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Strangers in Strange Lands

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The insightful monograph *Mistrusting Refugees* (Daniel & Knudsen 1995) reminds us of the central insight that people often mistrust refugees — strangers that they are — and that refugees, with good reason, often mistrust those they encounter in a new culture. This issue of trust lies at the heart of the refugee experience and is central to new forms of outreach scholarship that inevitably take us into unfamiliar cultural terrain.

As director of the Center for Family, Work, and Community at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, I've joined my academic colleagues in building partnerships with the growing refugee and immigrant communities in our region. I promote community-university collaborations and, through our University in the City Scholars Program, encourage faculty involvement in outreach scholarship. This is done, in part, by helping my colleagues to envision contributions they might make through their own research efforts or by joining interdisciplinary teams. In addition, I work with the community to identify faculty members with the right expertise, interest, and flexibility to serve as partners in framing and then tackling community problems. All of these activities are intended to further the university's mission of promoting sustainable regional economic development.

In the United States, one of the most significant changes in the last decade has been the growth in the numbers of refugees and immigrants making their homes here. The country is being remade by these demographic shifts, matched in this century only by the great influx in the early 1900s. Like many other cities, Lowell, Massachusetts, is grappling with these changes. Arguably the first industrialized city in the United States, Lowell is known for successive waves of immigrants who have come to the city since the early 1800s: French Canadians, Greeks, Portuguese, Italians, and Irish settled in Lowell to work in the mills. Lowell is home to the second-largest Cambodian community in the country; one-quarter of its residents are Southeast Asian, and there are growing communities of Sierra Leonians, Dominicans, and Brazilians.

Few professions, and their corresponding disciplines, remain unaffected by the changes taking place in communities such as Lowell. Schools face new challenges in meeting educational needs of pupils who speak languages such as Khmer, Russian, and Arabic,

and in responding to parents who sometimes hold vastly different views of the role schools should play. Health-care specialists confront new challenges in reshaping health-care delivery to meet needs of patients with expectations conditioned by experiences elsewhere, as Fadiman (1997) so eloquently illustrates. And, economic analysts such as Halter (1995) point to the importance of learning from the changes brought to local economies by entrepreneurial newcomers. As a result of challenges to standard theory and practice posed by changing demographics, academics in diverse disciplines — education, economics, health, and others — are confronted with many new opportunities.

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How, then, does a university begin to nourish these opportunities? An extended example taken from our environmental partnership illustrates opportunities that emerge when diverse disciplines work together and draw on shared concerns and abilities of the university and community.

University of Massachusetts Lowell (UML) is now a participant in the Southeast Asian Environmental Justice Partnership through which the community, the university, and primary health-care providers work to reduce environmental health threats. In Lowell, the presence of urban environmental problems directly affects people's lives, particularly those of refugees and immigrants who often live in the "leftover neighborhoods" in the poorest and most polluted parts of the city. Newcomers to this city — which has perhaps the longest history of industrial contamination in the country — bring with them agrarian lifestyles that emphasize fishing and gardening, only to encounter environmental problems that include water and air pollution resulting from hazardous waste sites and toxic releases. Many of these problems cannot be addressed by people from a single area of expertise. Yet the university had pre-existing strengths that had not yet been tapped, including expertise in geographic information systems, creating new methods of addressing water and soil contamination, developing community sustainability indicators, identifying ways for communities to reduce toxic wastes, and developing training models for involving youth and schools in environmental efforts.

My role in the partnership has been two-tiered. First, I've worked to bring faculty from diverse disciplines into the partnership and assist them in seeing the contributions that their specialties can make to an environmental collaboration with the refugee and immigrant community. Second, I've suggested how this outreach scholarship can return benefits to faculty research in the form of new hypotheses and new areas for investigation. At one level, the resulting partnership has concerned itself with concrete tasks, such

as information gathering and reducing environmental threats. At another level, the partnership has focused on capacity building in the university and community so these partners could, working together, better address the unequal distribution of environmental threats. At still another level, the partnership concerned the critique and revision of the way in which scientists engage their community partners. The result has been a partnership that has had a spreading web of influence on faculty roles of teaching, research, and service, as well as on the community at large. The following examples illustrate the range of issues that have come under examination in this partnership.

