Reaching Out to Neighborhoods: Communities and Universities Working Together

FINAL REPORT
Arizona State University Community Outreach Partnership Center

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grant provided the impetus for ASU to form a partnership applying university research and expertise to some of Phoenix’ most difficult urban problems. As grant manager, the Morrison Institute for Public Policy coordinated a multi disciplinary team of senior ASU faculty, city staff, and community residents who worked collaboratively to reverse neighborhood deterioration. A primary goal of COPC was to empower local residents with the skills and knowledge necessary to maintain the momentum of the revitalization process. ASU’s COPC team included 21 faculty and staff from eight different departments and five colleges.

The Central City and South Mountain Urban Villages of the city of Phoenix were the primary focus of COPC activity. In addition, targeted outreach assistance was directed to a specific neighborhood known as Rio Vista. This approach allowed COPC to coordinate its efforts with Phoenix’ Enterprise Community plan, as well as bring additional resources to a neighborhood in need.

COPC activities were designed to address needs identified by the community in the areas of economic development, community organizing and planning, and education and workforce development. Specific activities included: providing small business technical assistance; increasing citizen participation and developing local empowerment strategies; researching and formulating workforce development policies and programs; facilitating school-to-work transition efforts; providing bilingual injury prevention information; creating a neighborhood-based tutoring program; assisting with the development of at-risk youth services; conducting a neighborhood Charrette; increasing access to social services information; and, organizing neighborhood clean-ups that attracted the participation of over 100 ASU student and faculty volunteers.

Project Achievements

With its COPC funds, ASU sought to develop a comprehensive, multi disciplinary urban outreach effort that was applied in nature, multifaceted in approach, and rewarding in scholarly output. Accomplishments have been numerous, particularly in light of the fact that COPC marked ASU’s first attempt at a multi disciplinary response to local urban distress. Prior to the advent of the HUD grant, ASU’s history of community interaction was characterized typically by ad hoc, “single shot”
projects of limited duration and narrowly defined goals. The COPC approach has been well received, earning a citywide reputation as an effective and powerful resource for community development and neighborhood capacity building. Significant gains were achieved in citizen empowerment, university-community partnership building, and applied research strategies. The end result was a project in which faculty and students shared knowledge and skills with local residents, while simultaneously learning from the communities served.

Specific achievements included:

*Rio Vista Neighborhood Outreach*

- Creating an ASU-sponsored tutoring program which served over 100 César Chavez Elementary School pupils during a two year period;
- Facilitating the creation of the Rio Vista Block Watch, the community’s first viable neighborhood association;
- Procuring over $15,000 in city-funded grants to underwrite public safety and community organizing activities undertaken by the Rio Vista Block Watch;
- Attracting over 90 residents to a neighborhood needs assessment and prioritization meeting;
- Securing commitments from city officials to install 10 new street lights in Rio Vista;
- Arranging for ESL classes to be taught in Rio Vista; 48 students enrolled, and one resident was hired as an instructor;
- Empowering Rio Vista residents with the skills necessary to plan and execute neighborhood clean-ups; during the course of COPC, three were held, in which participation totaled over 150 ASU students, 15 faculty and 100 residents; and,
- Through COPC community organizing techniques, sowing the seeds for long-term involvement in, and support of, the Rio Vista Block Watch—monthly meetings consistently average 25 participants and Phoenix police representatives routinely attend.

*Outreach to Community-at-Large*

- Hosting a community dialogue for citizen activists with urbanologist Neal Peirce; in addition, Peirce was the featured speaker at a COPC-sponsored lunch attended by 60 of the city of Phoenix’ highest ranking management staff and elected officials;
- Providing technical assistance and action research that resulted in the city of Phoenix reprogramming $350,000 of EC funds for a Job Linkages program for inner-city residents;
- Delivering technical assistance to 15 small businesses located in the COPC target area;
- Organizing a School-to-Work Colloquium in which a mix of superintendents, teachers, counselors and business leaders participated;
- Sponsoring a grant writing and resource development workshop for neighborhood groups citywide; and,
- Creating a youth services providers coalition, which also organized a youth services conference attended by over 50 participants.
Applied Scholarship

