The Community Planning Center, College of Public and Community Service of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, uses community-oriented teaching to advance community development. The center defines community development broadly to include empowerment of people as well as improvement of material conditions in poor communities. Community projects directly involve groups of students in providing technical assistance and research to community groups and offer students the educational opportunity of grappling directly with the complex issues of community development.

A conversation with Melvyn Colón, Marie Kennedy, and Michael Stone

A Metropolitan University and Community Development

The College of Public and Community Service at the University of Massachusetts at Boston is a predominantly undergraduate college, offering nontraditional adult students a program combining liberal arts and professional education.

For more than a decade the college's Center for Community Planning has been at the forefront of efforts to provide students with the opportunity to work on part of their degree through participation in field projects serving communities and community organizations of the greater Boston area. Students acquire and demonstrate technical skills, learn to analyze the political aspects of community planning, and become aware of social values in planning processes.

Graduates of the center are employed at mid-level to senior positions in community-based service agencies, community development corporations, local governments, state agencies, and grassroots community organizations.

The following is a conversation about the Community Planning Center among three of its faculty members, Melvyn Colón (C), Marie Kennedy (K), and Michael Stone (S)

Defining Community Development

Marie Kennedy (K): In thinking about the college and community development, there are a lot of things that we do to promote community development. Community development is enhanced the more the university and the community are interwoven. That means where the students come from, where they go to, community leaders coming in to teach, students and faculty going out to work on projects, research being grounded in community issues...all of that. To the extent that you can maximize the permeability then you're doing a better job in terms of supporting community development.

Michael Stone (S): But, it's not a list of distinct things that you could do. In coming together, these things create a kind of dynamic that's more than just doing one or two of them by themselves.

Melvyn Colón (C): And I think that's the place to start in this conversation. What do we mean by community and what do we mean by development? We should start with some basic definitions, both in general and in relationship to what we try to do to promote community development through our work here at the college. Then, as we talk about that work we'll have set a context for understanding it.

When we think about the communities we want to work with, we're talking about particular disenfranchised groups, communities that don't have political power, or that have less economic power or opportunities than other communities throughout the region or throughout the area. And, by development, we mean more than just bricks and mortar or specific job creation. We take a broader look at developing people's capacity to intervene in their own environment or to bring justice to their lives.

K: And, as you say, Melvyn, we're not just talking about development as meaning getting more things. It seems to me that community development is still commonly understood in a very material sense: development of jobs, development of housing, development of products, infrastructure....

I think we're making an important departure from that definition. The nature of this departure is central to the types of projects and work we see the metropolitan university doing in terms of community development. We see community development very much as a development of a sense of community, as a development of community ties, as a development of people within their communities taking control over the planning and governmental processes that affect their lives.

We're talking about working in community development in ways that are basically in the interests of people who have been left out of effective decision-making, for one reason or another. Usually, it's a matter of economic oppression—it may be combined with race, gender, and other kinds of issues as well. And we work with groups with whom we can share a certain basic set of values around equity, equality, and so forth. We've also tended to work with groups that are unfunded, underfunded or cannot easily acquire research and technical assistance without our help.

S: We're working for communities whose voices aren't even heard in public arenas, let alone versus powerful private interests. And, in working to

empower people in these communities, we try to do so in ways that occur not at the expense of other members. That's why it's *community* development, not simply individual development. It is not simply hoping that people themselves will be able to achieve a sense of personal satisfaction, accomplishment, better standard of living but that it be done in some shared way, that recognizes the collective interest.

- K: This raises the point of what a difference it makes who your students are on the projects. The fact that most of our students are from working-class backgrounds, and are diverse racially and ethnically, makes it more possible to confront some of those issues than, for example, the students I had at the Harvard School of Design.
- C: We've sketched out a brief definition of community development—looking at both who the community is and what we think constitutes development. Given this definition, it seems to me that our work here at the college relates to community development in a number of ways. Some aspects would relate to any metropolitan university; others are more particularly related to the type of students we serve, our particular faculty and curriculum.

