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Civic-University Synergy: Addressing Fair Housing Through Engaged Community Programming

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ABSTRACT

With the anticipated implementation of the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) ruling, the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) initiated a civic-university partnership between themselves; the University of California, Davis Center for Regional Change; and the University of Kentucky Community Innovation Lab, to design a training program that would provide organizational leadership with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement the AFFH ruling. This case study examines the dynamic civic-university collaboration and provides lessons learned from the experience.

Keywords: civil academia partnership, equitable housing, community engagement, HUD, collaboration

During 2013, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced the release of a rule designed to equip HUD-funded communities with the data and tools necessary to meet long-standing fair housing obligations in their use of programmatic funds (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015). This final rule on Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) aimed to present all HUD grantees with clear guidelines and data to assist them in achieving fair-housing priorities and goals. To support these communities, HUD proposed the provision of more comprehensive data to grantees focusing on topics such as integration and segregation patterns, racially and ethnically concentrated areas of poverty, inconsistent housing needs, and opportunity disparities. Salient objectives of the rule included:

1. *Providing a balanced approach to fair housing.* The final rule assisted communities that rely on local

knowledge and local decision-making to determine best strategies for meeting their fair housing obligations at the local level—including making place-based investments to revitalize distressed areas, or expanding access to quality affordable housing throughout a community.

2. *Enhanced collaboration.* Many fair housing priorities transcend a grantee's boundaries. Actions to advance these priorities involve coordination by multiple jurisdictions. The final rule encouraged grantees to collaborate on fair housing assessments to advance regional fair housing priorities and goals.
3. *Community voice.* The rule facilitated community participation in the local process to analyze fair housing conditions and set local priorities and goals.
4. *A phased-in approach.* The final rule provided additional time for

communities to adopt this improved process for setting local fair housing priorities than was originally proposed (HUD, 2015).

With the anticipated implementation of the AFFH ruling, the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) sought to take a proactive approach to integrate this ruling into their programs and practices. Recognizing their leadership role within the state, HCD decided to initiate a transdisciplinary civic-university partnership with the Center for Regional Change (CRC) at University of California, Davis (UC Davis) and the Community Innovation Lab (CIL) at the University of Kentucky to design a training program that prepared organizational leadership with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement the AFFH ruling in their work. The program was novel in that it was transdisciplinary (Stokols, 2006), utilized participatory design through community engagement (Sanoff, 2008), and personified Boyer's (1990) model of scholarship.

The program began as a desire to focus solely on diversity in the context of AFFH, but eventually developed into a staff-tailored training centered on the personal and professional application of fair housing and social inclusion. Recognizing that AFFH would compel a more stringent approach to state assessments of fair housing, it was important to develop a curriculum that was multifaceted in its approach to fair housing, and forward thinking when considering staff needs and HCD's capacity as a fair housing leader. As such, the focus of this case study was to examine the civic-university collaboration and provide lessons learned from the experience.

CIVIC-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

Researchers have long studied the delicate subtleties associated with civic-university partnerships (Baum, 2000; Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Stoecker, 2008). Such subtleties can exist even prior to partnering, as each collaborating body may express dif-

fering expectations. Often community organizations see themselves as distinct from the university academy, such as having shorter timetables and expecting the results of the partnership to directly enhance the organization and their constituents (Elfreich & Helfenbein, 2018; Sandy & Holland, 2006).

In contrast, university faculty often convey broader time frames, taking a more theoretical approach that focuses on the theory and science behind the collaboration. This cultural dissonance is often referred to as the "ivory tower" syndrome, in which the production of knowledge does not necessarily respond to immediate social problems (Brown-Luthango, 2013). As a result, well-intended collaborations can become complex and unwieldy. Differing expectations and power imbalances caused by conflicting organizational cultures and norms often leave one or both parties feeling jaded and uneasy when exploring future collaborations (Dumalo & Janke, 2012; Elfreich & Helfenbein, 2018).

