

Realizing the Potential of Community-University Partnerships

BY YOLANDA ANYON AND MARÍA A. FERNÁNDEZ



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Universities across the nation are expected to contribute to their neighboring communities. Responses to this charge come in many forms: college students volunteering in neighborhood schools, faculty conducting research activities to support local evaluation efforts, and

Yolanda Anyon is pursuing a doctorate in social welfare at the University of California, Berkeley. Previously, she was program manager and community-partnership liaison for the John W. Gardner Center in West Oakland. María A. Fernández is the policy and program senior manager at the Gardner Center and has more than 10 years of experience working with youth and community-based organizations and in supporting community-university partnerships.

university centers and civic leaders launching major community-development initiatives. In many cases, these initiatives result in powerful new knowledge for the academic field and transformative experiences for community members. Yet other partnerships fail to produce such meaningful results because they do not develop truly collaborative relationships that are of equal benefit to both partners.

In fall 2000, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University initiated partnerships with two San Francisco Bay-area communities aimed at improving the lives of youths. The center worked with young people and other residents in each community to create and implement model programs that would both serve the commu-

nity and develop new knowledge and resources for research and practice.

But before it could do that, the center first needed to change the communities' negative perceptions of the university. Residents in Oakland and Redwood City said that in the past universities that claimed to be partners had:

- *Spent insufficient time learning from residents and about community strengths.* Researchers had theories about how to “fix” neighborhoods, and they focused on the community's obvious deficits and problems without exploring its strengths and assets. They did not sufficiently consider the experiences and ideas of residents before determining the partnership's course.

- *Given research objectives priority over community needs.* Researchers did not translate the data they collected from community-based research projects into information or practical tools that community members could use to solve local problems. Instead, they used what they had learned to address an academic audience, with few direct benefits to the targets of their research.

- *Not committed to long-term goals or strategies.*

Faculty members and students initiated projects that were connected to short-term grants or service-learning courses. Once the funding cycle or semester ended, so did the partnership.

Mistrust was particularly strong in low-income communities of color that researchers had historically exploited. The differences that exist between academic institutions and under-resourced communities in terms of privilege, power, and philosophy reinforced that mistrust.

How the center overcame that distrust, generated commitment to common goals, and laid the foundations for broad-ranging work may prove instructive.

THE CENTER'S DEVELOPMENT

The Gardner Center was founded to strengthen policy, practice, and research in the field of community youth development. This focus reflected the interest of its founding faculty director, Milbrey McLaughlin, a professor in Stanford's School of Education. Its use of community-university partnerships to help local youth and generate new research reflects the vision of John W. Gardner, a nationally renowned civic leader and public servant. Throughout his lifetime, Gardner spoke of the need for the university to function as a member of the broader community, with a responsibility to improve the quality of life for everyone. He believed that universities could make unique contributions to local efforts to further the well-being of young people, and he also recognized that residents had knowledge that could inform academic practice.

Support from the university was crucial early on. John Hennessy, Stanford's 10th president, understood the power of theory to inform, and be informed by, practice. He believed that universities needed to contribute to a better society and that partnerships with local communities were consistent with

the university's mission. The School of Education's dean, Deborah Stipek, also had a strong commitment to serving the public and leading educational reform at regional, state, and national levels. With support from these two leaders, the center was able to secure one-time funds from the university and space from the School of Education. Today, the Gardner Center is a grant-funded enterprise engaged in an ongoing effort to build an endowment.

A COMMUNITY YOUTH-DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO PARTNERSHIPS

Community youth-development strategies “harness the power of youth to affect community development and simultaneously engage communities to embrace their role in the development of youth” (Hughes and Curnan, 2000). This framework assumes, first, that young people and their communities are not problems to be dealt with but essential partners with assets and expertise, and, second, that the health of young people and their communities is interdependent—that as people grow up in communities, they simultaneously develop physically, intellectually, psychologically and socially.

