

2004

Reflections on the Wingspread Experience

Bruce L. Mallory

University of New Hampshire, bruce.mallory@unh.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/educ_facpub

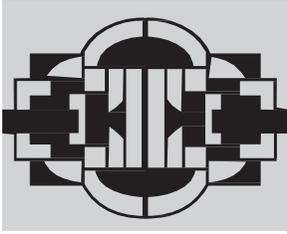


Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mallory, B.L. "Reflections on the Wingspread Experience." Higher education collaboratives for community engagement and improvement. Penny Pasque, Ryan Smerek, Brigid Dwyer, Nick Bowman and Bruce Mallory. Ann Arbor : National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good, 2005. pp. 18-22. Print.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Education at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Scholarship by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.



Chapter 2

Reflections on the Wingspread Experience

Bruce L. Mallory

The Place

The claim that “context is everything” may be overblown, but I must begin these reflections on my experience at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin, with a comment about the setting. Being a first-timer to the Frank Lloyd Wright designed residence, I was struck by the relationship between the physical environment in which we worked and the nature of the work itself. As a place and space intended to foster thoughtful reflection, the congruity between purpose and context was remarkable. The physical reminders of what it means to “reflect” were immediately apparent. The light itself, the late-October light, reflected off the water and through the leaves still clinging to the trees. The sky and vast lake reflected each other’s essence. During the first “reflection break,” as I gazed out the glass walls overlooking the creek, a great blue heron flew gracefully just above the surface of the water, gliding above its own reflection and away from this mortal observer.

This sense of quiet reflection was reinforced by the gentle, graceful staff who were ever present but never intrusive. The men in their bowties, the women in their black and white attire, provided a reassuring sense of elder wisdom and care in their warm demeanor and friendly smiles. In this sense, it was truly touching when the staff and conference attendees spontaneously celebrated the birthday of Dorothy, a member of the Wingspread staff.

The presence of sage elders echoed through the photographs of those who had come before us to the main conference meeting room called “The House.” The profound sense of history, social change, deliberation, and creativity was reified in the black and white images of Eleanor Roosevelt, Buckminster Fuller, David Rockefeller, Julian Bond, Frank Lloyd Wright, Les Aspin, and others who have come to Wingspread over the years. It was truly humbling to follow in such footsteps. I hope (and believe) that our work would have been appreciated by those who came before us.

The Design

As a facilitator, I was privileged to be involved in the design phase of the conference. Lacking prior experience of Wingspread, and not knowing the folks at the University of Michigan I was communicating with during the teleconferences and e-mails that preceded the conference, I was not completely confident about how the conference would transpire. My deep respect for Tony Chambers and Nancy Thomas, who helped connect me to the planning group, assured me that it would all be fine. And I recognize that my fellow planners—Penny Pasque, Ryan Smerek, John Burkhardt, Barbara Holland—were taking a chance on my role and competence as well. However, we entered into the design discussions with a shared commitment to open dialogue, an assumption that participants would be experienced leaders in the field, and a desire to create a structure that was both focused and able to accommodate diverse issues and perspectives.

The temporal structure was generally determined by the Wingspread model, thus our challenge was to create a balance between didactic and transactional talk within fixed time limits. In this light, we developed a relatively typical schedule that began with individual and panel presentations and then moved to small group work, to be concluded with plenary discussions intended to generate action items. These action items would in turn be directed toward local projects, to take back home or they might, we hoped, act as a stimulant to the next level of national discussion (i.e., to continue to develop what was unabashedly referred to as “the movement”). Within this standard structure, we hoped to pose questions that could provoke honest critiques, different—even oppositional—points of view, and more complex understandings of university/college—community partnerships and relationships than is normally the case. Throughout our planning discussions, we tried to design mechanisms that would create equity for all voices, regardless of affiliation or identity. Barbara was especially committed to this goal, and her frequent efforts to correct our academic-centric tendencies were effective as well as appreciated.

Once the conference was underway, it seemed to me and others with whom I talked that we had created a structure that privileged “expert” voices in the initial time blocks at the expense of open, spontaneous dialogue. Even as this concern emerged by the end of the first morning, the shift from didactic to interactive formats began to occur. In this way, any discomfort resulting from the “expert in front of the room” format dissipated. The shift to small group work formed around role- or constituency-alike identities provided the opportunity, just in time, to engage in deeper, more challenging conversations than could occur in the whole group. The memberships of the working groups had a logical and utilitarian basis; the concrete results of the dialogues suggest that the mix was effective and that the dispersal of community partners and educational leaders served the intended purpose.

In my own group experience, and apparently in others’, the dialogue was energetic, creative, and productive. The themes we had developed and referred to several times prior to the breakout discussions seemed to hit the mark, and the questions associated with each theme provided a good stepping off point. The Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) Fellows group, which Brighid Dwyer and I facilitated, began with a focus on “leadership,” one of the seven suggested themes, but we soon moved to a much more complex and complicated discussion that alternatively moved between broad ideological statements and quite concrete, practical examples of action to be summarized later in this essay.

