

Learning about Collaboration: A Community-Classroom Partnership between the East Side Work Resource Hub and the Humphrey Institute

by Bruce Casselton and Melissa M. Stone

Partnerships, alliances, and collaborations are now common forms of institutional life. In particular, many public policies are being implemented through these mechanisms, involving individuals and organizations from public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit enterprises. There is a large and ever-increasing variety of such partnerships, set up both voluntarily and by mandate, designed to tackle issues such as housing, economic development, transportation, healthcare, and social welfare reform.

Coauthor Melissa Stone developed a course in 1997 at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs titled "Managing Collaborations" to introduce students to the particular challenges of managing within these multiorganizational, collaborative settings. After offering the course several times, Stone became convinced that studying collaborations solely within a classroom setting was inadequate. Students had to experience the complexities, ambiguities, and particular

tensions inherent in partnerships, alliances, and collaborations in order to understand their unique management challenges. Stone also felt that by working in teams—which are themselves collaborations—students could reflect on these experiences to enrich their understanding of the project collaboration. East Side Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) director Kris Nelson learned of Stone's desire to engage students with a community collaboration and made possible the connection to the East Side Work Resource Hub. Thus, in the spring of 1999, a team of six graduate students began to work with the partner organizations at the East Side Hub as part of their course. At the time, no one realized the impact they were to have on the life of the East Side Hub partnership.

Background

In 1997, Ramsey County—backed by advice from employers, nonprofit service providers, and Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) recipients—

initiated an innovative approach to welfare reform that addressed the dual issues of job access for welfare households and access to workers for employers facing labor shortages. Organized as the Community Employment Partnership (CEP), the approach utilized 10 work resource hubs within St. Paul and Ramsey County suburbs that created neighborhood access to services for job seekers. The McKnight Foundation, embarking on its own statewide welfare reform partnership initiative in 1997, provided funding.

Although the county did not provide a template for how each work resource hub was to be organized, the broad vision was for each hub to be a partnership of county agencies and community-based organizations to deliver employment and support services. The location of the hub on the East Side improved the access to integrated, accountable, customer-driven government and community resources for residents. The co-location included Ramsey County Community Human Services financial workers and MFIP employment service counselors from five different organizations (currently, there are approximately 1,000 MFIP cases served through the East Side Hub). Additionally, there were support services such as drop-in childcare, General Educational Development (GED) and English Language Learners (ELL) classes provided by other organizations, and a referral mechanism to other community resources such as childcare, transportation, social services, and housing and legal services. The partners equipped a resource room and developed a job bank that helped all residents locate employment. Throughout the process, there was an expectation that the collocated partners would pool resources and create a common culture to support clients as they worked toward overcoming barriers in an expedient and effective manner.

The original vision behind the creation of the work resource hubs



photo by Steve Schneider

The East Side Work Resource Hub features a job bank to help residents locate employment opportunities. Other resources include drop-in childcare, GED classes, and referral services for housing, transportation, and legal assistance.

echoed the hope for many collaborative ventures: integrated service delivery, cost effectiveness, and creative problem solving. How to achieve those aims within a rapidly changing institutional environment—and across organizations more familiar with being competitors than collaborators—posed significant challenges for all hubs, including the East Side Hub.

The East Side Hub–Humphrey Institute Partnership

As explained elsewhere in this publication, the purpose of the COPC program is to engage colleges and universities in community development by funding faculty-student work on projects planned and driven by the community. Key themes in the East Side COPC’s community plans were job development, workforce readiness, and job placement. As one of the community “organizations” involved in the East Side COPC plan, the East Side Work Resource Hub was trying to establish its own stability as a collaboration at the same time it was providing services to the community. The East Side COPC played a unique role in assisting this collaboration’s development by connecting leaders at the hub with Stone’s course on collaboration.

In the spring of 1999, when the initial group of graduate students began work with the partner organizations at the East Side Hub, the purpose behind the project was twofold: to help the East Side Hub develop strategies for greater involvement by partners, and to research “best practices” of successful collaborations in governance, staffing, communication, accountability, and membership.

A clear purpose and good intentions notwithstanding, the students experienced firsthand frustrations and ambiguities that paralleled those experienced by the East Side Hub partners themselves. Seven of the ten weeks of the project were spent trying to reach agreement between the partners and students on the specific focus of the project!

