

# Individual Roles and Approaches to Public Engagement in a Community-University Partnership in a Rural California Town

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*This case study examines the roles that a professor, graduate student, consultant, and community education specialist at a public university in California have played in a partnership with an elementary school and a community-based organization in a nearby rural town. The case reveals that individuals' roles and approaches to public engagement evolve over time and differ markedly. Moreover, the actions of university personnel espousing community-driven partnerships may unconsciously reflect hierarchical power relations. The article discusses implications for community-university partnerships, especially in rural areas. University personnel should decide who is responsible for taking initiative in establishing the partnership and setting the partnership agenda, consider how to exercise power in supportive and directive ways, and coordinate their activities. Coordination among personnel and academic departments is especially important in rural communities, where school staff and community leaders and residents may become overwhelmed with multiple requests to participate in projects and research.*

Increasingly, scholars and citizens have called higher education institutions to serve the public by connecting research, teaching, and service to local problems (Boyer, 1990; Boyte & Kari, 2000; Ehrlich & Hollander, 1999; Kellogg, 1999; Peters, Jordan, Alter, & Bridger, 2003; Ramaley, 2002). Many public and private universities have responded to the "call to engagement" (Kellogg, 1999) by creating formal and informal partnerships with schools and community-based organizations (CBOs) in order to revitalize urban or rural areas (Richardson, 2000; Weinberg, 1999).<sup>1</sup> The partnership literature, consisting primarily of case studies examining universities' institutional roles and approaches to public engagement (e.g., Schumaker & Woods, 2001), often portrays "the university" and "the community" as homogeneous entities, thereby obscuring the variations, tensions, and contradictions within a given partnership. The literature has overlooked the multiple, divergent roles that university

personnel (i.e., faculty, students, staff, administrators, and other employees) play as they enact partnerships, the ways they exercise power vis-à-vis community partners, and the distinctive dynamics of community-university partnerships in small towns and rural areas. This article addresses these gaps by identifying the varied roles four university personnel have played in a school-university partnership in a small, rural California town.

Harkavey and Wiewel (1995), leading scholars of community-university partnerships, have identified the need "for systematic study of the relations of faculty and other members of the university with external constituencies" (p. 112). Delineating the variations in how personnel interact with community partners (i.e., their approach to public engagement) is important for several reasons. First, according to the Fannie Mae Foundation's study of community-university partnerships, "departments differ in their approaches, priorities, and sensitivity to the local community. Even within one department, faculty members differ, sometimes dramatically, in their approach to (and reception by) community organizations" (Abt Associates, 2001, p. 62). This suggests the need to identify how and why such differences matter. Second, the roles university personnel adopt (e.g., expert, consultant,

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<sup>1</sup>I use "universities" to refer to postsecondary educational institutions including 2- and 4-year colleges.

collaborator, trainer) structure power relations with community partners, for example, by encouraging deference or assertiveness, which in turn shapes the ability of community partners to influence the partnership agenda. Third, when a partnership is more personal than institutional, that is, based on personal ties rather than a formal structure, university personnel come to represent “the university” to their respective community contacts. Based on their experiences of trust, manipulation, regard, or disrespect, local residents form divergent opinions of the university as an institution and become more or less receptive to working with other university personnel (see Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2003, pp. 9-10). Thus, the way each university representative interacts with her community contacts configures the nature of the partnership and possibilities for future action.

An examination of individuals’ roles in partnerships is especially warranted in small towns and rural areas, where a small population, tight social networks, and a small number of schools, organizations, and community leaders magnify the impact of university personnel’s actions. Residents and university personnel often interact in multiple social settings (e.g., school board meeting, church, children’s activities), creating multistranded, long-lasting networks. Such interactions may engender trust, cooperation, skepticism, or antipathy. In addition, if personnel do not coordinate their research and outreach efforts, they may overburden school and community representatives with requests to join projects or participate in research. An informal partnership structure also places on rural residents the burden of managing outsiders’ well-meaning generosity and linking their uncoordinated activities in the community. In short, the ways in which university personnel work with citizens can nurture or damage trust and respect, profoundly shaping personal and institutional relationships for years to come.

This article examines the roles that a professor, a graduate student, a university consultant, and a community education specialist at Western University (pseudonym), a public university in California, have played in a partnership with a school and a CBO in a nearby rural town. The article answers the following questions: Which roles have university personnel adopted in their work in El Río? What is their implicit approach to public engagement? How does power operate in their relations with community partners? The case reveals that individuals’ roles and approaches to public engagement evolve over time, differ markedly, and are often rooted in hierarchical power relations that remain unarticulated. I argue that university personnel need to consider three issues: deciding who is responsible for taking initiative in establishing a relationship and setting the partnership agenda, balancing directive and supportive roles (i.e., using power to achieve a particular result or to enable community partners to act), and coordinating their activities in a community. Coordination is especially important when a particular rural town is the focal point for university

research and outreach, as the small core group of community leaders can become overwhelmed if university personnel do not integrate their projects.

This article deepens our learning about the distinct ways that university personnel in the same partnership interact with community partners. Case studies such as this one produce the kind of concrete, “context-dependent knowledge and experience [that] are at the very heart of expert activity” (Flyvbjerg, 2004, p. 420). Each partnership is distinctive, yet readers can use this case study to learn from the “force of example” (Flyvbjerg, 2004, p. 425), for instance, to consider how the previous actions of university personnel have influenced the receptivity of citizens in surrounding rural areas toward university researchers and projects. The article begins by describing the setting, partnership history, and methods. The next section examines each person’s actions and roles, and uses these to describe their implicit approach to public engagement. The final section identifies the implications for community-university partnerships.