The closing session on late Friday morning was effective and powerful. Those asked to make concluding remarks—Art Dunning, Edgar Lucas, and Grace Lee Boggs—approached the task with great thought and personal investment. Art drew our attention to the importance of the political, economic, and social context of community partnerships and the fact that efforts that fail to take context into account will not succeed. Similarly, efforts that fail to acknowledge the essentially conservative nature of universities, and the concomitant resistance to change, will be doomed. Edgar’s personal expressions of gratitude were heartfelt and humbling, reminding us that our dialogue had been about people as much as ideas and institutions. Grace’s words were characteristically wise, warm, and critical. She continued to challenge the power held by universities and their motivations for engaging in community partnerships. It seemed most appropriate that we would end the conference with a sense of dis-ease as we returned to the work of trying to create authentic collaborations. In this way, we moved over the course of two days from so-called expert, institutional voices to the words of those who work in the streets and storefronts in the name of social justice and community strength. It seems that the process we had designed in the abstract led to the desired results in the practice.

The People and What Was and Was Not Discussed

Not surprisingly, the success of this Wingspread conference resulted from the extraordinary group of people assembled by the Forum staff. The diversity of backgrounds, experience, ethnicity, age, gender, institutional affiliation, and perspectives created a rich mix of ideas that ranged from the philosophical to the concrete. Certainly the extra efforts that went into recruiting community partners were well worth it. Those voices became critical to the goal of authenticity and equity, even as they were small in number.

There was a constant tension throughout the conference between a tendency to defer to those associated with large research universities and the need to hear from those from smaller, struggling institutions. All participants seemed committed to making space for the latter, but those efforts sometimes felt forced and therefore token. In addition, the power and resource differentials between higher education actors and community actors were always present, except in the case of the Minority Serving Institution participants.

In fact, one of the tacit themes of the dialogue was about speaking truth to power, across different types of institutions and between institutions and communities. For example, some participants suggested that large research institutions can act like political empires, with their expansionist and “missionary” zeal. If “knowledge” is the new currency of the post-industrial age, then higher education controls the capital, doling it out with a sense of *noblesse oblige* and expecting to be thanked for doing so.

At a personal level, I was perplexed at the title of the conference, which could be taken as a marker for academy-centric thinking. Interestingly, the conference materials themselves were conflicted about the title, variously referring to “Higher Education Collaboratives for Community Engagement and Improvement” or “Higher Education Collaboratives for Community Improvement and Engagement.” I expect these were unconscious mistakes, but they are telling nonetheless. Both forms suggest that it is the community that needs improvement, and that higher education will be the impetus or gatekeeper of desired change. What would a different construction convey, for example, “Community Collaboratives for Higher Education Engagement and Improvement” or “Collaborative Engagement for Higher Education and Community Improvement”? Given more time, it would have been interesting to acknowledge these different constructions more explicitly, in order to learn something about how to find common language and common cause in such inherently unequal circumstances.

This discussion leads to another important theme that emerged during the conference, again focused on the choice of words. The provocative use of the metaphors “fear” and “lust” was meant to deconstruct the motivations of institutions seeking community partnerships, especially in the case of large universities located in depressed urban settings. But the diverse interpretations of the metaphors interfered with their intended impact, leading some to see this as further evidence of the “arrogance” of higher education. Similarly, in the MSI Fellows working group, my use of the word “collaboration” was challenged on the grounds that it often signifies the relationship between oppressor and the oppressed, as in “Fascist collaborators.” My effort to draw a distinction between “cooperation” and “collaboration” focused on the depth, complexity, and parity of the relationship, claiming that the former was simply instrumental interaction while the latter could imply more just forms of transaction and transformation. The interchange around these concepts was healthy and worth exploring at more length.

Further challenges to the meaning of taken-for-granted expressions arose around the concept of “community as resource.” Some found this phrase suggests the possibility of exploitation, as in the use of natural resources that are consumed and exhausted by material cultures. This sensitivity is similar to one I encounter in my work in early childhood education, where the notion of “children as our greatest natural resource” is viewed as exploitive. As such, “resources” are objects to be used (up), perhaps to be depleted without replenishment. Again, the power differentials between the resource user and the resource must be acknowledged. It is also true that universities and colleges can serve as resources to the community, but the historical realities suggest that it is more often the case that universities seek something from communities (research sites, internship placements, labor, political support) than vice versa.

Further, communities are essentially permeable, open settings, while universities are closed institutions not easily accessed by outsiders. Communities require no special credentials to be a member (at least not explicitly); universities are by definition places where status and credentials count for much. Thus, the sensitivity to the metaphor of “resource” must be understood as grounded in the historical and significant power differentials at play.

