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Organizing a Community Coalition: Lessons Learned from Lincoln, Nebraska

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By 1998, a total of ten universities – including the University of Nebraska-Lincoln -- were awarded “A Matter of Degree” (AMOD) grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to enact a comprehensive environmental plan for reducing high-risk drinking among college students. The grant, administered by the American Medical Association, came with three requirements: Institutions receiving the grant had to communicate publicly about the effort to reduce high-risk drinking on their campus and community, their strategies had to be created from the environmental model, and they had to utilize a campus-community coalition to create and accomplish their work. All three requirements were challenging. Many institutions believed that publicly admitting alcohol problems would be a public relations nightmare. In 1996, the environmental model had little to no evidence of effectiveness for college alcohol issues, though the concept had been researched and applied in other contexts. And most college Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) staff members had little to no experience in the kind of community organizing needed to create and sustain a coalition that combined campus and community members to address issues beyond the university borders.

There is growing evidence that utilizing a community coalition to accomplish environmental change is an effective strategy. The recommendation by the 2002 NIAAA

Task Force on College Drinking is certainly supported by the success of NU Directions, other AMOD projects, and campus-community coalitions across the country. Though the effort in Lincoln, Nebraska was accelerated by several factors, including town/gown coalition-building that had begun years before the AMOD program and coalition leadership that was well versed in community organizing, the process of developing a committed group of stakeholders, building consensus across diverse perspectives, and sustaining momentum among members for long-term change remained a constant challenge. In this essay, we will share a variety of the lessons learned about building a successful coalition to address environmental issues within a campus-community. Some of these lessons are no more than discoveries of “truth” about coalition work. Others transform easily into specific recommendations for community organizers, based on our evaluation of actions taken that proven themselves to be successful. Others lessons came the hard way as we faced failure and asked ourselves, “If we could do it all over again, how would we do it differently?”

Lesson One: A Core Philosophy Must Be Shared Across the Coalition About Coalition Work

The first lesson learned is one of those “truths” that has proven itself time and again in our work: In order for communities to organize successfully, there must be a core philosophy shared among the organizers and members that serves as a foundation to “how we do the business.” The NU Directions philosophy surrounded community dialogue, collaboration, and consensus-building, though there are other models for organizing. It is important that some philosophy, and the way in which it helps coalition

members fulfill their roles in the partnership, become a key part of any orientation. For NU Directions, that philosophy surrounds four key issues:

1. Everyone with a stake in the alcohol environment in Lincoln, Nebraska must have a place at the table.

One of the critical mistakes we've seen in communities addressing alcohol issues is that the only people sitting at the table are those who share the same perspective or experience about alcohol problems. Unfortunately, these are not always the individuals or groups that actually control or influence the environment. Though building consensus is much more difficult with diverse perspectives represented in discussions, it actually yields less time spent implementing strategies, as the people most likely to oppose implementation have already worked out their differences in the planning process.

Perhaps the greatest area of challenge to this philosophy is the inclusion of local hospitality retailers. Yet, including these individuals forced those in the coalition with purely AOD, enforcement, or educational backgrounds to consider the financial implications of policies on local business owners, many of whom are subjected to constant scrutiny and regulation, operate in an industry with excessive employee turnover and business failure rates, and are often inexperienced in corporate management. Placing a college bar owner next to a police officer or prevention specialist often led to long discussions and multiple disagreements but also yielded new perspectives for everyone involved and collaborative solutions that everyone could embrace and support.

A second group critical to the process are students who represent all aspects of the campus lifestyle. Many students who are initially attracted to the coalition's goals do not

share the perspectives of those students who both engage in and support the current alcohol environment. Students living in the environment have a significant stake in the decisions that are made and are more likely to feel the impacts of new policies and increased enforcement. As campus riots across the country have demonstrated, initiating an aggressive enforcement strategy without consensus from these groups yields more frustration (and public criticism) in the long run.

NU Directions began with a Student Advisory Council that enabled students to discuss issues and bring recommendations to the larger coalition while also serving as a sounding board for coalition plans. Two years into implementation, the coalition was well past its “planning” mode, and the Advisory Council was dissolved. But students remained a critical element, and representatives from Athletics, Greek Affairs, Housing, Student Involvement, University Program Council, student government and other populations remained a vital part of coalition workgroups.

Establishing a coalition that is naturally inclusive isn’t easy. Not every stakeholder is naturally collaborative, and territorialism can also become a barrier to group work. Organizers will need to return to this philosophy often and help individuals overcome the tendency to operate independently. A second challenge to the inclusive process is that it’s easy to frame stakeholders who do not share similar values – especially hospitality owners and students --within a “square table” perspective that assumes opposition and leads to power struggles rather than consensus. One of our student representatives was cited for a disorderly house violation through an effort created by the coalition to reduce high-risk parties in the neighborhood and began a public tirade against the role of enforcement focused around the Chief of Police, who also

served as the coalition's co-chair. The local media immediately assumed that the leadership of the coalition would "remove" the student from the group and were surprised to hear the opposite response when organizers insisted that the student provided an essential perspective for the coalition. Organizers must be willing to forgo their own bias and encourage others in the group to do the same. Every perspective may not be embraced, but must be considered in order for consensus to occur.