To effectively support their development, programs and systems must be well coordinated and relevant to the local context. Furthermore, this approach recognizes that the task of creating meaningful and lasting change requires a long-term investment and commitment from all stakeholders.

McLaughlin applied these principles to the work of the center. To create a common vision among partners, she and her team of student researchers first studied the history and context of their potential community partners through open-ended conversations with residents, local leaders, and community collaboratives. In the case of Redwood City, for example, the collaborative Redwood City 2020, composed of various educational and social-service institutions, played a major role in connecting the Gardner Center to key community leaders. These discussions also identified potential goals for collaboration.

What made such an open-ended strategy possible was the flexibility that funders provided the center. Rather than demanding precisely defined activities and outcomes at the beginning, the Hewlett Foundation, one of the center's initial supporters, funded a feasibility study, one of whose objectives was to develop the outcomes in collaboration with the community partners.

The Gardner Center ultimately finalized plans with two partnering communities and worked with them to construct model programs that would build on youth-development practices that research had shown to be effective, as well as community members' knowledge of what worked with their particular young people. These shared efforts, which tested the commitment of all involved, led to new relationships between the university and community partners and created opportunities for research and action that would have a lasting impact on young people's lives.

IMPLEMENTING MODEL PROGRAMS

The following activities and lessons learned are drawn from case studies of partnerships between the Gardner Center and Redwood City and West Oakland over a six-year period. Although the partnerships in the two communities evolved differently, they both were based on a model youth-leadership program called Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL). Beginning with about a dozen youths at each site, the project now assists more than 200 youths in the two communities.

YELL provides students at Kennedy Middle School (Redwood City) and McClymonds High School (West Oakland) with the opportunity to lead projects on social-justice issues that they find important and relevant. These young people learn methods for research and advocacy to find answers to the difficult problems that face their schools and communities. Participants then help improve local policies regarding youth and education through shared decision-making with adults.

The Gardner Center had three main objectives in pursuing these partnerships: addressing negative perceptions about university partners, generating community commitment to youth development, and engaging in city- and county-level research and reform.

ADDRESSING NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS

To change community members' attitudes, the Gardner Center had to understand the community and construct the model program collaboratively, support both research and practice, and develop agreements for long-term sustainability.

In framing a collaborative program, the essential lesson the center learned was to *frame initial conversations broadly*. Staff from the Gardner Center did not go to the initial meetings prepared with proposals. Community leaders were surprised, and in some meetings perplexed, to hear that the center did not have a specific "program" in mind. Instead, the guiding question for development of the partnership was, "What might we be able to do together to support young people?" This framing proved to be effective in opening doors.

Through its conversations with local leaders, the need for better coordination in services for youths became apparent. As young people shared their opinions about how to improve services and opportunities for youths, it quickly became clear that West Oakland and Redwood City could benefit from developing young leaders who could generate new knowledge about young people to inform local decision-making. Service providers and educational leaders also wanted to understand better how to apply academic theories of youth development to their own work.

Out of these discussions emerged a program design in which young people led action-research projects on issues important to youth. For example, students conducted needs assessments and then used this information to advocate for specific goals such as

additional mental-health services and the creation of a safe place where students could hang out after school. The hope was that in time, the program could serve as a model within the community of the power of a youth-development approach, as well as a research site to explore the application of such practices in two community contexts.

To overcome perceptions that the university acts only in its self-interest, the Gardner Center's second task was to ensure that it met the community's need for high-quality training and direct services, as well as achieving its own research and dissemination goals. Therefore, it was critical that the project implement promising practices that could be aligned with research questions about

their effectiveness within each community. Using existing knowledge about successful youth-development practices, YELL was designed to provide students with opportunities to direct the project through shared decision-making and through work as a team to address relevant school or community issues. Researchers ultimately collected information about how these pedagogical strategies affected the youths' psychosocial development and their acquisition of academic or practical skills. The knowledge gained from this work could be shared both in practice and in the academic literature.

