2014 Nelson Chair Roundtable
On Networking Community Based Programs

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Executive Summary

ROUNDTABLE SESSIONS

This year's Nelson Chair Roundtable invited program administrators from 11 different programs for youth in Boston, New York City, New Orleans, Miami, Bermuda, and South Africa. Community leaders, educators and other resource people were in attendance.

Meeting Community School Needs: Challenges and Strategies, Lessons from South Africa

Challenges and lessons learned from the Centre for the Community School in South Africa, presented by Dr. Allistair Witten served as a stimulus for discussion around optimizing the impact of programs through considering and supporting the contexts of community, family, and society. Participants warned that without a critical acknowledgement of the systemic contributions to poverty and segregation, schools can end up with the blame for the disparities in education. Leaders will need to confront the lack of infrastructure that supports school-community integration and create bottom-up solutions by connecting with the indigenous voices of youth and community stake holders.

The Roundtable also addressed the dangers of meeting external demands from the government, local politics, and philanthropic funders to the point of blurring the program's original vision and mission (*referred to as "Mission Creep"*).

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Nelson Chair Special Colloquium on South Africa

A colloquium featuring Dr. Denise Zinn, Faculty of Education Executive Dean of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and Dr. Allistair Witten, Director of the Centre for the Community School, as well as Dr. Dennis Shirley and Dr. AJ Franklin, Professors of Education at Boston College, was held on March 26th, 2014. Discussion focused on Dr. Zinn and Dr. Witten's presentation entitled "Re-creating the Schools We Need: The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University's response to the educational challenges of South Africa," which addressed the inequities permeating the country's communities and schools and examined ways the University's Faculty of Education seeks to resolve such issues.

To build sustainability in funding and visionary leadership, participants suggested ways to maintain integrity, gain more independence, and distribute leadership, some of which are highlighted here:

- Identify funding sources that align with your mission from the start
- Create a breadth of informed donors
- Consider collective cooperative funding with other non-profits
- Frame organization's work to the mission constantly at each meeting
- Tell the same story in all contexts, incorporating all voices
- Distribute leadership across school and community system to those invested in the program's mission
- Plan for succession through mentoring, training, and documenting

Program Development, Diversity, Scale and Implementation

In developing effective programs that reflect community voices, the Roundtable participants agreed that diversity must be infused into every aspect of the program. Chaired by Dr. Franklin, this session discussed how the lack of appreciation for certain types of diversity (e.g. gang membership, level of education) lead to the criminalization of youth's responses to trauma-filled environments. As many youth live in environments that present a different reality than one where education is seen as the pathway to success, programs need to consider such cultural dimensions of education. Participants suggested several strategies for working with these challenges, some highlighted below:

- Build safe spaces and structures into the organization to promote dialogue

- Create environment that sees diversity as fun and expects all voices to be heard
- Hire staff who are not only passionate, but also connected with the youth's community and experiences
- Hold conversations with parents and members of the youths' other spheres of life
- Provide concrete support for youth to explore outside their communities, e.g. equipping them with code switching skills
- Present youth with doable options

Staff Professional Development: Socio-Emotional Climate of Out of School Time

This professional development workshop centered on the growing need for integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL) into the classrooms and programs. While the pressure from funding sources to focus on academics still looms large, programs also see that children often arrive tired from school, and have difficulty adjusting to less structured time. In some cases, children's medication may be wearing off by the time they arrive at programs. Emphasis was placed on providing training and support to the staff who are burdened with high expectations for meeting the students' complex emotional and behavioral needs. Other strategies included:

- When possible, create new positions for personnel with social work/mental health background
- Hold collectively-led professional training on SEL, assuming no prior knowledge
- Invite clinical consultation to programs
- Visit each site to assess for specific needs, demonstrate how to lead classrooms with SEL framework.