The easiest way to find out if all stakeholders are represented is to ask several simple questions:

- Who would be involved or impacted by this action or strategy?
- Who would most likely oppose this action or strategy?
- Who could best implement this action or strategy?
- Who (of those answers) is not currently sitting at the table? Why not?

There are times when the answer to the "why not" question is sufficient enough to keep some stakeholders from the table; individuals who are simply oppositional and unwilling to consider the perspectives of others or those who are only marginally impacted or involved may cause more harm than good. Too large of a group can also be potentially ineffective. But the fact remains that key stakeholders must be present if true consensus is to be gained, regardless of whether they initially support the effort or not.

Inclusive organizing also means that the coalition membership becomes "fluid." NU Directions often utilizes smaller, time-limited task forces composed of the stakeholders most impacted by the strategy and not necessarily the typical departmental or agency representatives that Tom Casady, Chief of the Lincoln Police and co-Chair of the coalition, refers to as "the usual suspects." Some of these individuals are part of the

larger coalition; many are not. Some of our coalition members serve on a “call if needed” basis with issues that require specific political clout or special expertise. Others are consistently involved due to their roles at the university or in the community. This fluidity allows the coalition to quickly respond to a variety of needs, and also broadens the uniformity of message across the community. It requires organizers, however, to constantly and consistently orient new members about their roles within the coalition or specific project.

This leads to an essential second agreement about how we do business as a coalition:

2. There are multiple motivations for changing the environment that supports high-risk drinking among college students.

Not everyone involved in the effort shares the same passion or interest in keeping college students from the harms caused by high-risk drinking. Often, changes to a high-risk environment yields a variety of positive outcomes that may not be directly related to the health behavior of college students but serves the cause just as well

An example best illustrates this point. One of the objectives of the coalition was to change the style and form of the state driver’s license, which was easy to alter or reproduce and increased the use of “fake” identification by underage UNL students to gain access to alcohol. Changing this aspect of the environment required the passage of a legislative bill through the state unicameral. When identifying state-wide partners that could suggest, sponsor, and support the bill, the coalition needed to go beyond the issue of college drinking (and even underage drinking) to make the point that the taxpayer

money used to create a secure digital drivers license system across the state was worthwhile.

Of course, the coalition did its work to present the issue of false identification as significant to the environment that supports high-risk drinking for college students and other people under the legal drinking age. For the vast majority of Nebraskans, however, the growing concern over identity theft was a far stronger motivator than college or underage drinking, so the coalition seized on the opportunity to embrace partners who were concerned with identity theft issues. This tripled the number of supporters for the bill, as well as the media interest in the bill. The state police association supported the bill solely on the identity theft issue alone (though they were also concerned about underage drinking). The Nebraska Retail Grocer's Association supported the bill for the impact it would have on cash-checking schemes that had plagued grocery stores across the state as well as reducing the risk of selling to minors. The hospitality industry supported the bill because they saw themselves – not underage drinkers – as the victims of false identification when they were duped by a fake ID, cited by the police for serving a minor, and forced to pay a fine by the state's Liquor Control Commission. The state's Department of Transportation saw the new system as both a way to catch up to the rest of the country (Nebraska was one of five without a digital system in place) and a way to make a license system significantly more efficient. Even citizens liked the new system better out of pure vanity: digital photographs could be easily and inexpensively retaken so no one was stuck with a "bad" picture on their license.

All of these motivations were included in media kits and legislative briefings supplied by NU Directions, though few of them reflected the coalition's overarching goal

of reducing high-risk drinking among UNL students. The bill passed quickly and became law, and the outcome for the coalition – making access to alcohol more difficult for UNL students who are under the legal age -- was accomplished.

3. The harms caused by alcohol consumption in Lincoln and UNL and the effort to reduce those harms are matters of “shared responsibility.”

There are two overriding concepts found in the term “shared responsibility.” The first defines the drinking behaviors of college students as “shared” between individual choice and environmental influence; while every student at UNL has the responsibility to make the healthy choices about their individual alcohol consumption, the surrounding environment is also responsible for influencing those choices. The second concept of the term defines the responsibility of *addressing* and *changing* that environment as shared across all stakeholders of the campus-community.

Having a foundational agreement across all members of the coalition on both concepts is essential. While everyone has a voice at the table, it is equally important that every stakeholder also understands their responsibility and role in creating and solving the current alcohol problems in the campus-community. Discussions that return to philosophical arguments surrounding individual responsibility versus environmental cause can often derail strategic planning or implementation.

There are constant opportunities for these arguments to re-emerge as new aspects of the environment are discussed. A simple process of reviewing UNL alcohol policies among the campus environment workgroup was extended for months when new student representatives tried to assert the need to let “students decide for themselves” about their

alcohol use. Rarely do these repeated arguments yield much progress toward accomplishing the goals of the coalition, however.

