

Neighborhood Planning through Community Service-Learning: The Empowerment of East Sprague Neighborhood Residents in Spokane, Washington

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Abstract

This essay explores Eastern Washington University's East Central Neighborhood Partnership Center project, which utilized coordinated community service-learning classes and internships to create a neighborhood revitalization plan in partnership with a neighborhood council and community-based organizations. The author explores the ways in which the long-term relationship between the university and neighborhood organizations effectively promoted community service-learning classes across disciplines and expanded community participation to address community needs and to build community empowerment.

“We (the Community Colleges of Spokane and Eastern Washington University) hereby agree to direct the resources of our two institutions to the reduction of poverty and economic revitalization of our central city neighborhoods (in Spokane, Washington) in a sustained fashion over the next decade. We are committed to providing resources in full partnership with those that work and live in the neighborhoods and the business, governmental and non-profit entities which serve them.” (Memorandum of Agreement, CCS and EWU Presidents. Signed May 24, 2001).

Eastern Washington University (EWU), a regional comprehensive university, has been actively involved in community service-learning and Campus Compact since 1999. The University received a Washington Campus Compact grant to recognize, support and expand community service-learning within the administration and university community and a Learn and Serve America Grant from the Corporation for Service Learning to carry out an innovative “Pathways to Progress” project to deliver a “Main Street” revitalization program in Cheney, Washington through community service-learning classes. Although a number of programs and departments within the University have long traditions of community service—notably urban planning, social work, and education—service-learning has recently been embraced and supported across the University (Eastern Washington University 2004a, 2004b, 2005).

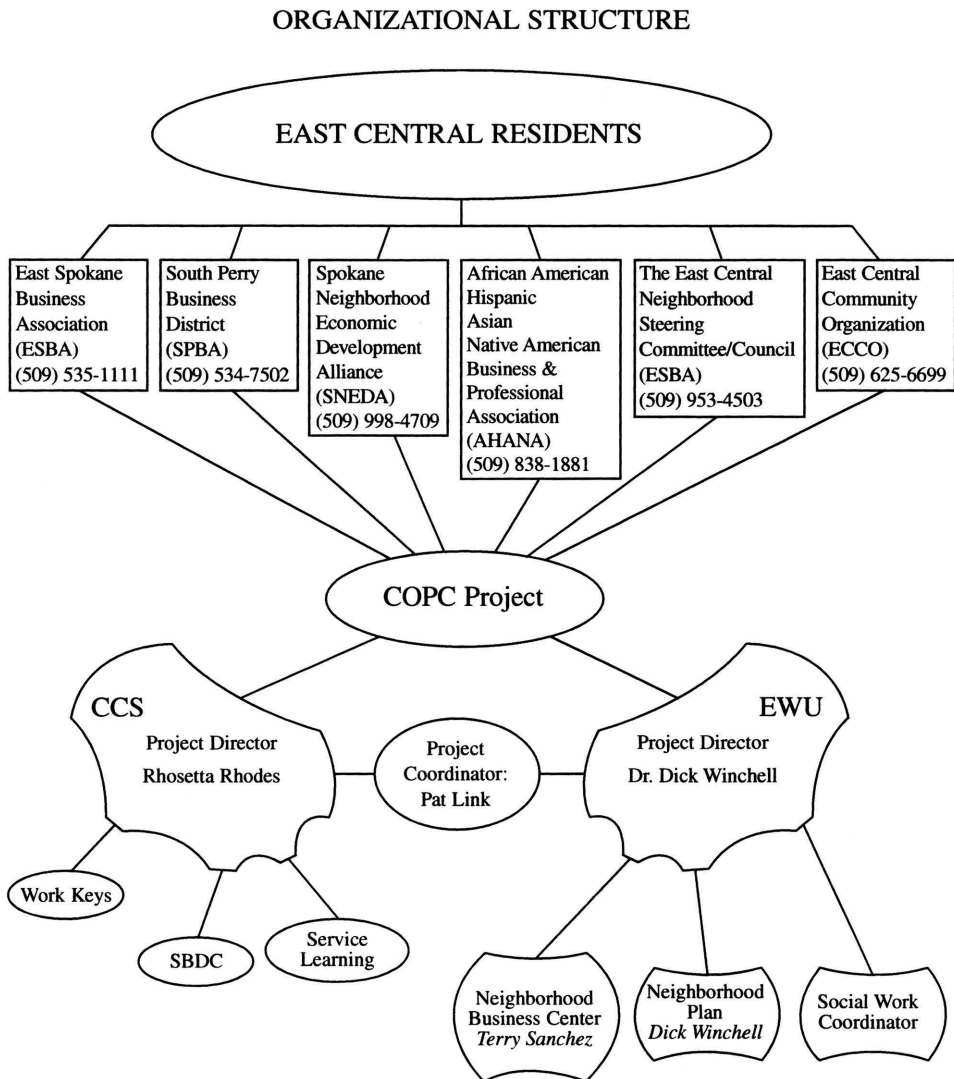
The LSA grant “Pathways to Progress” 2000-2004 demonstrated that universities could carry out a Main Street model program for downtown revitalization using community service-learning classes and interns. Community service-learning is often a “one shot” effort, organized by individual faculty, but under EWU’s “engaged university” initiatives there has been an effort to identify long-term community needs and issues, and to coordinate community service-learning projects, numerous classes and internships, external resource allocations, and public forums to address those problems. During the initial three years of funding, more than 30 faculty from a wide-range of disciplines and 1,000 community service-learning students engaged in coordinated activities which supported the Pathways to Progress effort. Computer Science students developed a Web site for downtown and community businesses, while communication and marketing students provided direct services to businesses and to the Pathways to Progress community-based, non-profit organization formed to lead the effort. Students developed plans that led to a \$1 million street improvement grant and a private-public partnership which created a \$5.4 million investment - in a “new urbanist” designed apartment and business complex in the heart of downtown. Eastern Washington University leased the apartment complex to house students for 20 years, a clear and reciprocal form of external resource allocations. All of these community service-learning efforts provided the models and the foundation for the East Central Neighborhood Partnership Center. The focus of this paper will describe how EWU’s role in this partnership led to the empowerment of neighborhood residents and the creation of the neighborhood plan for an urban disadvantaged neighborhood in Spokane, Washington.