Community Planning Students and Community Development

- K: The first thing I think of is access to higher education for members of the communities we're most interested in serving. At CPCS, we've particularly emphasized access to groups that have historically been seriously underrepresented in institutions of higher learning—people with uneven academic backgrounds, women, older people, people of color. We actively recruit such groups; we have a policy of open admissions; and we gear our curriculum and select our faculty with an eye to overcoming the sociological and psychological barriers to academic success faced by many of our students and essentially, to celebrate diversity.
- C: Of course, college education in any subject area for people historically denied access to higher education, will contribute to community development in a broad sense. Just the fact that graduates get training and the credentials needed to get jobs with decent wages means that you're helping individuals to improve themselves. But, here in the college, and especially in the Center for Community Planning, our curriculum—the types of activities and jobs for which we're preparing people—is more directly tied into community development. So, our students are not only coming largely from communities we wish to serve, but our graduates are going to work on community development issues, whether for community groups like community development corporations or for public agencies.
- K: I think that the biggest success actually is in the transformation of the students themselves. And here, where the students are the same people as those in communities we seek to empower, that's of critical

importance. Our students, through their education here, their exposure to

The biggest success is in the transformation of the students themselves.

working on projects, their exposure to students from different racial groups, really become much more powerful in their own communities or in community development corporations (CDC's) or wherever it is that they go to work.

- C: Maybe we should mention some examples of student-initiated work in communities that also was used for academic credit.
- K: The student welfare rights group that is still active in the college actually came out of a community service project we did with the Coalition for Basic Human Needs. This was when there were threats to AFDC recipients becoming fulltime students, so it was an issue that was of critical importance to a group of our own students. Not all, but many of the students who worked on this project were themselves AFDC recipients. In building the organization and doing community outreach, students were able to demonstrate a variety of academic credits. And, they were successful in winning a lot of their specific goals; they even produced an award-winning radio show.
- S: There are also individual experiences. Lots of what students do when it's not part of a group project doesn't go anywhere, but some of it is directly related to things that people are actually involved with. J.C. is probably a fine example of that. The project that she did around AIDS and hospice development really was where she was moving and really helped her develop skills and move into that kind of work.
- C: This college provides opportunities to suburban women who have raised families and who want to come back to school and get their education. This school accommodates them very well, and they then go back to their communities and often fulfill some community development functions.

We might ordinarily concentrate on field projects and research in more urban communities and especially in communities of color. But, we provide access to people who are not necessarily from the kinds of communities in which we do projects, so this is a broader community than we talked about earlier. We provide access to people who are non-traditional students. Some of them are from inner-city, low-income communities of color. But also some are older people from suburban communities. These people go back to those diverse kinds of places and make a difference—in advocating for fair housing or for affordable housing in their communities, as one student does, for instance, in Hull.

S: When we use examples of students we think of them as using the skills that they got in community planning to act as planners and advocates, around the issues in the communities they come from. This clearly is a form of community development and a form of access for these communities. But is our concept even broader?

- C: My sense of access is: Are they being provided with an opportunity that they wouldn't get otherwise?—That no place else out there is able to provide them? As long as a student goes and obtains a particular skill in a university and goes back to the community, and contributes to the family or to the community, that's community development, regardless of whether it's public and community service or something else.
- K: I would agree with that because, in general, community development is the development of people's capacity to take control of their lives and of their communities, to make informed decisions and essentially, almost in an old-fashioned way, to become responsible, informed, critical citizens.

In fact, there are two pieces about graduates that flow very easily from the access issue. One aspect of community development is that if you have been successful on access, then you have raised the level of critical thinking of a lot of people who otherwise wouldn't have had that happen. The other issue is what jobs or roles people have been trained for; this begins to point more specifically to careers in public and community service.