Generating commitment to the “shared responsibility” concept has proven to be an ongoing task of coalition leadership. New coalition members must be oriented toward the philosophy before entering workgroups or coalition discussions; the concept must be reframed often in newsletter articles, presentations, and public media work. Key spokespersons for the coalition need to use the term regularly in their conversations with individuals, groups, and the media. Coalition staff even created graphic models of the concept to help visual learners understand the idea. Most importantly, however, every incident on campus or in the community -- from the neighborhood party that went out of control to the brawl at one of the local bars -- has to be framed so that environmental elements are seen as contributing to the alcohol-related problem. Media spokespersons who respond on behalf of the coalition must have the shared responsibility framework close in mind in order to discuss any incident from this perspective.

4. There is a common vision of the ideal environment that is shared among all members of the NU Directions coalition, regardless of perspective.

Centering coalition work on a common vision of the “ideal environment” has proven essential for both large and small initiatives. It never fails that when you ask a group of students, bar owners, alumni, faculty, administrators, community leaders, police officers, and prevention specialists what they think we should do to solve the problem of high-risk drinking, there are a multitude of diverse (and opposing) responses. Ask them instead to define the kind of community they personally would like to live in, and the

answers are remarkably similar. We all want to live in a place that is comfortable, safe, fun, and helps us accomplish our personal and professional goals and dreams.

Coalition facilitators have asked the “ideal environment” question often, both in full coalition strategic planning sessions as well as in small workgroup or task forces engaged in a specific initiative. Creating a vision of what we want the environment to look like when all is said and done helps the group to find common ground quickly, which in turn builds a unity of mind and spirit that carries over in problem-solving. It also enables the group to think creatively about methods to produce the ideal rather than rely on traditional approaches. Finally, envisioning the ideal environment turns the group back to research “best practices” as the group asks the question, “Has anyone found a way to create this environment?”

A good example of this philosophy working well in accomplishing a strategic objective occurred when the Lincoln City Council commissioned the NU Directions coalition to recommend a mandatory server/seller training policy for the city. Coalition staff gathered a group of key stakeholders who would be most impacted by the new policy, including owners and managers of local bars, restaurants, hotels, and convenience stores. The opinion of the group on the adoption of this single method to impact the environment was unsurprisingly negative. Asking them instead to describe the ideal environment for their business became abundantly productive; the group uniformly saw the benefit of having trained staff serving and selling alcohol as a way to reduce a variety of problems. But the strategy of a mandatory training policy seemed to only add to their headaches rather than solve them. With nearly a 200% employee turnover rate, the limited availability of training dates and times, and the excessive cost of the training, the

idea of training every employee seemed too great of a burden. Inspired by the ideal and with the specific needs and issues in mind, NU Directions crafted a web-based server-seller training program that enabled owners to train their staff without any of the barriers. Doing so has also enabled discussions of mandatory training policy for servers and sellers to re-emerge in city government with much less resistance.

Another outcome of envisioning the ideal environment was the agreement across the coalition that NU Directions would adopt a “harms reduction” approach to the issue of campus alcohol consumption. No one envisioned an environment that did not include alcohol. Their vision, however, placed alcohol use in a responsible and healthy context that eliminated high-risk behaviors and harmful outcomes. The vision statement created by the NU Directions coalition reflects this ideal: “To create a community/campus culture that supports responsible low-risk drinking, including abstinence.”

This has proven to be helpful for a variety of reasons; reducing the negative outcomes of high-risk alcohol consumption is easier for most stakeholders to adopt when the sole solution isn’t prohibition. Students, bar owners, alumni and others were far more willing to own their piece of the problem (as well as the solution) when the issue was framed as eliminating the harms of high-risk drinking rather than eradicating alcohol consumption from the face of the University and surrounding community.

Lesson Two: The Coalition Must Be Supported From Top Administration

Perhaps one of the wisest funding requirements of the AMOD grant was the confirmation of visible support from the top level of both city and university administration. Often, the task of addressing alcohol problems on campus is relegated to the AOD office, who acts in an isolated vacuum. The opposite is essential in order for a

coalition to thrive: Addressing alcohol-related problems among college students must be a top priority of the mayor as well as the university chancellor or president, and that priority must be communicated across campus and city offices. Having visible support from these offices is critical for several reasons:

- Potential members see requests for participation or resource provision as coming from top administration and not from individual organizers.
- Resistance is diminished by those who are unconvinced of the importance of the initiative.
- The coalition maintains a sense of importance in the work they are doing.
- The community has the perception of the effort as unified across the community and institution.
- The community and institution feels a stronger sense of ownership of the coalition and the initiatives it creates.