#### Rural Partnerships and Community-University Power Relations

Most of the research on community-university partnerships in general (e.g., Dewar & Isaac, 1998; LeGates & Robinson, 1998; Murrasse, 2001; Ostrander, 2004; Reardon, 1998) and school-university partnerships in particular (e.g., Baum, 2000; Bepko & Payne, 2002; Johnston, 1997; Peel, Peel, & Baker, 2002; Sconzert, 2001) focuses on urban areas. However, partnerships also play a vital role in rural regions and the urban fringe. Because schools are civic and social centers that enhance the quality of life in rural communities (Lyson, 2002; Salant & Waller, 1998; Versteeg, 1993), some scholars believe they are ideal sites for community development efforts intended to ameliorate social and economic problems (Bepko & Payne, 2002; Harkavy & Puckett, 1991; Miller, 1995). Schools often work with universities and CBOs to implement community development projects (Judkins & LaHurd, 1999; Mullis & Ghazvini, 1999; Richardson, 2000; Smith, Bibeau, DeMason, & Grogran, 1999; Weinberg, 1999), as well as to provide social services (California Family Resource Learning Circle, 2000; Mullis & Ghazvini, 1999; Smith, 1999) and improve educational practices (Sconzert, 2001).

Partnerships between universities and schools or CBOs illustrate both the productive and coercive dimensions of power, that is, the expansion or restriction of one’s ability to act, both individually and collectively (see Allen, 1999). At their best, partnerships exemplify the concept of “power with” (Follett, 1924), as they enable individuals and institutions to accomplish more together than they could alone. However, hierarchies (i.e., disparities rooted in class, race, gender, status, and institutional power) also shape, often unconsciously, routine interactions between and among

university and community representatives (Shefner & Cobb, 2002). For instance, according to the community representatives in Leiderman and colleagues' (2003) report, "many of the risks or harm done by community/campus interactions come from the inability or unwillingness to directly address issues of privilege, oppression, and power" (p. 13).

Because power is embedded in all social relationships (Foucault, 1980), individuals' actions, no matter how well-intentioned, both reflect and alter the power relations among partnership members. Several studies (e.g., Leiderman et al., 2003; McCall, Groark, Strauss, & Johnson, 1998; Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1996; Shefner & Cobb, 2002) illustrate how university representatives' institutional power and expert status allow them intentionally or unintentionally to influence the partnership agenda, to make demands of community residents, to limit community partners' decision-making authority, to control and distribute resources inequitably, to use the community as a "living laboratory" (McCall et al., 1998) without improving conditions, and to expect community partners to adopt their suggestions. Universities are often the largest employer in rural regions; they may also influence planning and politics, fill leadership positions (e.g., school board), own a large proportion of real estate, and possess greater economic resources than other institutions. In short, universities' greater power and prestige enables them to "dominate" community partners (Shefner & Cobb, 2002, p. 292). Illustrating the coercive dimensions of power, or "power over" (Follett, 1924), these actions can lead to skepticism, mistrust, and resistance by local residents.

The roles that university personnel adopt entail distinct uses of power. Responding to critiques of "drive-by research" and the detached expert who does research on rather than with a community (Johnston, 1997; Nyden et al., 1996; Reardon, 1998; Stoecker, 1999), many university representatives now attempt to mitigate power inequities in their community work. For example, faculty, staff, and students in the East St. Louis Action Research Project created an "empowerment planning" model integrating community organizing, participatory research, and education for critical consciousness (Reardon, 2000). Similarly, Dewar and Isaac (1998) distinguish a "consultant-driven" planning model, in which academics and other experts "facilitate the planning process toward an end [goal] of eventual community control," from a "community-driven" planning model, which "relies on organizational and technical expertise within the community to guide and control the planning process" (p. 343). Stoecker (1999) contends that academics can be initiators, consultants, or collaborators in participatory research (a common partnership activity), asserting that each role involves tradeoffs for community partners, for example, in the level of control, investment of time, and skill development.

Although personnel involved in community work popularly espouse a community-driven approach to public engagement, their actions may support and/or contradict this philosophy. Argyris and Schön's (1996) theory of organizational learning is a useful way to explain the convergence or discrepancy between actions and professed beliefs. An espoused theory is the "theory of action which is advanced to explain or justify a given pattern of activity," whereas a "theory-in-use" is "implicit in the performance of that pattern of activity. It must be constructed from observation of the pattern of action in question" (p. 13). Theories-in-use are tacit, and, as such, may not match the espoused theory. The assumption that actions reveal one's underlying theory led me to examine how university participants worked with community partners and then to construct their implicit theories of public engagement from their actions.

### Setting and Partnership History

El Río, an unincorporated village of approximately 1,800 residents, is located in a rural area of a metropolitan county (see Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997, on definitions of "rural"). The town is surrounded by agricultural fields, testimony to the historical and contemporary significance of farming in the local economy and culture. Two public universities, including Western University, are located within 20 miles of El Río. According to the 2000 census, El Río's median household income was \$37,167 and 10% of the families lived below the poverty level. Conversations with community leaders and residents (primarily Latinos/as) revealed salient social conditions such as loss of employment (McGranahan, 2003), changing ethnic composition, and unequal access to education, health care, transportation, housing, and recreation. Like many rural California towns (Allensworth & Rochin, 1998), El Río has shifted from a White to a Latino/a majority of 59%, primarily Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants employed by farms, canneries, warehouses, the local school, and human service agencies, among others. Racial tension and socioeconomic inequities have accompanied these demographic changes (see Chávez, 2005).

The town's primary institutions are Ashe Elementary School (the only school), three churches, and the Family Resource Center (FRC), a school-related community-based organization. In 2003-2004, 151 students (K-6) attended the school; 79% qualified for free or reduced lunch. The school's ethnic enrollment was 82% Latino/a, 11% Anglo, and 7% other minority. The school is a social center for Latino families and has also become a site for community development.