Similar to other types of collaboration, community-university partnerships can take significant effort to begin and sustain; as such, there are few examples of this type of collaboration, particularly within the context of housing. In Tremblay, Kingsley, Gokiert, and Benthem (2018), a community-university partnership between a housing organization, university, and non-profit organization serving teen families collaborated to engage vulnerable teens in active community research. In a collaboration between Grand Valley State University's geography faculty and students and the Seeds of Promise organization, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology was utilized to assess vacancy and housing conditions (Ma, Hendrick, & Transue, 2018). Not surprisingly, there is much to be gained from this type of engagement. In ideal collaborations, partners share decision-making, balance power, consider diverse perspectives, and produce mutually beneficial outcomes (Levkoe & Stack-Cutler, 2018).

Clifford and Petrescu (2012) suggest university faculty should ask two questions when collaborating with community partners: “Are we giving our clients or partners something useful? Are we enhancing their capacity in some way?” (p. 83). Shiller (2017) explains the necessity of university faculty evaluating whether or not they are providing skills to their partner that will be useful for their future growth with reduced assistance. Clifford and Petrescu (2012) also posited questions for community partners considering working with university faculty: “Are we giving the faculty an opportunity to learn something? Do the faculty members further their research agendas in some way?” (p. 83). Ideally, the collaboration should be beneficial for both partners.

PROGRAM PURPOSE AND DESIGN PROCESS

In 2016, a collaborative team of civic leaders and university faculty began a two-year partnership to design and implement a Fair Housing and Social Inclusion Fellowship program. With the anticipated implementation of AFFH and HCD’s desire to advance fair housing practices in California, a multi-disciplinary team of educators from the University of California, Davis and the University of Kentucky’s Community Innovation Lab developed an engaging, experiential learning program for HCD staff to advance their knowledge of fair housing practices and strengthen HCD’s leadership moving forward. The team consisted of diverse academic expertise including community development, leadership, curriculum and instruction, urban planning, human ecology, architecture, and public scholarship and engagement. Through their collaboration emerged a community of practice where they shared educational research, professional practices, resources, and community engagement techniques focusing on community learning and development. Furthermore, the academic team collaborated with diverse executive professionals from

HCD to formalize their community engaged collective scholarship.

The program was designed to build greater understanding of the intersection between fair housing, social inclusion, and HCD’s policies and practices. The curriculum focused on the application of fair housing policies through the lens of implicit bias, cultural intelligence, and group dynamics. Fellows participated in an intensive five-month program where instructors facilitated workshops and coached HCD staff to apply participatory design concepts. Upon completion, fellows used newly developed skills and knowledge to propose fair housing projects supporting the new contexts. Recognizing HCD’s wide range of roles and responsibilities regarding housing and public service, the instructional team designed the curriculum to:

- Create awareness of individual bias in personal and interpersonal settings;
- Advance individual understanding and respect for social and cultural differences;
- Develop the capacity to assess personal, interpersonal, and group dynamics in culturally diverse settings;
- Teach effective cross-cultural communication and facilitation techniques to be used in diverse social and cultural settings;
- Increase collaboration across agency divisions to more effectively advance HCD’s fair housing goals and shift their approach to addressing fair housing issues;
- Identify opportunities to apply concepts of equity and inclusion to daily HCD work, and design action plans for policy and program interventions;
- Expand HCD staff knowledge of the AFFH rule;
- Provide analytical tools and mapping resources for conducting community assessments; and
- Incorporate the intent of the AFFH ruling into ongoing HCD policies

and practices (e.g., housing placement; constituent support for cities, counties, nonprofit organizations (NPOs), council of governments (COGs), and developers; HCD program implementation; funding applications; and interactions with state agencies).

PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The multidisciplinary team developed the curriculum for the Fair Housing and Social Inclusion Fellowship program with a focus on learner-centered instruction and participant engagement. The curriculum was intended to be flexible and tailored to the needs of the cohort. While developing the curriculum, the instructional team completed an extensive literature review, conducted key informant interviews with HCD staff, engaged in ongoing dialogue with executive leadership at HCD, and held multiple planning meetings to design the content of the training sessions. The following sections provide an overview of this civic-university collaborative process.

