management and decision-making in the nonprofit sector, especially as it relates to historical circumstances, political realities, and economic constraints. On the part of nonprofit leaders, many do not fully appreciate the institutional incentives in higher education that may discourage scholars from conducting research and service with the nonprofit sector.

Explorations in Power

The "Affinity Group" exercise brought many of these issues to the fore. Briefly, all LC members were divided into groups of faculty, practitioners, and bridgers. Each group caucused and addressed the questions, "What changes need to occur within (a) academia, and (b) the nonprofit community to support effective partnerships?"

In the subsequent large group session, each of the three groups reported out. By and large, results centered on three themes:

- Strategies to build new or stronger relationships;

- The need to understand and critically reflect on the structures and processes of institutions of higher education and nonprofit organizations;
- The need to change attitudes and behaviors of individuals in each group.

In the large group report-out, however, the content of the discussion seemed less important to participants than the feeling in which the reports were presented. Accordingly, participants tended to respond with emotions, rather than with intellectual discourse. Laughter, indignation, confusion, excitement, agreement, and disagreement -- both in statements made to the entire group, as well as more quietly to those within seating areas -- were pervasive. It was as if participants were recognizing the enormity of the collective challenges that they faced, both as members of LC and as leaders in a complex initiative in their own communities.

In the afternoon of the same day, several sessions carried the explorations and discussions further. Nine workshops, the bulk of which were led by members of the LC, were available; six focused on the salience of institutional power:

- **Academic Practitioners and Nonprofit Practitioners: Finding the Common Ground.** In this workshop, the use of the word "practitioners" for both scholars and nonprofit leaders served to bridge and equalize the importance of both professions. Common interests and benefits were discussed.
- **Nothing as Theoretical as Good Practice: Reaching Common Ground Between Nonprofit Researchers and Practitioners.** Here, the emphasis was on elevating "practice" to an accepted form of academic scholarship, while providing strategies for practitioners to gain useful evaluations from scholars.
- **Subversion from Within: Fostering, Sustaining, and Surviving Community-Focused Collaboration from within the Belly of the University Beast.** The title says it all. Highlighted were strategies through which stakeholders could work together to influence university structures, from funding to instructional approaches to award systems to better support the nonprofit sector.
- **Building Relationships in Communities of Color.** In this workshop, institutional and interpersonal tensions were identified that exist between academic faculty, nonprofit leaders and community members. Discussion centered on the differing perspectives of stakeholder groups, and ways to establish trust and initiate collective action.
- **Teamwork: From Reality to Dream and Collaboration... Learning How to Dance.** Both of these workshops started from the premise that there exist many barriers (institutional, cultural, personal) to collaboration between sectors and professions, and offered advice on how to overcome or avoid these barriers.

Most of the sessions ran over their allotted time because participants wanted to continue to explore issues and exchange ideas. This is not to imply that there was agreement or consensus on issues of power and how to change institutional cultures and practices. Indeed, proceedings at times were punctuated with animated discussion, including strong disagreements. People sometimes became upset or seemed discouraged. Consensus was not the objective, however. The aim was to allow participants to gain some new knowledge, but more importantly, to have the opportunity to freely explore and test their own assumptions and perspectives.

Summary

The elusive nature of power typically makes it perplexing for people to recognize, name, describe, and reflect on their experiences. During the meeting, therefore, it was exciting to observe LC members as they sought out people from different stakeholder groups, struggled to identify common interests as well as dimensions of power that separate them, and delved into differences in perspective. In these endeavors, participants demonstrated the value of the closely related learning disciplines of mastery and mental models.

Mastery. If mastery is the willingness to push the envelope by squarely confronting current reality, then it is fair to conclude that advancement was achieved. Throughout the meeting, participants explored power and its consequences at multiple levels -- within their own localities, the LC, and WKKF/BBI. Perspectives and viewpoints were debated to identify and sort through issues of power, so to move toward consensus of "what is."

Mental Models. Concurrently, participants sought to articulate a shared image of how things "should be." Progress was made, but there was an air of tentativeness. In discussions, for example, faculty and nonprofit leaders could often agree on the structural "problems" of higher education, but could not find resolution as to strategies or mental models to guide future action. Similarly, while racism and other forms of oppression were acknowledged as powerful barriers to building bridges, participants were hesitant to strive for consensus as to whether race and ethnicity should be brought to the table (put into the "foreground," as one participant said) and become a major focus for the LC. Fear and a lack of trust to discuss these issues exist in every newly organized group, and remain a challenge to BBI stakeholders.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is common in comprehensive initiatives to imagine change as taking place within, and as a result of, a framework of sequential action (e.g., establish goals and objectives, design ways to attain them, carry out the activities, and achieve the desired results). Certainly, much change is wrought through sequential action, but it need not be, nor is typically, the only structural process for stakeholders to pursue. Change is also effected through a cyclical process: reflecting on and assessing previous action, developing new possibilities, making course corrections, and performing new action.

A cyclical structure of change is especially relevant to initiatives like BBI that involve multiple systems and that are entrepreneurial (devoted to creating something new) because learning involves a similarly cyclical process. Before stakeholders can strike out on new ground, they need to consider what has been tried before, generate new ideas on that basis, go with their plans and hunches, experiment with new actions, and reflect on what has been learned in order to go forward again. The BBI LC represents the primary structure designed to keep the cycle of action and learning in motion, and therefore, evolving.

The conference strongly brought home the point that creating and pushing change is at once exciting and demanding. Exciting in that the promise for change and innovation is high. As indicated by participants, through the projects they have the promise to transform higher education's role in preparing nonprofit leaders, diversify the leadership of nonprofit management, improve relationships between institutions of higher education and nonprofit organizations, and contribute to a growing body of knowledge about the role of the nonprofit sector in civil society. Demanding is that the issues surrounding the change are complex, and often deeply rooted. In this endeavor, the LC faces three issues: (1) connecting institutional and personal change, (2) finding and using metaphors that inspire, and (3) using the LC as a place to practice.

