Long-Term Collaboration: Building Relationships and Achieving Results in the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative

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About the Authors

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Introduction
Much has been written in the past few years about the need for universities to become involved in partnerships with other organizations to address societal problems more directly. Many of the articles and conference presentations calling for this new involvement also identify the obstacles and barriers to pursuing this course successfully (see, for instance, the Winter 1996 issue of this journal). In this article we offer an analysis of a successful cross-sector collaboration and seek to identify the critical factors in creating success. Lest this sounds self-satisfied and presumptuous, let us add that the main reason we feel able to do this is that we have experienced plenty of failures as well, and thus can draw on that history in trying to isolate, in a qualitative manner, the key elements that have contributed to the partnership described here.

The collaboration between The Resurrection Project and the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) is taking place in the context of the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative, which in turn is part of the university's Great Cities program. The Great Cities program expresses the university's commitment to direct its teaching, research, and service programs to address urban issues in the Chicago metropolitan area. Great Cities refers to the mission of the university as a whole, and as such encompasses work done by hundreds of faculty and university departments. In addition, it includes several specific new initiatives. One of these is the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative, a partnership started in 1994 between UIC and organizations adjoining the university, especially Pilsen and the Near West Side. Pilsen, just south of the UIC campus, is home to a largely Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant community of almost 50,000 people. The Near West Side is a largely African-American community of about 15,000 people, with a high percentage living in public housing developments.

The purpose of the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI) is to strengthen the quality of life in these neighborhoods through collaborative programs between university faculty, community organizations, local government, and corporations. More specifically, UICNI has four objectives or measures of success: 1) the creation of a partnership between the university and community agencies; 2) the development of organizational capacity in the community to address future issues; 3) institutional changes at UIC that facilitate community-oriented projects; and 4) measurable improvements in the two neighborhoods in terms of health, education, economic development, housing conditions, safety, etc.

At present, UICNI consists of about 40 distinct projects, involving all colleges at UIC and several dozen community agencies and schools. Funding is provided by UIC, major grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development through the Community Outreach Partnership Center and the Joint Community Development programs, and a wide range of other sources. In terms of dollar volume and level of effort, the projects between UIC and The Resurrection Project

constitute approximately 25% of the total UICNI project. UICNI is overseen by a Planning Committee, whose membership consists equally of community and UIC representatives, and is managed by UIC staff.

The Resurrection Project (TRP) was established in 1990 by a coalition of socially-active Pilsen churches. The Resurrection Project is structured to be a comprehensive, community-based development corporation with a broad mission of building a healthy community in Pilsen. This goal is achieved by combining traditional organizing and development strategies. Through community-led initiatives, TRP has worked to restore residents' confidence and engaged them in reversing the physical and social decline of their community.

Prior to the creation of the UICNI, TRP already had a successful track record in creating affordable housing for low-income families, undertaking large-scale development projects, and mobilizing community residents. Because of its successes and the complexity of problems faced by the community, TRP staff and organizational resources were regularly stretched to their limits. TRP recognized the initiation of the UICNI as an opportunity to create a long-term relationship with a new partner, which offered resources and technical expertise valuable to community renewal. From the beginning, TRP leaders made clear their expectation that this not be a traditional, research-based relationship, but a partnership to implement programs and projects which address the needs of Pilsen families.

The initial investment of time in frank and open dialogue between TRP and UIC representatives established clear expectations, which would be the basis for future collaboration between the two organizations. The authors of this paper each participated in those early conversations. Wim Wiewel was then the Special Assistant to the Chancellor responsible for planning and implementation of the Great Cities program at UIC. Ismael Guerrero, Associate Director of The Resurrection Project, was then its Economic Development Director. Both also served on the Planning Committee of the UICNI, responsible for ensuring that this initiative met the needs of community organizations from two unique neighborhoods as well as the university overall.

What is Success?

What makes us feel that the partnership between UIC and TRP is successful? There are three characteristics, derived from the UICNI evaluation criteria that especially come to mind. We will first describe these, and then proceed to analyze what causal factors appear to have contributed most to this successful result.