Compared to El Río, Westfield, the town where Western University is located, has a much larger White population and higher household income, educational level, and cost of

Table 1  
*Selected Partnership Activities, 1997 to 2003*

	Brian Education Specialist	Andy Consultant	Laura Professor	Rachel Graduate Student
1997	adult computer education; gardening	Head Start expansion		
1998	youth science education; school garden (through 2002)			
1999	youth science education; after-school program; Healthy Start planning; youth development	assisted with Healthy Start planning grant	began participatory park planning; park clean-up	
2000	computer classes (through 2002); 4-H; Healthy Start planning	assisted with Healthy Start operational grant	(did not teach a class)	
2001	sixth-grade outdoor education; Healthy Start planning		developed plans for park and playground	
2002	adult computer education	dropout study (action research); exploration of affordable housing	completed playground and FRC	tutoring and computer support for youth
2003	helped fund second mural	exploration of bi-national economic development	FRC landscaping; seat wall	youth development; mural; helped plan after-school program

living. Some residents in outlying rural areas perceive Westfield as a snooty, intellectual town. At the time of the study, the Ashe principal (a Latino man), the FRC Director (a White man), and all of the university personnel lived in Westfield. One of the first connections between Western University and El Río occurred in 1989, when Andy, a White Western University employee with expertise in school-community partnerships, conducted a study of teachers' professional development in small, rural elementary schools, including Ashe. In 1997, Brian (a White community education specialist) and several colleagues secured university funding for a project which sought to increase farmworkers' access to technological and educational resources, and to develop a model of collaboration that could be applied to rural schools and communities. The Ashe principal, school parents, and university personnel discussed developing a partnership and decided to offer computer classes for adults and children. In 1999, the school, in collaboration with Western University, applied for and received a Healthy Start grant from the California Department of Education to build a Family

Resource Center on school property. (Healthy Start supports educational, health, and social service programs at or near schools in low-income communities.) Working closely with the school, the FRC provides health, counseling, and support services (e.g., a mentoring program) and oversees community development projects such as youth development, an after-school program, and park planning. After this study was completed, the FRC Steering Committee created a nonprofit to manage the FRC. It works with the school but is not under the school district's jurisdiction.

University personnel have primarily worked with school and FRC staff (i.e., the principal, several teachers, the FRC director, FRC staff, as well as several community leaders) to plan and implement community development projects (see Table 1). Typically, the principal (Steve) and/or the FRC Director (Paul) approved collaborative projects involving their organizations. During this study, community residents—primarily Latinos/as whose children attend Ashe—informed partnership initiatives through 2 monthly meetings, youth club meetings, and project planning com-

mittees. The partnership's structure—a loose coalition of faculty, staff, and students—has contributed to ambiguous purposes, decision-making structures, and membership. Lack of ongoing university funding and turnover among community and university personnel have deterred institutionalization of the partnership. (For example, since 1989, 4 outreach specialists and 2 professors from 4 departments, 2 county outreach staff, 12 student researchers, several landscape architecture classes, 1 art class, 1 postdoctoral researcher, 3 student service organizations, and several university centers have worked in El Río.) Since individuals usually worked on their own projects rather than coordinating across disciplines, each person's style of working with school and FRC staff shaped the nature of the partnership at that time.

### Methods

As a researcher at Western University, I primarily focused on examining the university's work in El Río. For the larger study upon which this article is based, I used ethnographic research methods in order to “place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455), specifically to gain a deeper understanding of the relations between university personnel, school and FRC staff, and local residents. During 1 year and 9 months of fieldwork, I participated in, observed, and documented through fieldnotes, partnership planning meetings, community meetings and events (e.g., inauguration of the health clinic, landscaping work days), and several meetings in which university personnel discussed the partnership. Struck by the distinct ways university personnel worked with school and FRC staff, I decided to collect additional data regarding their roles and approaches in the partnership. My analysis of these data is the focus of this article.

Using purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), I identified the five active personnel and invited them to attend two focus groups. One professor declined to participate. I interviewed the community education specialist because he could not attend the first focus group. Andy is a consultant with Western University's institute for school-community partnerships, which conducts research, oversees projects, and provides consultation and technical assistance for schools, CBOs, and educational partnerships, and works with schools receiving Healthy Start grants. Brian is a community education specialist with several decades of experience in community development and education. Laura is a landscape architecture professor with a particular interest in community-based design. Rachel is a graduate student in geography and Brian's research assistant. All participants were White U.S. citizens with varying social class origins.

This article draws primarily on the focus groups and interview, supplemented by observational data and previ-

ous interviews with Brian, the Ashe principal, and the FRC Director regarding a conflict in the partnership (see Prins, 2005b, for further analysis of their views). Based on Argyris and Schön's (1996) work, I surmised that asking people to describe their actions in the partnership, rather than their philosophy, would reveal their theory-in-use, or their implicit philosophy of public engagement. In the first session, participants drew timelines of their work in El Río—including critical incidents, the actions they took, and the roles they played—and presented them to the group. (This article reports the terms participants used to describe their roles, e.g., “producer.”) I asked follow-up questions such as how they responded to critical incidents and how their approach to working in El Río had shifted over time. In the second session, participants compared and contrasted their timelines and discussed issues such as discomfort with roles and the actual and desired institutional roles of Western University.

The focus groups and interview were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. Other measures of trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) include prolonged engagement with university personnel and community representatives, persistent observation of activities involving university personnel (e.g., landscaping planning meetings, partnership meetings), and triangulation of data sources (e.g., focus groups, observation of partnerships meetings, informal conversations, interviews with school and FRC staff). I coded the transcripts by creating a table identifying (a) the roles participants assigned to each phase of their work and (b) the actions that accompanied each role including extended transcript excerpts. I then identified excerpts that encapsulated their respective ways of working with people in El Río. I have presented their accounts as profiles to provide a fuller, less fragmented picture of each person's trajectory.

Following a colleague's recommendation, I then revised the article to examine how power is embedded in these accounts. Conceptualizing a continuum from directive actions (“power over”) to supportive ones (“power with”), I analyzed the profiles to identify whether individuals' actions served to limit or expand community partners' ability to make choices, exercise decision-making power, and so on. Although the focus groups did not explicitly examine how the rural setting affected individuals' roles and actions, I have incorporated my analysis of this topic in the article. Beyond the observation that the women seemed less likely to exercise direct power (e.g., by pushing their ideas), I have insufficient evidence to analyze here how gender, racial, or class differences shaped community-university interactions. This is a fruitful area for further research.

I played multiple roles in this study. I was an insider in that I had conducted research on other aspects of the partnership (Prins, 2005b; see Prins, 2005a, 2005c, for subsequent research), and interacted almost daily with two

of the university personnel (one was my supervisor, and the other was the graduate student). I knew the others professionally. However, my status as a short-term employee made me an outsider; moreover, my ability to assess critically the partnership's intended and unintended consequences required maintaining intellectual distance. Thus, rather than seeking to portray the work of university personnel either favorably or unfavorably, I have attempted to depict the nuances and predicaments inherent in this work. My desire to foster equitable institutional and personal relations among university and community representatives led me to explore how seemingly harmless actions like asking questions may serve to manipulate. This research also helped me consider the messages my own actions (un)consciously send to community representatives.