Program Impact and Outcomes:
Evaluation, Research and Accountability Models

With the growing accountability demands from funding institutions, programs now need to provide evidence-based programming and ongoing evaluation. Dr. Lauren Bierbaum of Partnership for Youth Development (PYD) illustrated an example of New Orleans, where organizations came to see evaluation as valuable rather than as unnecessary burden. Benefits of evaluation include data-driven decision making for program development, management, and improvement. Programs were encouraged to reflect on what they are already doing to achieve stated goals, document them, translate and utilize existing data (e.g. application forms) for evaluative audiences. Practical resources highlighted included:

- Nelson Chair Roundtable Network
- Intermediary research organizations such as PYD and local universities can provide partnership
- Feedback on grant applications from funding sources, regardless of whether a program successfully obtained funding
- Funding sources often are willing to work with programs to set the right language
- Remember that determining a program's own workable evaluation cycle and honing translation skills takes years of experience. They will come with time!
- Remember that funders most often want to know that programs have thought things through and have a plan

Program Sustainability: Funding Streams, Development Strategies and Maintaining Mission Integrity

This discussion topic connected the concept of sustainability to the previous discussions on funding, evaluation, and maintenance of mission integrity.

The group discussed both internal and external data collection and evaluation strategies that could help develop a convincing narrative for funders that demand outcomes. The value of participatory action research with youth and families, as well as the importance of programs working together as a collective were discussed in order to improve programs' leverage in acquiring resources and representing shared interests in youth.

- While keeping the same mission, be willing to change some methods used to meet changes in need
- Involving volunteers, parents, alumni and current students in program evaluation and fundraising will empower them and build useful skills
- Take the time to pick up the phone and follow up after meetings with other programs in order to create a network
- Building a program network can help avoid working at cross-purposes, as well as to provide additional resources to youth

Effective Leadership, Strategic Planning and Board Development

Participants summarized the issues discussed at the Roundtable, focusing on the challenges of effective leadership, including the demand for constant buy-in, staying in touch with the pulse of the community and the network of providers, and having emotional substance for the work. Suggestions for overcoming these challenges included:

- Getting everyone involved from early on, especially youth, by inviting them to conferences, strategic meetings, etc.
- Telling the same story of the program's mission in every context, only communicated differently for different audiences.
- Equipping youth with robust self-esteem and relationships that will serve as social capital, and knowledge of the systems to be able to make use of what is available

2014 NELSON CHAIR SPECIAL COLLOQUIUM

The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University of South Africa stands committed to carrying on Mandela's legacy by providing educational opportunities not only to its student body, but also to both impoverished and privileged youth in the surrounding communities. The achievement gap and resource inequities found between wealthy vs. township schools that serve 80% of the South African population were highlighted as persistent obstacles for students to accomplish their dreams. Through Paulo Freire's notion of "humanizing pedagogy," the University works to challenge the inequalities and restore hope for youth, communities and their schools.

In the University's efforts, the Centre for the Community School stands as a model for success. It aims "to contribute to educational improvement in South Africa by developing theoretical and practice-based approaches to school improvement that are relevant and responsive to the contextual realities of schools and the communities they serve." Rather than viewing the community and schools as their own, separate entities, the Centre for the Community School identifies schools as the center of education as well as the community. To re-create the schools that are needed, the Centre examines the instructional core of the schools, along with their capacity, resources, culture and organizational management, all within the context of the external environment.

Presenters noted that to improve schools, achieving a balance between the educational demands of the students and social needs of the parents and community is imperative. Engaging and partnering with parents and the community also ensures that the parents of all socio-economic backgrounds are given voices.

Per Dr. Witten, this also "breaks the stereotype that poor parents do not care about education." In addition to diminishing inequities, such engagement and dialogue are vital to uncovering what the community members desire for action; this process is conducive to buy-in and sustainability. At the Centre, numerous examples now exist to demonstrate the effectiveness of this synergy among community, school, and parents. They include: the addition of food gardens at schools, development of nutrition programs, creation of centers for parents to receive basic training on job applications, implementation of a library, and formation of a clinic on school property providing parents with the training to become clinical workers.

Presenters concluded that with continuous improvements, hope and despair can coexist in a dialectical relationship and will have a positive influence on re-building the schools and communities in South Africa.