

**Promoting Democratic Practice in the
Context of an Extended University-Community Partnership:
Lessons from Participant Interviews
and Observations Over Five Years**

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Introduction

Through over a decade of collaboration, the work of the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good has been deeply influenced by the mission, goals and especially the insights that we have received from the Kettering Foundation. In 2002, John Dedrick helped to shape a series of national conversations we sponsored to explore the responsibilities of colleges and universities in a changing contemporary society and in 2003 Scott London helped to edit a thoughtful report on how those discussions were reflected in the thinking of national leaders across the country (see Appendix A).

Kettering associates led by Margaret Holt helped us to construct a discussion booklet and introductory materials that led to conversations in five different Michigan communities, organized around the question, “Who is College For?” This effort has been the focus of a number of scholarly papers and has been reflected in policy discussions within several states. It also provided guidance and inspiration for the formation of neighborhood and community based efforts to increase college participation, including one that is the focus of this report.

It is important to note that the major National Forum initiative that has most closely drawn on Kettering wisdom and values was named “Access to Democracy. We believed that this title appropriately reflected the importance of democratic participation at two complementary levels. By organizing conversations to address issues of access to higher education we were hoping to both open the door to economic and professional opportunities for young



people and make their involvement in democratic processes meaningful. In effect we were helping to deliver on the promise of citizenship by assuring that more young people were fully prepared to enact that promise in their lives. Secondly, we were quite conscious that by organizing local discussions on a matter of importance to families and communities we had the opportunity to build capacity and to contribute to a change in a fundamental, even defining aspect of community life. One of our findings from Access to Democracy was that, based on a comparison of attitudes before and after a community discussion, participants believed that they had more control over factors determining the education of their children. The focus of responsibility shifted from political representatives such as the president and congress to principals, teachers, parents and community groups. This shift in awareness is as healthy for democracy as it is healthy for communities.

This report attempts to capture lessons we have learned in our work with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. Through this work we have improved our shared understanding of how community organizations, universities, and local leaders come together to solve regional challenges. We are proud to say that, in addition to what we have learned, our partnership has contributed to efforts that have the potential to make significant strides in improving college access across the state of Michigan and specifically in the northwest Detroit community of Brightmoor. It is also important to reflect on how we have grown in our knowledge of the power of the democratic process in community development.



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This report will outline what we have learned in working in Brightmoor and other Michigan communities with the support of the Kettering Foundation. It will begin by describing the evolution of our work over slightly more than six years, from meeting with communities across Michigan through Access to Democracy, to our ongoing relationship with residents, community groups, educators and representatives in the Brightmoor community.

For the purposes of clarity and method, we are disciplining ourselves to make explicit the questions that have guided our work and which continue to help us make sense of what we what we have learned. However, as with much research the more we have learned (and the more that community engagement provides us with surprises and challenges) the more questions we have. We will conclude with some ongoing questions that have arisen out of our neighborhood partnerships and the reasons we believe they could be important beyond our immediate context and perhaps useful to others with similar commitments to local engagement and for those that share a similar faith in the democratic processes that take place in community settings.



The Evolution of Our Work

The roots of our connection to Brightmoor and the Kettering Foundation began with our initial reflections regarding the importance of college access in communities across the state of Michigan. The importance of obtaining a postsecondary education for an individual's personal and economic well-being seems to grow each day. While some economists have started to suggest that the benefits of a college degree are shrinking as more citizens possess them, the gap in earnings and employability are still demonstrated. In the current recessionary period, the job market is especially competitive and may portend fewer employment opportunities across the board, but remains markedly better for those with a college degree.

According to a recent article in *The New York Times*, there is a 4.2 percent unemployment rate among college graduates versus a 14.2 percent unemployment rate among those with less than a high school diploma (Rich, 2011). Obtaining a college degree is key to economic mobility.