Through these negotiations, students were confronted with a variety of core questions: Who was “in charge”? When was an agreement actually final? What was the East Side Hub anyway? In the end, the students recommended a series of steps to formalize decision making and leadership within the East Side Hub collaborative—in other words, to establish the hub as an entity that could be understood by its partner organizations.

In 2000, another group of students worked with the newly hired manager of the East Side Hub, coauthor Bruce Casselton, to examine how the hub should extend its reach of programs and services to MFIP and non-MFIP clients. Gaining agreement on this project’s focus was much easier. Stone realized that negotiations needed to start earlier and involve multiple parties at the East Side Hub. Casselton, however, was the clear focal person and could guide the process with partners. In fact, students found the initial project focus to be too narrow. They proposed an ambitious additional part to the project that integrated their understanding of theory with the East Side Hub experience. The result was the introduction of a developmental chart (see Figure 1) for the hub to assess where it had been and where it could go in terms of programs and services, community empowerment, membership, and leadership in order to achieve its mission.

This past year, two more groups of students again worked with Casselton and the East Side Hub partners. The broad theme of both projects was hub sustainability. One team assessed the value of the collaboration to partners and developed ways to capture or measure that value. The other group focused on fiscal management and funding strategies for the East Side Hub. In addition to specific recommendations, the students concluded that the hub’s value could not be captured by “bottom-line” measures for partner organizations, but that other measures could indicate the kinds of collaborative advantages enjoyed by partners from their involve-

ment in the hub. If partner managers could see these other types of values, then the best future funding strategy was cost sharing by partner organizations.

Results

The flow of the projects parallels the development of the East Side Hub as a collaboration—the first project concerned important governance and structural issues, the second focused on expanding the collaboration to include more partners and more services, and the third targeted critical sustainability issues.

The first year’s team recommended that the East Side Hub develop its own mission statement, regularize meetings and committee structures, and hire a “manager” to serve as a full-time coordinator for hub activities. Prior to the student project, hub partners had discussed several of these ideas, such as hiring a full-time staff person. The report provided additional rationale and credibility to these ideas, and within six months, the East Side Hub implemented most of the recommendations.

The second year’s team recommended additional partners who could offer childcare, transportation and housing services, and, more generally, a clearer path for the hub to follow to become more fully integrated into the East Side community. Taking advantage of countywide discussions and the potential infusion of additional state and federal funds, the hub focused on developing a unique transportation plan and a peer connection program for MFIP participants. Unfortunately, funding was not secured for either project. Late in 2000, the East Side Hub focused on strengthening relationships with local employers. Casselton continues to introduce the team’s developmental chart to other partnering organizations.

The outcomes measurement group in the third-year team identified several themes that emerged from their interviews and based their recommendations for outcome measures on those themes.

Figure 1. Developmental Chart for East Side Work Resource Hub¹

Interorganizational Strategies	Networking	Coordination	Cooperation	Collaboration
Exchange information	X	X	X	X
Alter activities		X	X	X
Share resources			X	X
Enhance abilities of all partners				X

¹ Adapted from A.T. Himmelman, “On the Theory and Practice of Transformational Collaborations: From Social Service to Social Justice.” In C. Huxham, ed. *Creating Collaborative Advantage*. London: Sage Publications, 1999.

The timing of these recommendations was crucial because of a Community Employment Partnership initiative to base future financial support for the hubs on outcomes and performance measures. Thus, the students' work supported a critical process for the East Side Hub partners.

The financial stability team's work also coincided nicely with current initiatives at the time. Their recommendations focused on financial reporting system changes that were included in discussions between Casselton and the East Side Hub's fiscal agent. Additionally, the funding strategy recommendations identified several viable pathways, but also introduced the possibility of disengagement of the partners from the collaboration. At the time of this writing, the choice of funding strategies has not been made.

