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California Community Topics, an occasional publication series of the California Communities Program (CCP), provides useful information to citizens and local leaders about important issues of community governance, leadership, and economic development. The CCP is a statewide unit of the University of California's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, with applied research and outreach responsibilities. It is housed by the Department of Human and Community Development, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, at UC Davis. David Campbell is director of the CCP. He may be reached at (530) 754-4328; FAX 752-5855; E-Mail dave.c.campbell@ucdavis.edu.

Realizing the “Engaged University”: Woodlake Pride and the Challenge of Developing Youth into Community Leaders

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In recent years, many voices have called on land grant universities and the Cooperative Extension system to reclaim their historic civic mission as “vital agents and architects of a flourishing democracy” (quote from the “Presidents’ Fourth of July Declaration of the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education” issued by Campus Compact and the distinguished Presidents’ Leadership Colloquium Committee). The Kellogg Presidents’ Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities calls for “the engaged institution...more sympathetically and productively involved with their communities.”

A key theme in these calls is the idea of reciprocal partnerships in which universities not only share their knowledge and resources with the community, but also use knowledge from the community to improve institutional research and learning. At issue is whether these university-community partnerships will be tilted primarily toward corporate, private, or special interests, or instead serve a broader public interest, including underrepresented communities.

To realize the engaged university, we might usefully begin by learning from existing examples of successful university-community partnerships. In this brief, we consider the case of Woodlake Pride, a response by a Cooperative Extension Farm Advisor to perceived community needs, particularly the challenge of youth leadership development. No single case can serve as a definitive model of institutional engagement. Our purpose in this brief is simply to highlight the positive community development dynamics that occur when university personnel wed their expertise to a keen sense of civic mission.

Community Context

Woodlake is a community of 7,500, set in the edge of the Sierra foothills in eastern Tulare County. Agriculture is the traditional economic base. As in the rest of California, major demographic shifts are underway in this part of California’s southern San Joaquin Valley. In many communities, Latinos are now in the majority. Youth in Latino families are a key community resource, since they are the valley’s future decision-makers. Their choices on water and land use issues will determine the fate of agriculture as the region grows in population. Many Latino youth are skeptical of agriculture, especially those whose parent’s are farmworkers. Along with the traditional difficulties of adolescents, a large number of these young people are troubled by the intense struggles associated with poverty and cultural assimilation.

Currently, most programs that seek to serve these youth are reactive in nature, intervening only after problems develop. This includes most of those by police, state and federal government programs targeting at-risk youth, and even efforts by private foundations or philanthropists. An alternative strategy is needed, one which embraces these youth and their families as vital community resources and provides them with forward looking opportunities, support and resources. This “asset-based” or “preventative” approach to community development has obvious appeal. The idea is to find ways to encourage and reward exemplary families, and to engage youth and their parents in community projects that achieve visible and useful results.

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Woodlake Pride

Woodlake Pride is a 7-year old, grass roots community improvement organization developed by Tulare County UCCE Farm Advisor Manuel Jimenez. It began as a simple realization about community responsibility: “At home you pick up your trash and you put it away. Well, the community is your home too. Yet many small communities are dirty places that aren’t much to look at.” Jimenez started asking people: “Is Woodlake pretty? What would you do to change it?”

Over time, the questions planted the seeds for a variety of increasingly visible and sophisticated community development and beautification projects, including:

- Development of a 2 acre vegetable garden where youth learn responsibility to themselves and to the community;
- A community work day where youth volunteers and parents planted 40,000 flowers along two city blocks and surrounding sites;
- Establishing youth recreation programs run by older teenagers;
- Working with the local water company on a storage pond; and the city of Woodlake and Chamber of Commerce on a tree grant;
- Being selected by Bank of America to design a new county park along a one-mile stretch of lakefront property, including an agricultural and botanical garden with tree cultivars and shrubs.

With leadership provided by Jimenez and his wife, Woodlake Pride has accomplished these tasks of increasing scale and complexity as an all-volunteer organization, rather than as a non-profit with paid staff. Woodlake Pride partners with existing community organizations, including service clubs, scouts, FFA, schools, etc. Proteus, Inc., a non-profit with long-standing ties to the farmworker community, has helped out by providing liability insurance. In general, however, the organization functions primarily as a catalyst for self-help projects that bring together diverse sectors of the community, including farmworkers, farmers, and those who live in Woodlake but commute to work elsewhere.

Jimenez notes: “It’s important that those of us in farming don’t just talk to ourselves. We attempt to get diverse sectors working and talking together; literally creating “common ground” by cultivating gardens, etc. Kids especially need exposure to people not like themselves. Too many funded programs target a specific segment of the community. But it doesn’t do kids much good just to be around other at-risk kids. So instead of looking for a big sugar daddy to fund everything, we work to get as many people as possible to invest something of their own, so they feel ownership: ‘See that garden....I planted it. See that tree, I planted that.’ ”

To the extent possible, Woodlake Pride tries to get the adults involved with the kids. This often requires educating parents about

the nature of volunteering, particularly Mexican immigrants with little tradition of volunteerism. “It doesn’t always work, and sometimes we get a mix of kids that is particularly hard to work with, but usually things have worked out,” says Jimenez.

Woodlake Pride involves whites and Latinos on an equal footing, with neither group dominating. Everybody contributes. At meetings professionals and blue collar workers talk as equals because their common denominator is pride in the community where they live and where their kids are growing up. Jimenez believes the foundation laid by Woodlake Pride may advance broader community goals, such as interesting youth in pursuing higher education, involving more adults in community service, and joining forces locally to solve political controversies. As Jimenez concludes: “The worst we can end up with is a more beautiful community, even if we don’t develop youth and get adults working together. But we are beginning to see those things happen also.”

Significance

Woodlake Pride is an example of what Harry Boyte, in a book called “Building America,” has called “public work”—linking citizen engagement to concrete projects done by public groups with visible results. It helps build a democracy based not simply on citizen deliberation but also on public achievement. For Jimenez, Woodlake Pride represented a way to wed his technical expertise as a Farm Advisor, to his deep understanding and commitment to the local community. The result, which grows out of his role with Cooperative Extension but transcends a narrow definition of that role, is a wonderful example of what can be done when a community development vision accompanies university work.

The next step is to ask: “How might the university look different if it took seriously its civic mission in places like Woodlake, and towards the youth of the Central Valley’s emerging Latino majority?”

Further Reading

Boyte, Harry C. and Kari, Nancy N. 1996. *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Campus Compact and the Presidents’ Leadership Colloquium Committee. July 15, 1999. *Presidents’ Fourth of July Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education*. <http://www.compact.org/resources/plc-main.html>

Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities. February 1999. *Returning to our Roots: The Engaged Institution*. <http://www.nasulgc.org/Kellogg/engage.pdf>