The benefits of a college degree are not limited to larger paychecks. Considerable research points to the social and public rewards that come to communities and to society as a whole when more citizens are educated. In fact, the first publication which we developed in partnership with Kettering focused explicitly on the importance of college to a democratic society (2003). Partially in the response we received to that national effort, and inspired by Kettering's commitment to engage communities in thoughtful discussion, we decided that we needed to see if individuals at the community level saw these



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social benefits as accruing to them and to their children and families. Moving from the abstract of “democratic society” to the test of “life lived within democratic communities” was a conscious choice and one that has profoundly influenced our work ever since.

When we decided to research the benefits of having a college degree at multiple levels of analysis we began by examining the decision-making process that Michigan students and families go through when choosing whether to attend college. We hoped that out of this research would emerge a model to help inform public policies in Michigan surrounding college access. It must also be noted that this effort occurred during a time when our state was debating the issues of college access as related to affirmative action and the use of race-conscious admissions at our major universities. In effect, we were taking a national and state debate and using it to ask questions on a local level.

The National Forum’s Access to Democracy project brought together community leaders, local residents, and civic organizations across the state to discuss college access and educational attainment. Our conversations were driven by the basic question: “Who is college for?” With the support of Jennifer Granholm, then governor of Michigan, we brought to Michigan residents our question and our desire to listen. Guidance from the Kettering Foundation was critical in helping us shape these conversations, and eventually led us to develop discussion guides, train moderators, and very carefully record (and analyze) community viewpoints.



These dialogues helped us understand the complexities of developing a college-going “culture” in communities across Michigan. The deliberative dialogue model, borrowed from Kettering and the National Issues Forum (NIF), allowed us to ensure that communities felt they had been heard without *a priori* judgments. This method also helped us to record what we were learning in these conversations. For many of the communities we visited, this was the first time an organization had really listened to their concerns and considered their dreams for the educational attainment of their children.

Access to Democracy included 69 structured dialogues between nearly 1000 people across five Michigan communities. We collected significant data from our participants including journals, surveys, and transcripts of our dialogues. With this information in hand we consulted with the Kettering Foundation in the hopes of partnering to further examine what we had learned in these community conversations. We developed a research proposal that would allow us to step beyond our initial findings and conduct follow up interviews with community leaders. Ultimately, we planned to develop tools to support others in developing similarly effective community dialogues surrounding educational access. We found that the more we examined our relationships with communities across the state, the more we realized that each was different – and the more we felt drawn to focus more closely on the voices of one community, Brightmoor.



The Brightmoor Neighborhood of Detroit

Brightmoor is a four-square mile region in northwest Detroit. Much has been said about what could be “wrong” with Brightmoor. The poverty and unemployment rates in the community are high, and many of its residents are on some form of public assistance. Scholars and students from the University of Michigan have been present in Brightmoor with the hopes of addressing these issues for several years. We sought to meet with community leaders, listen to their thoughts, and build upon existing community assets to improve educational attainment.