The characteristics that indicate success include: (1) the fact that projects with tangible results are being implemented; (2) the mutual respect and understanding of each other's self-interests that pervade the contacts between the organizations; and (3) the clear benefits that are accruing to each organization.

Tangible Results

Both the university and TRP recognized the urgency of community revitalization and the lack of resources among community development corporations. The urgency of community revitalization translates into a need to create change in as short a time frame as possible. The university recognizes and respects the fact that community organizations are already engaged in efforts to create positive change in their communities. To overcome early skepticism and suspicion, the

university had to demonstrate that it could be a valuable partner by directly assisting the community organization with its current needs. Likewise, the community organization had to be prepared to utilize the services and resources made available by the university and to direct the effort in a productive and efficient manner. Working on real projects, which lead to tangible results with positive outcomes, is what demonstrates the value of the partnership to each partner. At the same time, actual collaboration (rather than just talking about it) strengthens individual relationships, establishes clear lines of communication between the organizations, and engenders the trust, which is the basis for ongoing collaborations.

For UIC and TRP, the Pilsen Rent Study is an example of this type of tangible, results-based relationship. The Pilsen Rent Study was initiated by TRP because it needed to document existing rental conditions in Pilsen in order to advance its case for subsidized housing with the City of Chicago's Department of Housing. UIC agreed to direct the study and conduct the analysis, and provided funding for the interviewers. TRP played a major role in establishing the goals and identifying the areas to be surveyed, and hired community residents to do the interviews. This was done to ensure that the final product would serve TRP's strategic needs. TRP, for its part, worked cooperatively with UIC staff to develop and prepare the survey, assisted in the training and orientation of interviewers, and provided timely and constructive feedback during the analysis phase. The project was completed in time for TRP to use the Pilsen Rent Study in its justification of rent levels for a low-income housing tax credit project.

Mutual Respect
Successful collaborations also require the mutual respect and understanding of each partner's self-interests. The open and honest dialogue which is undertaken at the outset should lead to all partners being able to state their interests in the partnership, their expectations of the other partner's role, and clarity of the other partner's interests. These interests and expectations should form the basis for the overall relationship as well as for any specific projects.

In creating UICNI, the university took the initiative in engaging the community in a dialogue on expectations and interests. University staff interviewed a cross-section of neighborhood representatives from the two targeted communities. Staff then incorporated the community's desires directly into the plans for the UICNI and created a governance structure that allowed maximize direct participation of community leaders.

The Guadalupano Cultural Institute is an example of the importance of mutual respect and understanding. The Resurrection Project had always been clear and forthright about two important self-interests: one, that it was looking for opportunities to expand its organizational capacity, and two, that it expected to advance its own community initiatives through the UICNI. Previous to the UICNI, TRP was working to create a new community cultural center for Pilsen families. The staff of UICNI was familiar with the project and identified it as a potential collaboration project. TRP was introduced to faculty at UIC's School of Art and Design. Through an exploration of each other's programs, expertise and goals, TRP and the School of Art and Design developed a partnership to develop educational art programming which would be offered at the Guadalupano Cultural Institute. TRP was provided with the financial resources to add a program director to its staff and to make necessary building improvements to the facility through a grant from HUD's Joint Community Development program. The School of Art and Design lent its expertise in art education by developing and staffing the art classes and creating opportunities for internships for several of its graduate students.   By having enough confidence

in each other to relinquish some control over the resources and development of the project, both partners were able to advance their program agendas.

Mutual Benefit
Finally, as can be inferred from the examples of the rent study and the cultural center, tangible results and mutual respect must be accompanied by clear mutual benefits. Often, this can be the most challenging requisite for the community partner. The community partner must recognize that the university is an academic institution with economic and organizational requirements. Even though it may seem rich beyond measure compared to a community organization, the university is not a grant-making foundation or a pro-bono consultant. Just as advancing projects, securing new resources, and tapping into technical expertise are of prime concern to CDCs, high visibility projects, opportunities for student learning and faculty research, and projects which meet its own institutional needs must be created if a long-term commitment from the university is expected.