To manage this balance, the Gardner Center hired a director for each YELL program with experience in both youth work and academic research, along with a connection to both Stanford and the local partnering community. In Redwood City, María Fernández served as the founding YELL director. She brought with her experience working as a parent liaison in a school in that community, a connection to Stanford as an alum, and a master's-level background in education. Yolanda Anyon started YELL in West Oakland a few months later, after having supported youth programs in the area while working in the

county's social-services agency and writing her undergraduate thesis at Stanford on the implementation of welfare reform in the city.

A key lesson learned at this stage was the importance of giving program coordinators explicit responsibilities in both research and practice. To eliminate any impression that one set of goals was more valuable than the other, the YELL directors acted as research practitioners with two primary responsibilities: working with young people and other community members in meeting their goals and supporting university students and faculty in implementing the research agenda.

On occasion, these two roles seemed at odds, especially as the program grew. As the directors, we often felt that research tasks took time away from relationship-building and direct service. So we hired Americorps volunteers as program assistants. Also, Stanford graduate-student researchers who documented the young people's experiences in YELL built trust with both the staff and young people by fully integrating

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themselves into the program, consistently attending after-school sessions, field trips, and staff meetings.

This required extraordinary commitment from those students, but the unique dynamic that resulted allowed the Gardner Center to collect rich data about the program's impact. At times, data analyses and findings from the center's research team did not arrive fast enough to either inform YELL programming or meet community needs. Eventually, however, these multi-purpose data were used to answer academic questions, contribute to program improvement, support grant evaluations, advocate for additional funds, and share successful program strategies with the broader community.

Many community-university partnerships face challenges in securing and sustaining the financial resources needed to support their work. As a new center with a grant to conduct a feasibility study of partnerships in local communities, the Gardner Center was in a unique position to support YELL's early development. Housed within a school of education at a major research university, the center also had expertise in community youth development and education.

Community partners offered in-kind resources such as staff time, local knowledge, connections, space, equipment, and commitment to making the program work. In particular, the principal at McClymonds High School, Lynn Haines Dodd, and the student-resources coordinator in Redwood City, Edna Aciri, served as early advocates for the program. They and others helped leverage resources, including access for young people to decision-makers and local funding to maintain and expand the programs.

The Gardner Center managed the YELL program with verbal agreements and the trust that both parties were committed to a long-term partnership. But as the center began long-term strategic planning, the center's board of directors and administrative leadership questioned the organization's ongoing responsibility for managing YELL after five years of implementation, particularly since more than enough data had been collected to meet research goals. At this point, we had to address questions about what each partner would ultimately be accountable for. Meetings revealed conflicting priorities among researchers, program staff, and administrators within the Gardner Center and with community partners concerning how to respond to multiple and often varied priorities.

The Gardner Center's staff members debated whether the center could more effectively contribute to long-term change for young people through continued direct services that supported youth leadership and that earned community credibility, or whether it should redirect its resources to other emerging possibilities for systemic work across institutions. On the other hand, the community partners, including school administrators and other leaders, worried that as schools felt an ever-increasing need to dedicate their efforts and resources to raising students' scores on standardized tests, the gains made by YELL would be lost without the Gardner Center's leadership in staff supervision, fundraising, fiscal management, and advocating for youth-development practices.

But once the center's staff communicated with partners more explicitly about their commitment to continue providing help in program design and in developing funding, community partners assumed primary responsibility for managing the program. We have yet to see what long-term impact this change will have on the center's work, particularly in terms of the unprecedented

opportunities to conduct community-based research that a center-staffed project afforded university students and faculty. As it stands today, the Gardner Center and each community are all involved in an ongoing search for financial support to sustain the program and disseminate the lessons learned.

So a key lesson is the need to *create a plan for sustainability and shared accountability up front*. Although a two- or three-year grant was enough to launch a youth program, it did not represent the kind of long-term investment needed to see meaningful community change. As exciting and successful as a program like this feels to everyone, communities want to see that universities are partners for the long haul, not just when grant money is available.