Among the "stars," our graduates include a whole series of city councilors—two in Malden, one in Boston, one in Quincy, Somerville. We have current students as well as graduates in the Mayor's Office, Public Facilities, and the Redevelopment Authority in Boston. We have people who have been town planners, housing authority commissioners, conservation commissioners, even while students who continue after graduating, as well as those who have moved into such positions after graduating. We have tenant organizers, workplace organizers, advocates for linguistic minorities, job training specialists, community agency administrators.

- S: I want to add another dimension of access. The institution is not only responsible for recruiting and enrolling people from underserved communities, but provides, as this college tries to, forms of cultural, psychological and sociological support.
- K: It's more than simply academic support or preparatory courses or critical skills.... It involves looking at access on all levels, including certain basic skills, and considering the cultural, psychological issues that either attract or discourage.
- S: ...from curriculum to styles of teaching, to when classes are given, to student support services, to the faculty composition, to the kinds of facilities, i.e., all of the ways in which the university conceptualizes its population and how it functions in order to serve those people.

What should a CPCS graduate look like? A graduate should be competent, confident and purposeful. Many of the people who have received awards from this center and other centers are people who have shown impressive growth in self-confidence. What they have gained is not simply a set of skills that they have developed or enhanced or improved, but a

sense of who they are and sense of confidence about their capacity to do things. K.C. came in with an interest in women's issues and community issues, but was very insecure about her knowledge and her skills and felt that no one would take her seriously, and she didn't take herself very

Graduates have gained a sense of who they are and of confidence about their capacity to do things.

seriously. Where she has gone professionally both in terms of the stature she has acquired as well as her sense of presence is most impressive. She is a manifestation of community development in her own person as well as in terms of the actual professional work she does. That's an exciting example of how

our graduates, in many instances, gain perspectives that are not part of any formal curriculum yet are really powerful expression of community development.

Another rather different example of the growth that takes place here, came up in a conversation the other day with a new student. This is a woman who, unlike K.C., has been very, very competent in her job, very assertive. She's an aide to a state senator and has been his campaign manager for the last several campaigns. She was discouraged about the field of planning, having before her as an example the planning that goes on at the State House and she was thinking of studying something else. As we discussed our curriculum, our approach to planning and community development here at the college, it hit her that, yes, people she was working with at the State House were very good at planning a campaign or planning how to get a bill through, but that kind of planning left out the essential ingredient of really getting the decision-making power to the people whose lives are most affected by those plans. She's now considering a job change, but she's definitely re-energized about her education and future possibilities working in community development. Our curriculum, however imperfectly, does address a part of community development that I think is not addressed adequately in many programs.

C: Few schools actually prepare students for a lot of the jobs that need to be done in community organizations. This is one of those places that does that.

From my experience as a director of a community development corporation, it was very difficult to attract people qualified to do community development, who were at the same time sensitive to the issues of empowering communities, people capable of working on community development in such a way that built within people the capacity to continue the work. There are graduate programs that produce community development professionals, and CDC's can try to attract graduates of these programs but it creates some difficulties for the organizations. One problem is that many graduates don't intend to make a commitment to Boston, so that the achievements can

be very transitory. And frankly, their education confers on them such debts that they really need more money to be able to work on an ongoing basis. If you can get people out of a metropolitan university [with a B.A.] who can perform some of these functions, it would be a real contribution to community work.

Legitimating Community Leadership

K: Another rather unique way in which we contribute to community development is the formal legitimation we provide of the expertise of community leaders and of the work of community organizations.

For one thing, we frequently bring in community leaders as adjunct faculty to teach in areas in which they work every day. Lots of times they don't have the credentials that university teachers are "supposed" to have, but what we're saying in hiring them is that we value their expertise; we're saying that the work they do, what they think, is important and credible and that their practical experience is something we need and don't necessarily get from somebody just because they have a doctorate! This "stamp of approval"—validation—on the part of the university often gives community leaders credibility with government and funding agencies and even with their own constituency. And, of course, we gain firsthand insight into critical community issues and "state of the art" community development practice.

C: We also credit the importance of what a lot of community groups are doing by using local community struggles as case studies in our teaching and bringing in speakers from local community organizations to our classrooms and forums. It can be quite a "shot in the arm" for a group to read about their local struggle, to see it being used as a teaching tool for others and to have community leaders "showcased" at forums.

