

## **Community Organizing Practices in Academia: A Model, and Stories of Partnerships**

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### **Introduction**

This article is based on my experience in developing a model of civic engagement at Occidental College that incorporates practices I learned as a community organizer. Using a narrative approach, I share several stories: my own story; the story of a staff member at Occidental College's Center for Community Based Learning, who was previously a community partner; the story of a community partner; and the story of a faculty member in Occidental's Mathematics Department. These first-person stories illustrate the journeys that took each of us to a role in building long-term, reciprocal, academic-community partnerships. These stories represent and reveal something I learned in community organizing: people are more likely to engage in long-term movements to create social change if they are in touch with their stories, their roots, and the reasons behind their desire to create change. Another way to refer to this is honoring our birthrights, or the rights and responsibilities we were born with and that determine our role in society or in this world (*Wolin, 1989, chapter 8*).

Although Occidental College has been the base for my development of this model, I have learned a great deal from my work with higher education colleagues and institutions in Mexico, Ireland, and the United States. The model of civic engagement we have developed at Occidental addresses an issue in higher education that I have observed and have heard described by several colleagues in the civic engagement field: the lack of reciprocity of interest, skills, and resources in creating long-term partnerships between academia and communities. Many of us in this field have presented numerous papers and given talks and workshops at conferences, or published papers and books about this issue. In my view and experience, however, it is easier to talk and write about this issue than to actually implement models for creating reciprocal, long-term partnerships. I have shared my work and experiences with some colleagues who have been involved in civic engagement for over 20 years,<sup>1</sup> and they have all said that the model I have created has something to offer to the field of academic community engagement that can address this issue. These colleagues have especially

pointed to the relational foundation with all stakeholders for its efficacy in creating long-term reciprocal partnerships, as well as in ensuring long-term sustainability by creating ownership within key faculty members and within key community partners. My hope is that readers will find the story of this model's evolution useful in reflecting on and improving their own academic community engagement work.

### **The Model at Occidental**

Occidental College is a small, residential, liberal arts college in Northeast Los Angeles, California. It is surrounded by a number of communities that are dealing with issues of poverty,

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including Eagle Rock, Highland Park, and Cypress Park. The surrounding communities and cities are an ethnic mix of Latinos, Asians, Anglos, and a small number of African Americans. Bordering Northeast Los Angeles are the City of Pasadena and Glendale, both of which also have pockets of low-income, underserved communities. The college has always had a strong tradition of engaging its students in community service and social issues; Barack Obama (2004), for example, mentions his involvement in the anti-South African

Apartheid movement during his time as a student at Occidental. However, until the founding of the Center for Community Based Learning (CCBL) in 2001, there was no institutional vehicle for connecting community service to curriculum. Prior to the CCBL, there was the Center for Volunteerism and Community Service (CVCS), which served as a clearinghouse for students interested in volunteering and community organizations and schools interested in student volunteers, without any connection to curriculum. The CCBL's main purpose is to institutionalize curriculum-based community engagement.

As I mentioned above, the model of civic engagement I have developed at Occidental College incorporates practices from community organizing. I would like to clarify that the community organizing I am referring to is not the type that is most commonly known, which includes tactics like mass mobilization, confrontation, and demonstrations for the sake of addressing specific issues.

Instead, it is focused on practices that can help bring about long-term social and cultural transformation through a slow, reciprocal, relational process. The success of this model of organizing depends on organizers' ability to build a collective of leadership and expertise, and on the collective's ability to own the model and stay engaged over a long period of time. At Occidental, I have been exploring how community organizing practices, concepts, and philosophy can contribute to the creation of an academic community engagement model that builds academic community partnerships to create long-term cultural and social change.

I have used four key practices to develop and sustain this model. In what follows, I elaborate how each of these practices was operationalized at Occidental.

### **1. Assessing Interest**

I began my work at Occidental by getting to know key faculty members, community partners, and students. I did this through a series of one-to-one meetings with people who were seen as key and respected leaders. These meetings were relational, as opposed to one-sided interviews. Meetings like these have been the foundation and the ongoing glue for all long-lasting, deep organizing that I have witnessed in my career as an organizer. During these meetings, I asked people questions about the culture of the college. I asked them for their thoughts, experiences, and feelings about community based learning (CBL) and about engaging with the community. I did this to find out about the things that people really cared about – or, in organizing language, their self-interest. This could also be referred to as what motivates someone to do meaningful, social justice-related work. I also shared the things I care about, and information about the purpose of my position and the CCBL, but I tried not to define how the program would work in detail. I wanted the details of the program to emerge from collective action, rather than defining the functions of the CCBL for stakeholders.

In addition to these relational meetings, I also visited a few academic institutions and attended a number of service-learning conferences so I could learn about the field and its existing models. I thus came into contact with the pioneers and experts of service-learning,<sup>2</sup> and I learned about some of the concerns and dissatisfactions with how service and service-learning had failed to engage students in deep, political ways of creating social change; with the difficulties in getting a critical mass of faculty involved; and with the lack of improvement in conditions of poverty around urban academic institutions.

I further learned through my relational meetings at Occidental that there had been several efforts to institutionalize curriculum-connected community service, all of which had resulted in service and volunteerism. This was due in part to several faculty-related obstacles. For example, connecting academic with civic learning through community projects was generally not perceived as rigorous learning, and faculty often did not want to add any new initiatives to their full plates without being rewarded. I learned that many faculty members either had no idea how to interact with community partners or were not comfortable initiating these

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interactions. In almost all cases, they did not have the skills to design CBL classes. Despite these findings, I found enough interest among the faculty to support the creation of a model to institutionalize community based learning.