Neighborhood Empowerment: Citizen Involvement and Participation in All Aspects of Planning

Two processes for citizen and neighborhood empowerment were incorporated into the development of the East Central Neighborhood Partnership program and the development of the neighborhood plan. First was the organization of the Neighborhood Partnership itself in which the Community Colleges of Spokane’s Community Service-Learning Programs and EWU Planning and Business programs worked with community-based organizations to gain funding for a HUD COPC grant to make resources available to the community. This project sought to identify and utilize residents and community-based organizations in the initial development and all subsequent aspects of the Partnership. The overall organizational structure of the East Central Neighborhood Partnership Program (Figure 1) places neighborhood residents at the top of the organizational chart. The six community-based organizations are at the next level, representing community-based efforts already in place for revitalization of the neighborhood and neighborhood expertise. At the next level are the CCS and EWU coordinators and the project staff hired to link project activities to neighborhood processes. All aspects of the grant from the creation of the program to advising on all program activities have been directed by the Partnership Advisory Board which meets monthly. This effort includes organizational empowerment for the community-based

organizations, and the structure assures that EWU and CCS participants acknowledge at all levels that the neighborhood itself is empowered to control this project.

Figure 1
The East Central Neighborhood Partnership



This structure also identifies a critical concern within community service-learning – how to establish and maintain a true partnership and effectively engage community leadership in working with community service-learning projects, especially involving more than one class, when each class and instructor also have their own learning objectives and needs for student learning. Part of our success was to use this

organizational chart to directly involve different faculty, students, and classes with community-based organizations and citizens in their projects. The faculty coordinator was responsible for maintaining appropriate contacts with the right community leaders and groups for each class or activity, while monthly reports on overall progress and use of classes and students kept everyone on the board up to date. To the maximum extent possible these coordinating meetings and projects “modeled” or followed processes of good project management and community development which enabled the community to guide all activities and development of the plan. Besides a monthly Partnership Advisory Board meeting, broader citizen involvement was achieved through bi-monthly reports and presentations to the stakeholders and to the Neighborhood Council.

All faculty who conducted major class projects, guiding internships or working on community service-learning activities, met with and made presentations to the Partnership Advisory Board prior to the class, provided updates during the class, and either invited Advisory Board and community members to any final class presentations or made those presentations during regular community meetings of appropriate community organizations. Participating faculty and key students were also invited to participate in the project staff meetings.