Organizational interviews. To gain a better understanding of HCD's needs, the instructional team conducted interviews with organizational leadership and staff to inform the curriculum. A stratified purposeful sampling was used to identify a cross-section of agency representation given the hierarchical nature of public agencies and the need to capture diverse perspectives on perceptions of HCD, the AFFH, participation in past staff development curricula, and learning interests. These included 12 individuals representing: 1) executive, mid-level, and lower-level employees, 2) HCD's different divisions, 3) years of employment between 6 months to 26 years; average 8.8 years, median 9 years. The informants answered questions regarding HCD, AFFH, and the proposed curriculum, which provided a more complete picture of the organizational aspects of HCD and base knowledge of staff regarding fair housing. This infor-

mation largely informed the curriculum development to ensure the training was tailored specifically to staff's needs.

Collaborative curriculum development. Upon completion of the interviews, the instructional team conducted a two-day colloquium to develop and finalize the proposed curriculum. In advance, each member of the instructional team was assigned a section of the curriculum and asked to develop a proposal for the content and delivery of those workshops. The two-day meeting created an opportunity to present these ideas to the team, receive feedback, and develop cohesion between each session. As part of this process, members of the instructional team presented a summary of the literature and previous organizational interviews. In coordination with the curriculum development, the session was used to discuss the evaluation process for the program, including the methods and frequency of assessment.

In preparation for the rollout of the program, the team developed an application process for the program, created an agenda for the information session to be offered at HCD, produced materials to distribute to potential applicants, and brainstormed incentives for the fellowship participants. These deliverables were discussed with members of the executive leadership team to receive input and approval before recruiting participants for the program.

Executive leadership perspectives. The instructional team also collaborated with the executive leadership at HCD to further inform the curriculum development process. This provided important insight about the vision and expectations for the training program, as well as greater understanding of inner-agency dynamics. HCD leadership was receptive to the expertise of the instructional team, while also providing suggestions to the instructors to build upon their work both prior to and during the program. This process aligned with Levkoe and Stack-Cutler's (2018) characteristics of positive collaborations.

HCD leadership suggested extending the program invitation to other agencies and making it a goal to have a cross-section of participants from various divisions. In discussing the curriculum, the executive leadership also recommended that the instructional team keep in mind the various approaches to housing that fall under HCD's work to ensure that the program was applicable to their programs and policies. For the project-specific work, the leadership expressed skepticism regarding staff's ability to be creative and innovate, pointing to the prescribed and structured nature of staff's current responsibilities. As such, they suggested that participants receive support and guidance throughout the project development phase. Overall, most of the executive leadership were invested in the program and willing to support the instructional team as needed, with the ultimate goal of producing something useful for HCD that would be implementable with limited resources. Additionally, they effectively articulated potential cultural nuances that could impede program implementation, which helped strengthen the civic-university partnership (Elfreich & Helfenbein, 2018; Sandy & Holland, 2006).

Cohort selection. Participants were recruited at an agency-wide event where the instructional team described the fellowship program and answered questions related to the curriculum, its goals, and anticipated outcomes. Interested individuals were encouraged to submit applications to be considered for participation in the fellowship program. The selection team sought to recruit a diverse pool of participants; however, demographic information was not collected on the gender, age, or race/ethnicity of individuals when they applied. Rather, the instructional team asked applicants to provide their years of employment at HCD, division, and staff level in order to select a cohort with a range of skills and responsibilities related to housing policy. Based on the stated interest of applicants and their role within the agency, the instructional team determined the final list

of program participants in consultation with HCD executive leadership.

The program participants included 22 individuals that were selected from HCD's departmental divisions. One fellow also participated from the California Business, Consumer Services, and Housing Agency. The cohort was 55% female and 45% male, with experience at HCD ranging from 8 months to 15 years. Although the instructional team aimed to have a mix of staff in supervisory roles, only two participants were in management positions. During the program, four fellows left the cohort due to personal and professional circumstances that prevented them from completing the curriculum.

Due to group dynamics and the nature of learning processes, the instructional team adapted the curriculum multiple times throughout the program. The transitions that took place were largely related to incorporating more time for team development and adjusting the project development phase to more effectively scaffold the work. This work was guided by the following objectives:

- Integration of an action research methodology with participatory engagement methods in the development and application of a curriculum that integrates policy education with cultural development, and
- Evaluate community engaged learning in an atypical "community" environment.