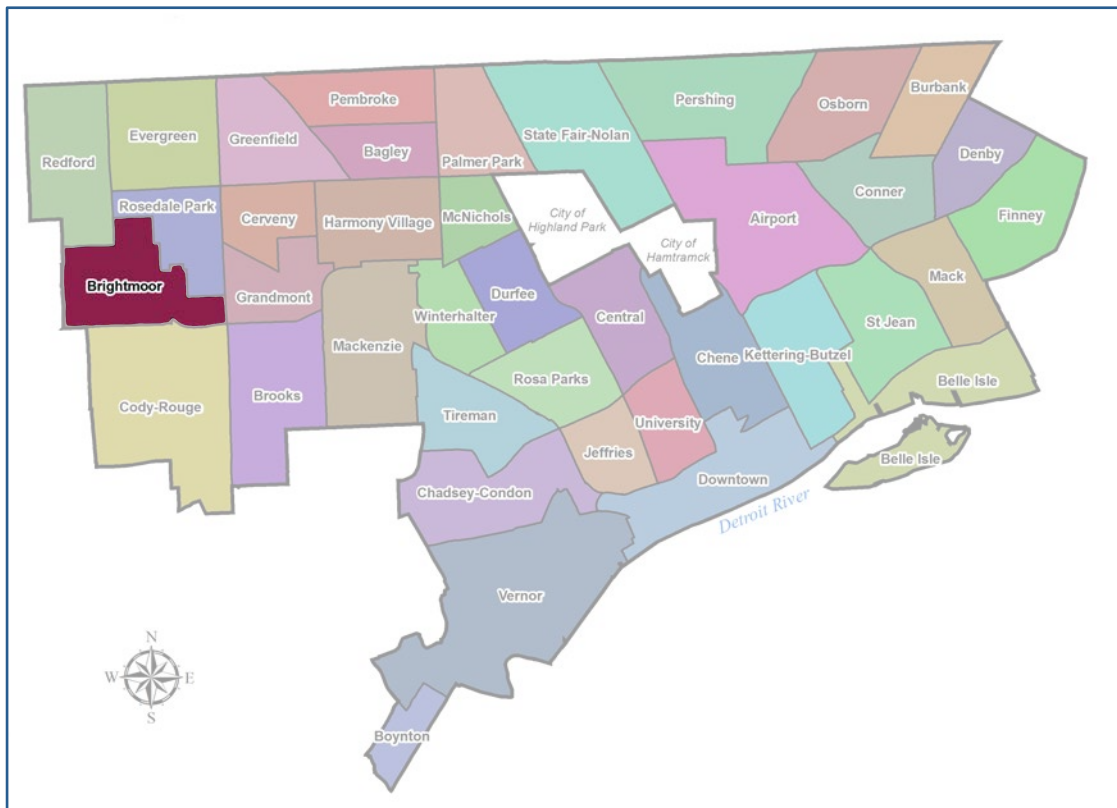


Figure 1. Map of Detroit neighborhoods, adapted from <http://datadrivendetroit.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/DetroitReferenceUWSubcomm.jpg>



For the past few years, community and civic leaders have been meeting in Brightmoor to discuss improving educational access and attainment. Students and faculty associated with the National Forum have been directly involved in these discussions and at a number of points have played an important role in sustaining them. With initiative from graduate students associated with the National Forum, the community was able to get a state-funded Michigan College Access Grant (MCAN) to support a series of monthly meetings between a diverse set of community partners on the topic of educational attainment for neighborhood youth. These conversations included representatives from community foundations, scholarship programs, schools, universities, and churches. We hoped that by pooling our diverse knowledge and resources we could develop a plan to contribute to educational access in the community.

In the years since our first meetings in Brightmoor much has changed in the community. We have been able to hire an Americorps Member to support the Brightmoor community high school in educating students about college and career opportunities. We reached out to administrators and students at Marygrove College, near the Brightmoor neighborhood, to support them in developing their own strategy for building a college-going culture in their community. Perhaps most significantly, we have had the privilege of watching the community take ownership of the local issues surrounding career and college attainment. Whereas we were once a primary driving force for helping convene city leaders and encouraging dialogue around this issue, that



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work is now originating from within the community itself. Consistent with our values and understanding, we have remained convinced that for community building to be sustainable it must be rooted in community leadership.

While a lot has changed since we first began working with Access to Democracy and in the Brightmoor neighborhood we are not in a position to either claim credit or determine causality. But that does not mean that we are not deeply aware of the importance of the continued support of the Kettering Foundation in shaping this effort. Consequently we are excited to have the chance to reflect on what we have learned in our work together.



Guiding Questions

This report will consider several key questions which have guided our work:

1. How do diverse organizational partners, operating within one defined community, holding differently and similarly espoused goals, understand and value democratic participation in community change?
2. What is the vision of community change or improvement that is held by various community representatives and how do they see this vision aided by democratic engagement?
 - a. What definitions of community exist across different stakeholder groups?
 - b. How do differing definitions of community change relate to differences in institutional histories, foundational beliefs, theories, methods and forms of practice?
3. Does an explicit concept of democratic participation underlie the partnership process?
 - a. What are the differences and similarities in enacted approaches to democracy through the partnership?