Not every top administrator will initiate this visible support on their own. You may need to create incentives for top administrators to support the effort, and then provide public opportunities for these individuals to show their support. It's important that coalition organizers find ways to connect the visible support of coalition activity to the accomplishment of an administration's organizational, political, and personal goals. Knowing those goals is an essential first step. What is the Chancellor or Mayor's vision for the university or city, and how does the existence of an environment that supports high-risk alcohol consumption serve as a barrier to making that vision a reality? What aspects of success in reducing these harms will benefit their vision and goals? Organizers may need to find ways to report and publicize data so that they are framed within the

relevant issues facing these administrations. How does high-risk drinking stop the university's efforts to increase student retention? How has a dense set of alcohol outlets downtown limited economic development for the city? How are the costs created by not addressing high-risk drinking behaviors of students affecting the financial bottom line for the university or the city?

At the time of its inception, NU Directions was blessed with both a city mayor and a university chancellor who saw the value of the coalition's activities and who quickly lent visible support. But the coalition couldn't rest on that alone. Whenever possible, opportunities were created to inform and visibly involve the Chancellor and Mayor in coalition activities. The co-chairs of the coalition – Lincoln Chief of Police Tom Casady and UNL Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs James Griesen – have regular contact with the Mayor and the Chancellor, and are able to share information and request assistance with a credibility that a typical organizer could not possess. They are also invaluable in providing staff and coalition members with insight on the motivations, attitudes, and interests of these top-level officials.

Involvement must be public in order to demonstrate visible support. Our Chancellor gave the welcome at a state symposium we hosted on policy solutions to alcohol problems. Our mayor took part in a "bar walk" that was covered by the media. Both the Mayor and Chancellor have spoken at celebratory coalition meetings. Coalition spokespersons regularly credit the support of these two officials for the success of the work.

One challenge to anticipate is the reality that these top-level administrators may not stay for long. NU Directions has seen three mayors and two chancellors since 1998;

other AMOD schools have seen the University Chancellor or President's office change hands almost annually. Yet, the process of discovering the agendas, key goals, and involvement strategies remain the same, as does the need to tie the coalition's efforts of changing the environment to the goals of the new administration. Coalition organizers must recognize their responsibility in orienting new upper-level administrators by employing those coalition members with access and credibility to new office-holders to create opportunities for presenting the coalition mission, goals and activities as an established part of the institution and municipality.

Another challenge surrounds the "perception versus reality" issue of administrative support. Creating the perception of supporting AOD efforts on campuses and in communities is currently in line with public opinion (and therefore attractive to most upper-level administrators). However, support needs to be more than merely words. When real challenges to environmental changes occur by campus or community partners, organizers will need to rely on an upper-level administrator who will demonstrate their support by 'going to the mat' to see changes accomplished.

Lesson Three: The Strategic Plan Must Be Designed Around Specific Local Data

Given the growing number of publications and research projects on best practices for college alcohol prevention, it's important to remember that every campus-community coalition must employ strategies that address its own specific environment. The AMOD project found that not all campus-communities were the same or could employ the same approaches. Beyond regional culture, there are a number of structural, political, and environmental factors that are unique to any campus community and should be considered when strategic planning.

Several key questions – answered by local survey data, focus groups, observation, and the collection of police, hospital, health center, and other local data – can help the coalition pinpoint what aspects of the local environment must be changed to support a reduction in high-risk alcohol consumption. The questions asked at NU Directions included:

- Where, exactly, are our students most likely to engage in high-risk drinking?
- What environmental factors can we identify that support this choice and therefore must be changed or eliminated?
- What environmental factors are needed to support low-risk behavior and must be added, increased, or promoted?
- Which strategies identified in the literature most relate to our specific environment?
- What adaptations are necessary to make this strategy more effective in our specific environment?

The temptation to apply everything that the literature suggests to be effective is always present (particularly following a workshop or conference where we return with a plethora of new ideas). Coalition members representing various perspectives will also have their favorite prevention activities; the bias for certain approaches is natural and should be expected by community organizers. NU Directions staff found that, although every idea and strategy was open for discussion, centering the conversation around the specific data of the Lincoln community and UNL campus provided a perspective that enabled the group to focus their activities. Form follows function.

Keeping a clear picture of the specific local environment in front of the coalition is therefore an important task for staff. First, indicator data must be central to the creation of strategic goals and objectives. Coalition organizers can develop graphic representations of indicator data that allows quick and easy interpretation for coalition members. Facilitation of coalition and workgroup discussions should return to the indicator data often, especially when determining specific activities.