### Findings

This section describes the multiple roles that participants played, their approaches to public engagement, and the critical incidents that shaped their roles. The findings should be read in light of the fact that university personnel felt a personal connection to the people and place of El Río, even though they did not live there. For instance, Brian felt a "bond" with El Río and developed a "connection" with youth. Rachel described her work with youth as "really personal" and wondered whether she was becoming a member of the community. Andy hoped to retire in El Río. Working with people in schools and communities was not a detached, intellectual activity; it was tied to individuals' vocation and identity.

#### *Boot Ideas Out There and See If They Fly*

A formative event in Andy's community work was the 1989 study of Ashe teachers' professional development. He stated that the study was a "waste of time" because it "was an externally driven question" disconnected from local questions and concerns:

And that was sort of a break point for me. I decided that I wasn't going to do anything that was really stupid or embarrassing to me and/or the people that I wanted to work with in the community. So consequently, everything since then has always been based on the idea that if there's somebody there that's got an agenda, I will do what I can to do the least harm, that will help them pursue that agenda.

Andy described several roles he has played during subsequent phases of his work. As a "researcher" he is conducting an action research project with the principal, two teachers, and two university colleagues to examine why Ashe alumni

persist or drop out of junior high and high school. As a "coach" and "technical assistant" he helped Ashe and school district leaders develop proposals and obtain several large grants including the grant for the health clinic. During this phase, he tried to "cajole Paul [then Healthy Start Coordinator] to do certain kinds of things to get [residents] involved," as Andy felt that residents had little say in deciding how to use the grant. For instance, when Paul wanted to conduct a needs assessment survey, Andy advised that he "do some really good outreach and find as many people in the community and hold some focus group meetings."

Andy tried to "coax" or suggest ways that Ashe and FRC leaders could involve residents in planning, but he discovered that some of his ideas did not take hold. He noted that "what surfaced in [the Healthy Start] operational grant proposal had little to do with . . . what I heard [in community focus groups] . . . so I began asking Paul questions about what direction they're going in, and, like, there was no attempt to even begin to work on" some of the problems residents had identified, such as public transportation and economic development. He stated that ideas took hold if they suited school or FRC leaders' "preconceptions of what ought to be." He "jarred" their preconceptions by asking questions about El Río's unemployment rate, types of employment, and the effects of seasonal employment on school attendance. He knew the answers, but wanted to get Paul to

say something like, "Well, maybe we should address some issues like economic development." I don't care whether it's the kind of thing I want to do or whatever, but somehow that some of those— [Laura: You were trying to plant that seed . . . that we should look at this.] . . . I would go to these parent meetings . . . and I would watch what's going on there and I would watch the extent to which Paul would take in that stuff and filter it . . . Paul will tell you that I warned him that I will throw stuff at him continuously to see which ones he picks up. . . . But, I'm curious as to why, in a community like El Río, there are some really good opportunities to do something that nobody wanted to pick up [e.g., free computers, Earned Income Tax Credit workshops].

Andy implied that Paul did not legitimately represent community residents' interests, partly because he believed the Healthy Start proposal Paul cowrote did not fully reflect their concerns.

This excerpt shows how Andy presented opportunities and challenged community partners' preconceptions by asking questions about problems they had not considered. He would check later to see if the principal or Healthy Start Coordinator acted upon his questions and suggestions. Al-

though he was disappointed in the apparent lack of interest, he stated,

I'm not going to make people do something they have no interest in. There are no hills to die on for me out there. . . . So, if they want to do what they want to do, that's fine. I just sort of say, "Okay, here's a possibility. Is it worth your interest?" And sometimes I try and find out why there wasn't interest in it.

Andy summarized his style of working with community partners in this way:

There's an old Monty Python series where this king is sitting on a mountaintop and he wants to find out somebody who's invented a way to fly. And everybody climbs up to the top of the mountain and he boots them off the edge and says, "Fly!" And so, I guess my projects are [that] I boot them out there and see if they fly. But, it's basically, if I can put together the feasibility and then turn it over to the community and say, "Look, do you want this? It's yours. I don't want any part of it other than what I've been able to figure out about it. That's all."

In short, Andy's approach to public engagement is to develop an idea (e.g., binational, rural economic development), to ask community partners if they are interested, and then to observe the results. He explained that the ideas "come from conversations with people in El Río, but I'm developing [the ideas] on my own," drawing on connections with funders and extensive community development and research experience in rural areas. Andy's account suggests that he exercised power both in subtle ways (e.g., asking thought-provoking questions, coaching community partners in grant writing) and in more overt ways (e.g., developing his own ideas for projects). Although he did not "define [his] goals and interests as the organization's agenda" (Shefner & Cobb, 2002, p. 276) or insist that the principal and the FRC Director adopt his ideas, their decision whether or not to pursue the opportunities he presented did shape his perception of their competence. In a large city, Andy could have approached another school with research and project ideas, but in El Río there were few other points of entrée into the community.

*Envision Possibilities, Make Connections, Provoke When Necessary*

Brian has supported and secured funding for many projects in El Río. Consequently, for many residents he is the face of Western University. He used the metaphor of movie production to describe his roles in the partnership:

producer, director, cameraman, "a worker in the sense of doing construction work, a driver, a materials developer, a gaffer . . . a promoter, a PR [public relations] person, salesman, facilitator . . . a writer," researcher, documenter, envisioner, and historian. Brian sees himself primarily as a "producer" or "broker," which means encouraging things "to take place and to move along" and "envisioning some possibilities and some projects and involving myself and trying to involve other people and individuals." Indeed, Brian introduced many colleagues—including Andy, Laura, Rachel, and me—to El Río and secured financial resources and volunteers to support community projects. He noted that although community partners sometimes see him as a "source of funds," he has tried to avoid "play[ing] that kind of role." As a "promoter" of the partnership, Brian has exposed faculty, administrators, funders, and the media to projects in El Río. As a result, this small, rural school and the FRC have garnered extensive publicity. This role stems from Brian's "visceral" connection to El Río (personal communication, October 19, 2005), since he grew up in a small town "not unlike" El Río:

a rural, poor, not greatly energized community but one with great potential. So in terms of promoting, it was meant to make El Río people (particularly [those associated with the] school) both aware of resources they might tap into as well as making the resources or those holding the resources to see the potential and possibilities.

