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The University of Illinois has formed collaborative institutional partnerships with four Chicago communities to address problems of children and youth. These partnerships, in the Nation of Tomorrow Project, bring multiple community institutions that interact in the lives of children together with academic and professional units of the university to enhance the community institutions' capacity to support children's learning and development. The project poses important institutional challenges to the university as it develops new working relationships among its own units and with community institutions.

University-Community Partnerships

Addressing Problems of Children and Youth through Institutional Collaboration

In recent years, the problems of children and youth have captured this nation's attention. The litany is long and altogether too familiar. Legions of reports chronicle the rising number of children living in poverty; changes in family structure and support systems; declines in academic achievement; growing school failure and dropout rates; and increases in substance abuse, teenage pregnancies, and gang activity. Minority children and youth in urban areas appear disproportionately burdened. The current generation of children has been called "neglected," "at-risk," "imperiled," and "lost."

Nearly eighty years ago, in his address to delegates of the first White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed: "When you take care of children, you are taking care of the nation of tomorrow." Now, too, the well-being of this and coming generations of children is seen as inextricably linked to the social, political, and economic future of the nation.

Concurrently, calls have sounded for greater leadership from both the public and private sectors in addressing the problems of children and youth. These calls

advocate development of new partnerships among government, businesses, universities, schools, and other community agencies to marshal human, financial, and material resources to solve these problems. Universities, businesses, schools, and other local institutions in communities across the country have begun to respond by exploring new working relationships or reaffirming existing ones. Some responses have been measured; others have been bold.

It remains to be seen whether these responses are appropriate and effective, whether they develop and flourish over time, or whether they wither in the shadows of shifting national, state, and local priorities. That is not an issue we engage here. Instead, we present a comprehensive five-year project, developed by the University of Illinois and supported primarily by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, to address the problems of children and youth in urban areas.

This project—entitled the Nation of Tomorrow, after President Roosevelt's proclamation—concerns the development of new knowledge and strategies to be applied in the service of children and youth in schools and communities. It also concerns the development of new institutional partnerships to broaden and strengthen the base of resources that may be brought to bear on these problems. The partnerships link the university, public schools, parents, and various community agencies in new, collaborative working relationships. The Nation of Tomorrow also establishes fresh working relationships within the university. The intra-institutional relationships seek to bridge two geographically separated campuses—Chicago and Urbana-Champaign—and to link academic and professional units on each campus. These units have worked independently on issues concerning children and youth but have seldom addressed them together.

The Nation of Tomorrow

The Nation of Tomorrow establishes partnerships between the University of Illinois, four low-income, racially isolated black and Hispanic communities in the city of Chicago, and a target elementary school in each community. Elementary schools were chosen as focal points, because they are the institutions with which all children in each community are most likely to interact. Also, the choice reflects the project's emphasis on preventive, as opposed to remedial, approaches to children's problems.

Conceptual Framework

The Nation of Tomorrow is grounded in two complementary conceptual perspectives that distinguish it from other university-school-community part-

nership projects. First, the project adopts an ecological view of children's learning and development. According to this view, the emergence of a child's personality and capabilities results from an interplay between the common stages of development and the social institutions that form the child's environment. Children's development can be enhanced by changing the institutions with which they interact. As in any ecological system, change in one element precipitates change throughout the system. Meaningful change therefore must attend to the interactions among multiple institutions that comprise the system. Attention also should be paid to developmental periods of childhood and youth. Initiatives must target early periods in children's lives, with the aim of preventing problems, rather than remediating them. Moreover, children must be supported beyond their younger years so that gains can be sustained.

The second, related perspective is institutional collaboration. As decades of research make clear, meaningful long-term change requires sharing, joint knowledge development, and collective problem solving among related institutions. Change cannot rely primarily on installation of programs and practices from external sources such as the university. Change must focus on processes of institutional self-examination and renewal.

Taken together, these perspectives create a focus on enhancing the capacities of and the functional relationships among multiple institutions with which children interact from early childhood through at least early adolescence. Because it is impossible to involve all institutions with which children interact, the Nation of Tomorrow targets four primary institutions in children's lives: the family, the school, community child care and youth programs, and community primary health care agencies. In addition, these perspectives define specific ways in which the university and community institutions work together. Agendas should be developed jointly and responsibility for work and outcomes should be shared. Each institution must acknowledge the different, yet complementary, resources and expertise that the other institutions bring to this endeavor. Furthermore, the university should work with these institutions not to solve problems for them, but to enhance their capacities to work together more effectively in the service of children and youth.

