

Case Study: The Politics of University-Community Partnerships¹

The state legislature provides annual funding for the Institute for Policy Research (IPR), a policy research center located at City University, part of the public university system. City University is located in the city of Utopia, population 1 million. (For additional information, see Fact Sheet, attached.)

Last year, the state legislature asked IPR to study the lives of children of incarcerated parents, statewide but with a particular focus on Utopia. IPR's director has a personal interest in this topic, so he opted to serve as the primary researcher. The two graduate assistants on staff helped him conduct the study.

Now the state legislature has approached IPR with a proposal: the legislature will give IPR a pool of money to administer competitive grants for positive interventions for at-risk youth whose parent(s) have been incarcerated. The grant recipients can be civic, nonprofit organizations, government offices, and schools, but not individuals. The legislature is offering additional funding to IPR for assessment of these interventions. The legislature has also asked IPR to provide them with a list of policy interventions that can be made at the state level. The state legislator most interested in this work is anxious to get a bill proposed and passed before the end of this legislative session.

IPR's director is concerned that his study - and the follow-up work - did not adequately incorporate the views of people who are actually living the problem. The graduate assistants interviewed three care providers, three school teachers, three law enforcement officers, three psychologists, etc., but only as a way to confirm the conclusions already made in an earlier draft of the report.

He has convened an advisory group to make recommendations on how to proceed. The advisory group is composed of six people:

- ❖ The IPR director (convener and facilitator)
- ❖ The state legislator who wants to craft and propose a bill
- ❖ A parent whose spouse is incarcerated and whose child attends a Utopia public school
- ❖ A middle school teacher who works at a public school in Utopia
- ❖ The IPR office administrator
- ❖ A representative of the state Department of Youth Services

This is the third time the group has met, and you are worried because the group seems stuck. You suspect that the power dynamics in the group are the problem. What do you do?

[By the way, the university's provost, to whom IPR reports, has decided to sit in on the meeting, not to participate but to observe and learn more about what the institute does.]

Each of you will take on the role of one of the six people sitting at the table. (No one will be the provost, but she is in the room.) As you participate in this meeting, consider:

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1. What do you see and hear that indicates to you that there are power dynamics compromising the group's effectiveness?
2. How do the power dynamics affect your own interactions with the group?
3. What could you do to change the power dynamics? What might you have done in advance?

These questions will be discussed in the larger group:

4. What does it really mean for university centers/representatives to be "attentive" to the dynamics of partnerships with communities?
5. How do universities and their community partners respect the range of assets that each contributes to any partnership?

All the while, please be considering this larger question:

6. How do we move from exemplary practices of any particular partnership to broader shifts in democratic culture?

Who are you? Here are the roles for this exercise:

The IPR director (convener and facilitator): 42 years old, white, male, PhD in political science, resident of Utopia. Has been at the university for three years, having been hired to run the institute. Seems to get along well with the provost and has developed some good relationships with legislators, other public officials, and civic leaders in the area. Is the author of several well-respected studies and two books.

The state legislator who wants to craft and propose a bill: 67 years old, African American, well-respected and dedicated civil servant. Represents Utopia district. Has been uncontested for his legislative position for over the past three elections. Plans to retire after this term has expired.

A parent whose spouse is incarcerated and whose child attends a Utopia public school: 28 years old, female, multiracial, born and raised in Utopia, attended local schools, attended City University. She currently works at a local insurance agency as an actuary and has been promoted three times since starting the job four years ago. Child is 8 years old, male. She and her husband are getting a divorce.

A middle school teacher who works at a public school in Utopia: 50 years old, male, white, lives in a local suburb, has been teaching in this district for 8 years.

The IPR office administrator: 36 years old, Latina, English is her second language. Received her GED and now takes courses at City. She lives in Utopia, is married, and has two children in the public school district. Her family relies on her for her health insurance and other benefits, and she gets free tuition at the university.

A representative of the state Department of Youth Services: 50 years old, African American, female, is associate director of the state agency. She's been in that position for 15 years. She's thinking of running for the soon-to-be vacant legislative seat from Utopia.

Fact Sheet for Utopia, the state, City University, and IPR

About IPR

- ❖ IPR consists of a director, a half-time associate director, two graduate research assistants, and administrative support.
- ❖ The director and one of the research assistants are white men. The associate director is a white woman. The other research assistant is an Asian American man. The office administrator is Latina.
- ❖ The office administrator and the director live in Utopia. The others live outside the city limits.
- ❖ The legislature funds 70 percent of IPR's annual operating costs as well as research on specific policy questions. City University supports the remaining 30 percent of IPR's expenses. If needed, IPR can approach the legislature for additional funding to employ more researchers on an initiative.
- ❖ IPR is structurally located in the office of academic affairs; the director reports to the provost.

About this state

- ❖ Utopia is located in a state that enjoys a reputation for being both affluent and beautiful.
- ❖ The state enjoys the nation's *highest* per capita income rate nationally.
- ❖ The three urban areas in this state are annually identified as among the five *poorest* cities in the United States.
- ❖ The three urban areas are also home to 84 percent of the state's minority population.
- ❖ Statewide, when "household assets" are measured, white households statewide have average assets that exceed \$179,000, compared to just \$7,000 for minority households.
- ❖ Statewide, 89 percent of the students who are eligible for free or reduced price lunches are students of color.
- ❖ Students who are eligible for free or reduced price lunches consistently perform at a fraction of the achievement level of their more affluent peers; about 20 percent of the supported students pass the 10th grade state mastery test, compared to around 80 percent for those who need no financial support for meals.
- ❖ The state legislator who is serving on this advisory committee is an African American from Utopia; he's been in the legislature for more than 20 years.

About Utopia

- ❖ Utopia has the second highest adult and childhood poverty rate among cities in the United States with populations over 100,000.
- ❖ In 2007, over 41 percent of the children living in Utopia lived below the poverty level, compared to a statewide average of 8 percent. Utopia's poverty is manifested by staggering deficiencies and challenges by any measurement, including in record-breaking rates of high school dropouts, crime, infant mortality, eligibility for school lunch programs, drug and alcohol abuse, and unemployment. (There's no data on current, post-recession poverty levels, but the predications are that the gaps have widened.)

- ❖ 84 percent of the children under age 18 in Utopia are of color.

About City University

- ❖ City University's student population is 8,000; about 12 percent are students of color. Statewide, the population is 3.5 million. 70 percent of the state's residents are white.
- ❖ Of the 350 faculty members, 5 percent are African American; 3 percent are Hispanic, and 6 percent are Asian American. Only a few of faculty of color are tenured.
- ❖ City University's president is an African American male. The seven other administrators who make up senior staff are white. Four are men; three are women. All senior administrators have advanced degrees, a PhD, JD, or MBA. The provost is a white female.

About Incarceration

- ❖ More than one in every 100 adults in America are in jail or prison.
- ❖ On any given day, over 1.5 million children in this country – approximately 2 percent of minor children – have a parent serving a sentence in a state or federal prison.
- ❖ There is a disparate impact on families of color, with African American children nine times more likely and Hispanic children three times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison.
- ❖ 75 percent of incarcerated women are mothers.
- ❖ 63 percent of federal prisoners and 55 percent of state prisoners are parents of children under age 18.