The proposed development of a new family health clinic by TRP for UIC's Medical Center is an example of creating collaborations, which are mutually beneficial. The university had assisted TRP with an earlier effort initiated by the community to reform the poor services provided at a public health clinic in Pilsen. Despite repeated negotiations and proposals to the city, little progress was made. At the same time, the UIC Hospital was facing new competitive pressures as a result of health care reform. A movement toward managed-care arrangements meant that the university would be at a disadvantage without more community-based clinics to create a large primary care patient population from which to draw tertiary care patients for its hospital.

Medical Center staff crafted a proposal to have TRP act as developers of a new community health center with UIC as the service provider. TRP will leverage its expertise in real estate development to create a new facility which serves the needs of Pilsen, and UIC will have a new site in the community to position it to meet the competitive requirements of new managed-care programs. While the details of this specific partnership are still being negotiated, the project has a strong likelihood for success, due in large part to the strength of the relationship between UIC and TRP. If the project does not move forward for some reason, it will likely be a mutual decision, and both partners will continue to explore future collaborations. (An example of such a decision occurred in 1996, when a faculty member from UIC's School of Public Health asked for TRP's collaboration in starting a major violence prevention initiative in Pilsen. Although the funding had already been secured, and many agencies were interested in collaborating, TRP decided this new effort would distract the organization from its priorities, and it declined to take a lead role in collaborating).

What Made Success Happen
The characteristics described above are both indicators of success, as well as self-sustaining factors contributing to further success. Four additional factors stand out as major contributors to the creation, development, and growth of this collaboration. These are (1) the long-term, large-scale, institutional commitment by UIC; (2) the fact that the initial projects selected for collaboration were already underway; (3) the collaborative and cooperative attitude of TRP compared to other community organizations; and (4) the existence of multiple linkages between UIC and TRP and the synergy that was created quickly. The first two of these factors were also present in other partnerships that UIC started at the same time. But without the same collaborative and cooperative approach on the side of the community organization, multiple

linkages (which did not pre-exist) did not develop, and synergy was not created. As is so often the case, once the synergy stage is reached, a positive feedback starts operating that allows the partnership to grow and expand, and withstand minor setbacks.

Institutional Commitment
The UICNI was conceived by the Great Cities Advisory Committee, and the Office of the Special Assistant to the Chancellor was charged with its implementation. Thus, from the beginning it was a Chancellor-level project, able to draw on resources throughout the institution. Because of UIC's experience with previous projects, it was broadly recognized that the development of partnerships takes time and that short-term projects often create antagonism in the community. Thus, UIC made a ten-year commitment, although initially it was unclear what level of resources would actually be available. The Special Assistant's Office allocated resources starting in the fall of 1993 to conduct a needs and strengths analysis, and because of its central location was able to bring faculty from throughout UIC to the table to discuss potential projects with community partners. Additional staff was assigned when the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development issued a Request for Proposal for the Community Outreach Partnership Center program in order to write the proposal. The proposal was ranked first in the nation (out of approximately 100), in large part because of the institutional commitment that was evident. Three aspects were cited in particular: the status of the UICNI as part of the Great Cities program; its organizational location in the Chancellor's office; and the very high cost-sharing offered by UIC. The latter was funded out of the allocation in July, 1994, of $800,000 in permanent funding by the state legislature to the Great Cities program. Along with a $600,000 allocation the next year, this made it possible to set aside approximately $250,000 per year in state funds for the UICNI (the other new state funds were used for such new programs as a Faculty Seed Fund, the Great Cities Institute, and the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs). This enabled UIC to use all of the federal grant funds for direct programmatic activities, rather than having to use part of it for internal management and administration. Furthermore, some of the state funds were used to assist UIC units that were unable to put up any matching funds themselves, as well as to provide direct funding to some of the community partners when initial cost estimates proved too low.

The location of the UICNI in the Chancellor's office was also attractive for external partners because it created the opportunity for access to other resources. For instance, Chief Executive Officers of both Montgomery Wards and First National Bank of Chicago served on the Chancellor's Corporate Advisory Board, which had played the lead role in conceptualizing the Great Cities idea. They subsequently made commitments, along with other companies, to assist UICNI with job opportunities, loan guarantees, and other forms of assistance.

