

**The Nuevo South Action Research Collaborative
A Model of Community Engagement and Service –learning
in Eastern North Carolina
(Towards a New Type of University–Community
Collaboration)**

Outline of Presentation

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Introduction

The Nuevo South Action Research Collaborative (NSARC) is an organization whose mission is to effect positive change in Latino communities in eastern North Carolina through university–community partnership building in research and action. The NSARC began in the fall 2008 with academics from the East Carolina University (ECU) Department of Anthropology in collaboration with a single community organization. At the time, the collaborative had the name Nuevo South Community Research Initiative (NSCRI), emphasizing the articulation of research and community. In the first year and a half (Phase I: Restricted Partnership), the partnership implemented three projects, involved faculty and students from other academic units besides Anthropology, but was not able to involve more community organizations. In response, a decision was made to call for an open meeting with the purpose of inaugurating a new phase for the collaborative (Phase II: Open Coalition). This new phase would be characterized by the involvement of as many university and community representatives as possible. The meeting was held on April 23, 2010, with over 50 participants from the university (faculty, staff, and students), grassroots organizations, and the network of service providers from several counties in eastern North Carolina.

This presentation will describe the evolution of the Nuevo South Collaborative, identifying challenges and lessons learned.

Phase I. Restricted Partnership

General Characteristics

- Informal partnership between faculty from the ECU Department of Anthropology and a single grassroots community organization.
- Partnership was born out of a synergetic moment:
 - Leader of community organization was looking for a new way of partnering with the university.
 - Anthropology faculty wanted to develop sustainable partnerships with community organizations. Two main motivations:
 - Emphasis on applied and action research.
 - Community connections for migration research.
- Partnership required an intense rapport building process.

Model

- Faculty and organization leader jointly identified community needs (no formal needs assessment study).
- Faculty wrote proposals for the organization and assisted in program implementation.
- The community organization was always the fiscal agent.
- No formal agreement between the faculty and the organization.
- Some volunteering and service-learning activities associated with projects.

Projects

- Diabetes awareness workshops.
 - Project funded by local hospital foundation.
 - Funding given to the community organization.
 - Anthropology faculty assisted in implementation and wrote final report.
- Promoting healthy lifestyles through community health advisors.
 - Project funded by local hospital foundation.
 - Proposal was written by Anthropology faculty.
 - A partnership with faculty from several academic units was create:
 - College of Nursing
 - School of Social Work
 - Department of Nutrition and Dietetics
 - The project was co-coordinated by member of the community organization and the Anthropology faculty member who wrote the proposal.
 - Students were involved through:
 - Service-learning:
 - applied anthropology undergraduate class
 - Social Work practicum
 - Volunteering:
 - Students volunteering in the weekends.
 - Interests for volunteering opportunities particularly because of the language and culture.
- Enhancing Latino youth civic engagement
 - Project funded by state civic education program
 - Proposal was written by Anthropology faculty
 - Community organization was the fiscal agent
 - Project was coordinated by the director of the community organization
 - Anthropology faculty conducted a process evaluation and wrote the final report

Products

- Working relations were developed with faculty from different academic units
 - School of Social Work
 - College of Nursing

- Department of Nutrition and Dietetics
- Department of Health Education and Promotion
- Relationships were established with members of the Latino community (beyond the partner organization) and service providers
- Relationship was strongly affected by disagreements in the administration of funds, accountability to the community, and transparency

Phase II: Open Coalition

General Characteristics

- Re-launch the collaborative as a more inclusive coalition based on the realization that the restricted partnership model was not sustainable.
- This new collaborative is based on the need to:
 - Be as inclusive as possible at the university and community level
 - Represent the social and cultural diversity of the Latino community
 - Involve community organizations, service providers, and non-organized residents
 - Include representatives from the eastern North Carolina geographic region
- The new collaborative was launched in a meeting that had over 50 participants from the university, service providers, community organizations, as well as residents who do not participate in any organization. Participants came from several counties in the region.
- In the inaugural meeting, there was agreement that a collaborative needed to be created that would try to meet the needs of the Latino community of the region. There was consensus that the coalition had to be action and research-oriented and that it should include as many people and organizations as possible.

Model

- Core activities (multi-emphasis):
 - Program implementation or solutions:
Activities aimed at implementing solutions to issues and social problems identified by the collaborative. For example, a youth leadership program, a lay health advisor project, and a mentoring program.
 - Research:
Activities to enhance the understanding of the local, regional, and transnational Latino communities in eastern North Carolina through the study of key social, cultural, and economic issues. Also, studies that help develop strategies and methodologies to strengthen the community and improve the delivery of services.
 - Volunteer and service-learning:
Through curricular and non-curricular activities, involve students with grassroots organizations and service providers serving the Latino community. Students can be engaged in general support activities, guided research, or anything else that is agreed upon between the organization, the student, and the university. Student

involvement in the community will be supported by the ECU Volunteering and Service-Learning Center.