T Focusing two ASU geography classes, and two Architecture studio classes, on research and design projects relating to the Rio Vista neighborhood; for many of the 75 ASU students involved, it was their first exposure to Phoenix’ South Mountain community;

T Sponsoring a Rio Vista-oriented charrette involving over 50 students who examined land use, housing, recreation and community development issues;

T In response to needs articulated by both the COPC and the EC Advisory Committees, faculty from the Geography Department, the Center for Business Research and the Morrison Institute produced a variety of reports which were used to create a Job Linkages program aimed at connecting inner-city residents with locally available jobs;

T Facilitating the translation into Spanish of an “Urban Survival” safety prevention program administered by the Phoenix Fire Department;

T Research jointly conducted by a Public Affairs Professor and an Architecture professor sought to improve information dissemination about available social services by creating an on-line directory of information that can be displayed spatially, and aggregated at the county, urban village or Rio Vista neighborhood levels; and,

T College of Education faculty researched the extent to which opportunities exist for youth in Phoenix’ inner-city to participate in activities emphasizing leadership development skills.

Lessons Learned

Arizona State University’s COPC strategy was often a “work in progress,” with partners continually probing, collaborating and even experimenting, to put together a multi disciplinary effort that would be meaningful to both the Academy and the community. In the process, many lessons were learned. Significant among them were:

Outreach vs. Research - The Capacity of the University

1. If outreach and applied scholarship are to become integrally woven into the fabric of university practice, institutional endorsement must be unambiguous and support explicit.

2. “Action research” and “scholarship” are not mutually exclusive—outreach can become an effective vehicle for expanding the knowledge base and publishing journal articles while also contributing to the public good.

3. Funding, alone, however, will not guarantee successful outreach and applied research projects; faculty need more training relating to the goals and processes involved in such work.

4. University-sponsored urban outreach efforts are often labor intensive and require a basic understanding of community organizing techniques in order to be successful. This may be an impediment to creating multi disciplinary teams of professors whose areas of expertise are narrowly defined, and who have specific teaching commitments they must meet.
5. Despite the obstacles cited, universities have real strengths that can influence empowerment objectives and community development goals. Foremost among them is the ability to provide technical assistance and expertise in an array of disciplines, thus providing residents with a range of resources to address neighborhood needs. Further, as neutral conveners of urban improvement efforts, faculty are in unique positions to remain above the conflicts that mark local politics and neighborhood control issues. Finally, universities can provide the energy and vigor of student involvement, which can be realized through both community service projects as well as action research and technical assistance.

Collaboration and Partnership Building

1. Within the university, collaboration across program areas can be difficult to achieve; consequently, comprehensive, multi disciplinary urban outreach efforts are best supported by institutional structures (e.g., designated centers) created specifically for that purpose.

2. University faculty and students are intrinsically “outsiders” in the eyes of local residents, therefore, projects involving sweat equity can often “buy” legitimacy for university members seeking to establish trust among neighborhood residents.

3. Citizen participation and empowerment can be achieved by approaching problem mitigation in a step-wide manner, i.e., tackling the easiest issues first, then building upon problem resolution skills developed to address subsequent—and more difficult—concerns.

4. Because local government support—or lack thereof—can significantly impact the success of a COPC, it is important to identify expectations and establish trust early on, and maintain information exchange throughout the life of the project.

Conclusion

Ultimately, university-community partnerships will succeed or fail at the local level. Evaluations and benchmarking notwithstanding, local residents, not federal authorities, academics or city officials, will determine project value and relevance. On balance, in the case of the ASU COPC, community feedback has been positive and affirming. The work of the ASU COPC has been recognized and publicly acknowledged by elected officials, community leaders, and Rio Vista residents. Neighborhoods throughout the city have requested similar assistance for local improvement projects. Meeting that demand will depend largely on the ability—or commitment—of the university to institutionalize COPC-type efforts. By institutionalization, it is meant the continuation of university-endorsed urban outreach programs that have access to secure and steady funding and are recognized and supported by the administration. As ASU seeks to strengthen ties with greater Phoenix, its toolbox of effective strategies should include an emphasis on community partnerships and urban-oriented applied scholarship.