Project Goals and Components

The Nation of Tomorrow seeks to achieve four related goals concerning children's learning and development:

- to improve academic achievement;
- to decrease self-destructive behavior, such as substance abuse, and increase children's sense of self-worth and personal agency;

- to raise awareness and adoption of physically healthy and health-promoting behaviors; and
- to encourage prosocial behavior—that is, the capacity to get along with others, to form friendships and positive peer networks, and to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence.

Three major project components have been designed to achieve these goals. Each component aligns community institutions with academic and professional units of the university and establishes new connections among community institutions. A substantial part of 1989-90, the project's first year, was devoted to collaborative planning and agenda building in each program component. Implementation began in the fall of 1990.

School Enhancement Activities. The first project component, School Enhancement Activities, is designed to improve learning opportunities for children in schools through a comprehensive approach to teacher professional learning and development. This component is based on the premise that teacher learning and development and instructional improvement are fundamentally organizational issues. The school organization must be developed to mobilize and enhance sources of teachers' learning and to support teachers in developing and implementing new classroom practices based on that learning. Classroom teachers and university faculty from the Colleges of Education, Liberal Arts and Sciences, Social Work, and Kinesiology will engage in collaborative learning and problem-solving activities to enhance teachers' classroom practice. Concurrently, teachers, administrators, and university faculty will work to address organizational conditions in schools that constrain teachers' professional learning and instructional improvement.

Consistent with the project's principle of collaboration, initial agendas for School Enhancement Activities were developed jointly by teachers and university faculty. Focal issues identified for the first few years of the project included early childhood education; reading, writing, and literacy; math and science; special education; instructional uses of microcomputers; and student motivation, cooperation, and self-concept. These issues are likely to change over the course of the project as the interests and concerns of participants change.

The primary vehicle for teacher learning and development is the peer work group, comprised of teachers and university faculty members who share a common area of interest and concern. In the first few years of the program, these groups are likely to be composed of teachers from the same school, but in subsequent years will draw their members from across schools. The groups are likely to bring together university faculty members—perhaps from different units of the institution—who share common interests but have not worked together before. Activities of the groups will

range from joint definition and articulation of school-based problems, to formulation of alternative strategies to address them and to study the implementation and outcomes of these strategies.

Family Ties. The second component of this project, Family Ties, concerns parent education and involvement in the education of their children at school. Faculty and staff members of the university's Cooperative Extension Service and College of Social Work will work with parents, social service providers, clergy, teachers, and other community leaders to develop parent education programs that will be taught by parents to other parents in each community. These programs, being developed collaboratively with parents and community representatives, most likely will vary across each community. They will reflect parents' needs and concerns about raising their children and interacting with schools. These include:

- the physical safety of their children;
- the ability of community service agencies to meet their children's needs;
- young children's transitions from home to school;
- how children spend their time after school; and
- the adequacy and appropriateness of parental skills and values in difficult, hostile, and changing environments.

The Family Ties component will coordinate its work with the School Enhancement Activities to help teachers and parents work together. This component also links Cooperative Extension Service to existing child care and after-school youth programs in each community to enhance program quality and accessibility to children and youth.

Access to these programs will be promoted by family advocate teams composed of persons hired from the community and trained by the Cooperative Extension Service. Team members will help families determine their needs for child care and youth programs, and select community programs that best meet those needs.

Partners in Health. The third component of the project, Partners in Health, promotes the health of children and youth using a grass-roots, community-based approach. This approach is designed to assist parents in understanding and taking greater responsibility for the primary health care needs of their children. It seeks to help parents learn more about the health care services available in their communities, how to gain access to them, and how to make them work in the best interests of their children. In addition, it seeks to help parents understand the importance of continuity of care.

Partners in Health will work primarily through the program's elementary schools. It will support employment of a full-time nurse in each school to work with faculty and staff from the university's Colleges of Nursing and Pharmacy, School of Public Health, and Department of Pediatrics. The teams will include, as well, child advocates hired from each community and

trained by the university's College of Nursing Health Advocacy Program and the Family Ties component of the project. Each team will work in the communities to assess health needs of children and youth, to link families and primary health care providers, and to help teachers improve their health education programs in the schools. The school-based health education program will be complemented by drug education programs sponsored by the university's College of Pharmacy.

Linking the Pieces

As described above, the Nation of Tomorrow proposes to form new partnerships that will link the university and its various academic and professional units in collaborative working relationships with different community institutions. These linkages will be promoted in several different ways.

The project as a whole is overseen by an operations board that is composed of university and community representatives. Local community advisory committees include representatives from the different community institutions involved, as well as several at-large members representing general community interests. In addition, each community has a full-time site coordinator who serves as liaison between the university and the community and among community institutions involved in the project.

The work of different units of the university is coordinated in the field and on campus by a project director and by university faculty members who serve as coordinators for each of the three program components. Administering and monitoring project activity is facilitated by the university's Center for Urban Educational Research and Development on the Chicago campus.