Conducting a Khmer and Lao Community Survey While Building Student, Faculty, and Community Capacity

Dr. Nina Coppens, a faculty member in the Nursing Department, brought health care expertise to the development of an environmental-risk-perception survey designed to understand the experiences of refugees that might result from exposures to environmental hazards. This important task of collecting baseline data and learning about health beliefs also was used as an opportunity to restructure the teaching of graduate students to emphasize in community research collaborations with refugees and immigrants. As Lowell's health-care providers of the future, the students gained first-hand experience with how differences in perspectives and lifestyles can make traditional health care unresponsive to community needs.

Combining Culture and the Assessment of Risk to Address Immediate Problems

Refugee leaders who did not expect to confront environmental problems are finding that they must do so in Lowell because of the pervasiveness of risks associated with these problems. One important contributor was Dr. Rafael Moure-Eraso, who teaches doctoral students the theory and application of environmental-risk assessment. He helped the partnership to examine the question of how risk assessment can be made useful to community decision-makers. He also critiqued approaches to the risk assessment that are not attentive to cultural experiences of community members. He worked with community partners to evaluate a contaminated mill that was under consideration as a possible new facility for a Southeast Asian organization. The structure had been donated by previous manufacturing owners with the proviso they could not be sued for any environmental contamination. Collaboration within the partnership enabled community leaders to shape the technical expertise they received to match their decision-making needs. This work also provided a model to examine other, potentially contaminated "brownfield sites" under consideration as locations for new immigrant businesses and community organizations.

Living in Multiple Worlds: Drawing from the Strengths of Immigrant Youth while Educating the Community

Environmental views of teens who have attended American schools are very different than their parents; involvement of this future generation of leaders is central to the sustainability of this partnership. Faculty from many departments collaborated with the River Ambassadors (the partnership's Southeast Asian teen group) to assist them in developing environmental-leadership skills and creating environmental programs that are responsive to ways in which rivers and canals are used by Southeast Asian families. These River Ambassadors extended their reach into high schools through their work with education faculty to identify ways urban environmental-justice issues could be incorporated into a revised high school science curriculum.

Searching for New Forms of Outreach that Combine Culture and Technical Information

As another means of increasing outreach scholarship and meeting community needs, the partnership is creating a cable television show for Southeast Asians on "Just in Time" environmental decision-making. The show focuses on the kinds of environmental decisions about homes, work, and recreation that refugees and immigrants make in their everyday lives, and suggests how the latest research information can be made useful to those decisions. This show, produced by the River Ambassadors for their peers and parents, combines the old and the new by including interviews with Buddhist elders that draw on their environmental wisdom with the use of geographic information systems and environmental web sites. Faculty members have been recruited to serve as technical experts for teen environmentalists. A show on asthma and air quality, for example, draws on technical assistance from Dr. Paul Jablon in the Graduate School of Education who specializes in the study of air quality as an educational issue. Dr. Jane Freimiller, a faculty member from the Philosophy Department, is coordinating elder interviews to be conducted by youth, that look for ways the increasingly Americanized youth can become less estranged from their elders by joining them in discussions about the environment.

Adapting Cultural Values to a New Homeland while Creating New Forms of Environmental Outreach

The partnership learned early that concerns about water and its purity were of greater urgency in the Southeast Asian community than were questions about air or soil contamination. The purity of water is central to many aspects of the culture, and was tied to recreation, ceremonies, economics, and jobs. Thus the partnership needed to find ways to build much of its outreach around water. For hundreds of years in Southeast Asia, water festivals along the Mekong River celebrated culture and water. In Lowell, the Merrimack

River has played a parallel role in its history. The partnership worked with other groups to recreate a traditional Southeast Asian Water festival, adding an environmental emphasis that recognized water as a gateway issue to other environmental topics. These festivals brought together many groups to consider water quality, but have done so through a cultural approach that recognizes the authority of the Southeast Asians. More than 8,000 people attended the festival the first year, and participation grew to 20,000 the second year. Environmental activities included aquaculture exhibits, water-quality testing, environmental passports for children, and demonstrations on which parts of contaminated fish are unsafe to eat. Wastewater specialists participated in pointing out the importance of river cleanups. All of the environmental outreach activities were intertwined with traditional dances, food, and boat races, and provided opportunities to build additional university-community collaborations.