RESULTS

Participant Retrospective Program Evaluation

At the end of the five-month curriculum, participants completed a retrospective evaluation for the Fair Housing and Social Inclusion Fellowship program. Overall, 100% of participants ranked the fellowship program as 'good' or 'excellent.' In order to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum, numerous learning objectives were identified, including the ability to:

- Identify individual bias(es) in personal and interpersonal settings;
- Recognize and appreciate social and cultural differences;
- Effectively communicate and facilitate cross-division collaborations;
- Effectively communicate to California stakeholders in diverse cultural settings;
- Incorporate the intent of the AFFH ruling into one's professional work;
- Effectively work within a group in culturally diverse settings; and
- Design action plans/projects for policy and practice interventions.

When participants assessed their abilities prior to the program, most indicated a 'neutral,' 'fair,' or 'poor' response to each of the learning objectives. At the end of the program, zero participants ranked their abilities across the learning objectives as 'poor,' and only one participant provided a response of 'fair' when assessing their ability to incorporate the intent of the AFFH ruling into their professional work. However, 80% of participants assessed their ability in this category as 'good' or 'excellent,' which suggests that the outlying participant is not representative of the experience. The greatest improvement was demonstrated in participants' ability to identify individual bias(es) in personal and interpersonal settings, with an 80 percentage point increase under the combined categories of 'good' and 'excellent.' Participants demonstrated the least improvement in their ability to effectively communicate to California stakeholders in diverse cultural settings, with 53.3% of participants remaining 'neutral' in their assessment of this skill. The other learning objectives generally saw improvement, with most participants ranking their abilities as 'good' at the end of the curriculum program.

Ultimately, one-third of the fellows reported being 'very satisfied' with the program and 53.3% reported being 'satisfied.' More importantly, 26.7% of participants indicated that they could use the ideas and skills gained through this program 'to a

moderate extent,' and 53.3% of participants indicated that they could use these ideas and skills 'to a great extent.' Thinking beyond the current program, almost half of the participants reported being 'very confident' that this program would positively affect HCD culture and the future of fair housing, and one-third reported being 'confident' that this program would have a positive impact on HCD and the future of fair housing.

Instructional Team Reflections: What We Learned

The Fair Housing and Social Inclusion Fellowship program was designed to strengthen HCD's capacity to further fair housing, and in doing so, provided insight into the process of using a collaborative and participatory approach to positively impact institutional culture. From this process, the instructional team made the following key observations:

The learning process is as critical as the product itself. Although a wide range of understanding still exists among HCD staff regarding fair housing and social inclusion, the fellows' participation in this program demonstrates a desire to pursue this work more extensively and integrate this knowledge into their roles and responsibilities at HCD. Many fellows expressed a desire for a longer fellowship program and greater skill development, and it was evident that more time and depth were needed to fully explore the topics of fair housing and social inclusion. However, the knowledge gained in this program is transferable to future efforts, which contributes to HCD's leadership and potential impact. With this commitment to learn, HCD holds great capacity to advance their fair housing efforts and infuse participatory practices into their programs and policies.

Trust-building is a foundational piece of the collaborative process. Although developing relationships is time intensive, this process is critical for establishing rapport between partners, especially when different entities have not previously worked together. At the onset of the fellow-

ship program, trust issues emerged between the participants and instructors regarding the evaluation of the program. When fellows were informed about the collection of data for evaluative purposes, many raised concerns about anonymity and the eventual use of this information. As such, several participants initially chose to limit their inclusion in the evaluation process. This distrust seemed to reflect the inner-agency dynamics taking place at the time and a general perception of mistrust between staff and executive leadership. As the curriculum progressed, the instructors worked to build greater trust and engage all participants in a meaningful way. These relationships are important to note since they largely influence the cohesion and effectiveness of partnerships. Trust-building can also provide opportunities for future collaboration. As such, the Fair Housing and Social Inclusion Fellowship program could ideally extend beyond a singular project and serve as a jumping off point for continued engagement and additional fair housing efforts.

