Community Engagement Roundtable Series

Meeting Summary
May 3, 2017

Topic:
Building Successful Community Partnerships

Speaker:
Dr. Ron Cox (Associate Professor & Associated Director for Community Engagement, Center for Family Resilience)

Summary:
In this roundtable, Cox discussed his experience developing and maintaining relationships with community partners in the Oklahoma City and Tulsa areas. Shortly after arriving in Oklahoma, Cox—who is fluent in Spanish and previously lived for a number of years in Venezuela—reached out to the local Hispanic community. He noted that he had no specific agenda for these early conversations and, instead, was primarily interested in learning about his new neighbors. Over several months, he attended a number of community events and had many conversations with local residents. As part of one of these conversations with a community leader, he indicated his experience with and interest in the academic and social experience of Hispanic youth. The community leader quickly volunteered to introduce Cox to the administration of Oklahoma City Public Schools and Tulsa Public Schools, relationships that soon led to the creation of the Juntos Program (click here for more on the program). Cox argued that while other OSU faculty had consistently little success in their requests for data from area school districts, he was more successful because he approached the schools as part of a local partnership.

During the conversation, Cox recommend that faculty looking to create local partnerships do the following:
- **Learn to see us through their eyes.** To many Oklahomans, OSU is a big institution with deep pockets that always gets what it wants. For some people, OSU therefore presents exciting opportunities for collaboration, but for others, OSU may be a bully, hoarding resources and crowding out others’ views. No matter your own view, be sensitive to how others see OSU.
- **Don’t have meetings, build relationships.** You can often get more done over a beer at 5:30 pm than you can in many meetings. Many community groups are small organizations of passionate people who are used to working in both formal and informal settings. Help group members trust you by meeting and working with them in ways they are familiar with.
- **Be sincerely interested in your potential partners’ passion.** Most community groups have clear, practical, and often difficult goals that powerfully and personally motivate their members. Talk with group members about those goals and how you and others at OSU can help the group succeed. Share in the joy of a community’s successes as well as the distress of a community’s challenges.
- **Let others take credit whenever possible.** Letting a community member or group take all or part of the credit for a partnership activity will likely make them more enthusiastic about and committed to your partnership. Look for opportunities to share credit in ways that will not affect your larger professional goals such as future journal articles or tenure documents.
- **Teach people how to “breach” OSU.** Help community members and groups know how to begin a conversation with OSU. Identify faculty and staff members with interests similar to the community’s and arrange a conversation.

- **Find a local guide.** When you first enter a new community, recognize and respect its preexisting structure and practices. Find a group member who is willing to introduce you to key community members, expected behavior, and common ideas.

- **Build transition mechanisms into partnerships from the start.** At all points, design partnerships that can be entirely transferred to community. This will help ensure that the positive work of your partnership will continue after you move to other projects or locations.

- **Be a liaison between the university and the community.** Individuals and organizations on and off-campus may vary considerably from one another in their communication and work practices. Translate the practices, goals, and limitations of each group to improve unity within the partnership.

- **Don’t make promises you can’t keep.** Community groups are often small, have relatively few resources, and face firmer deadlines than are common in academic settings. Such groups therefore often have little room for error.