Through my one-to-one meetings with community partners, I learned that many were not aware of curriculum-connected community service. They either criticized the college for not being more interested in the surrounding community, or they saw the college as a place to hold meetings and events, or as a place where they could recruit student volunteers. Not many acknowledged the knowledge and resources they themselves could bring to the partnership. As with faculty, I found enough interest among community partners in the creation of a model at Occidental to connect community service with curriculum, as well as possibilities of engaging in reciprocal partnerships for long-term change.

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## **2. Building a Leadership Team**

Applying this model involves learning what participants consider important enough to get deeply involved in over a long period of time. Knowing people’s self-interests helped me determine what roles they could play in CCBL’s efforts. Through this process, I identified a group of faculty members first, then added community partners who became my co-thinking and co-visioning team. In my experience as a community organizer I have learned that successful community organizing is based on deep, well-informed, collective ownership. My main role, therefore, has been to find

those whose passions are related to creating change through their respective fields and occupations, and to bring them together to jointly lead the process of change with me.

A different and more familiar way to create and sustain a program is to come up with the details of the program, and then try to convince others to join the program. This, again based in my experience, often results in mostly the “choir” participating, while the bulk of the program is carried out by only a few people. Using what I learn about their self-interests through relational meetings, I invite people only to what they are likely to be interested in, or find useful for their own work. The first year, for instance, we offered CBL-related workshops and lunch gatherings in response to what I had found out through the relational meetings. The second year we took a proposal to the faculty assembly to create a CBL Faculty Committee that would be officially connected to the faculty governance structure. The proposal was passed unanimously. The third year, as President Theodore R. Mitchell led the college into a process of defining key priorities for the following five to seven years, the college as a community decided that connecting the campus with Los Angeles should be one of the top three priorities. The culmination of these incremental steps was the creation of a model that is owned and led by a leadership team.

### 3. Creating Strategies and Programs Based on Power Dynamics

Power is a concept often connected with corruption and abuse. Partly because of this, many of us are not comfortable with being associated with having or wanting power. In community organizing, however, power dynamics are addressed and discussed openly. Community leaders and organizers recognize that power does not have to lead to corruption or abuse. Osterman (2002) quotes Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)<sup>3</sup> organizer Ernesto Cortes on the meaning of relational power in IAF’s organizing philosophy.

Organizing means understanding that power comes in two forms: unilateral, top-down, expert-driven power from organized money. . . . But power also comes from organized people with their institutions. Power can also be not just unilateral but also relational. Relational means when two or more people get together and have a plan and begin to act on that plan. When you put together a house meeting, you are building power. When we build power across our region, then we can

have the kinds of initiatives, the kinds of programs we want. We have to remember our mantra “power before program.” “Power before program.” Got that? (*pages 3-4*)

Among those I consulted in envisioning and creating the CCBL were faculty members who had certain kinds and amounts of power because they were respected by the administration and their peers. These faculty members were also familiar with the power structure of the institution. They became the CCBL leadership team.

Let me share here my observations about power dynamics in academic-community engagement. With the faculty leadership team, and through the relational meetings with administrators and students in addition to faculty members and community partners, I learned early on that the power to create something long-term and collectively owned at Occidental lay primarily with professors. This makes sense, not only because CCBL is curriculum based, but also because once professors are tenured, at least at Occidental, they tend to stay until retirement. On the other hand, administrators and students stay for limited periods of time. Through observations of academic institutions in general, I have learned that high-level administrators often feel compelled to do what faculty members suggest, or risk facing a dissatisfied faculty body. An academic institution may function with high turnover of administrators, as has been the case at Occidental for close to five years now (in 2010). Because students enroll in college to learn from professors, the institution cannot function effectively and competitively without a strong, qualified, stable body of faculty.

I have also seen students organize around issues that affect them. They often succeed in their efforts, but only temporarily; after all, they will be graduating in a few years. Likewise, students' parents have power, but only during the years that their sons and daughters are enrolled in the institution. I have also seen cases of certain alumni having a high level of influence regarding certain institutional issues and decisions, but they are not on campus enough to monitor daily operations. The Board of Trustees oversees policy and financial decisions for the campus, and they make hiring and firing decisions regarding college presidents. But to use their power effectively, they need support from at least high-level administrators and faculty members.

Community partners have a certain amount of power. Isolated community organizations and schools, however, rarely have enough power or resources to influence the decisions and operations of academic institutions. One of the unique features of the

Occidental model of civic engagement has been the organization of a regional network. My hope has been that once this network becomes a strong player in the region, working toward creating long-term change can be a real possibility at Occidental. This regional network, based on sharing and exchanging power, can ensure that academic institutions recognize a community's interest, knowledge, and resources, and it can protect and support the college if public pressure arises regarding its engagement with a community. This is relational power, not one-sided, unilateral power.

#### 4. Engaging in Critical Reflection

An on-going practice in this model is to pause and reflect about progress or lack of it, barriers and obstacles, and lessons learned, and to use this information to redirect activities as appropriate. This process of reflection is usually followed by a fresh look at power dynamics and a new cycle of one-to-one meetings to continue identifying key leaders and interests. The effectiveness of this process has been the main reason, in my view, that the CCBL at Occidental has continued to exist and make progress in spite of high presidential turnover and financial challenges during the past five years. Within this period, Occidental has had four presidents.

#### Northeast Education Strategies Group

What follows is a brief description of how the model of civic engagement developed at Occidental has led to the creation of the regional network. (The individual narratives in this article elaborate more on this network, which has been in existence since fall 2002.)