Several factors make it difficult to draw a causal connection between student team recommendations and actions taken by the collaborative. First, collaborations are dynamic entities, and events beyond the control of the collaboration will significantly affect it. For example, as the second student team was wrapping up its project, the hub was facing the possibility of a relocation that would have profoundly affected its services and financial condition. In fact, at the time of this writing, the East Side Hub faces the relocation issue again. Second, decision-making processes within collaborations are complex—especially for major decisions—because the self-interests of partner organizations are not always aligned, attendance at meetings may be sporadic, and partner representatives may not be authorized to make commitments for their home organizations. Thus, moving forward on major decisions, such as cost sharing, takes time and is influenced by many complicating factors.

To what extent did the student teams' recommendations facilitate the sound development of the East Side Hub? That is difficult to answer, and perhaps less important than the contribution of the students' examination in the first place. The value of these efforts to the East Side Hub was more than a list of recommendations. The profound benefit was the investigation of the health of the partnership by bright, invested individuals. The students were able to provide a service that self-examination by the participating partners could not achieve. With the first team, and each year thereafter, it

was recognized that the partners—particularly the partner managers—would share information with the students that they might not share with their partner colleagues.

More specifically, Casselton believes that exposing the East Side Hub each year to a group of new students has kept the hub honest, and has consistently injected a sense of reality about what the hub is. From his perspective, students gave the hub plenty of theoretical insight, but more important, they regularly held up a mirror to hub partners, which helped the hub focus on what was real and what was not. This articulation by the students may have prolonged the life of what is often an ephemeral and temporary organization. Several other hubs in Ramsey County have not had this regular outside examination, and have struggled to remain real. Casselton believes that by introducing the idea of disengagement, the students were pointing out the natural evolution of the collaborative process. More to the point, students helped the East Side Hub recognize that at some point "all horses die and we can resist the temptation to try to kick them back to life."

Challenges

Casselton believes that one of the challenges was in setting the tone for appreciating and valuing the examination (he would avoid calling it an intrusion) by the students. Everyone is busy and partners benefited from a gentle reminder of the long-term value to the East Side Hub of the student projects. The time spent to help the students grasp the complexities of the partnership was also a challenge, although the work of the previous year's students helped guide the immersion process for the next group. Last, trying to keep the right names with the right students during the infrequent face-to-face meetings was a personal challenge for Casselton.

According to students, one of the biggest challenges they faced was how to balance multiple and competing demands—the need to master the conceptual material on collaborations, develop a working team, and dive into the hub project as soon as possible. Their past experience with in-class projects did not prepare them for the necessary—and sometimes lengthy—negotiations with the hub, and the need to have a solid understanding of the hub as a complex entity before going forward with the



photo by Steve Schneider

Some of the biggest challenges of the community-classroom collaboration for Professor Melissa Stone were learning to reevaluate her role in the classroom and being prepared to deviate from the course outline to meet the evolving needs of her students.

specifics of the project. Furthermore, students were sometimes not aware of how staff from community organizations or public agencies perceived them, both as graduate students and as representatives of the University of Minnesota and the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. They were entering into other people's worlds as outsiders, and needed to learn to balance their tendencies toward quick critique and analysis with a deeper appreciation for how the collaboration was being experienced by those directly involved.

For Stone, one of the biggest challenges was always being prepared to deviate from the course outline to meet the emerging needs of the student teams for particular types of information—for example, understanding social welfare reform policy, designing semistructured interviews, or analyzing qualitative data. The syllabus became an evolving worksheet that has varied widely year-to-year. What this challenge implies is also a gradual change throughout the semester in the role of the faculty member from being the traditional authority figure in the classroom to being a facilitator of the total experience, including intellectual rigor, quality of the project, and team experience. As projects unfolded, the student teams needed to take more and more control over their learning, deciding what they needed and when they needed it. Stone often found students reluctant to step outside their role as receivers of information and into a role of co-creators of their educational experience.

Lessons Learned

From these project experiences, we offer the following lessons. First, working over a number of years with the same community partner deepens the experience for the partner, the faculty, and the students. Relationships between community partners and the university require time to develop clear expectations concerning what students are capable of doing and what the partner most needs and wants from the relationship. Time is also necessary for trust. Trust is the critical ingredient for any partnership, and expanding the boundaries of a partnership to include students and faculty requires no less. Clear expectations and trust then allow the rela-

tionship to move from an expert-to-client model into a partnership model based on mutual learning.