Once data-centered objectives have been determined, updated information on indicator data should be provided for the coalition so that members are aware of how the issues of high-risk drinking are playing themselves out for the target population while strategies are being implemented. Though the process of constantly collecting and updating information about the environment is time-consuming, it is critical that coalition members are provided a context for prevention strategies so that they can make good decisions about what strategies to employ, and then how to modify those strategies once they are implemented. Of course, a comprehensive plan will make the evaluation of any specific strategy difficult, especially when taken out of context. It's important

NU Directions staff accomplish this in a variety of ways. We often reformat much of our collected data into simple charts and graphs so that coalition members (and the media/general public) can quickly understand the issues surrounding our specific environment. Pictures are worth a thousand words, so whenever possible, we find ways to provide images of the environment. Staff have often taken coalition members (and other community leaders) on a "bar walk" to help them see the impact of a dense collection of alcohol outlets two blocks from campus when it's in full swing – at midnight on a Thursday, Friday or Saturday night. We've also done walks during home

football games to illustrate tailgating, and are planning a neighborhood “party walk” to help coalition members understand what happens to a neighborhood when a “party house” lives on the block. We must be careful not to over-react to these images and incidents, but use them as a context for our work. Often, we’ll begin and end a bar walk or the presentation of a graphic image from the environment with discussion to help coalition members keep a perspective about the individual representation from the environment, grounding the evidence of a specific piece of the environment with a “big picture” perspective provided by general data.

Coalition members have now gotten into the habit of collecting flyers or advertisements they find in the community or campus about high-risk activities, or taking pictures of billboards, window signs or neighborhood yards to illustrate an aspect of the local environment for others. Midway through the five-year period of our initial funding, we published a “mid-project report” that chronicled all of the indicators as a way of assessing progress; the report served to reinforce the notion that our progress couldn’t be measured on whether we had activities, but on whether those activities were producing change in the environment. A five-year report was also created to give the coalition a snapshot of the environment as well.

One of the most challenging questions that must be asked of the coalition is “When are we done?” It’s an important question that has yielded some interesting discussions among the NU Directions coalition. Returning to our vision of the ideal environment is one way to answer the question, especially if we’re using local data to ask “Are we there yet?” Determining a specific set of quantifiable reduction goals is another. Finally, identifying the difference between environmental change and environmental

maintenance helps us determine whether our efforts need to be refocused (and refinanced) to maintain the environment we've created and which aspects of the environment have not yet reached a point of change to support healthy behavior.

Lesson Four: Coalitions Need Strategic Communication

Most every aspect of coalition work involves communication at some level, so creating a communications plan alongside the coalition's strategic plan is a worthwhile investment of time and energy. NU Directions operates a "parallel" communications plan that both identifies communication activities that assist in accomplishing coalition objectives as well as communication activities that keep the coalition informed, unified, and motivated.

Much like the selection of environmental strategies, the choice about communication vehicles that support coalition activities should also be based on aspects of the local environment. Simply identifying "media advocacy" or "social marketing" as an activity often may not yield the best results. The same is true for newsletters, advertisements, and white papers. Asking a set of questions about the community, the message objective, and the target audience may lead to the best strategic decision.

Questions asked often at NU Directions include:

- 1) Who do we want to receive a message?
- 2) For what purpose? In other words, what do we want this audience to DO with this message?
- 3) What is the most credible medium for this audience to receive this message? Are they more likely to receive it by hearing it in one medium versus another? Which of these mediums is best supported by the local culture?

- 4) Who in our coalition, institution, or community is the most credible spokesperson to deliver this message?
- 5) What do the gatekeepers of this communication medium need from us in order to get them to communicate the message?
- 6) What prerequisite background knowledge or perceptions are needed by the target audience in order for this message to “make sense?” How does this impact the timing and order of this message?
- 7) What are some ways the target audience could misperceive or create objectives to the message that we can inoculate?
- 8) What does our evaluation of this communication activity teach us about future communication efforts?

In Lincoln, the news media plays a significant role in the shaping of community views and attitudes. Being a city with both a state capitol and flagship institution, the television and print news mediums become a common source for information and opinion formation, and life at the university is a major local media “beat.” However, there are other critical mediums that NU Directions has needed to utilize to send effective messages. One of the most effective mediums for reaching hospitality owners and managers is the use of the local beer distributors, who delivered notices of community forums and other relevant information to managers along with their invoice. As we’ve learned time and time again: form follows function. Effective coalition communication should come from a clear understanding of the community and not from generic communication methods.

Lesson Five: Coalitions Need to Devote Resources on Qualified Personnel

A common assumption among practitioners is that coalitions with more funding should be more successful than those with little or no resources. Though there is some truth in the fact that financial resources are helpful for a variety of reasons, misperceptions about how funding is best used abound.

There are multiple strategies to impact the alcohol environment in a campus-community that require little or no funding, particularly in the area of policy change. Gathering key stakeholders together to discuss needed changes in policies or utilizing the media to present the “shared responsibility” message are relatively low-cost activities that can yield significant results. The NU Directions experience has demonstrated that the vast majority of resources gathered for coalition work are best spent in bringing in qualified personnel for three critical positions: a community organizer, a communications specialist, and an evaluator. The resources needed for individual initiatives come from a vast array of pools and partnerships that are generated largely from the work of these three positions.

Though the leadership and the membership of the coalition is based on key stakeholders who are directly affected by environmental change or who have access to specific resources for use in that change, NU Directions found that coalition staff must be hired for specific responsibilities that require specific qualifications. Those responsibilities, their importance to coalition work, and the qualifications needed are explored here.