The goal of the network, which is called the Northeast Los Angeles Education Strategies Group (NESG), is to create a long-term partnership for social change, especially on education-related issues. The network began through a relational process—through sharing of stories and interests regarding education; learning together about the relevant power structure and demographics; and reviewing literature about education reform efforts locally and elsewhere.

The NESG has grown in a gradual, strategic way, and its membership currently fluctuates from twelve to fifteen schools and community organizations, including Occidental.

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NESG has engaged in meetings with Occidental's past and current presidents since 2002, as well as with elected officials and high-level administrators in the Los Angeles Unified School District. An important element of NESG is ongoing political education for its members. Most members of NESG have attended community organizing trainings held by the IAF's local affiliate organization, One LA. Most schools and NESG organizations are members of One LA. This gives the group ongoing access to all aspects of community organizing training, and to an organization that has the power and resources to make an impact locally, regionally, and nationally. The aim is to create an entity with enough power to partner with Occidental, on an equal and reciprocal basis in order to jointly create long-term change. This type of partnership is also intended to provide deeper educational experiences for students in CBL classes.

The stories from three colleagues more clearly explain how the NESG has created the space to build long-term leadership and expertise. They also make reference to the ways long-term change is taking place, especially around creating a college-going culture in Northeast Los Angeles.

### **Illustrating the Model through Stakeholder Narratives**

In what follows I share my story and the stories of a staff member who recently came to academia after five years as a community partner; a current community partner; and an Occidental faculty member. We each relate the ways in which our interest in creating change has evolved and how our journeys have led us into academic community engagement. The stories also illustrate how this model centers on learning through narrative, and through a reflective process that involves the self in relationship to others.

### **Maria Avila's Story and Role in this Model**

I was hired by Occidental College in November 2001 to be in charge of the Center for Community Based Learning (CCBL), which was created the previous summer. Former Occidental president Ted Mitchell and a group of faculty members had decided that they wanted to create a center to institutionalize civically engaged pedagogies and research. I was selected for the position because of my organizing background. I have worked as a community organizer in Mexico, and in the United States for most of my adult life. As I search for the origins of my organizing passion, one event in my life consistently comes to mind.

I was about to turn 17 when I began to work at a maquiladora factory in Juarez, Mexico. After a few incidents of bleeding fingers and denied permissions to use the restroom, I began to question my supervisors and talk to my coworkers about these issues. This is the first time I remember reacting against what I considered social injustice, although I did not think of it that way at the time. This experience led me to go back to college and learn how I could create social change through a career as a social worker. I worked as an organizer in Juarez's rural areas, both as part of my social work practicum and after I got my degree in social work in 1975.

Here in the United States I worked for a short period with the racing industry in, which made me aware of the inhuman conditions under which race-track workers operate. As a new immigrant I embarked on a journey to reposition myself professionally. I became aware early on, for instance, that the social work that I had learned and practiced in Mexico had a more sociological, community-development approach than what I was being exposed to in the United States. This difference was manifested most clearly when I suggested to my supervisor that I could combine casework with community organizing so that the workers could determine how to improve their working and living conditions. My supervisor responded that I was describing a model that worked in third-world countries, and that I needed to learn the advanced model of a developed country like the United States (i.e., case and clinical work).

This realization contributed to my decision to accept a position with a school for Latino adults in Chicago's Pilsen area in 1983 that used Paolo Freire's (1993) model of liberatory education. Through this experience I was introduced to the lives and struggles of working-class, recent immigrants, and to a model that aimed at combining academic education with political education. Students were working toward a high school diploma, Spanish literacy, or English as a second language. This had the potential to lead to empowerment and possibly community organizing, but in reality it did not result in direct organizing.

While continuing to find my professional place in this country and culture, I studied for an MA at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, with a concentration in community organizing. I learned there that the advice from my supervisor in the racing industry actually had its origins in academia. The professors told us (students) that on a survey of all students who entered the program at the same time I did, over 80

percent of students had replied that their primary interest was to become a private, clinical practitioner, and very few had an interest in working on issues of poverty or creating social change.

In 1987, I moved to Los Angeles. After working with a youth social service agency on the west side of Los Angeles for over two years, and after my unsuccessful efforts to connect social services and youth counseling with community organizing, I moved to

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Albuquerque, New Mexico. There, while working as a volunteer with an organization whose purpose was to organize around groundwater contamination issues, I reaffirmed myself as a community organizer. I learned then about the Industrial Areas Foundation (Boyte, 2004; Chambers, 2003; Gecan, 2002; Osterman, 2002; Shirley, 1997). I worked with IAF in New Mexico and California for nine years. The IAF model of organizing, combined with my studies and orga-

nizing experience in Mexico, as well as my journey as an immigrant, is the foundation for the work that I now do at Occidental College.

I was invited to apply for the position of director of the Center for Community Based Learning by a member of the Occidental faculty whom I had met in my IAF organizing years in South Los Angeles. I soon realized that I could transfer my organizing skills and instincts into this new academic context. I found myself connecting what I was learning about academic civic engagement with what I had done and studied as a community organizer. I discovered a pattern in the way my work was evolving. I noticed the similarities between my current work in academia and my previous work as a community organizer.

### **Celestina Castillo’s Story**

I am the assistant director of the Center for Community Based Learning at Occidental College. Before assuming this position in January 2009, I was a community partner for over five years through the Northeast Education Strategies Group, which is how I began to learn the community organizing model of engagement that we utilize at the CCBL.

I am from Highland Park, one of the communities that surrounds Occidental College. Highland Park is a predominantly

Latino neighborhood with low- to middle-income levels and a history of high dropout rates and poor-performing schools. The area has a long-standing history of gang activity, but most recently it has been identified by the *New York Times* as a “New Cultural District.”