- Advocacy:
Develop unified fronts to engage in public debates around critical issues affecting the Latino community, such as immigration, health disparities, political participation, and access to education.
- Guiding principles
 - Accountability:
Participating researchers, grassroots organizations, and service providers should be accountable to the people in the community with whom they work. This means that people should be clearly made aware of the nature of projects, the funding sources (and how much of that funding goes to the people or the community group), and their impact. At the same time, researchers and organizations should respond to the community when information is requested. Although these conditions are intrinsic to a true participatory process, and some of them are included in all university research projects through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) informed consent form, it is necessary to make them explicit as founding principles of the NSARC. All projects implemented through this collaborative will be expected to comply with these principles.
 - Participation:
Related to accountability is the conviction that all research activities implemented through the NSARC should be responsive to felt needs of the community defined by the members of this collaborative formally (e.g., through needs assessments and asset mapping studies) and informally (e.g., through consensus). Although we recognize that good research does not necessarily have to be socially responsive, the NSARC will only sponsor studies that comply with this condition.
 - Knowledge equivalence:
There is a fundamental equivalence between academic and community/popular knowledge. These systems of knowledge are of equal value, neither is superior to the other.
 - Reciprocity:
The collaborative should strive to meet the needs of the community and of academics/students. Commonly, the needs of the community are related to finding and implementing solutions to social problems. Meanwhile, the needs of academics/students are commonly related to learning and producing new knowledge, and representing that knowledge in the form of written products, participation in academic meetings, and other scholarly activity. The NSARC will bridge the gap between these two players through a balanced, complementary, and reciprocal agenda.
- Focus Areas:
 - Community and capacity building:

Activities aimed at strengthening the network of Latino organizations, building organizational capacity, and developing leadership.

- Culture:
Activities aimed at studying, enhancing, and celebrating the culture of Latinos in eastern North Carolina as well as their contributions to larger society. This includes the arts, sports, education, science, and humanities. These activities will help shape the public image of Latinos, enhance the connections with larger society, and help strengthen cultural identity.
 - Education:
Activities dealing with the key educational issues affecting the Latino community of eastern North Carolina. These may include retention and drop-out of school-age children, access to post-secondary education (community college and university), learning English as a second language, and adult education.
 - Health and human services:
Activities related to accessing and using health and human services, promoting healthy lifestyles, and changing conditions of health inequity affecting the Latino population of eastern North Carolina.
 - Migration and settlement:
Activities aimed at increasing the understanding of the migration and settlement experience of Latinos in eastern North Carolina, and to finding solutions to problems associated with that experience. These activities will take local, regional, and transnational perspectives.
- Leadership:
 - Director
 - Advisory board: equal representation
 - Co-coordinators for each focus area: one from the university and one from the community (grassroots organizations or service providers)

Proposed Projects

- Projects that do not require funding (based on volunteer and service-learning resources):
 - Computer literacy with community organizations
 - English as a second language
 - Mentoring program for incoming Latino students (faculty and student volunteers)
- Projects Requires funding
 - Lay health advisors program
 - Strengthening the network of Latino community organizations (some activities require funding and some do not)
 - Transnational family and community support program
 - Cultural competency training for service providers

Conclusions

- The restricted partnership model (collaboration with only one community organization) is fragile:
 - Susceptible to fluctuations in the local political climate
 - Susceptible to personal misunderstandings and conflicts
- There is a potential cultural disconnection between university and community organizations:
 - University: the culture of grants, projects, and accountability
 - Community organization: culture of voluntarism and “processes” (vs. “projects”)
 - Wrong assumption: community organization shares the institutional culture of grants and project

Mutual efforts need to be made to make this cultural disconnection explicit and to find ways of overcoming it.

- A sustainable partnership needs to rest on transparent and open communication among members. Problems need to be discussed openly and immediately. A strong partnership will resist that type of open dialogue.
- It is important to include in a collaborative not only organizations, but also residents who do not play leadership roles in organizations. Residents who do not belong to organizations provide a direct link to community needs and assets.
- Volunteering and service-learning activities can play a key role in a university-community collaborative:
 - Solutions that do not require monetary resources.
 - These activities should be at the forefront of the collaborative. They allow showing results early in the process, something that would not happen with complex projects that require grant funding.
 - Challenges:
 - How do we provide continuity of services when using volunteers or service-learning curricular activities in the program?
 - Possible solution: insert volunteering and service-learning activities into a long-term plan. These activities will intertwine with other activities in order to provide continuity to the organization.
- A major challenge of this collaborative is changing the cultural divide between the university and the community:
 - How do we make university researchers accountable to the community?
 - How do we make community organizations accountable to community residents?
 - How do we translate the principle of knowledge equivalence into actual practices?
 - How do we accomplish a true balanced reciprocity in the university-community relationship?
- As a final word, the benefits of university-community collaborations are immense, not only at the project level (e.g., projects that are participatory and based on felt-needs), but also at the societal level: valuing non-academic knowledge and building an equal playing field society.