Faculty Research and Professional Practice

S: Which brings up another way in which we relate to community development—through our faculty, who they are and what they speak and write about.

Just as we've tried to balance our curriculum in terms of theory and practice, we've always emphasized having a faculty which is balanced, in terms of practitioners and the more traditional scholarly university professors. In the career centers, in particular, we really emphasize having teachers who've had some actual experience in the field.

K: In fact, nearly all fulltime teachers in community planning were practitioners first who came to teach. Lots of us began as part-time teachers, brought in from community groups and public agencies because of our experience in the field. I started teaching one course at night in "Housing

Design and Site Evaluation" when I was the director of planning for the [Boston] Mayor's Office of Housing. And, Melvyn, before you came here on a fulltime basis, you taught one course for several semesters while you were the director of *Nuestra Communidad*.

- S: In fact, in hiring faculty, we've always argued for valuing community planning experience equally with academic credentials and not necessarily requiring traditional academic credentials, even for permanent faculty. For example, while both you and Melvyn have lots of experience, neither of you has a Ph.D. and my Ph.D. isn't even in a related field!
- C: What this means is that we have closer ties with various community groups and issues than is usually true in a university. Our professional

Our professional practice and research are tied directly into the immediate work of local community groups.

practice and research is tied directly into the immediate work of local community groups. Although none of us are directly working for community groups anymore, we all serve on community boards, provide technical assistance, provide credible advocacy for community groups by being "expert witnesses" at hearings, do formal research, produce profes-

sional reports as well as books and articles that directly help community groups and promote community development.

- K: The body of work that I've done with others over the years on Roxbury community development was actually the extension of work begun as a field project. We were just trying to understand what was going on in that community, where it had come from and where it was going, so that we would know how to more concretely deliver technical assistance to the community groups. But what that series of papers and articles ended up doing was, not only providing that kind of guide, but also it gave a certain kind of legitimacy and weight and authority to the community organizations that we chose to write about.
- C: It's very important defining those concepts; it elevates the groups and places them in the proper context and creates a consciousness within the group about their purpose.

Also, the kind of research that you do, Michael, in looking at the issue of housing affordability, it has been very important to the work that we did at *Nuestra* and to the Fenway Community Development Center. We embraced that work because it provided us information about the problems that the families for whom we were advocating were having in trying to maintain a residence in our neighborhoods.

S: There is a tension that may be worth exploring a little in this discussion. For the most part, the work that I've done since being in an academic institution has included direct community research. By and large, I've not published in refereed journals, by choice, because that's not

the audience I'm trying to reach. The issue of audience remains central. It's not only the content of the research but the questions of "for whom" and "for what purpose," which determine both the medium as well as the style in which it's written. Some of my stuff, of course, does get read by academics. But most of it is either in non-academic journals or in books. and I speak at virtually no academic conferences, although I do speak at lots of conferences, mostly ones of community development activists. Some of these people may have academic jobs, but for the most part they are people who work for community development corporations or local agencies or nonprofit groups or advocacy groups. And these conferences are ones where activist-oriented academics can learn, as well as share their own research. They can get oriented toward and stay in touch with a lot of the community issues beyond the locality that we are situated in. So. that question of audience, I think, remains crucial, if we think about who we're doing it for. And it becomes a real dilemma in the institution, to the extent that the reward system, the promotion system is based upon the production of work for dissemination through certain media, which, from the point of view of community development, are not the appropriate media. Dissemination through non-traditional media doesn't, in any way, devalue the intellectual legitimacy, the rigor, the significance of the ideas.