Exploring New Connections

While initial project activities have developed primarily around these major components, other university-community connections envisioned for the project are being explored. There are three major types of connections. The first connection would increase the access children and youth from these four communities have to programs and services that are not directly affiliated with or supported by the Nation of Tomorrow and that are available on the university's Chicago campus. Examples would include student enrichment courses, college preparatory courses, and college and career counseling services sponsored by the Early Outreach Program. They also would include numerous academic-year and summer programs sponsored by different academic units, such as the Department of Mathematics and Computer Sciences' summer computer and math camps.

A second type of connection envisioned is between the schools and communities and the university's various professional preparation programs. Over the five-year project period, it is anticipated that these schools and communities will become settings for demonstrating "state-of-the-art" institutional working relationships and professional practices applied in the service of children, youth, and their families. The schools and communities can become exemplary sites for clinical preparation of future teachers, school administrators, social workers, school nurses, and other professionals whose responsibility will be to work in and shape community institutions serving children and youth.

Finally, this project creates opportunities for the university to connect the four Nation of Tomorrow schools with other schools and school districts throughout the greater Chicago metropolitan area. The university's Center for Urban Educational Research and Development (on the Chicago campus) supports two consortia—The Chicago Area School Effectiveness Council and The Network for the Enhancement of Teaching—that together consist of more than 500 city and suburban schools in and around Chicago. These consortia seek to promote cross-school information sharing, action research, joint problem solving, and program development.

By creating such connections with other schools, this project will be able to increase exponentially the resources available to Nation of Tomorrow schools and further promote their efforts to enhance learning opportunities for children. These connections also will promote the dissemination of new knowledge and practices developed in the Nation of Tomorrow schools to other schools in the city of Chicago and throughout the greater Chicago metropolitan area.

This project signals a shift from viewing communities and their institutions as subjects for research and intervention, to viewing them as partners and co-contributors.

Changes and Challenges

The Nation of Tomorrow represents several substantial changes for the university, both in its relationships with surrounding communities and in its own organization and focus. This project moves beyond traditional, short-term relationships with single community institutions to long-term relationships involving multiple institutions. It involves some community institutions that have had no previous experience working directly with the university. The Nation of Tomorrow represents a shift away from relationships with community institutions that have assumed passive or reactive roles, to new collaborative relationships in which both the university and community institutions assume proactive roles and share leadership, initiative, and

responsibility for their work together. This project signals a shift from viewing communities and their institutions as subjects or targets for research and intervention, to viewing them as partners and co-contributors.

In addition, the Nation of Tomorrow brings together university academic and professional units that have had little experience in working with each other. Beyond establishing these new relationships within the university, the project presents new prospects for institutional integration of research and service—two primary functions of the university that traditionally have carried unequal emphasis and status and that typically have been performed separately. These changes invariably challenge prevailing patterns of belief, policy, and practice that have influenced past university-community relationships, relationships among academic and professional units within the university, and the work of individual faculty members.

In developing these new inter- and intra-institutional relationships, the university faces several important challenges. The university must be prepared to overcome community distrust and suspicions that it is more concerned with pursuing its own interests and agendas than with helping communities deal with their local problems. At the same time, the university must be prepared to shape reasonable expectations for its involvement with these four communities. The university must help the communities understand that its function in this project is not to unilaterally “fix” the problems of children and youth, but to serve as a partner with community institutions in jointly crafting solutions to those problems. The university must help communities assume more proactive roles in this process and help them to recognize that their contributions, while different from those made by the university, are valuable and valued. At the same time, the university must help its own faculty and administrators understand the collaborative nature of this project, accept the university’s role as a partner, as opposed to an intervener, and acknowledge the expertise and experiences persons from community institutions bring to the relationship.

In addition, the university must develop new administrative mechanisms to support and coordinate work within and among academic and professional units across two campuses. It must negotiate new relationships between research and service in the work roles of its faculty. This latter challenge involves developing an understanding among faculty and administrators unfamiliar with action-oriented inquiry that research and service may coexist and inform each other in mutually productive ways. It also involves developing incentive and reward systems to motivate and support faculty members who choose to participate in such work.

In all, these challenges suggest that establishing new relationships between the university and the community involves institutional preparation and development. They suggest that new working relationships, particularly relationships that represent substantial changes in prevailing practice, do

not just happen. Their development and success are functions of new understandings and new ways of thinking and interacting. In many ways, through this project the university poses for itself the same challenge it poses to families, schools, and other institutions in these four Chicago communities. That challenge concerns developing new attitudes, understandings, and skills and new ways of working with other institutions to achieve a common objective—enhancing the learning and development of children and youth.

Suggested Readings

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