As the above examples indicate, we have designed programs that address multiple needs and fulfill multiple goals. We attempted to meet targeted informational goals while building capacity for the future within and outside of academia. In the process, faculty and community residents have entered unfamiliar terrain. UML faculty brought with them technical expertise but little understanding of the Southeast Asian culture. Newcomers brought many models for social processes and the creation of change, but little familiarity with American research universities. Finding common ground and building a base of shared experience that creates trust continues to be crucial to this ongoing partnership and other initiatives.

We are finding that trust comes partly from staying power, and from making outreach scholarship central and not peripheral to the university. Often, to maintain these initiatives, one must design new mechanisms for encouraging long-term faculty involvement. At UML we created the University in the City Scholars program as an important mechanism for increasing university capacity and responsiveness (Forrant & Silka 1999). Under this program, recently honored by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development with a "Best Practice" Award, a semi-annual "Request for Partnership" solicits faculty involvement in a range of collaborative projects identified by a community-faculty team with knowledge of urgent community needs and areas of emerging faculty expertise. Faculty members who respond and are selected receive course releases to establish resource collaborations for purposes of redesigning courses, redirecting research interests, or beginning to develop products. After initial support for a semester or year, the collaboration sustains itself through resources that have been generated (e.g., course practices that create additional outreach resources, new coalitions among faculty and community leaders to carry out community-based research and intervention).

Recent University in the City Scholars include faculty from such diverse disciplines and departments as electrical engineering, developmental psychology, physical therapy, regional economic and social development, English, and management. Their "products" include evaluation guides that respond to specific program evaluation questions from the community, redesigned graduate courses that set up a "community request for partnership" process by which community groups can apply for technical assistance from course teams, new mentoring programs that link research and course content with emerging community needs, and grant proposals to bring faculty, students, and community leaders together to design a much-needed Family Resource Center.

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Implicit throughout this essay is the claim that outreach scholarship often depends on finding innovative ways to integrate teaching, research, and professional service and that these integrations often happen through community-university partnerships. Successful partnerships help faculty to draw from and build on one another's work. Yet, many puzzles remain to be solved about partnerships if they are to fulfill their promise as successful components of a university's mission. Elsewhere (Silka, 1999), I have written about the paradoxes that lie at the heart of many community-university partnerships. Contradictory claims about partnerships raise key questions: Are these activities peripheral to the academic endeavor or at its very heart? Do these activities represent a useful approach because they are robust, easy to create, and well-suited to faculty roles? Or do they draw faculty into unfamiliar terrain that fragments the professoriate and diverts attention from the knowledge generation function of universities? The increasingly common practice of emphasizing community-university partnerships forces us to confront questions about the nature of expertise, disciplinary allegiances, reward systems, local application versus national prominence, and the uneasy relationships urban universities maintain with their surrounding communities. Partnerships, I would argue, are powerful tools by which urban universities can examine questions of how knowledge will be produced and used. ■

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About the Author

Linda Silka (Ph.D., University of Kansas), directs the Center for Family, Work, and Community at the University of Massachusetts Lowell and is a professor in the interdisciplinary Department of Regional Economic and Social Development. From 1978 to 1997, she was a faculty member in the Department of Psychology. A social and community psychologist by training, Silka develops programs to create community and university partnerships. Recent partnerships include the Southeast Asian Environmental Justice Partnership started with funding from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, a Community Outreach Partnership Center begun through funding from the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Office of University Partnerships, and the Center for Immigrant and Refugee Community Leadership and Empowerment. Silka involves community residents, students, and faculty in using new technologies (such as community mapping using geographic information systems) to address long-standing community challenges. She also teaches graduate courses in community mapping, grant writing, and program evaluation, and consults widely on capacity-building strategies in program evaluation.