In contrast to these behind-the-scenes roles, Brian has occasionally been a "director," meaning that he exercises power by "provok[ing] action" or influencing a desired result. For instance, Brian scheduled a meeting with youth to discuss starting computer classes and other youth development projects (see Prins, 2005a). Brian checked with the principal and a teacher before scheduling the meeting; however, because the computer lab belonged to the school, he did not check with the FRC Director, who officially oversaw community and youth development. He initiated the meeting because he believed the youth were not "getting the acknowledgement or the credit for what they're doing," namely, their previous efforts to renovate the community park. Brian saw the youth as an "incredible resource" and envisioned that with support, they could "transform that community":

[I] had talked to the teens, had enough interaction with them to know that they wanted to do things. I mean, they wanted to have something to do. I made a judgment. . . . I think I said that I'm going to do this and I'm going to push and prod and provoke here. Not without communicating with some of the people [a teacher and the principal], but . . . And I

knew that with [the FRC Director] that was going to raise some hackles.

This action sparked a dispute among several university and community representatives about how the group made decisions, who had authority to initiate projects, and the appropriate exercise of power by university personnel.<sup>2</sup>

A central question in partnerships is whose vision drives the agenda. Brian described how residents' visions for the community and his own vision and values have informed his actions:

You know, I have to be quite honest. I have a vision. And it's not just my vision, but it's also from members of the El Río community, going back to the '97, '98 when we were meeting out there with... people. . . . There were a number of meetings where people were talking about their visions [e.g., trees, playground, computer center] . . . And I was listening. I wasn't saying, "This is what we should do." . . . So it was more listening, hearing what people were saying. Adding some of my own things here, but taking them at . . . face value, saying, "This is what they wanted." So what can I do to contribute for them, for that community, for that school to move in that direction?

Brian explained that he has played a "pushing and nudging role" when community residents' visions were not enacted, when leaders did not follow through on their promises, or when opportunities were "missing":

I felt that I have provoked—deliberately so—because people weren't doing what they said they would do. . . . I didn't necessarily feel comfortable doing it, but I did feel justified in doing it, because I saw that this community had some real potential and internal resources that were not being respected, you know, by making promises and then not delivering on those [e.g., when school leaders did not follow through on promises].

He emphasized, "It wasn't just my saying, 'This is what El Río or Ashe has to do,' but other people had painted some of these visions as well."

Brian's work in El Río shows how university representatives play a vital "coordinating, resource exchange function"

<sup>2</sup>Paul and Brian both claimed to exercise power on others' behalf and believed the other had overstepped his authority. Brian perceived Paul as a gatekeeper who wanted too much authority. Paul appreciated Brian's work, but stated that he felt "manipulated by him" and thus had not asked him to play a greater leadership role in El Río.

(Sarason & Lorentz, 1998, p. xi) and can simultaneously assume distinct roles (e.g., staying behind-the-scenes or "directing," securing funding or digging in the garden). For rural schools with little access to universities and economic resources, such persons provide a valuable infusion of volunteers, financial assistance, publicity, and advocacy. Brian's approach was to envision possibilities and present opportunities for new projects, to connect university personnel and financial resources with partnership activities and, occasionally, to provoke action. The latter raises questions about whether and under what conditions academics can legitimately initiate projects in communities where they do not reside (see Stoecker, 1999). Brian's account illustrates how directive actions can shape power relations in partnerships, and how those actions may be motivated by a desire to hold leaders accountable to citizens and to build on citizens', and one's own, vision for a community.

#### *Transfer Ownership to Community Partners*

Brian introduced Laura, a landscape architecture professor, to El Río in 1999 when she was looking for a site for her community participation class. Utilizing participatory planning methods, several of her classes and advisees have worked with residents and school and FRC staff to design a community park, design and build a playground, and landscape the FRC building. Initially, Laura was an "outside expert" because residents asked her "what could be done or what should they do." On a walking tour of the town, they became "listeners" as residents told stories about the buildings and sites. As "researchers," they analyzed census and property ownership data. They were also "facilitators" (e.g., led community goal-setting workshops, invited residents to conduct research with cameras) and "participants" (e.g., organized a park clean-up day).

In 2001, Laura's undergraduate class decided to pursue one of the community's goals: to develop a plan for the undeveloped park land. She asked the class to

review all the material that had already been gathered and not go back and ask the same kind of questions over again, so that we weren't starting from ground zero. So . . . that was really important [to me], about having continuity, as far as universities working in places—that that kind of institutional memory is there and that when new people come in . . . the onus is put on them to figure out what had been done previously, instead of making the community go through it all over again.

Laura explained that community residents get "very frustrated" when successive researchers ask them the same questions, revealing her awareness that when university personnel do not "do their homework," they exercise power

and privilege by shifting the investment of time to residents. Instead, Laura modeled respect for residents. For instance, to elicit citizens' visions for the park, students used participatory methods such as interviewing people from "all the different factions in the community" (e.g., White parents who transferred their children from Ashe, leaders who were "at odds" with Latino/a residents) and holding workshops with Ashe students. Believing that it's best if residents "know as much as you know," Laura and her students also presented expert information so residents could make informed design decisions.

A turning point in this project, a community design presentation in the spring of 2001, illustrates Laura's approach to public engagement. She recalled that as Natalia, a community resident and teacher, translated university students' comments into Spanish, Natalia "embellished" and added her own comments, showing her excitement about the project:

There's a whole term of transferring ownership, so that you're transferring it from the designer to the people in the community. And to me, that was where I felt like I could actually see it happen—that . . . it was their plan. It wasn't our design; it was their design. And they were the ones that were believing in it. . . . Everybody at that meeting was all of a sudden jumping in and doing things. And to me, that's when the enthusiasm just sort of skyrocketed, and they could see it. Their vision—they could actually see it and understand what it was going to be like and that they could make it happen.