We have always treated these questions as both probative and inspiring. In fact the term “guiding” is entirely appropriate when we think of the effect they have had on our activities and our reflective moments. While we were not able to develop precise answers to all of the original questions, they have pushed us forward in our work, helped us to discern between alternative



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courses, and powerfully influenced how we have come to think about our role in communities.



What Have We Learned?

We have learned a lot in our years with Access to Democracy and in connecting with the Brightmoor community. Some of what we have found matches our learning goals, and some of it has not. We present six lessons here that we think are particularly important:

- 1) Building community relationships and dialogues requires a multifaceted development strategy
- 2) Understanding how a community defines itself is key to successful communication
- 3) Trust is an essential component of productive community dialogues and partnerships
- 4) It is important to incorporate a variety of leadership styles into community dialogues
- 5) There is value in learning through doing
- 6) Dialogue is key to communities' understanding of democratic participation

These lessons represent a combination of “takeaways” both planned and unplanned. We constructed this list by carefully reflecting on our previous research reports which in turn were directly shaped by observations made in the community and by the voices of community representatives themselves. In organizing around summative themes there is a chance that the underlying evidence that supports these clusters can be lost, a concern that we both acknowledge and have tried to address by incorporating evidence as directly



as possible without suffocating the reader. If these thematic findings can be used to prompt discussion rather than conclude it, they will be helpful since it is our hope that what we have learned will prove helpful in developing future university and community partnerships.

**Previous Reports from the National Forum
to the Kettering Foundation**

- “Higher education for the public good: A report from the National Leadership Dialogues.” 2003.
- Community organizing strategies for promoting public deliberation in diverse community settings: Phase I report, April 30, 2008
- Community organizing strategies for promoting public deliberation in diverse community settings: Stage II: A scholarly article. December 21, 2008 (Revised March 2009).
- Community involvement on continua: “Step sons” and civic professionals within community-based coalition’s democratic practice. May 13, 2011.

**Lesson # 1: Building community relationships and dialogues
requires a multifaceted development strategy**

We analyzed interview transcripts from conversations with community leaders in four communities across the state of Michigan and with six NIF program directors and staff. Participants were asked about their communities, the dialogue and/or organizing process, and barriers to partnership within the community and with universities. The recorded interviews were transcribed and resulted in more than 300 pages of data.



Through our analysis we learned several key lessons:

- Interorganizational relationships are essential to create dialogues and sustain action, and although communities must tap into existing networks, extensive patience is required to navigate these relationships through to long-term change.
- Communities are uniquely motivated around issues, and even an issue such as higher education access is differently defined to the different locales. For one community, access raised concerns about community college funding; for another community, it brought up ideas of future economic viability; and for another it brought up the systemic relationship between education and other community needs.
- Communities and universities encounter both unique and similar challenges, as the roles that the university should play in a partnership are sometimes not distinct from those of a community coalition.
- The participant recruitment, dialogue process, and impact of the dialogue are not easily severed as three distinct parts of community dialogue; they are seamlessly interrelated as they each influence which participants get into the room, the richness of the dialogue, and the type and sustainability of impact.

As might be suspected, there is no single model for organizing locally within communities because communities carry with them political, social and



economic contexts that are often not transferable to others. However, the above lessons can be taken from working with these groups about initiating relationships, tapping into community resources, and working with the university and the overall complexity of community dialogue work.

Lesson # 2: Understanding how a community defines itself is key to successful communication

Several scholars have noted the challenge of miscommunication in university and community partnerships (Prins, 2005; Sandy & Arguelles, 2006). One issue that became clear early on in our work was that communities articulated community building and their goals for university-community partnerships differently than we did. We found that though we and our community partners had generally similar goals, we often did not use the same language to describe our work together. This was more than a matter of semantics. We frequently encountered differing and often overlapping definitions of the community that was being served. While members of the resulting coalition shared a general concern for educational attainment by community youth, this was just one of many interests motivating those who came to join the effort.