My family has been in Highland Park for four generations. My maternal grandmother was from the Tohono O’odham Indian Reservation in southern Arizona. She came to Los Angeles in the late 1930s to find work after her mother and other family members had died. My grandfather was a Mexican American migrant farm worker from California who eventually settled in Los Angeles. In the late 1950s, my grandparents were the first nonwhite family to buy a home on our block. When they moved in, the neighbors circulated a petition to force them to move out, but were not successful. After my mother passed away in 2009, my husband, my four-year-old son, and I moved into the house.

During college, I felt it was my responsibility to obtain an education in order to contribute to my community. At first, my plan was to be a doctor and open a clinic on the Tohono O’ Odham reservation. Then, when I did not do well in a cellular biology class, I decided to study history in order to teach at the high school level. As a student, I worked with Upward Bound, the Chicano Studies Center, and the Minority Student Action Program.

After graduating from college, I worked with alternative education schools and programs, with junior high and high school students and young adults who had not done well in the traditional educational system. I worked with teenage girls and young women around sexual health and relationships. I believed that by providing educational and social services, I would be able to help my community. However, I found myself becoming frustrated with the lack of discussion of the larger social and historical issues that caused the need for the services I was delivering. Providing a space and support for young adults to earn a high school diploma or GED did not guarantee them a job, nor did it solve the larger problem that led to the high numbers of school dropouts. Their situation reflected a systemic problem, not isolated incidents that simply required individual behavior modifications. Nonetheless, we did not engage the youth in these programs in any conversations about how the dropout rates had been between 40 and 60 percent for decades in the neighborhoods that many of them came from, and we did not discuss whether they had any interest in addressing the problem.

I started taking classes at a local community college in the evenings, including Community Economic Development and Community Organizing. In these classes I began to think more

about money and organizing. In the community organizing class I was asked: "What is the difference between social service and social change?" Pondering the response to this question was a dramatic time for me, because I had assumed that all staff members of all the organizations I had been working for were concerned with social and historical injustices, and not just with being a professional or a "helper." I realized that I had never asked many of my colleagues the same question, and that I avoided individuals who I assumed had an experience different from my own.

This took me to graduate school, where I began studying public policy and community development, hoping to find solutions to the high dropout rate and poverty in communities like Highland Park. I saw a bigger picture, and I learned about how community economic development projects are financed, how public policies are created, and how to analyze social problems from an economic standpoint. I still felt, however, that there was something missing among the data, the policies, and the economic analysis of things. Where were the people who were affected by these community economic development projects and policies, and what did they have to say?

#### *Finding the missing piece: organizing*

Following graduate school I began working with a nonprofit organization called the Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council (CPC) (now the Children's Council of Los Angeles County). When I started with the CPC in late 2003, it was expanding from a focus on planning and service integration, and collaboration between community-based organizations and county departments to community engagement and organizing. The CPC was in the early stages of developing its community engagement approach, and trying to figure out how to engage leadership from both service organizations and local communities in order to further the well-being of children and families in LA County. At the time, there was an emphasis on early education/school readiness. I was responsible for working in a geographic area that encompassed Northeast Los Angeles, where Occidental College is located, Service Planning Area (SPA) 4.

At the same time, Maria Avila, director of Occidental's Center for Community Based Learning, was beginning to bring together principals from a few of the local high schools (traditional/district and charter schools). Knowing Maria as an organizer, and aware that there is a definite connection between early education, high school achievement, and access to college, I decided that her group

was a good place to see how the group would develop and if it could help me to develop an approach for the CPC-SPA 4. Maria's organizing turned into the Northeast Education Strategies Group (NESG) in 2002.

#### My development as a leader

During the first two years, NESG served mainly as a learning and reflection space for me. I was not clear about what role I could play within the group, but I enjoyed the people, the learning (particularly the minitrainings given by One LA/IAF organizers), and the conversations. Besides members representing schools, there were few participants from non-profit organizations. We discussed issues around education and learned to utilize organizing tools, such as one-to-ones. We had minitraining sessions on leadership, power, self-interest, and on understanding our own stories of why we did our work as educators, organizers, or service providers. Teachers and administrators from the various schools talked about being in schools and being educators. Sometimes they developed projects or activities together after NESG meetings. For a long time, however, I was not sure how to connect the NESG with my work at the CPC.

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#### Power: summer 2006, IAF national training

After about two years together, members of the NESG began going to One LA/IAF training and local action sessions. In 2006, after close to three years with NESG and CPC, I attended an IAF ten-day, community organizing national training program. The IAF training was significant for me because during that training I realized that I had always avoided engaging with power, both as an individual and as a professional. I learned that engaging power is different from confronting power or questioning authority. I had confronted power before, but I had also intentionally avoided doing so because I did not trust people in powerful positions and did not think there was any space to engage power. I had made assumptions about people in power and did not see the point of asking what they were interested in, or communicating to them about what I and others in my community cared about and were

interested in being part of, such as the education of our children and family members. The training, however, reminded me that this type of conversation could occur if there was a collective of organized institutions and people.

### Action

In 2007 the work of the NESG and SPA 4 converged on education. As part of my work with the PC, I was also working with community service organizations to build groups of parents who were interested in addressing community issues in some of the areas neighboring Occidental College, such as Cypress Park, Highland Park, and El Sereno. In these parent groups, we began discussing community issues, organizing, and leadership development.