Dr. Winchell, EWU Planning, working with graduate planning interns John Fisher and Christina Wollman, coordinated the integration of class projects and directed student interns in the development of products to create the neighborhood plan. EWU planning activities included development and distribution of neighborhood newsletters, meeting minutes, and other products. Materials produced by community service-learning classes, interns, and students were reframed into technical documents to become part of the neighborhood plan, and were ultimately summarized and integrated into the Neighborhood Plan Document (Fisher and Winchell 2004).

Community Voice in the Development of the Neighborhood Plan

The second aspect of empowerment of neighborhood residents took place through a special “Stakeholder Team” formed by neighborhood residents that met twice a month from January 2004 to December 2004 to identify and study community issues and to set priorities for action to promote community revitalization. The Stakeholder Team, which included neighborhood council members, residents, business owners, and human service providers, also held neighborhood public forums and public meetings to discuss planning issues. The focus was on neighborhood engagement in public problem-solving through the neighborhood plan.

The city of Spokane created a process for neighborhood planning to implement the City’s Comprehensive Plan, adopted in 2001, through local input and decision-making, to support concentrations of urban development through “Centers and Corridors” recognized in the Comprehensive Plan. The East Central Neighborhood included three “centers” for concentrated urban development and chose to follow the Neighborhood Planning Guidelines established by the city of Spokane.

The first step was to create a neighborhood steering committee to guide the planning process. A committee of 30 residents, business leaders, leaders of community organizations and faith-based organizations, and citizens representing all parts of the neighborhood, was established. An initial process with this group identified key issues to be addressed in the plan, and established a mission statement for the group: *The Mission of the East Central Neighborhood Stakeholder Team is to create a visionary Neighborhood plan that represents the needs and desires that evolve from the East Central neighborhood citizenry, businesses, and other institutions through a series of open community forums for the betterment of the neighborhood and its residents while also addressing city and regional goals.*

The Stakeholder Team went through several stages to complete the formal development and adoption of the Neighborhood Plan within a one-year time period. These stages are summarized below:

Initial Stakeholder Formation. This included an open community meeting to identify key issues which needed to be addressed through planning and an open invitation for all community members to join the Stakeholder Team. A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Process of strategic planning was used, led by a planning graduate student, and written documentation was compiled and used to guide the planning effort on the project Web site (Fisher 2004).

Stakeholder presentations of community service-learning class projects, applied research, planning inventory and analysis reports. The Stakeholder Team identified nine elements to the Neighborhood Plan. Following presentations on these topics, the stakeholders were asked to study the information presented, add more information or suggest additions, and then identify actions or alternatives which would address problems or issues identified. A list of actions or alternatives for each element was compiled.

Prioritization of actions and implementation efforts. Once a list of actions and alternatives was produced for each element, major public meetings were held to provide residents the opportunity to give input to the process. The results were developed into a very clear neighborhood plan document which included maps showing locations of critical resources, issues, facilities, problems, a narrative summary of the element, and the prioritized “action items” to be implemented within the neighborhood plan. This neighborhood plan was then reviewed by the Steering Committee, the Neighborhood Council, and the public. Final revisions were completed in December 2004, and the plan is now proceeding through the approval process of the city of Spokane to become officially recognized by the city as the Neighborhood Plan.

Implementation. The priorities for action have been completed, but because this was a broad-based plan covering many topics, its implementation includes initiatives with the parks department, the streets department, the State Department of Transportation, the City Human Services Office, and many other programs and agencies beyond the more

typically- proposed changes in land use and zoning to encourage broad economic and community revitalization. During February 2005, the Stakeholders sponsored a final public meeting to develop a Strategic Implementation Process for the Neighborhood Plan. Six working committees were identified and developed work plans to implement various aspects of the Neighborhood Plan. Their work will be reported at least every six months to the Neighborhood Council, and the Neighborhood Council will support and guide implementation of the plan, in continued partnership with the EWU Planning Programs using community service-learning students and faculty-directed interns.

The neighborhood participants in the Stakeholder process contributed over 10,000 hours of support in meetings, not counting time for reading detailed technical reports prepared for each of the elements, and field analysis in their neighborhood. They also worked closely with EWU faculty and planning students to set up booths at the neighborhood fair and guide community participation in the development of the plan.