Such an enduring partnership requires foresight, planning, and difficult early conversations about shared responsibilities. The longer the Gardner Center managed YELL, the stronger became the community's expectations that it would continue to do so indefinitely. A "memorandum of understanding" prior to implementation that addressed issues of collective responsibility for YELL's oversight and financial sustainability could have prevented later tensions and served as useful tools for moving the partnership forward.

GENERATING COMMUNITY COMMITMENT

A second major goal of the Gardner Center's model-program strategy was to generate commitment to the strategies of community youth development. Since people in the communities really wanted to see how the academic theories and promising practices in youth development could be useful in their improvement and reform efforts, the center used YELL to:

- Tailor effective practices to confirm their value and contextual relevance, and
- Develop positive relationships with local stakeholders by implementing promising practices.

Before suggesting that schools or community-based organizations use the community youth-development model, the Gardner Center adapted it to local contexts by staffing YELL with research practitioners who translated theories of youth engagement into practice. Then as teachers, administrators, and city leaders observed their own young people successfully perform as researchers and advocates, they began to develop new venues for young people's involvement.

For example, the high school in West Oakland has created structures for youth input into decisions about school policy and programming. In Redwood City, the second YELL director, Mary Hofstedt, helped increase opportunities for young people to sit on decision-making bodies involving school climate and to actively participate in civic activities, with the city manager as a key champion. In West Oakland, some young people helped create small schools within the larger one, while others served as decision-makers and evaluators for the high school's after-school initiative. The Oakland Unified School District, using YELL research strategies as a model, now collects data on the perspectives of young people at all grade levels.

So the essential lesson here is to translate academic theories into applied strategies. While partners rarely disagreed outright with the theories and strategies of community youth development, they often expressed skepticism about whether they could be applied in their neighborhoods, given the unique ethnic,

cultural, and social identities of their students. By tailoring theory to local practice, the center motivated school and community leaders to implement effective strategies on their own.

In early conversations, community leaders described past relationships with university researchers that were often distant and detached. The YELL directors, program assistants, and graduate-student researchers gained credibility by working directly with young people and showing up for everything from faculty meetings and community forums to athletic events and potlucks. As a result, they could learn about the day-to-day challenges faced by young people and the adults who serve them.

To keep local leaders engaged, it was also critical that the top leaders at the Gardner Center were directly involved, instead of relying on staff or university students to convey messages or to lead planning efforts. Many community participants recall how important it was to see the center director's commitment to the partnership, both at its inception and at key junctures, whether in celebrating joint successes or in having difficult conversations.

With time and trust came unprecedented access to local leaders and informal settings where decisions about policy, practice, and research were made. These relationships also resulted in the creation of internships and other research projects in the community involving Stanford students and faculty. So another key lesson is that it is necessary to *invest significant time and resources in building relationships*. By developing relationships with local residents, the center neutralized their cynical perceptions of the university. Respected school staff members and community leaders became champions for the partnership, brokering additional relationships, garnering broader commitment to YELL strategies, and setting the stage for expanded partnerships. This process took not just months but years, as the Gardner Center continued to learn from its mistakes and appreciate the value of the trust that had been extended.

SYSTEMIC RESEARCH AND REFORM

While the development and implementation of model programs produce immediate rewards for youth participants and communities, the ultimate goal of these partnerships is to create long-lasting, systemic change. To position the Gardner Center for this, staff members leveraged relationships built through YELL to enable them to expand youth-development opportunities in the community and to develop new research projects.

In West Oakland, for example, mental-health advocate Alex Briscoe and the San Francisco Foundation used the YELL model and the students' research to help articulate a rationale for creating a school-based youth and family center. Today, a federally financed health center and a privately supported collaborative of community-based organizations provide health and wellness information, academic enrichment, leadership development, art instruction, and violence-prevention and job-training programs for McClymonds students and their families.