Thus, the high level commitment, with ample resources for the long term made it very worthwhile for both faculty and community partners to spend time developing possible projects and seek participation in the UICNI. The Resurrection Project has a fairly systematic and careful approach to selecting projects and partners. Since TRP is considered a successful organization, and has received several forms of recognition, it is not very difficult for the organization to find potential partners; the issue is how best to allocate its own limited staff resources. Among the factors in its decision to collaborate with UIC were the level of resources that appeared to be available and the centrality of the UICNI in the university's priorities.

Ongoing Projects

The UICNI started with a survey of key community informants, asking them about their experiences with UIC in the past, their perception of projects that were needed, and their interest in participating in a partnership. Based on this, meetings were convened between small groups of faculty and community representatives to discuss possible projects. UIC staff sought to identify ongoing projects both within UIC and in the community, as well as new needs that could be matched with faculty interests. In the case of TRP, the organizations chronic staff shortage was partially addressed by providing a graduate research assistant. The other TRP project included was the analysis of rent levels in Pilsen, described above. UICNI staff also became involved in the discussions between TRP and the UIC Medical Center and offered support for any surveys or other analyses that might be needed. Because of this, the subsequent alternative plan was developed which entailed the establishment of a new, separate UIC family health clinic, funded in part from the second HUD grant. This grant also provided funding for staffing of the new community cultural center that TRP had been developing for some time. Finally, the grant piggy-backed onto an existing program between TRP and the Neighborhood Housing Service, Inc. which provided grants and low-interest loans for home repair. New money was made available to expand the level of funding and for staffing, which allowed TRP to take over the management and administration of the program from Neighborhood Housing Services.

Thus, all of the activities between UIC and TRP were part of already existing projects or directly arose out of priorities that TRP had. This was very different from the traditional model of a faculty member with a research project or experimental program seeking the cooperation of a community agency. At the same time, the projects met UIC's needs as well. Several graduate urban planning students gained useful applied work experience in a high quality organization. The Pilsen Rent Study provides important data in a continuing debate about the gentrifying influence of UIC's continued growth on the neighborhood. The new medical center will meet a longstanding need for UIC to gain patients in a competitive health care environment. And the funding for the community cultural center has provided several funded opportunities for work by faculty and students from the School of Art and Design, a notoriously underfunded department.

Collaborative Attitude

As is true for so many universities, UIC's relationship with the surrounding community is often fraught with tension. Significant urban renewal took place to enable the construction of the university in the mid-1960's, displacing many residents. During 1993 and 1994, exactly while the UICNI was being developed, the university acquired an additional 40 acres of land, which by that time was mostly vacant, but still housed a weekly flea market and had in the past housed many more businesses and residents. Indeed, some community activists argued that the UICNI and the whole Great Cities program were merely smokescreens for UIC's land acquisition and development schemes. There are also frequent rumors about UIC's interest in rehabilitation of the public housing development located only a few blocks away from the campus. Furthermore, UIC's admissions standards and ability to retain and graduate minority students, as well as its minority hiring and purchasing practices, have over the decades provided an attractive target for community activists and minority politicians--sometimes deservedly so, sometimes inappropriately and unreasonably.

During the needs assessment conducted for the UICNI, many interviewees expressed appreciation for individual faculty and students who had done projects with the community, while expressing distrust of the institution as a whole.

Within this context, UIC's approach to potential community partners had to be very careful. The UICNI staff had significant experience in working with community agencies, and thus was able to build on previous experiences and personal relationships. Particularly in Pilsen, UIC staff were very knowledgeable about the politics and attitudes of the many community agencies present, and initiated discussions primarily with the half dozen or so organizations that had in the past maintained joint projects of some type with UIC.

Lest this sound too blatantly political, we should also point out that one of the other main partner organizations in Pilsen, the Eighteenth Street Development Corporation (ESDC), was paying an organizer to mount the opposition to UIC's land purchase while discussions were going on about ESDC's participation in the HUD grant. UIC and ESDC had often cooperated in the past, and ESDC's executive director was a recent graduate of UIC's planning program. Although both UIC and ESDC staff received some pressure from their respective constituencies to break off talks, the staff felt that institutional disagreement in one area did not preclude cooperation in another. Indeed, several of the UIC staff involved in the discussions did not agree with the university's policy and were sympathetic to ESDC's stance.