Community voice for all neighborhood residents was an important responsibility of the plan and for the Stakeholder group. East Central is a HUD CDBG neighborhood recognized by the City of Spokane Neighborhood Services Program, which provided funding for direct mailing to all residents and to all businesses. EWU planning students developed two newsletters that included a business survey which were sent to all businesses. Three newsletters were mailed to all residences (over 5,000 residential units) during 2004 to explain the neighborhood planning process, the products and results, and to invite public participation in the plan development. The public dialogues from this planning effort were documented on our Web site (Fisher 2004), which fostered interaction and participation in all stages of the planning. Presentations of student research on each element were made to the Stakeholder Team at regular meetings, along with additional meetings to engage neighborhood businesses and neighborhood human service providers and faith-based organizations. These meetings provided active opportunity for neighborhood residents and business owners to address key problems and develop strategies for actions.

Community Voice in the Creation of the Neighborhood Plan

Part of the planning student and faculty engagement with the community was to facilitate community voice, citizen participation, and citizen empowerment throughout the development of the plan. As the Stakeholder Team was forming, planning students learned skills in strategic planning, including the use of a simple strategic planning process, SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). Graduate planning students, under faculty direction, facilitated a community-based SWOT exercise with the Stakeholder Team at their first meeting, providing training in the process. The Stakeholder Team then scheduled and held a public meeting in which they assisted in facilitation of a community-wide SWOT exercise which had more than 70 participants. Working through small groups, the SWOT exercise led to the

identification of key problems, concerns, and issues within the community, which were then used to identify key topics and components of the Neighborhood Plan. Documentation of the Stakeholder SWOT, the community SWOT, and also a human service providers SWOT exercise was completed and posted on the Web. Review of the SWOT report led to the stakeholder adoption of key issues and the work program for completion of the Neighborhood Plan. Following community development models, the processes of planning and community development were presented to the Stakeholder Team so they could, in fact, carry out and participate fully in all aspects of the development of the plan, including scheduling and management of the effort. Students and stakeholders gained valuable experience in community building through successful participation and leadership in the community SWOT exercise.

Finally, a process to prioritize all the actions identified for implementation from one element to another took place. Starting with the Stakeholder Team a full list of alternatives was made available, and members were given “dots” to stick on their first, second, and third alternatives for action. This listing was also completed by June 2004, when public engagement at two neighborhood outdoor fairs took place, enabling several hundred citizens to complete their own prioritization, which was incorporated into the plan. Further prioritization activities included a final public meeting on the plan during which over 50 participants again prioritized the actions identified in the plan. Ultimately, over 500 residents participated in the formal prioritization of actions which became the plan. Planning students, interns, and stakeholders themselves helped facilitate broader citizen involvement. In addition, the three newsletters that were sent to all residents and businesses invited participation in meetings, review of the plans, and direct comment on key plan items. The newsletters also described the plan as it evolved and the major actions proposed in the plan.

Business Development and Human Service Engagement

The East Central Neighborhood Partnership recognized that in addition to a standard neighborhood plan, successful neighborhood empowerment and revitalization would need to involve the mobilization and active participation of the businesses within the neighborhood and the human service and faith-based organizations. Human service providers and faith-based organizations played a key role in the neighborhood, not only to address critical needs of residents but also as investors and resources within the neighborhood. It was determined that more than 90 human service organizations and over 40 faith-based organizations were active in the neighborhood. Quarterly meetings for all organizations were established, and a neighborhood needs assessment and an inventory of providers and programs was conducted; a process which mobilized these human service providers and faith-based organizations. An inventory of needs and support from Washington State University (Blodgett 2004) was integrated into the neighborhood planning effort which resulted in a human services element within the neighborhood plan. Implementation of this element priorities include on-going coordination of providers, a joint resources publication, and coordinated grants and program development to meet critical needs coming from new budget cuts across many programs.

The Partnership Center also promoted business development and direct job skills development. The Community Colleges of Spokane provided job and skills training to neighborhood residents, and support for businesses through their Small Business Development Center. EWU's Center for Entrepreneurship and its Business Development Center were used to collect business data and develop neighborhood revitalization strategies within the plan. Business efforts linked to the plan included a newsletter and survey of all 1,200 businesses in the neighborhood. The results of that survey provided insight and support for strategies for revitalization, initially coordinated by Hector Torres, a graduate planning intern (Torres 2005), and further developed under the direction of EWU Entrepreneurship Professor Dr. Robert Schwartz (Schwartz and Sanchez 2004).