In Redwood City, local YELL data helped secure funding for a family-resource center that now serves hundreds of students every year. When city leaders saw local youths from a variety of backgrounds make knowledgeable presentations about their community, the city manager, Ed Everett, created new opportunities for their engagement.

Relationships resulting from YELL also provided Stanford faculty, students, and staff with access to information about prospects for systemic reform. For example, connections at Kennedy Middle School in Redwood City led to additional schools participating in a district-wide campaign to create "community schools" through professional development and strategic planning with teachers, administrators, families, and the broader community. Similarly, because of its relationships with school leaders in West Oakland, the Gardner Center was able to work with them to align in-school and out-of-school learning through professional development for, and collaborative projects with, teachers and youth-services providers. So another key lesson is the need to *use relationships to engage in systemic reform*. The Gardner Center leveraged relationships from YELL to help a broader group of leaders develop more-effective programs and policies, using data and analyses provided by young people.

The Gardner Center also capitalized on community relationships to initiate research that answered both academic and policy questions. Stanford faculty developed several service-learning and research-methods courses that placed students in partnering communities to address local concerns and strengthen students' practical problem-solving skills. Master's and doctoral students conducted their theses or dissertation research—many with the guidance and support of the Gardner Center's research staff and the YELL directors—and shared their learning with relevant community leaders.

For example, Stanford faculty and students studied how some youth become disconnected from the institutions meant to serve them and end up as financial burdens on the state. McClymonds High School granted student researchers permission to shadow cohorts of students during and after the school day and document this process of detachment. In both communities, city and county officials now are beginning to look at data on young people across systems to examine how they move among health, welfare, education, and juvenile-justice departments. Both projects will identify ways to reengage young people.

So it is clear that *site-based placement of university staff can yield critical knowledge for researchers and practitioners*. Since Gardner Center staff and students were embedded in the community, they were privy to local knowledge that could be used to develop research questions to inform policy. By supporting student research and courses that included community-based research projects, the center informed theory and supported the development of future leaders across academic disciplines.

Instead of sending university "experts" out to the field to tell community leaders what "the research says" about what young people need, the Gardner Center staff collaborated with them to build better tools, resources, and local models of community capacity. YELL directors served as "critical friends" by sharing research results with local leaders in a way that did not feel like an attack from a powerful outsider. Community members believed in the center's good intentions and understood that its research was meant to support improvement, not to criticize.

CONCLUSION

All universities can encourage the development of large or small initiatives similar to YELL. The institution, however,

must believe that community-based research and practice is vital to both student learning and to the broader community. In 2004, Stanford signaled that belief by beginning to sponsor the Community Partnership Awards, which celebrate outstanding partnerships that benefit the university's neighbors. The Gardner Center's YELL program in Redwood City was a recipient of the award in 2005.

Until faculty-reward structures give more recognition to community service and action-based research, however, it is essential that tenured faculty lead community-partnership efforts. Milbrey McLaughlin's credibility, determination, and relationships were key to securing the resources necessary to create the center, and her sustained effort was largely possible because of her tenured status. Making contacts with various communities and organizations, establishing trust, and formalizing partnerships were extremely time-consuming activities. It is unlikely that a junior faculty member, focused on building a portfolio of scholarship for tenure review, could have devoted the necessary time and attention to such activities.

On the other hand, community partnerships can contribute to faculty members' careers by providing them with access to research sites with rich sources of data. And institutional values can be changed. Universities can foster community-based research not just with reform of their reward structures but also by providing summer salaries, research support for junior faculty, and dedicated space for students and faculty engaged in community research and model programming. As a symbol of Stanford's commitment, with the support of private donors, the university remodeled a

campus building in 2006 to house school and community partnerships, including the Gardner Center.

Colleges and universities that pursue similar collaborative opportunities for research and practice with local communities will continue to face challenges resulting from the checkered history of community-university partnerships. Despite the difficulties involved, however, these partnerships hold tremendous promise for generating innovative research, supporting community transformation, and training the next generation of leaders in the community and in academia. ☐

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