Unlike some other community organizations, TRP's strategy is not one of opposition, but of cooperation and collaboration. Itself a collaboration among many community churches, TRP works closely with city agencies, corporations, and other mainstream institutions. Its staff is well-educated and understands many of the interests and constraints of university faculty and students. Thus, TRP is an easy partner for UIC to work with. This was perhaps clearest in the joint effort to improve the operations of the city-run health center by arranging for UIC to start managing the center. UIC knew it needed TRP's support in the community, as well as its ability to bring pressure on the city government. TRP needed UIC's capacity to actually run the center. While the deal fell through because of the city's unwillingness, it created a partnership that quickly led to the identification of the alternative opportunity in the form of the establishment of a family health center.

Multiple Linkages and Synergy
The development of multiple projects and multiple points of contact increases the chances of success and also enables the partnership to withstand slowdowns or setbacks on particular projects. For instance, TRP's relations with the Medical Center had come about entirely separately from those with the UICNI staff. It would have been impossible to include that project in the initial HUD grant, because it would have directed disproportionate resources to TRP, and other organizations would have objected. However, once the specific need for funding for a new clinic building became clear, its fit with the goals of the second HUD grant was so obvious that inclusion became possible. Similarly, a faculty member from the School of Art and Design established an independent relationship with TRP, which then became the basis for inclusion of the cultural center in the UICNI. At least three staff members at TRP maintain independent relations with UIC faculty and staff, making it possible to advance on several projects at once.

The relations between UIC and TRP have now reached a stage where new projects and joint activities are generated continuously among the individuals involved. For instance, as a result of the discussions about housing issues that were part of the initial project, the main financial analyst of TRP offered to co-teach a course in UIC's planning program on housing finance. When UIC was asked by a foundation to organize a Chicago delegation to attend the United

Nations Habitat II conference in Istanbul, TRP staff were among the logical invitees. TRP regularly hosts tours and site visits of visitors to UIC who are exploring the nature of university-community partnerships; and this very article is further evidence of the growing collaboration. Clearly, both organizations need successes, and with every joint activity that works smoothly, there are further incentives to seek out this particular partner for the next activity.

Conclusions

This analysis of indicators and causes of success shows that many factors contribute to the development of a productive partnership. Most of these are clearly under the control of the partners themselves, but not all of them are, certainly not in the short run. For instance, the absence of previous relationships or joint projects, limited resources, or one-sided benefits will make it unlikely that a collaboration will work. In particular, the university's expertise and resources alone will not be sufficient to make a project work. Thus, it is important to choose strategically when contemplating new alliances. On the other hand, once a partnership is established and achieves some results, powerful reinforcing effects begin to take place that continually enhances the relationship.

We do not believe that total clarity about project objectives is a necessary prerequisite for success. As long as partners can see some benefits, they may be willing to proceed. Furthermore, as trust develops, partners will be more willing to assume that over the long term benefits will accrue to both sides. In a continuing partnership, new projects and objectives will regularly emerge; trying to specify these too early and precisely may limit creativity and the ability to take advantage of strategic opportunities.

The creation of a working partnership takes a long time and requires large investments of funds, staff, and energy. Therefore, it makes sense to use such partnerships, once created, for multiple and continuing purposes, rather than conceiving them as narrowly focussed strategic alliances that achieve one specified objective and then are abandoned. Even the occasional loss of focus, or occasional compromise on activities, will be far less costly than the price of starting all over with a new partner.

Finally, we believe there is a need for more research and writing on the topic discussed here. Too often the development of partnerships is seen as an afterthought, or simply a minor step on the way to some larger goal. For all institutions and organizations, partnerships are a potentially very rewarding way of achieving their goals. There is an opportunity for universities to create a niche and enhance their usefulness by taking the topic of partnership development itself as one worthy of research and teaching. Obviously, one can only do so by being engaged in partnerships, experimenting with them, and reflecting on the experiences.