In early 2007, it became apparent that several of the parent groups that SPA 4 was working with were concerned about education. One group of mostly monolingual Spanish-speaking parents in Highland Park was working on securing additional child care for parents during an ESL (English as a second language) class at a local community-based organization. They felt that in order to support their children's education, they needed to learn English, and needed support from the social service organization that was offering the ESL class. A second, mostly monolingual English-speaking group of parents in Highland Park was working on bringing a dual-immersion program to a local elementary school, as many of their toddlers would be attending local schools within the next couple of years. A group in Cypress Park had had an ongoing focus on advocating for children with special educational needs. A group in El Sereno was focused on safety on the local high school campus, and had supplemented the school's supervision team by volunteering to monitor certain areas of the very large campus.

At the same time, the NESG had spent the previous year learning about and discussing power and action, and there was going to be an election of a new school board member for the area. Seeing the opportunity to connect the organizing skills I was learning through NESG, IAF training, and my work with CPC-SPA 4, I asked the parent groups if they were interested in learning about the power structure of the school district. They all showed interest, and felt it was connected to their work within their local groups.

The time was ripe, both for SPA 4 and the NESG, to practice what we had been learning: engaging and demonstrating power. However, not all of the SPA 4 parents and organizations knew the NESG and vice versa, so at our March 2007 NESG meeting we hosted a joint meeting, which then became a series of joint meet-

ings, held every 2 months, at various schools throughout Northeast Los Angeles. The goal of these meetings was to prepare for a meeting with the newly elected school board member for the area, Yolie Flores Aguilar.

In each joint meeting, we brought together members of SPA 4 parent groups and service organizations with the school administrators, teachers, and parents from NESG member schools. Parents from various schools engaged in one-to-one, and group conversations with each other and with service providers, teachers, and administrators from various schools, and with students and professors from Occidental College.

Parents from a number of the SPA 4 groups expressed their excitement about interacting with each other, and with principals of other schools, college students and professors. I recall parents saying that now they knew people at Occidental College and that it could be a place for their children. Overall, as this broad range of people engaged in conversations about education, they realized that they were not the only ones who cared about education in Northeast Los Angeles; they were part of a larger community.

During these joint meetings of the NESG and SPA 4, we did minitrainings, similar to those we had done with the NESG earlier. At the end of the year, when the group (this time with more than 100 people from local schools and organizations) met with the new school board member, we shared stories of our work to improve the education of children in the area, and the board member shared her personal story, which demonstrated why she cared about education.

#### Reciprocity at the individual, professional, and institutional levels

I helped to develop the NESG, and the NESG helped me to develop as an organizer; we belong to each other. It and the Center for Community Based Learning have provided a space for me to develop into a leader and organizer, both through learning with others and through reading, conversation, and collective action. I saw reciprocity at a different level, too. I realized that through my work with the CPC-SPA 4, I was able to bring parents and other community members to the NESG, and this helped the group develop.

Being part of the NESG also supported me in developing a framework for my work with the CPC-SPA 4, connecting social service with social change. I was also able to see how the CCBL model connected community organizing with service-learning, moving it from a philanthropic and charity-driven approach to one of engagement and reciprocity. Moreover, I saw that when Maria

Avila started the NESG, she did it in a way that allowed others to own it. It was not something that one organization alone owned. Rather, we are all part of the NESG, and it is part of all of us. While the credit for starting the NESG goes to the Center for Community Based Learning, over time, it has come to belong to others as well.

#### *Final reflections and my new role in academia*

Through my involvement with NESG and SPA 4, I participated in many events connecting the campus and the community; shared my community expertise in various classes; and presented with Maria at various local and national conferences and events. Now that I am the assistant director of the CCBL, I realize that all the work I did as a community partner more than prepared me for the job. In fact, I am getting oriented to the campus through the process I used in my work with SPA 4 and with NESG. During the past semester, I have been conducting one-to-one meetings with faculty members and students to begin developing relationships with them, and to learn about their stories and individual interests. We are also conducting one-to-ones to position ourselves for the new, incoming president of Occidental, Jonathan Veitch, who has a reputation for involvement in academic civic and community engagement. We want to get a sense of what others on campus are thinking and feeling about his strong public comments about outlining his desire to connect Occidental with the greater Los Angeles community, particularly the schools.

#### **Nik Orlando's Story**

I see my journey to education and community-based learning as a form of artistic expression in that it has grown and changed over the years the way a painting evolves over the course of its life to completion. Currently, I am the regional director of Los Angeles Partnerships to Uplift Communities (PUC) Schools. In this position, I am both coach and manager/evaluator of principals at five charter schools. I support their professional development, and evaluate their performance both in compliance responsibilities, and in achieving the academic goals of the school. Below I give a snapshot of how I arrived at this position.

I entered education as a side project. In addition to being a painter, I felt passion toward creating events for the city that showcased all forms of art: music, performance, visual. These events included the community in creating the props and scenery for the themed events, so the attendees were also the artists. These events, however, were not profit-generating. The lack of financial reward

for my art drove me to find a way to make extra money while retaining the flexibility to continue in my art endeavors. I decided to work as a substitute teacher. As it turned out, I ended up consistently substituting at a small charter school in downtown Long Beach. Soon I was asked to join the team of permanent teachers at Constellation Community Middle School. I would serve not only as a teacher, but also as the community connection to the art world.

Subsequently, I moved to Los Angeles and found another small charter school in its first year. Soon after, I became the principal of the California Academy for Liberal Studies (CALS) and then regional director of five schools disseminating best practices, which are part of PUC's services. In all three roles, I have engaged in action research, a cyclical model of research, action, measurement, reflection, and redesign. This has allowed me to continue my engagement with collaboration, shared ownership, and leadership. This way of working—as part of a collaborative—is important, and a major part of who I am.