Lessons Learned for Community Service-Learning

This project, and EWU's on-going expansion and integration of community service-learning as part of an "engaged university," offers many learning opportunities and points for reflection. First, it was very helpful to establish a long-term relationship to address a specific community need, and then invite faculty and students across the campus to participate. The long-term relationship also offered more productive linkage between neighborhood needs and classes. The author was the project coordinator, but based on prior work across campus, faculty who had participated in community service-learning as well as those who taught classes which could address relevant needs were contacted and invited to participate. Their participation was part of an on-going effort to provide background information and contacts, as well as on-going support before, during and after their class project.

Another advantage of the long-term project was the ability to expand and build from one class to another. For example, an initial survey of 1,200 businesses was mailed out but had only a 5% response rate. Because we had additional business classes and interns, we were able to complete follow-up direct contacts where students targeted all new businesses in the neighborhood and specific areas within the neighborhood over the three quarters following the initial class. The total response rate was more than 10%, and although each class did initial data analysis of the surveys they completed, all surveys were compiled and a research methods class completed detailed statistical analysis of the results the following quarter.

Sometimes the results of the study and work of the class did not directly match the needs of the community. The faculty, as participants in staff and advisory board meetings, had direct support from other faculty, including the project coordinator, and the community-based organizations from the beginning. If the class projects did not match expected community or project results, we could work with the faculty to gain maximum interpretation, meaning, and value from their class study as it related to the development of the Neighborhood Plan. Because we had a longer perspective, often a class the next quarter or even the next year could repeat the exercise under a revised structure to gain more useable results. This coordination of community-based activities

provided a great advantage over uncoordinated, individual class efforts. Staff meetings varied in frequency and length of meetings by quarter, depending on number and type of classes, and over time the project shifted from weekly to bi-monthly and monthly meetings.

Each class had a structure of interaction with the team and the community organizations. Prior to any community service-learning class participation in the Partnership project, the faculty had to schedule a meeting with the community-based organizations, usually by coming to the monthly Partnership Advisory Board meetings. Faculty then met directly with relevant community organization leaders to frame a purpose and schedule of participation. Usually someone from the Partnership team, along with one or more leaders of neighborhood organizations came to an early class and gave a presentation on the issues and needs within the community, an orientation to the community, and to the Partnership Project. During each class there was regular reporting and review between the project coordinator, the involved faculty member, and partner organizations. At the end of every class, there was some form of presentation or report made to the community-based organizations, usually the neighborhood council, or persons from that organization came to the final class presentations. Participating faculty were asked to provide final written products, as well as a summary of the community service-learning effort, and some sense of student reflection and their own comments on the project. In some cases, faculty were asked to revise and create final documents, or faculty chose to do so on their own as part of their own research agenda. Faculty were encouraged to present their applied research to the community-based organizations and to share all products with the neighborhood. A Web site was developed to post student work products, to coordinate the Stakeholders and neighborhood meetings, and to post academic research by faculty, master's level research reports, and other presentations developed by faculty and students.

Conclusion

The presence of long-term relationships to address community needs changes the impact of community service-learning efforts. While one class or project may be important, a series of classes and projects over time, with coordinated efforts among faculty and the community, makes a more significant contribution and investment. In this project, over a three year period the "in-kind" contributions of faculty support was more than \$70,000, and student time in Community Service-Learning, given a value of \$10/hour, represented an additional \$250,000 in resources for the community. Efforts in the community working with Stakeholder and neighborhood groups included over 10,000 hours of neighborhood resident volunteer time, mostly in the form of bi-weekly meetings during the final development, drafting, and approval of the Neighborhood Plan. The project, which is on-going, represented an investment of over \$500,000 in direct and indirect external resource allocations to address poverty and mobilize neighborhood efforts at revitalization.

The East Central Neighborhood Partnership Center project used service-learning classes, student interns, and faculty-directed research to complete a neighborhood plan. The project expanded Eastern Washington University's efforts to become an engaged university, and illustrates the potential of community service-learning to mobilize significant resources and create partnerships which can meaningfully address and respond to community needs.

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