In our December 2008 report, “Community organizing strategies for promoting deliberation in diverse community settings,” we defined community as, “a county boundary, or adopted service area of the groups we worked with.” In Access to Democracy the communities with whom we partnered were large and diverse geographic regions and our broad definition



was able to account for all these groups. We looked at communities as places defined locally, where locals determined who was included and excluded from a particular community. Frequently we began to see who was left out of a particular community or included by who choose to attend a particular dialogue. It is important to note that the term “community” as we have defined it is not something completely cohesive, in fact it was often just the opposite.

Achieving a representative sample of a community for our various dialogues was a particular challenge. As we noted in the 2008 “Community organizing strategies” report, “Although some organizers stated that all they needed for people to enter the room was to offer an invitation, other communities suggested that 'true community representation' was not achieved and that a greater effort should have been made to incorporate diverse people, particularly underserved groups, in the dialogues.” Overall we were often moved by the passion of community members for bringing diverse groups to the table – the challenge was getting them there.

When we began our work in Brightmoor we had to revise our understanding of community. In our May 2011 report, “Community involvement on continua: “Step sons” and civic professionals within a community-based coalition’s democratic practice,” we conceptualized community very broadly as, “a space for action.” This definition allowed room for the community to conceptualize itself as it wished, and community



building could happen when we gathered in dialogue “for action” with one another.

The importance of developing tools to effectively communicate our goals for our community development work together became clear early in our time in Brightmoor. As more individuals and community partners joined our meetings, language became more challenging. Some of our partners were focused on amplifying pre-existing educational needs from the community. Scholarship providers and other college and university partners advocated for maintaining high academic expectations for students. Others who worked with local youth were concerned that simply pushing students to enroll in college ignores students who do not feel ready to enroll in college, or are not currently in school. Each partner at the table believed that he or she was representing the interests of the community, but each was doing so in a different way.

When it came time to choose a name for this new community partnership there was additional debate. The grant from the state supported what was called “Michigan College Access Networks” or MCANs, so the “Brightmoor College Access Network” became an obvious choice. This was more than a rhetorical accident. It actually related directly to stipulations in the funding process. However, many members at the table found that a focus on college attendance to be too limiting and wanted to include other avenues of educational and career attainment. Ultimately the group settled on the “Brightmoor Career and College Access Network” or BCCAN. This name



still captures the optimism of the “CAN” acronym that MCAN offered, while adjusting for the unique hopes of this community. What might seem like a simple compromise hides a very vigorous discussion about the community, its needs and its future.

Ultimately, in both Brightmoor and Access to Democracy, how we and our community allies understood community and what was intended in our partnership with the community was important for us to understand in order to

Understanding Communities in their Contexts

In our work at the National Forum we frequently make use of the concept of “ecologies” to understand relationships between individuals, communities, and organizations. This idea helps to clarify an aspect of community definition that is important to understanding Brightmoor in its context.

The neighborhood itself is found in the westernmost section of a changing city. That city, Detroit, has its own identity and history, its own formal structures, and a special informal culture. Detroit has its own problems, too, some of which are shared in Brightmoor and some of which are unique to the municipal definition of community.

During the time period we have been working in Detroit, its mayor identified Brightmoor as one of his target neighborhoods for renewal. That mayor resigned from office in a scandal. The next mayor took office with a plan to downsize the City by focusing growth in a few neighborhoods and pulling services out of others. The fate of Brightmoor (as we described in one of our earlier reports) was left ambiguous in this process.

The concept of “Detroit” became central to a national discussion about the role of manufacturing, labor unions and economic competitiveness. Detroit Schools became a focus of state and national attention and at various times over the course of our engagement the schools were placed in receivership. At one time the public high school serving the Brightmoor community was closed.

At the state and national level there were trends, disruptions and challenges too. All of them are part of the environment of Brightmoor but are reflected in its self-definition, its sense of the future, and even the nature of its day-to-day discourse.

In this sense “community,” no matter how carefully defined, is an idea that takes in a given space and all that surrounds it as well.



build a successful relationship. It was particularly important that we adapt our definition of community to fit the needs of the local area we were working with and make our definition broad enough for us to incorporate how the community understands itself. If we had employed a “one size fits all” definition for both the communities we connected with in Access to Democracy and in Brightmoor we would have missed out on much of what makes each of those partnerships unique and it would have impeded our ability to communicate in each relationship.