Concurrent with my new roles in Los Angeles, I was introduced to the NESG. I was also introduced to, and became involved in, many reciprocal partnerships with representatives from other schools participating with NESG. All participants in these partnerships experienced a strengthening and broadening of community as well as collaboration, shared ownership, and development. These are essential components of the community organizing model of civic engagement used by Occidental's CCBL.

These partnerships have been the catalyst for growth at our school, both academically and culturally. CALS has partnered with Occidental in various ways. For students from Occidental's Education Department it has meant performing research studies with CALS students, or doing teacher preparation fieldwork at CALS. Students in Occidental's Religious Studies Department and Women's Studies Program created a gender equity learning experience for our students. Students in the English Department created a film study and writing course for our students based in culturally relevant content. These partnerships have had an impact on our school while ensuring that Occidental students gain valuable knowledge and experiences.

Our school has benefited from these partnerships, from data from the various student projects, and from our membership in the NESG. This has led to improvements in many aspects of our program. In particular, it has strengthened parent engagement at CALS, the focus of the next section.

### Parent organizing and engagement

We decided a few years ago to shift the concept of *parent involvement* to *parent engagement*. Our first initiative at CALS proved to be a culture-shifting experience. Before the new school year started, we met with incoming parents and asked them, “What is your vision for your child, and what do you want their relationship with their teacher to be like?” We also asked the teachers the same types of questions. Most responses from parents were aligned with those of the teachers, with a focus on college success for the children and a safe environment for learning. Our gap analysis, however, found that parents just wanted to “know who they (the teachers) were.” Our teachers had not given responses around relationship building with parents in a way that allowed parents to get to know them personally. In response to these findings, teachers at CALS now engage in relationship-building activities that enable the parents, students, and teachers to learn about each other.

This relationship building between teachers and parents allowed us to move to the next step, that of engaging parents in the school and in the achievement of all students, not just their own children. The guidance and support of One LA helped us advance to this next level, strengthening our parent meetings with one-to-ones, and creating a core set of parents who were able to share, make decisions, and engage in school growth and decision making. Our parents have now been a part of creating our Expected School-wide Learning Results program which leads new parents through orientations and “relationship-building nights” for the school. At these events, parents sit side-by-side with teachers to brainstorm, reflect, and design.

These sessions have positioned parents to share their ideas, thoughts, and needs with the CPC-SPA 4, local city councils, and the local school board. They have learned that their voice is not only important but powerful. They can see that they have created change in their community outside the school. Their efforts include informing the Los Angeles Unified School District of needs in the community; informing local businesses of the importance of monitoring children in their stores; and speaking out about initiatives that would affect their neighborhoods.

In a classroom, teachers scaffold instruction to build student understanding by gradually removing limits to accessing knowledge as students gain the skills and confidence to understand the full complexity of the material. Strong partnerships created with NESG have similarly enabled parent organizing in our schools to evolve. Parents have built their knowledge over time from learning

experiences strategically created by the principal, assistant principal, and teachers. Experiences with the NESG, and with each other, have led parents to understand why and how they can support all students at their children's schools.

#### Future

As we move forward, I am interested in ensuring that the Northeast Communities of Los Angeles become places where we have collaborated so much, and with such efficacy that parents have true choice. I envision a system that lets any parent look at all the schools in the area and choose which one to send their child to, based on the strengths and focus areas of the school, and the needs of their child. The schools would all be strong based on their collaborations and sharing of best practices.

I believe that we could begin by transforming all of our actions with the NESG into actual action research projects. These projects could uncover purposeful catalysts and meaningful strategies for parent engagement through researching and analyzing data from the many NESG partnership projects that have components of parent engagement. When parents either sign their child up for the project, are involved in the project, and sign consent forms for an action research project, it is possible to collect such data and involve the parents in creating action steps based on the results of the data. Analyzed data from all these components could be used to strengthen new projects. I have engaged in action research projects as a principal at my school site and have seen their power to transform a program and organization. I have been personally fulfilled by the ability to have community, collaboration, and leadership grow from action research projects.<sup>4</sup>

I look forward to the NESG expanding and learning from the addition of action research.

The painting continues as I work toward cultivating this action research component to the NESG's efforts. I view action research as a new medium. The artist in me continues to lead me toward new ways to practice community engagement and community action.

#### **Alan Knoerr's Story**

I am an associate professor in the Mathematics Department and the Cognitive Science Program at Occidental College. I am someone who enjoys solving problems and wants to change things that are not working well. Over time, I have learned that I cannot make the kinds of changes I want by acting on my own.

I grew up in Durham, North Carolina, and attended segregated public schools. When I was in junior high school the system integrated and I went to Hillside, the traditionally African American high school in the city. Largely due to a remarkable meeting of minds between C. P. Ellis, a local Ku Klux Klan leader, and Ann Atwater, a Black civil rights activist, integration did for a time lead to genuine engagement between Blacks and Whites in Durham. As a teenager, I was able to see that remarkable social change can occur when people start working together.

My interest in mathematics developed late. While I was reasonably successful at it, I generally found math to be boring and arbitrary. It was not until my sophomore year at Oberlin College that I had an epiphany and realized that mathematics can be found in anything that has pattern and structure. Since then I have sought ways to integrate mathematics and social justice, and to develop deeper understandings of both. Fresh out of college, I taught math at a small, private high school in Boston that worked with inner city children, many of whom had dropped out or been expelled from other schools. I then earned a doctorate in applied mathematics at Brown University. In 1991, I joined the Mathematics Department at Occidental College.