K: I think we've won a partial acceptance of professional reports, publications in non-refereed journals, and presentations at non-academic conferences as legitimate forums for disseminating our work. It has been harder to win acceptance of the more unusual ways of getting our work out there and ways where even the authorship is a bit clouded. I'm thinking of the difficulty we had in getting my exhibit "Preserving Low-Income Housing in San Francisco" accepted as a publication or whatever for my fourth year review. I'd coordinated the exhibit for fifteen or so community housing development corporations; it was shown in a lot of places and had a big impact on the city and state historic preservation groups, but....was it really my work, was it equivalent to a publication? Now that I've got tenure, I feel more free to do this kind of work-last year I coordinated the "Roots of the Rainbow" exhibit and worked on the slideshow for the State of the Neighborhoods Convention. More than sixty community activists worked on these and it was a very empowering experience for everybody, getting in touch with community history that way. But, if I'd been worried about personnel reviews, there would have again been questions of authorship, quality, accuracy—things that weren't so important to what I was trying to achieve....empowerment, which is always hard to measure.

S: We've come to understand that while the media through which people disseminate should not be limited or necessarily even particularly emphasize the traditional academic media of dissemination, there is a value in people sharing and communicating in some way beyond the direct experience that they have individually as professionals. Even in this kind of an institution, dissemination of our work is part of the role that comes with being in a university. You don't have to publish in journals but still, you want to disseminate in some way or other.

Field Projects: Teams of Students Working Under Faculty Supervision

- K: It seems to me that all of these ways of promoting community development come together on the field projects we've done over the past ten to twelve years.
- C: How did the center get started doing projects? Not that many planning schools have this kind of program anymore...locally, I guess Tunney Lee's "Total Studio" at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is somewhat similar.
- S: We realized that while we required students to do individual work in communities, a lot of the students weren't in situations that lent themselves directly to doing professional community work in actual community settings.

The original conception was fairly general: one or a group of faculty working with a group of students to learn and acquire academic credit while at the same time providing service to the community—we didn't develop it in any great detail. That's the point where Marie came in...

K: Well, I was hired largely on the basis of the work I had done [as assistant director] with the Urban Field Service at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. This was a field project program which Chester Hartman founded at HGSD around 1967, one which became a model for a number of planning schools throughout the country. The design of the community service program here owes a lot to Hartman's Urban Field Service, as do all the subsequent programs we've developed...There were important differences, but these mostly rested on the differences in students. That was where I saw a real opportunity here at CPCS that hadn't existed, certainly not at Harvard University in the late 1960s. But the basic program design rested upon the notion of teams of students working under faculty supervision around research and technical assistance projects defined by community organizations. And these community organizations were to be mainly those unable to otherwise afford technical assistance. Students would do their learning and get academic credit for their participation, faculty would get teaching credit for their supervision. At Harvard, we actually hired working professionals to supervise the projects because, by and large, we found that people at Harvard were too academic to be able to directly supervise the projects. This was another opportunity at CPCS—most of the faculty had professional and community experience which better enabled them to be involved in projects.

In coming here, being familiar with that model, it really took me a while to figure out what a difference it made that we were doing this on the undergraduate level, that we were dealing with adult students and not with young people who had mostly gone through college and directly into graduate school, which was the typical graduate student that we had been working with. And, what a difference it did make that the students here—adult and undergraduate—were also mostly working jobs, had families, were mostly of a working class background and so forth.

It seemed clear right at the start that it didn't have the same educational value to simply take the students out of the classroom and expose them to real world problems—most CPCS students are only too familiar with real world problems. So, that couldn't be the main academic rationale for the program here, as it had been at Harvard. And, it was hard to work it out with the competency-based system of credit that we have. You couldn't simply say to students: "Well, you're going to have credit just for doing a project,

whatever the project is that the community group is defining." We could at Harvard, because students were getting "studio" credit, where exactly what skills and knowledge would be involved wasn't specified. Here, each competency statement makes it pretty clear what a student is supposed to learn and demonstrate. So, I had to intervene more in exactly what the project would be—had to

Mesh together the needs of a community group, the skills and interests of faculty, and the specific educational needs of students.

sort of mesh together the needs of a community group, the skills and interests of faculty and the specific educational needs of students. I couldn't just help the community group to define their project, then hire a supervisor who knew about that and grant the vague "studio" credit, as I'd done at Harvard.