Laura's account reveals that transferring the ownership of a project entails involving citizens in planning and decision making from the outset, gradually shifting power and decision-making authority to participants, and simultaneously equipping them with skills and knowledge so that they can make informed decisions and successfully implement a project (see Stoecker, 1999, pp. 843-844, on switching control and transferring knowledge).

However, as the following story illustrates, Laura struggled to ensure that their project partners, FRC staff, included citizens in project decision making. Laura's students led a meeting where residents (mainly poor or working-class Latinos/as) were to choose the next steps in the park project, but Laura noticed that the residents looked puzzled. She learned from the FRC Director that residents had not informed the grant proposal for the next phase of the park project:

It was like nobody there—none of the citizens at the meeting—knew at all what was going on with the whole Service Day [park project]. That really

threw us for a loop. We really had to step back and sort of explain the whole concept and what was going on.

For Laura, this incident raised questions about who made decisions: whoever happened to attend the meeting? an appointed advisory group? "Does everybody have a right to get to vote?" The attendees had voted to build pathways, yet the next week the project planning committee, comprised of several community residents and FRC staff, decided to landscape the FRC area. (Laura surmised that people at the meeting had just assumed the landscaping would happen.) Concerned that people would be upset that their decision was changed, Laura invited the FRC Director and the project coordinator to her class to discuss the situation. She and her students asked what they should do and explained, "You need to be aware that [the change in decisions] may be an issue with somebody." In this case, Laura used her power as a professor and planner to alert community partners that ambiguous decision-making processes could unintentionally exclude or alienate the very residents they wanted to include.

Laura also encountered a tension between transferring ownership and creating a beneficial service-learning experience for her students. For instance, the project planning committee scheduled meetings during Laura's class, making it difficult for her students to attend meetings. She wondered if this was a sign "that you don't want us to be there at all;" at the same time, this decision showed community partners' "assertion that 'Wait a minute. This is for us. It's not for you. This is our meeting. And we're going to set the days and set the agenda,' which I think is great and that's what it should be." Laura's roles have shifted across projects and circumstances, but she has maintained the same approach to public engagement: to transfer ownership (i.e., power, control) so that residents believe in and take responsibility for implementing local projects. Importantly, rather than subscribing to the romanticized view of homogeneous, harmonious rural towns, Laura elicited and incorporated the perspectives of multiple community subgroups.

#### *Watch for Signs of Welcome*

Since she began working as a research assistant in El Río in 2002, Rachel's roles have vacillated between ambiguity and clarity. During a visit to Western University prior to graduate school, her advisor suggested that she visit the Cinco de Mayo celebration in El Río, since he thought she could eventually work there as a research assistant. Because community members had not invited her to attend the celebration, she wondered, "Should I be going out there? Am I really welcome to do this? Who am I to go out there?" Whereas in an urban neighborhood one could presumably attend a community festival without attracting much atten-

tion, El Río's small size made outsiders more visible, which helps explain why Rachel felt she needed an invitation.

That fall Rachel attended a few community events as an "observer," but she had no specific role. The dispute among partnership members regarding youth development led to her work with youth. According to Rachel, this dispute prompted Paul, the FRC Director, to say,

"Wait, hang on a second. What are you [university personnel] doing? You can't just do whatever you want out here." So . . . that's how I got involved in that research partnership, then the development of the form [a proposal which outside entities complete before initiating projects with the school or the FRC], and what projects get done and so on. And really that's where Paul and I got to know each other.

After Rachel began meeting with youth as a tutor and mentor, Paul invited her to be the Youth Development Coordinator (a university-funded position) and to attend FRC staff meetings.

Rachel has mainly been a "facilitator" and "participant." She explained, "I basically go and hang out with the teenagers and get to know them. It's really in the process of trust building at the moment." Paul asked her to help create an after-school program and to plan staff trainings. In the summer of 2003, Rachel was asked to involve youth in painting a mural, which an artist designed with elementary school students and teenagers. Rachel introduced the teenagers to the artist and told him, "If you want me to stay I will stay. If you want me to go, I will go, because I have no attachment to this project. I'm just getting it going." He invited her to continue.

Rachel reflected on the trajectory of her work:

I've gone from observer-lost person to participant, facilitator, to assistant on the mural, to leader—I'm playing big leadership roles in the Family Resource Center—to wondering how much I'm becoming a member of the community, of some sort. And that critical moment was just something little—of being invited to play in the teachers versus sixth graders softball game. [laughs] Which was really fun. And for me, it was just a big moment. I felt like over here [points to the beginning of her timeline]—when I was being told to "Go to Cinco de Mayo," or, "Go to this ribbon cutting"—do I really belong? And I went and I was welcomed by the kids and the teachers.

In each of the incidents that Rachel circled on her timeline, a community representative asked or invited her to do something, for example, to be the Youth Development Coor-

inator. These incidents were important "because they were exclamation points in the midst of big question marks. That finally I felt like I had some purpose and some legitimacy in being there, because I'm always questioning that." Rachel suggested that legitimacy means university personnel adopt specific roles when community partners invite or grant them permission to do so.

Rachel described how she has tried to build good relationships with community partners:

To maintain my integrity, really. To resist doing things that I was asked to do that made me uncomfortable . . . I think patience and waiting for things to happen is really [important]. I didn't plan any of these things, yet I like what they are. So yeah, being willing to accept my own limitations, but also being willing to just kind of walk blindly and hope that I'm on the right path and you know, listen and watch for the signs that I am welcome. Which means that people instinctively smile and say "hi" to me. That makes me feel welcome. That I don't have to push myself in anywhere.

Rachel's approach to public engagement, then, is to wait for openings and signs of welcome and to maintain integrity by resisting roles, such as "pushing herself in," that contradict her values. Since being welcomed confers membership and legitimacy, Rachel has assumed leadership roles when community partners have asked her to do so. However, she also openly advocates for her views. This account suggests that Rachel considered how her power as an outsider and university representative mediated her relationships with community partners. Waiting for others to welcome her, for example, allowed them to set the terms and to place parameters around her activities. Finally, Rachel's account raises thought-provoking questions about whether and how university personnel can belong to a community where they do not live.