Dual Focus on Institutional and Personal Change

As LC members forge and firm up alliances within their project teams, as well as across projects, they will have to be prepared to engage in change at both the institutional and personal levels. A theme that echoed throughout the conference was that change at either level at the expense of the other yields less than optimal results, and more significantly, tends to obscure opportunities where leverage might best be applied.

For example, in the Affinity Group activity, it was evident among faculty and bridgers that conceptualizing the structures and operations of nonprofit organizations is difficult. Faculty and bridgers indicated that it is nonprofit practitioners who need to change -- in their understandings, attitudes, and behaviors. That faculty and bridgers scarcely mentioned needed changes in the structures and workplaces of the nonprofit sector is perhaps telling of the relative "invisibility" of the sector. Whenever individuals have difficulty seeing structures, there is a tendency to focus on gaps or needs as located within individuals. As such, Affinity Group

results imply a need for deeper, fuller, and more collective conceptualizations of the nonprofit sector.

Conversely, according to faculty, changes they would make in the academic sector involve altering institutional elements. Faculty did not cite needed changes as occurring within individuals employed in academia. These results suggest that encouraging faculty to reflect on the ways BBI connects with their personal visions is likely to add power to the effort.

Nonprofit leaders tended to strike a balance between recognizing the need for institutional and personal change. However, they also stated a need to know more about the institutional structures that govern academic operations.

Creating Shared Meaning through Metaphors

Another major challenge will be in creating shared meaning among the many stakeholder groups involved in the Initiative. Alignment of the aspirations of BBI's many stakeholders has begun, but is not yet fully elaborated. Of course, this is to be expected, given the newness of the Initiative. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that among the many metaphors circulating at the conference, three were dominant.

First, is the "building bridges" metaphor, which is the very name of the Initiative. Building bridges signifies that gaps exist that should be bridged; for example, between academicians and nonprofit leaders; between teaching, research, and practice; or between various projects and teams that comprise the initiative. A second metaphoric domain relates to apparent growth in the nonprofit sector, and anticipating its needs and functions in the future. The specific metaphors here are "the initiative is like Wayne Gretzki playing hockey. He doesn't go *after* the puck, but skates to where he thinks the puck will be," and the caution of "let's not be like mesmerized chickens who suddenly find themselves on the white line in the middle of a highway and oblivious to traffic bearing down from both directions." The final metaphor is "the initiative is seeding the field," preparing and growing new leaders for a field of endeavor (meeting human needs and delivering services through the nonprofit sector) that is expected to widely flower.

The point is not that BBI stakeholders will, or even should, find a single dominant metaphor to convey the spirit and intent of the Initiative (though they could), so much as to locate the meaningful connections between the various metaphors. If metaphors have the power to both reflect and shape reality, the set of metaphors employed by stakeholders will present guideposts of the process and progress of the various learning disciplines (systems thinking, shared vision, mental models, mastery, and team learning). As such, the LC may find metaphors changing as the initiative undergoes various stages.

The Learning Community as a Place to Practice

Fortunately, the LC is intended to be structured so that members will be able to tussle with challenges in a safe environment, without punitive consequences. Safety is crucial, for as members form and deepen relationships, it is expected they will become more committed to the Initiative and to each other. In addition, as members are exposed to, test, and try out various perspectives and strategies, in building relationships, engaging in shared action, and identifying and addressing issues of power, they will be better prepared to deal with similar dynamics back in their own communities and projects. Two case examples from the conference illustrate these points. They are highlighted below.

The Reaching out to Communities of Color Networking Discussion Cluster began with a forceful affirmation of the necessity of dealing with historical and current forms of racism and other "isms" in outreach. Vignettes were exchanged among group members of how, for example, higher education and large institutions "expect us to come to their place, instead of coming to our place," when "it's not even clear what they have to sell anyway," and "we can't continue to walk with bags over our heads" [avoiding discussion of the issues].

Conversation shifted to the relationship of these issues to the BBI. Some participants suggested that WKKF, the conference organizers, and the LC members were at risk for mirroring and reproducing these same sets of dynamics. Not surprisingly, a free-for-all discussion ensued.

Then, the group seemed to coalesce. Participants reached awareness that they themselves are the primary stakeholders of BBI, are the individuals who will make change happen, and as such, should grasp their own power and steer events as they see fit. The result was a plan for collective action. Group members agreed to "foreground" issues of race, ethnicity, and power. They recommended that a general session be held on these issues at the next conference, that a list server be created on the BBI Website to share expertise and ideas about outreach, and finally, to assertively push WKKF and LC members to establish clear goals and strategies around issues of diversity and to monitor them.

The second example exemplifies how a group of participants more informally developed plans to create a subgroup of the LC to pursue action.

As project team members from Portland State University, California State University-Los Angeles, Arizona State University, and University of Texas at San Antonio interacted during the conference, they were struck that "only four sites" exist in the West, and that each is "isolated" from one another by vast geographic distances. Creating an additional, smaller learning community, composed of these four projects, was appealing for these teams. Also evident

was that these teams are taking positive, concrete steps to form a community they believe will help their advancement, individually and collectively.

In sum, the September conference set the stage and conditions for BBI stakeholders to begin to cohere as a learning community. Obviously, the LC is in a nascent stage, and the BBI itself is yet young. Time will tell if and how the LC consolidates itself and what dynamics it helps effect. As a result of the current conference, the LC appears to be excellently positioned to become both functional and productive. It appears that if the LC maintains its focus, it is likely to continue to experience success.

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