S: I think that the significance, not only of the students, but of the curriculum here has been a very important ingredient. From the time that we designed the program, we recognized that our first responsibility was the educational one for the students. While we wanted to do community service and we wanted to fulfill service obligations of the college, the center, and the university toward these communities, at the same time, our first professional obligation was to meet the educational needs of our students. Given the competency-based system and the kinds of students that we have, we always had be sure to select projects with a scope and a substance that would make it possible for the students to acquire the skills represented by the competencies. I think that has posed difficulties at various times, because community situations often don't readily lend themselves to that....We have had some projects that worked better that way, where there were more precisely defined pieces of technical assistance, where we could negotiate

with a community group that we can do A or B, but nothing else, because it doesn't fit the curriculum, it doesn't fit the educational needs of the students, it doesn't fit other restrictions that we have.

K: And, there has always been a presumption that we're going to work with less well-funded or unfunded, more grassroots organizations...there are real educational pluses to working with these kinds of organizations. But, it's harder as a teacher, as a supervisor of those projects, because they're less predictable and the kind of supervision and linkage you're going to have with the community group is less consistent.

At the same time, these aren't the sort of organizations that most students as graduates are going to get a job with, because they don't have jobs and they sort of come and go. So, on one level, it's the best opportunity to find out how groups like that work, how you assess the needs in a relatively unorganized situation, and how you remain sensitive to that when you're a graduate of the program and working for a more established agency. It's usually on that level that the most compelling, conflicting, and critical urban problems begin to emerge.... Established agencies are generally carrying out programs and projects that have already been fought for and won by people coming together in less structured organizations. But at the grassroots level, people are really struggling around the essential questions—who gets what, when, where, how.... This hasn't been formalized into programs yet. So there's a kind of learning that goes on in that exposure that's unique, that you can't get elsewhere. But it means that it's a lot harder to do these projects.

S: With these kinds of projects, where interactions between students and community are unpredictable, the faculty role becomes especially critical and a lot of the contact depends upon the faculty person. While we try to facilitate students building those relationships, it still tends to work out that it's the faculty person who has most of the contact with the staff or with the leadership of the community group. And, we try to bring the students out to community meetings, we try to bring some of the community people here for discussions, but there's always constraints on both ends. It's like this double-ended funnel; in a way it ends up being a couple of people from the community group and the faculty who have to keep the connections.

The truth is that most of the people who are in these communities don't have the time if they even have the inclination, for the intensive involvement the students take on. That small group of people who run the risk of burn-out, who devote themselves in a generally unpaid way over a long period of time, are the ones who really become the most confident, strong, articulate, effective people. For the majority of people that just doesn't happen. All of us wish it would happen more that way, much more broadly, but as long as people do not have enough money, have unstable jobs, family stresses and all those other kinds of things, it's always going to be limited.

C: But, I believe that a general consciousness is slowly emerging in each of the service agencies around the city, in each of the communities. Directors and staff people, and even board members, are beginning to talk more and more about it. Do we just keep providing these services? What is our role in providing services? When do people's lives improve? Where do we get development out of this? How is it exactly that people begin to own their process?

At the Boston Housing Partnership, for instance, when I was working at Nuestra Communidad Development Corporation, they had already finished their first project. It was fully occupied; there were over 500 units of housing in that first project. They had already hired management companies, and they were looking at the records of the management companies in those particular projects and the problems that had already arisen with vandalism. They decided that they were going to hire tenant liaisons. And the first tenant liaison program was really people who were intermediaries between the management company and the development organization. But at those meetings there were people saying, well, you can have the development and you can have these systems in place, but at some point attention has to be focused on people actually going the next step, beyond just living in better housing, to becoming empowered around that housing. Keeping organizations alive to be vigilant about the preservation of a fair relationship with the development organization and a lot of other issues.

K: These are much broader questions than we can answer through our projects, but I think we're making a small contribution...through the various ways we work to promote community development, we're helping to sketch out the answers.

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- 74
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