The instructional team faced organizational and participant constraints. When implementing the training, these limitations primarily arose due to the short time frame of the program and participants' competing workloads. This was coupled with a perceived lack of support from supervisors for employee participation, as well as a lack of incentive for HCD staff to participate. It also became apparent throughout the program that a wide variation of skill sets and experience existed among participants. This made it challenging to explore the concepts at an accelerated pace, and more time was certainly needed to dive into complex topics such as individual bias, organizational culture, micro-aggressions, and the AFFH ruling. When it came to project development, participants remained generally risk-averse with little incentive to be novel, and were initially unmotivated to complete their projects. This was nominally countered with visible support from executive leadership.

The fair housing projects hold great potential. The fellows developed quality project proposals that provide an opportunity to address barriers to fair housing and incorporate the intent of AFFH into HCD's policies and practices. The value of these projects was strengthened by the cross-divisional and collaborative nature of the fellowship teams, which allowed for an exchange of ideas and expertise. Working beyond the agency silos helped facilitate new solutions to existing problems. The staff who attended the presentations were also receptive to the project proposals, demonstrating an interest in these ideas and a recognition that this work is needed. However, a general lack of confidence existed among the participants about the implementation of the projects following the fellowship program. This uncertainty was a barrier to motivation throughout the program, and many fellows expressed concern about the lack of commitment from the executive leadership to move this work forward. Yet, these projects stand to be further developed and implemented as a potential way for HCD to advance their fair housing practices.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

As previously discussed, civic-university partnerships are often strained due to differing cultural and institutional norms between the organizations and collaborating universities (Baum, 2000; Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Stoecker, 2008). Our specific partnership facilitated a civic-university collaboration with the California Department of Housing and Community Development, that was further supported by a joint university collaboration between UC Davis and the University of Kentucky. Our case highlights effective approaches to navigating these complex partnerships in a way that minimizes common stumbling blocks when collaborating.

First, while it may be perceived as time consuming, building relationships among the collaborating organizations and

leadership is critical. In order to accomplish this, we spent a substantial amount of time getting to know leadership personnel within the civic organization while also conducting in-depth interviews with staff across the organization. This not only provided great insight about the knowledge associated with the initiative, but also gave a voice and encouraged buy-in to the overall process by the employees. Moreover, this provided an awareness of the perceived social and cultural dynamics within the organization. Our process supports Levkoe and Stack-Cutler's (2018) characteristics of effective partnerships.

Next, university instructors came together to design an informed curriculum and evaluation for the fellowship program. During this time, instructors followed Clifford and Petrescu's (2012) recommendation to reflect on questions associated with the program's usefulness to the community client. The diverse perspectives from instructors from different fields provided a type of synergy; it allowed for ideas to be brainstormed and built upon, resulting in a more robust program. Additionally, the multidisciplinary team of educators created a safe and inclusive environment for idea generation, exchange, and critique while clarifying disciplinary terms and language.

Also, during the final draft stages of the curriculum development, executive leadership from the civic organization were consulted to create awareness and clarify any cultural or organizational nuances that would potentially impede program success. This stage was critical as the transparency and open discussion substantially strengthened the fellows' program and its delivery. This also substantiates Levkoe and Stack-Cutler's (2018) assertion that partners share decision-making, balance power, consider diverse perspectives, and produce mutually beneficial outcomes.

Finally, maintaining programmatic flexibility while intentionally creating opportunities to check in with collaborators, participants, and university instructors were key factors to programmatic success. This

helped to quell potential conflicts associated with such a complex collaboration. Additionally, it assisted in developing rapport and trust among all collaborators, strengthening the relationship and possibility for future collaborations.

While the program highlighted through this case study had many associated successes, the value of this case study within the current context is how it can inform future civic-university collaborations. Recognizing the value of multidisciplinary collaborations within the academic setting, it should also be mentioned there is inherent value in collaborations that bridge academics and outside entities. Civic-university partnerships assist in truly breaking down the "ivory tower" mentality; they bring research-based knowledge from the academic setting out into the community, while also encouraging practical application to what could be considered "too theoretical" (Brown-Luthango, 2013). What's more, collaborations across fields encourage clarification of disciplinary terms and language, which can lead to a shared language and understanding. In addition, multi-university and civic collaborations are an important way to encourage synergy and, with expertise from multiple universities, can now be effectively engaged across multiple regions. Undoubtedly, collaboration is something that continues to be valuable as we move into the future.

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