When I first came to the college, members of the Mathematics Department had a passion for changing undergraduate mathematics education to make mathematics more widely accessible. We were part of a national “calculus reform” movement, changing both curriculum and pedagogy, and we developed a successful program. Ten years later, following a series of retirements, and other institutional changes, this program had largely faded. I realized that I did not know enough about how power and institutions worked to be able to institutionalize changes I had helped bring about. For a time, I allied with faculty members from other departments in an effort to promote quantitative literacy on campus. In the course of that work, I was invited to attend a meeting of the Northeast Los Angeles Education Strategies Group (NESG), and I was so struck by how Maria Avila, director of Occidental’s Center for Community Based Learning, ran that meeting that I wanted to learn more about what she did. I tried some of her techniques in my faculty committee work, and because they were successful I decided to become more involved with the work of the center.

Since then I have been a member of both Occidental’s Community Based Learning Faculty Committee and the NESG. I have also taken advantage of training sessions offered by the Industrial Areas Foundation. In these ways, I have been learning

community organizing techniques, and using them to build leadership with faculty and students on campus, and with community partners. Here, I relate my experience using community organizing tools to create and implement a strategy to address the crisis in mathematics education, particularly highlighting the slow, relational process through which a highly reciprocal partnership was created.

One of the neighborhoods adjacent to Occidental College, Highland Park, is a community under stress. Incomes are low, city and county services are inadequate, gangs are active and violent, many students are learning English as a second language, and many parents have low levels of education and literacy. Math literacy and achievement are also low—a problem throughout much of Los Angeles, and indeed, throughout much of the United States. At Franklin High School, the large high school serving Highland Park, many students cannot reliably do *arithmetic*. Yet *algebra* is required for graduation. Especially in communities of color, poor mathematics education is a key obstacle denying many a high school diploma, admission to college, and access to employment. For this reason, it is more than just a pedagogical concern—it is a significant social justice issue.

Key to the problem is teaching and curriculum. Mathematics is generally taught as algorithms to be memorized rather than as problem-solving. Teachers are inadequately trained, frequently isolated and discouraged, and often believe that their students either cannot learn math or do not care. This was the situation in fall 2005 when, through the NESG, I met the new principal of Franklin High School: Luis Lopez. Mr. Lopez turned out to be a graduate of Occidental's Math Department.

Throughout the 2005–2006 academic year, three colleagues in Occidental's Math Department and I met collectively and individually with math teachers and administrators at Franklin. We spoke of our interests and listened to each other. In the end, we decided our students would benefit from interacting with each other. We also decided we wanted to continue our faculty-to-faculty collaboration. Together we designed a new course, Math 201: Mathematics, Education, and Access to Power. This is a small seminar course taught at Occidental College every semester, with an average enrollment of six students. There are no specific prerequisites. The course meets once a week. We read and discuss papers on the cognitive science, pedagogy, and politics of mathematics education. Students also work each week with students and teachers at Franklin or other local schools. The course culminates in individual or group projects

with the schools. Students' participation is informed by the course readings, and by what they have learned through their community work. Occidental students have found this to be a life-changing course, with a significant proportion deciding afterward to become involved in social justice work, and even to become math teachers. The schools have also benefited in many ways.

The success of Math 201 encouraged us to deepen our involvement. Faculty discussions supported an experiment at Franklin that involved comparing two alternative curricula to the traditional one. Franklin ultimately adopted a vastly superior mathematics curriculum. We also learned that math teachers at different schools rarely communicated, but wanted to do so. In 2008 we joined with Ricardo Mireles, executive director of Academia Avance, a local

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*“Our goal as a collective is to learn together to improve our work and to improve math education in our schools.”*

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charter school, to found NEwLAMP—the Northeast Los Angeles Math Project—as a coalition of math educators, elementary school through college. NEwLAMP uses the community organizing principles and practices that are the foundation for the model of civic engagement at Occidental's Center for Community Based Learning (CCBL): building relationships through one-to-one meetings to learn about each other's interests; building a collective of shared leaders to strategize and make deci-

sions about issues to address and actions to take; making decisions based on an analysis of power dynamics affecting issues selected by the collective of leaders; and evaluating and reflecting on progress, then making decisions about whether to redirect or change strategies. Our goal as a collective is to learn together to improve our work and to improve math education in our schools.

Another project stems from our affiliation with One LA. Through that affiliation, we are helping to bring curriculum of the Algebra Project to Franklin as part of a multisite, multiyear grant awarded to the Algebra Project by the National Science Foundation. Founded by civil rights organizer and mathematician Bob Moses, the Algebra Project is a national organization that aims to help the lowest achieving quartile of students qualify to enter college without need for remediation in mathematics (*see <http://www.algebra.org>; see also Moses & Cobb, 2001*).

Complementing the Algebra Project is another national organization, the Young People's Project. This is a peer-mentoring program in which college students train high school students to

mentor middle and elementary students in mathematics. Math 201 was the impetus for a new Occidental student club for students interested in mathematics as a social justice issue. Club members are now working with the Young People's Project at Academia Avance, Franklin, and several other schools in Highland Park.

The story of another project that came out of Math 201 illustrates the value of community organizing principles in our efforts. In fall 2007, we worked with several math teachers and district math coaches to host a schoolwide math festival, "Math Mania Monday." Every student at Franklin was involved, and much to the astonishment of the math teachers there, every student was highly engaged by the puzzles, games, and math challenges offered. As one teacher put it, "We can no longer say that our students can't be engaged by mathematics. Our challenge now is to create this level of engagement in our classrooms on a daily basis."