1) The Community Organizer

Hiring a coalition organizer with experience in developing and sustaining strategic partnerships both on campus and in the community makes a significant

difference in the success of the coalition. Often, this role is relegated to the campus Alcohol and Other Drug Program Coordinator, who has extensive training as an educator, counselor and perhaps even as an administrator, but rarely as a community organizer. This individual fulfilling the role of growing and sustaining a coalition must have extensive knowledge of the local social, political, and cultural landscape. They'll need to know the people and places that are central to the specific campus-community's life. They'll need to understand the protocols, pecking order, and value-system, which differs from locality to locality. According to Gladwell's (2002) Tipping Point theory, they'll need to know who the connectors, mavens, and salespeople live within the community and how to access those individuals to help accomplish the mission of the coalition. Someone with pre-existing networks within the campus and community is best, but the person who serves in this role should have the natural skills to identify and develop positive relationships with key stakeholders from diverse perspectives, to organize the coalition's activities, and to facilitate the implementation of the work.

This is not to say, however, that AOD professionals can't fulfill this role. What this lesson suggests is that those given the task of organizing a campus-community coalition must recognize and develop a specific set of skills to accomplish the work. If those skills fall outside the realm of an individual's training and experience, then identifying mentors from the local community is a critical first step: Who has the knowledge about local community or campus networks and politics that can guide me in how to work within this community? Often, the answer lies as close as the coalition's leadership. Coalition chairs, if well chosen, can be wonderful mentors. Most college campuses and city/county governments are rich in potential mentors. The time spent in

building an ongoing relationship and seeking counsel from these individuals is well spent.

Professional consultants who specialize in community organizing or strategic planning – many of whom specialize in environmental public health -- can also be helpful, but are limited by their knowledge of the specific culture. Although consultants can provide a framework of questions and help structure criteria for organizers (and can also lend credibility to local administrators who value recommendations from national experts), specific advice about approaches to members of a community, particularly policy-makers, is best left for those mentors who live and work within the community and who are familiar with the quirks, foibles, and oddities that exist in every locality. Often, these quirks are the critical aspect of whether an initiative succeeds or fails; the idea was right, but we presented it in a way that made key community player X, who we should know is always worried about profit, angry because we didn't frame the idea as supportive to business goals.

A second pitfall for the community organizer surrounds having a coalition assume that this staff member will single-handedly accomplish the work of the strategic plan. At times, NU Directions staff have fallen victim to this thinking, and it has served as a wake-up call about organizing. In many cases, organizers create this perception themselves by spending too much time “doing” the work rather than encouraging the appropriate coalition members to get the work done. Though the staff member may feel they can accomplish more on their own, the result is often a loss in coalition ownership of the initiative, which often results in the strategy dying without an institutional home once funding (and the coalition) are gone. Community organizers, then, need to always allow

coalition members to “own” the strategic plan. NU Directions accomplishes this through several techniques many of which were learned the hard way):

1. Coalition members – rather than coalition staff -- chair specific workgroups or task forces. Staff members always attend these meetings as note-takers, but rarely serve as chairs. Critical to this technique is allowing coalition chairs to “call” the meeting; NU Directions staff have found that by trying to facilitate meeting times for coalition groups, members assume it is the staff’s responsibility to run the meeting. Key, then, is the relationship between the organizer and those coalition members serving as committee chairs.
2. Staff provide information and resources – the raw materials -- that assist the coalition in accomplishing their goals, and quickly provide summations and next-step facilitation as coalition members move toward accomplishing activities.
3. Staff notifies coalition chairs and members when progress is not occurring with an objective rather than rushing in and “rescuing” a project. A common mantra for NU Directions staff is “trust the process,” which reminds us often that things may take longer than we’d like, but will yield a better outcome if we allow our patience (and good facilitation rather than actuation skills) to stay the course.

2) The Communications Specialist

Obviously, as communication is a critical component to effective coalition-building, a communications specialist who can coordinate both internal and external communications through the campus and community is a helpful addition to a coalition, particularly one focused on environmental change. At NU Directions, a communications staff member assists in developing and enacting the advocacy, education, social norms

and social marketing activities of the strategic plan. The communications specialist also provides systems that enable coalition members, policy-makers, campus administrators, and students to stay informed about coalition activities through newsletters, list-serves, and a web-site.

The A Matter of Degree program recommended the addition of a communications staff member for all ten of the AMOD sites. Many of the coalitions used University Communications staff who dedicated a percentage of their time to coalition activities. While helpful, institutional communications personnel may be unable to devote the amount of time or energy to the coalition, and may also struggle with reconciling environmental advocacy with institutional marketing. Because of these limitations, other coalitions have hired a full-time communications coordinator to fulfill the role.

In either case, having someone to assist the coalition organizer in the specific tasks and duties related to communication has been a valuable tool in progressing coalition efforts. Most importantly, though, the communications specialist becomes a critical link between the university (and at times, the municipality) and the coalition, ensuring that coalition messages are consistent with and compliment other institutional messages. In an age of institutional branding, coalition communications that are contrary to larger institutional goals can lead to division and a lack of institutional support that is easily avoided through this connection.