#### Discussion and Implications for Community-University Partnerships

Below I discuss the finding that personnel played distinctive roles in the same partnership, and suggest that university personnel need to consider who should take initiative, how to balance supportive and directive roles, and how to increase internal coordination.

##### *Different Roles, Same Partnership*

These accounts show that university personnel play multiple, shifting roles in partnerships with schools and CBOs and that their ways of working with community members vary considerably. A hallmark of a good partnership is

the recognition that neither universities nor communities are “monolithic entities” (Abt Associates, 2001; Leiderman et al., 2003). Since universities may not have a unified approach to public engagement, we cannot assume that personnel from a single institution will assume similar roles, whether expert, provocateur, or coach. Rather, if we distinguish how individuals’ actions mold relations with community partners (e.g., increasing trust or breeding resentment), we will better understand how a university might affect a community in contradictory ways. The fluidity of Western University representatives’ roles supports Rubin’s (1998) conclusion that “different kinds of involvement can characterize the same partnership” and that community and university representatives should be “open to the likelihood that the university’s roles will change over time” (p. 310).

The actions of university personnel shape the collective memory, influencing how residents and leaders perceive the university as an institution and how they receive other faculty and students. Indeed, observational data and interviews with the principal and the FRC Director show that they formed distinct relationships with university personnel, based on their manner of working with community partners. For example, the FRC Director invited some individuals to play a greater role in the partnership, but limited the activities and influence of those who did not clearly articulate their interests in working in El Río or who acted in what he deemed a manipulative manner. This finding supports the conclusions of Leiderman and colleagues (2003):

If community members have had previous positive experiences with a faculty member, campus department, or program, or a particular institution of higher education, they are more likely to trust plans that are not fully articulated. (pp. 9-10)

University representatives working in rural communities interact with a much smaller universe of citizens and institutions, meaning that residents are likely to associate “the university” with a particular individual and to perpetuate favorable or unfavorable perceptions through their social networks. In turn, gatekeepers may support or limit access to community groups. If they limit access to the community, then university personnel could have few other points of entrée, whereas in urban areas they could presumably work with various schools and organizations.

#### *Balancing Supportive and Directive Roles*

This study illustrates the myriad ways university representatives consciously and unconsciously exercise power in partnerships. The literature review indicates that this issue transcends geographic location. Each person espoused a community-driven model in which they guided, facilitated, or supported initiatives rooted in community residents’

visions (Dewar & Isaac, 1998). Theoretically, this meant sharing power equitably instead of privileging university interests. However, participants’ theories-in-use differed in that their actions (e.g., waiting for signs of welcome, transferring ownership, presenting opportunities, “booting ideas out there,” developing feasibility for projects, asking provocative questions, provoking action) entailed more or less direct ways of exercising power. Further, university personnel had implicit and explicit expectations about which roles community partners should play (e.g., the principal should pursue community development), which projects they should undertake (e.g., economic development), and how they should conduct their work. Specifically, university personnel wanted residents to have a greater say in planning and leading school and FRC projects. They recognized that official leaders do not necessarily speak for the community (see Baum, 2000, on representation).

This study illustrates several ways university personnel might respond when official leaders’ decisions or actions (a) conflict with their own values or ideas or (b) appear to reflect inadequately residents’ visions or interests. Directive actions (i.e., using power to influence or control the situation) may include provoking action, pushing a specific idea, or initiating a meeting or project, whereas supportive actions (i.e., using power to enable community partners to act) entail waiting to be invited, observing, asking questions, openly discussing concerns with community partners, and so on. Stringer (1996) warns, “When we try to get people to do anything . . . we are working from an authoritative position that is likely to generate resistance” (p. 43), reminding us that even ostensibly supportive actions such as asking questions can be manipulative if their hidden purpose is to persuade others to do something.

Brian and Andy appealed to leaders’ (perceived) insufficient recognition and inclusion of residents and their concerns as a rationale for directive actions, whereas Rachel and Laura seemed to prefer modeling citizen inclusion in their work or giving community partners what Nussbaum (1990) calls a “tip,” that is, “a gentle hint about how one might see . . . [that] prompts the recognition of the concrete” (p. 160). Both supportive and directive actions influenced the kinds of knowledge and skills community partners developed (Gaventa, 1993) and their ability to shape the initiation and implementation of partnership activities (Stoecker, 1999), to make decisions, and to influence the partnership agenda (Shefner & Cobb, 2002).

The geographic isolation, limited access to higher education institutions, and tenuous financial situation of many rural schools and CBOs place them in a precarious position vis-à-vis powerful institutions: Saying “no” to university personnel could mean foregoing grants, volunteers, student teachers, publicity, ties to a prestigious university, and other resources. On the other hand, the Ashe principal noted that the school’s record of “drawing resources and participation”

from El Río and Western University meant they could be more “picky” in choosing proposed projects: “[D]oing activities just because you’re from Western and have an interest here in El Río, or specifically with Ashe Elementary School, doesn’t necessarily mean that we should be involved.”

How, then, can university personnel support community partners’ ability to influence the partnership agenda and advocate for ideals such as citizen inclusion? University personnel cannot presume to know what is best for others, but neither should we withhold ideas or betray our ideals. Johnston (1997), a professor who worked with teachers in a professional development school, writes that her “refusal to be directive meant that the university voice was absent from some of the conversations, deliberately silenced in favor of the teachers’ perspective” (pp. 28-29). Her insights suggest that university personnel should share ideas, ask questions, direct attention to issues, and advocate for strategies—but in ways that respect community partners’ knowledge and authority. Laura’s actions (e.g., including citizens in park planning, talking to Paul about ambiguous decision-making procedures) exemplify this approach.

### *Taking Initiative*

The community-university partnerships and participatory research literature emphasizes that the project initiators, whether citizens or researchers, usually have more control (Stoecker, 1999). In this case, Western University personnel seemed to express contradictory ideas about taking initiative: Several believed the principal and the FRC Director should call for partnership meetings and take responsibility for establishing projects, yet they also (implicitly) expected community partners to pursue the opportunities they presented, and in some cases criticized them for not doing so. However, if we believe community partners should be the initiators, we must also accept the rejection of our suggestions. Resistance and foot-dragging are, after all, forms of power (Scott, 1990). School and FRC staff occasionally took initiative by requesting university funding for special projects, yet some university personnel did not want community partners to see them as a source of funds or to approach them “whenever they need something from the university.” The desire to control how and when community partners make demands of the university implicitly reflects their power as institutional representatives. Further research could explore whether these patterns are evident in urban partnerships.