Second, faculty also need to trust that students will develop a quality product without faculty having to control the exact flow of the process. Faculty need to give students a solid conceptual grounding, leave space during class time for reflection and feedback, and pay attention to team dynamics that can derail a good project. Students *can* do the rest!

Finally, we have learned that the benefits of these partnerships between the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and the East Side Hub go beyond any list of final recommendations proposed by

student teams. Substantial benefits arise from the processes of engagement where faculty, students, and collaboration partners have to articulate, listen, and reflect on what it is they are trying to do and how. For Casselton and the partners, this was the experience of having a mirror held up to them for each of the last three years. For students and Stone, this was making theory real and knowledge useful.

Bruce Casselton has managed the East Side Work Resource Hub since November 1999.

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Project Awards

To keep our readers up-to-date about CURA projects, each issue of the *CURA Reporter* features a few capsule descriptions of new projects under way. The projects highlighted in this issue are made possible through the Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR) program at CURA. The projects described here represent only a portion of those that will receive support from CURA and its partners during the coming year.

■ **Calhoun Gateway Small Area Plan.** The West Calhoun Neighborhood Association (WCNA) and the Cedar Isles Dean Neighborhood Association (CIDNA) are collaborating on a project to determine the optimal land-use plan for the area around Calhoun Village and Calhoun Commons. A student will research potential uses for the area, incorporating feedback from neighborhood stakeholders. The project will result in a small area plan that will propose a vision, goals, and general land-use plan for the area.

■ **Community Garden Resource Guide.** The GreenSpace Partners is a community greening program in the Phillips neighborhood. The program is sponsored by the Green Institute and works directly with volunteer community members to improve inner-city livability through developing and maintaining community green space. GreenSpace Partners is currently working to increase the number of green spaces and reforest the neighborhood. The program will receive student assistance in creating a resource guide for community gardeners.

■ **Business Analysis of Lake Street Commercial Corridor.** Lake Street Partners (LSP) is a collaboration of 11 community organizations whose communities share Lake Street as a border and who have similar economic and community development visions for the Lake Street community. Lake Street Partners will receive assistance from a student to assess the potential for business growth and stability along the Lake Street commercial corridor from I-35W to Hiawatha Avenue. The project will result in an analysis that will inform LSP's workplan for the commercial corridor.

■ **East Side American Indian Task Force—Multipurpose Center and Demographic Database.** The East Side American Indian Task Force is one of four task forces working with the St. Paul East Side COPC and is coordinated by the American Indian Policy Center. The American Indian Task Force will receive student assistance to conduct a feasibility analysis of a multipurpose center planned for American Indians on St. Paul's East Side, and to update a demographic database about American Indians living in St. Paul, with special attention to residents on the East Side. These projects will identify resources for developing the multipurpose center and provide demographic information for future research projects.

■ **Marcy-Holmes Master Plan.** The Marcy-Holmes Neighborhood Revitalization Program (MHNRP) exists to serve all stakeholders in the Marcy-Holmes neighborhood. The organization is completing the first phase of its Neighborhood Revitalization Program, which focuses on housing, crime and

safety, economic development, and environmental issues in the neighborhood. In the interest of preparing the neighborhood for future growth and change, MHNRP is undertaking a neighborhood-wide master planning process. A student will assist MHNRP to conduct a literature review on neighborhood-university collaborations, with the goal of identifying projects and programs that have successfully addressed the growth of universities and the impacts on the neighborhoods in which they reside.

■ **East Side Latino Task Force—East Side Latino Resource Center.** The East Side Latino Task Force is one of four task forces working with the St. Paul East Side COPC. The task force recently conducted a needs assessment of the Latino/Latina community on the East Side that identified the need for a resource center where Latinos/Latinas could obtain access to cultural and social service resources. The Latino Task Force will receive student assistance to develop a plan for the operation and funding of a Latino Resource Center on the East Side. The project will result in a report that will identify both a strategy and resources for developing the center.

■ **Midtown Greenway Zoning Overlay Research.** The Midtown Greenway Coalition is a grassroots group representing residents and businesses from the 14 neighborhoods through which the Midtown Greenway will pass. The Midtown Greenway is a planned nonstop bicycle highway within a greenway along the 29th Street rail corridor in south Minneapolis that will connect the Minneapolis Chain of Lakes with the