Like the role of the community organizer, however, the communications specialist focusing on environmental change must employ a specific set of skills that is not always common for those with training and experience in marketing, public relations or advertising for institutions of higher education. A communications specialist for a

campus-community coalition should have abilities in media advocacy, public health persuasion, and social marketing. Environmental messages in particular are a different breed from the promotional messages used to attract students, alumni, donors, and the media to a college or university campus, and may require communications staff to seek additional training or mentoring in this area.

Coalition communications staff also need to become fully competent in their knowledge of college drinking, and should have access to the literature from the field about the motivations and experiences for college students and environmental stakeholders in order to conduct accurate target audience analysis for message design and dissemination. Like all communications specialists, they'll need to conduct research into the specific local audiences they are attempting to persuade by their messages, understanding the political and social culture of the community that will guide decisions about mediums, spokespersons, and the messages themselves. Whenever possible, the communications coordinator for NU Directions utilizes task forces, populated largely by students, to design and strategize coalition campaigns.

Coalition efforts lacking the funding to hire a full-time communications specialist are best to utilize the talents and expertise available to them throughout the college or university's academic arm, where faculty and classes serve as wonderful resources to serve the communication needs of the coalition while also offering rich co-curricular experiences for students and potential research for faculty. Likewise, there are a number of local advertising, marketing and public relations agencies that offer discounted or free services for community efforts. Communications professionals from any of these arenas can be added to the coalition to assist in the effort with relatively low costs.

3) The Evaluator

Finally, there is a need in every campus-community coalition for someone with expertise in data collection and analysis to serve as the evaluator of the work accomplished. The AMOD grant required the hiring of a local, part-time evaluator to assist in local data collection and serve as a liaison to the national evaluation team from the Harvard School of Public Health. NU Directions leadership saw such value in the addition of the evaluator to the core team that funds were shifted to institutional sources to enable the position to remain long after the grant ended.

There have been a number of specific benefits to having qualified staff in this role. The local evaluator ensures that indicator data is reliably collected and analyzed so that it can be presented to coalition stakeholders with confidence. The local evaluator with access and expertise in local institutional research requirements can speed up the bureaucracy that often accompanies the data collection process. Most importantly, the local evaluator can offer impartial feedback to the coalition based solely on the data collected that instructs coalition modification and improvement of activities and strategies. Local evaluators, working in conjunction with the local community organizer and communications specialists, also serve a vital role in providing a chronicle of the process for use by other entities.

Yet, key qualifications are required for the person stepping into this role. Alongside the obvious skills in statistical and qualitative data collection and analysis – particularly in the area of environmental health behavior – is the ability for an evaluator to remain connected to the process while remaining impartial. This “fly on the wall” mentality can be difficult to maintain, especially for evaluators who come from the

academic community and are also naturally stakeholders of coalition efforts themselves. Also essential is the ability of the local evaluator to effectively communicate conclusions and explanations to members of the coalition, translating highly technical terms and statistical methodologies into concepts that are easily understood by laypersons.

Several actions by coalition organizers and leaders can help. Careful coordination with the community organizer, along with mentoring from other evaluation specialists, can provide a structure that surrounds a clear (and valued) role for the local evaluator within the coalition where the evaluator is given appropriate opportunities to interact with the coalition and its workgroups and has clear boundaries for when interaction can taint objective observation of the process.

Lesson Six: Start with Winnable Issues

There is no question that campus-community coalition efforts to change environmental contributors to high-risk drinking behaviors among college students is long, tedious, and often frustrating work that requires years of consistent activity. The AMOD program benefited greatly from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's commitment to funding campus-community efforts for up to nine years. For many coalitions, indications that changes in the environment were having an impact on college drinking didn't begin to appear for at least three or four years. All of this can be greatly discouraging and de-motivating to coalition members who live, alongside the rest of us, in a world where instant gratification is king and immediate results are a common expectation (and the lack of them a common source of criticism).

Creating a timeline for strategic plan interventions where "winnable" issues were accomplished early was a deliberate strategy employed by NU Directions organizers.

Within any strategic plan, a variety of these smaller, less controversial initiatives exist that offer coalition members a sense of accomplishment and help to build momentum toward more challenging environmental changes. Changes in campus or community policies that are often controlled by coalition members, initiatives with clear community support, and social marketing campaigns that influence small but visible changes in the way in which a campus thinks and talks about alcohol use are all good examples.