These ideas took on special meaning in the MSI Fellows working group. The ideas of that group will be represented in a separate essay of this monograph, so I will only comment on two themes that are relevant here. First, the power and political relationships between MSIs and their surrounding communities are qualitatively different from those between research universities and their immediate neighbors. The distinctions between the experiences of Johns Hopkins and Morgan State serve as an example to generalize from. As Maurice Taylor put it, MSIs are part of the phenomenon of diaspora; they, like their inner city minority neighbors, are dispossessed and often disenfranchised. MSIs do not serve the mainstream of American higher education; a significant number of them are now on the edge of viability. The institutions, like their neighbors, struggle for existence, power, and recognition, both locally and nationally. In this sense, there is much greater parity in the power relationships and collaborative partnerships that characterize MSIs and communities. Forms of engagement may be more co-equal and interdependent. Dean Taylor writes, “Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) are more likely to be integrated and engaged in their

communities because the fortunes of one tend to be the fortunes of the other. Partnerships between HBCUs and their communities are often about mutual dependency rather than about messianic leadership” (2004). This unique relationship offers opportunity for mutual collaborations and shared forms of engagement.

When the relationship is more one-sided, arguably the more typical case, the concept of “university partner as cultural anthropologist,” suggested by Sandra Pacheco, is useful. In this light, faculty and students seek a deep understanding of “another culture” before they determine how to enter, interact with, and leave the community. There is conscious effort to participate in the rites, routines, and rituals of the community, and to behave in ways consistent with community norms. And just as contemporary cultural anthropologists face the dilemma of objectivity vs. social action when they observe injustice, university actors must be clear about the ends they are pursuing when they enter into communities. If the community setting is viewed as an *in situ* lab, or a “living classroom,” an object to be measured or observed, the likelihood of exploitation and insult seems greater. If the community is respected as having worth in its own right and the professor or student understands herself to be a potential intruder or a guest, the relationships will be more equitable and mutually rewarding.

Other valuable ideas will be found in the MSI Fellows paper that is forthcoming. It will be critical for the particular circumstances of minority serving institutions to be recognized as the national discussion on HE-CE partnerships develops. There will be much to learn here, and the lessons will have pedagogical, leadership, political, and financial implications. A beginning point will be to call for national and state policies that assure the viability of minority serving institutions. The interdependence of these institutions and the communities in which they function (geographic as well as social) is real and valuable for both sets of interests.

Closing Thoughts

One of the dilemmas that may face the “public good” movement in higher education is in the way in which universities necessarily operate as corporate entities while they seek engagement with what has come to be called the “third sector” (e.g., see Georgetown University’s Center for Democracy and the Third Sector). Universities and colleges belong either to the public or private sectors of the political economy. Communities, made up of informal and formal networks of citizen actors, are neither—they constitute a third sector. In this third sector, community-based networks focus on highly local problems, from the affordability of housing to the care of children after school and the placement of stop signs at busy intersections. Formal as well as informal community groups address crime prevention, the quality of local schools, the use of land for neighborhood gardens, and the closing of streets during festival celebrations. In Robert Putnam’s terms, it is these community networks that create social capital. They are not corporate in the legal or structural sense, and as noted before, they are open, permeable forms of affiliation.

If, as academics claim, institutions of higher education produce intellectual capital, and communities have the capacity to produce social capital, perhaps this suggests where the twain shall meet. Intellectual capital without social grounding and “real world” testing is of little value; social capital without the infusion of new ideas and experimental-analytical tools defaults to the status quo, even when the status quo creates obstacles to individual and community development. Such an understanding of what each partner brings to the dilemma of asymmetric collaborations may be the first step toward creating a transformative approach to engagement that advances both institutional and community goals. This is not to say that universities are without social capital or that communities do not embody intellectual capital as well, but an understanding of their distinct roles and purposes in society can point toward a site for mutual dialog and action. Again, the lessons to be learned from the experience of minority serving institutions and their communities could be quite useful in resolving the dilemma I have portrayed.

Lastly, if the work of this conference is to be translated into concrete actions and a new understanding of the public obligations of higher education, we must expect that academic leaders—deans, provosts, presidents, trustees—speak often and loudly to this end. Recent commentators have lamented the loss of strong public voices in higher education relative to pressing social problems. Certainly this loss of voice is not because there are fewer issues to speak to. Rather, it seems that the corporate sensitivities of universities and colleges tend to suppress public comment and advocacy.

Our institutions do produce and hold intellectual capital. Our commitment now must be to engage the social capital that struggles for growth and sustenance in local neighborhoods, towns, and cities. A strategic joining of these two forms of capital, based on principles of democratic participation and social justice, could hold great promise. The goal of reciprocal and equitable engagement, in this light, seems possible, if not imperative.