Assisting with the Math Mania event at Franklin was Richard Rivera, the math coach at Burbank Middle School, which is the primary feeder school to Franklin. Burbank was having a hard time that year (e.g. a relatively new principal was confronting an organized parent effort to remove her; teacher indifference to changes the principal was trying to make; a high level of gang activity; and violent incidents at the school), but agreed to work with Richard to put on a "Math Mania Martes" at Burbank in the spring. Burbank's math teachers were initially skeptical. In line with the community organizing practice of evaluating and reflecting after every meeting or event, I debriefed them immediately after the event, asking, "What did you see, what did you learn, and how do you feel about it?" They said that this was the best thing that had ever happened in the school. They could not believe how engaged the students were, that there were not any fights, and that the police did not have to be called.

Math Mania Martes repeated at Burbank in spring 2009. This time every math teacher staffed a booth or table. After the event, the teachers were already planning what they want to do the next time. In this way, Occidental's small Math 201 class helped catalyze a renewed sense of purpose and collective ownership among the Burbank math teachers.

Even as the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is currently reeling under severe budget cuts, addressing the crisis in mathematics education has emerged as a priority for the district. In July 2009, through the work of One LA, the superintendent of LAUSD, Ray Cortines, publicly endorsed our work with the

Algebra Project and the Young People's Project. He has also been instrumental in securing the resources needed to begin the Algebra Project at Franklin High School and at Crenshaw High School in South-Central Los Angeles. We are now part of a city-wide coalition of math educators and others working to dramatically improve math education in our schools. Thus the principles and practices of community organizing, as well as collaboration with existing community organizing groups, have been, and will continue to be, key to our success.

### ***Reflections and Lessons Learned***

When I (Maria Avila) arrived at Occidental in 2001, I was not clear how my role in connecting curriculum to community engagement would develop, especially since I was new to academia's culture, language, and operations. I approached my new job as a continuation of work as a community organizer, using the skills and practices learned throughout my work in Mexico and the United States. As detailed earlier, I began assessing the terrain, as any organizer knows to do, by learning about the Occidental context, about academia in general, and about the field of academic engagement with communities (e.g., service-learning, community-based learning, civic engagement). I had heard from some of my colleagues around the country that there was a certain disappointment with service-learning and civic engagement efforts being relegated primarily to the offices in charge of leading these efforts. I wanted to change this by creating a model of civic engagement that would be created and owned by the various stakeholders throughout the college, as well as by the community partners.

I started writing about the importance of, and possibilities for, creating this model in 2002. At the time, I was not interested in writing for publication. I was interested in learning from others' feedback and, most important, in engaging others in thinking with me about challenges and opportunities in creating such a model. Early feedback included questions (and questioning) about my writing and thinking about the concept of creating cultural change in academia. Those questions addressed, for instance, the reasons for including community voices from the beginning, as opposed to creating the model internally first, and then reaching out to the community. Others questioned my use of the concept of culture, and my focus on creating cultural change within academia. This was my introduction to academia's way of engaging in debates about the meaning of words, ideas, and concepts. I was engaged in conversations on whether I was talking about culture or cultural

change; or the notion that such change could even be conceived of; or whether community, faculty, or students should be at the center of the *why* of academic community engagement. I heard from some that I needed to be careful politically with talking about my observations of academic culture, and was pushed to think about the role of academic knowledge in addition to organized people and money in creating social change.

Throughout my work as a community organizer, I have relied on “storying,” a concept used by Kevin Bradt in his book *Story as a Way of Knowing* (1997), which refers to the way sharing our story with someone else transforms us and changes our story. This way of knowing resonates with me, and it allows me to learn about what really matters to other people I speak with while reaffirming what really matters to me. As mentioned in my introduction, this “work,” in my experience, is best performed and sustained if we are clear about our motivations: our birthright.

Choosing the illustrative stories for this article from those that I have worked with was not easy. The stories told in this paper chose themselves in a manner similar to the organic way in which the civic engagement model has emerged. I have worked closely with the three authors and, have encouraged us all to share our work at conferences, and in publications.

I am aware that mentioning the word *power* and addressing the concept as directly as we do through this model can make people uncomfortable. Yet the concept of power is important not only for creating structural, cultural change, but also for being realistic about what can and cannot be done, short-term and long-term. I cannot, for instance, embark on a new program or plan for CCBL for next year without recognizing that Occidental has a new president who happens to be interested in and committed to engaging the college with Los Angeles. Hence the pragmatism of learning about his real interests and motivations for engaging the college with community; or what this means for other colleagues on and off campus; or what resources might become available or cease to be available.

While this civic engagement model has shown that reciprocal academic community partnerships for cultural and social change can be built, I cannot help but wonder about its applicability elsewhere. How much interest is there, for instance, from colleagues in academia and from community-based organizations and institutions in partnering for long-term cultural and social transformation? Is there enough appetite, along with the required patience, for taking the time to create models that include all stakeholders from

the start and keep them engaged in implementation and assessment? Is there enough motivation to invest in our own development along with other stakeholders and in acquiring the political skills required to engage in public work? From what I have learned in academia, most of us think we already know how to create effective programs within our fields. And given that academic institutions are in the business of educating students, is there enough interest in engaging with surrounding communities as neighbors, in addition to educating publicly engaged students and future professionals?

## Endnotes

1. Including Amy Driscoll, Harry Boyte, Dick Cone, and Frank Fear.
2. These colleagues include Dick Cone, Harry Boyte, Barbara Holland, Nadine Cruz, and Ira Harkavy.
3. The IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) was founded by Saul Alinsky in Chicago in the 1940s. The IAF model of organizing centers on building broad-based organizations of collective, long-lasting power through churches, synagogues, and other places of worship, as well as schools, unions, and other community-based organizations (<http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/>).
4. Action research was adopted by educators from community grassroots organizations—community organizers who used it to effect change in their society.

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