Sometimes, the winnable issue is an opportunity that exists outside of the plan but is seized by the coalition. During the first year of the coalition, while workgroups were still finalizing aspects of the strategic plan, a request came to the city council to approve a “bottle club” license in the already dense downtown entertainment district. Bottle clubs utilize a form of licensing where “members” can consume their own alcohol within an establishment outside of state-controlled hours of operation. The request, if approved, would clearly contradict much of what the coalition was attempting to address. As one of City Council members (who was also Chair of the city’s Internal Liquor Committee) was part of the campus-community coalition taking part in the strategic planning process, the issue of limiting access and availability to alcohol was on the forefront of discussions. The coalition quickly worked with the city attorney’s office to draft an ordinance that banned bottle clubs from the city while communications personnel created media advocacy strategies to bring the issue into public view. Public attention created by the coalition led to the license holder rescinding the request, and with the support of the Internal Liquor Committee and the public and private advocacy of the coalition, the ordinance was passed. Coalition members were able to celebrate success early in the process, which energized them and built confidence for future strategies.

Working with a timeline that strategically builds momentum has an additional benefit in that while it energizes coalition members, it also “softens” the community and policy-makers for more controversial or challenging changes. NU Directions scheduled policy initiatives that restricted beloved high-risk rituals and traditions (like bar crawls, alumni tailgating, and fraternity/sorority social events) or required significant state legislation for later in the strategic plan, focusing initial efforts on smaller harm-reduction activities that would help students, the community and policy-makers understand and trust the intent of the coalition and recognize the need for additional changes. The result of a “slow and steady” approach to some initiatives has meant an easier road for their accomplishment without the risk of lost interest by coalition members or the criticism of inaction by everyone else.

Lesson Seven: Share and Celebrate Success

This leads naturally to the last major lesson of the coalition, which is to share and celebrate the success of each and every accomplishment. Environmental changes accomplished by a cooperative coalition don’t naturally appear in the limelight – they must be placed there by active organizers who are also willing to ensure that every member involved receives and enjoys the applause.

Organizers must make sure that changes created by the coalition are communicated through every channel possible, from releases to the media to announcements in coalition member newsletters (and the newsletters of representative organizations). Often success can (and should) be represented with a visual or tangible component so that it can be easily and effectively communicated to coalition members, the community, students, administrators, and funding organizations. Volunteer/partner

recognition events, media stories, charts and graphs showing behavioral changes, bill-signing ceremonies, and testimonials or thank you letters from grateful stakeholders are all invaluable in making an accomplishment feel tangible and important.

Sharing credit is also an essential component of celebration, so that everyone who contributed to the effort feels as if they are valued and appreciated. This is sometimes more difficult than it appears. Many stakeholders as well as community organizers live or die by the “what have you done for me lately” mentality that pervades most organizations, including institutions of higher education. Credit for being an instrument of productive change is career currency, so being able to take sole credit for an accomplishment will mean more to some individuals than it will to others. However, like currency, distributing credit across a coalition is a worthwhile investment that often yields high dividends. NU Directions coalition staff make it a habit to let coalition leaders and members give media interviews in response to announcements of positive data trends, and when no members are available, to always speak “for the coalition,” giving credit to organizations, stakeholders, and the collaborative process itself for the changes.

One example illustrates this best. In an effort to eliminate high-risk promotions in the Lincoln/UNL environment, the NU Directions coalition began a letter-writing campaign to the Mayor, City Council, Police Chief, and Chamber of Commerce of Panama City Beach complaining that the “Spring Break 2002” flyer distributed to UNL students via the campus newspaper promoted dangerous high-risk activities that influenced drinking behaviors for college students and was unwelcome at UNL. Though the coalition hoped only to discourage the locality from selecting the UNL population as

one of its target audiences, the effort – which had now expanded to UNL parents and other interested community members who also wrote letters -- caught the attention of local and national media who had been prompted to the issue by national advocacy created by the American Medical Association, the AMOD national program office. Of particular interest to media were letters by prominent officials in Lincoln to their counterparts in Panama City Beach. The letter from the Lincoln Chief of Police, who also serves as coalition co-chair, to the Panama City Chief of Police, was featured in multiple national media reports. When the national television program 48 Hours came to interview Chief Casady for an episode on the Spring Break issue, the coalition co-chair was quick to show producers copies of all the other letters also sent, indicating to the media that his effort was one of a collective many. The sentiment was repeated often by all coalition leaders and staff when celebrating the 2003 edition of the marketing publication, which had taken every one of the suggestions offered by the coalition and changed its promotional policies.

Conclusion

Though organizing and maintaining an active and effective campus-community coalition is challenging, it is also deeply rewarding. Growing evidence suggests that the campus-community coalition is an essential element for changing the alcohol environment surrounding a campus. Throughout the United States, the community coalition has become a standard model for AOD work affecting a variety of populations, and remains an important strategy for impacting the environment where college students live, learn, work and play.

Central to a successful campus-community coalition, however, is the active involvement from a cross-section of stakeholders who cooperatively create the kind of environment that benefits all and harms none. Our experience in the campus community of Lincoln, Nebraska has convinced us that collaboration across the community is the result of careful and consistent organizing where every stakeholder is invited to the table so that agreements can be forged on the vision and philosophy of the work, resulting in a consistent and cooperative approach to the environment that is based on local data. We are equally convinced that, when both the problem and solution is shared by all involved, the celebration of our collective successes in creating a better environment are that much more fulfilling.

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