Delineating two types of “taking initiative” helps to distinguish the roles of university and community representatives. The first type entails pursuing and establishing an institutional relationship. Schools and CBOs may benefit from working with universities, but they have no obligation to do so. However, the civic mission of universities, especially land-grant institutions, means they have a responsibility to “take the initiative to reach out to society” (McCall et al.,

1998, p. 215). The second type of initiative is determining the partnership’s focus and methods; these decisions are ideally made through deliberation. Due to hierarchical power relations, however, university representatives often unduly influence the partnership agenda (Shefner & Cobb, 2002) and expect community partners to adopt their suggestions (McCall et al., 1998). Community partners, then, should have a greater say in shaping the partnership agenda because they have to live with the results, whereas in many cases university personnel can walk away.

### *Lack of Internal Coordination*

Coordination among personnel and academic departments demonstrates institutional commitment to a partnership and respect for community residents. In this case university personnel typically worked independently on their projects in El Río, illustrating the difficulty of cross-disciplinary coordination in a “compartmentalized university” where “hermetic boundaries” demarcate professional specialties, academic departments, and colleges (Levin & Greenwood, 2001, p. 112). For instance, when I asked university personnel if they saw any patterns in their timelines, Laura commented, “It’s like they’re all separate roads.” Andy added:

And the people living in the community are the connectors. . . . And quite honestly, that’s part of the problem, in my estimation, is [that] the people that we rely upon as the local agent[s] of our motives or ideas [are the connectors] . . . I think [our paths] come in proximity, but I think that the observation [Laura] made is that we’re strung together by the people that work out there.

Lack of coordination was evident in the four urban community-university partnerships that Maurrasse (2001) studied, which suggests this issue is not limited to rural communities. He argues that “Higher education/community partnerships historically have often been inconsistent and uncoordinated, leaving neighborhood residents wary of even the most well-intentioned outreach efforts” (p. 7). The failure to coordinate activities in a community mirrors the university’s hierarchical, compartmentalized structure and signifies the unrecognized power of university personnel.

Lack of coordination can have harmful, albeit unintended, consequences. In rural partnerships, university activities are concentrated in a town or area with a small population and, concomitantly, fewer schools, CBOs, community leaders, and potential collaborators than in an urban area. By seeking out the “usual suspects” (e.g., leaders, volunteers), researchers may inundate rural residents with requests for information, collaboration, interviews, or service-learning projects. The danger is that residents will grow weary of

being asked to participate. (One El Río resident refused my request for an interview for this reason.) The Ashe principal confirmed the importance of coordination: “More and more as we [the school and the FRC] develop our community action process, people want sort of a piece of the action and it does need some coordination or it’ll quickly turn into chaos.” As a result, “We have to manage the generosity being heaped upon us.”

Another consequence of lack of coordination is that local residents have to link the disparate paths of university personnel. Ironically, residents may hold the institutional memory of university activities, while university personnel may know little about their predecessors’ work. This sends the unspoken message, “My time is more valuable than yours.” Further, as the Ashe principal explained, the university’s “many-faceted role” in El Río could send “mixed signals” to residents and staff, making it difficult to understand how various university personnel and projects (e.g., landscaping project, youth club, action research with teachers) were connected. Likewise, Maurrasse (2001) states that a “lack of cohesion can create confusion” (p. 7). For instance, Western University personnel gave seemingly contradictory advice to community partners about how much time they should take to plan the Healthy Start grant. Finally, as Laura noted, lack of coordination can mean that university personnel miss opportunities to enrich community projects, for instance, to design housing that draws on the oral histories collected by university students.

This study supports Maurrasse’s (2001) recommendation that universities should create a “central convening entity” to coordinate “the various community partnership activities taking place on particular campuses” (p. 190). University personnel working in rural communities can increase coordination by creating a collection of previous studies and projects in a given town, by requiring new university participants to review these materials, by creating shared surveys or interview guides that address multiple research questions, and by forming a community advisory board to approve partnership initiatives. These strategies would not only demonstrate respect for community residents, but also foster more equitable relationships among partnership members.

### Conclusion

This study shows that in a single partnership, faculty members, staff, and students may adopt distinct roles and approaches to public engagement, each of which entails distinct uses of power. In this case, the concentration of university personnel in a small, rural town, coupled with the personal nature of the partnership, magnified the impact of their actions. These actions shape relations with community partners in complex, contradictory ways, which suggests that a university does not have a uniform presence in a town;

it has many. Furthermore, as university representatives establish routines of interaction, they socialize community partners to act in particular ways, for instance, to adopt or question their advice. The findings reveal that often, faculty, students, and staff unwittingly replicate hierarchical power relations (e.g., by not coordinating), but they can also model equitable ways of working with community partners (e.g., taking leadership when invited to do so). When university personnel disrupt inequitable patterns, they enable others to exercise more control over partnership activities.

If university representatives and community partners lived in the same town, these findings might differ in important ways; for example, they would interact as citizens, parents, board members, or neighbors in multiple social settings. In addition, comparative research could reveal the common and distinct features of partnerships in urban neighborhoods, suburbs, large towns in metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties, and other settings.

The accounts of Western University participants raise questions regarding the intended and unintended consequences of exercising power in supportive and directive ways, who should take initiative in partnerships, and how best to coordinate university activities in rural areas. Under what circumstances can university partners legitimately intervene or provoke action? How should university personnel respond when community partners’ actions fall short of their expectations or ideals? What kinds of parameters should rural schools place around university activities? Who is responsible for maintaining a partnership and pursuing new projects? How can universities increase coordination without burdening faculty, who are seldom rewarded for outreach? How should universities ensure that resources are spread equitably among surrounding rural schools? The way university personnel answer these questions will shape how they interact with community representatives, what they accomplish together, and, ultimately, how community residents and school and CBO leaders view the university as an institution.

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