Lesson # 3: Trust is an essential component of productive community dialogues and partnerships

Developing trust is a key component of successful personal, community, and organizational partnerships. As we described in our May 2011 report, “Community involvement on continua: “Step sons” and civic professionals within a community-based coalition’s democratic practice,” two “directions” of trust, vertical and horizontal, are helpful to consider and are reinforced by the current scholarship. Below is an excerpt from our May 2011 report which illustrates the distinction:

Vertical trust — the trust operating within different levels of institutions —and horizontal trust — within group trust — operate as concepts to help understand development of partnership in a neighborhood, as individuals and institutions reach beyond their perceived borders (or don’t). For example, Brockmeyer (2000) sees this operating in a Detroit Empowerment Zone partnership. “Vertical trust,” she argues, “is more likely to produce broad-band EZ participation, while in local political cultures with strong vertical distrust, horizontal trust is likely to be stimulated in narrow-band networks as an oppositional strategy” to those outside the region. Alternatively, White (2009) argues that dual perspectives operate among



individuals when they think about trust in partnership; individuals can consider institutions threatening or friendly depending on the level of abstraction of those institutions. If individuals in a community think of institutions in the abstract, they are more likely to be distrustful of them, but when individuals consider institutions in terms of their relationships with individuals, they are far more trusting. In the abstract, White argues, citizens and institutions “vie” for control of communities, but at the micro level there is space for collaborative change (p. 14).

Unfortunately we found that sometimes our own participation as representatives from a university provided a challenge to bringing diverse partners to the table. In our December 2008 report, “Community organizing strategies for promoting deliberation in diverse community settings,” we noted that one of our community partners described our role as an organizer in a way that reflects a point of view that probably reveals that the conversation was taking place in a farming community some distance away from Ann Arbor:

The university is viewed in some communities as a very liberal organization. And so there's kind of some skepticism. There's kind of some, "Okay. What do these people want?" Where agriculture is a lot of times or the majority of agriculture people are more conservative, just the nature of the beast. I know. I work with a lot of people that are on both sides, but in general there are some perceptions there. So sometimes it's a little harder.

We were often able to overcome communities’ hesitation regarding our own participation in a dialogue through building upon trusted relationships. One community member highlighted the challenge of finding a neutral and safe space to engage in dialogue this way:

And so it’s trying to find ways to communicate clearly what it is you’re trying to do, and what you’re not . . . We had some



forums a while, many years ago on . . . the issue was called the boundaries of free speech. It was an NIF issue. And I remember we had, before the series started —We were having one at the college, one at a church, one at a synagogue, one at the YMCA downtown. I mean, we really tried to even just physically move them around to a lot of places to show diversity. But because one of them was being sponsored by a religious organization, and by sponsored I just mean they gave us space is all it really was. We had the president of the ACLU call and say I'm really concerned that, you know, this is going to be an issue . . . that you're trying to promote a certain agenda. He didn't know our organization. He didn't know anything about us. He just said he thought this was happening. And of course, as president of the ACLU, naturally most people are going to look at flyer about the boundaries of free speech and maybe not even pay attention to, or if they do, they aren't going to think always in the same way that he . . . you know, he in his position was thinking: Is free speech going to be protected in this conversation? I mean, are people going to have diverse views? I explained to him, you know, exactly what we were trying to do. And the fact that, I even kind of talked to him about what the framework of the issue was to let him know that we're really looking at this from a variety of perspectives. Well it turned out he drove like two hours each way to come to the first two or three of the meetings. And he was delighted.

We also found that one key component to getting community members to the table required that we clearly articulate the outcomes we were hoping to get from our conversation. As we wrote in our December 2008 report, “Getting people into a room and offering ‘talk for the sake of talk’ was unacceptable, as could be imagined.” In the end, if the dialogue was well organized and of a high quality, our community partners left happy and unconcerned about any issue of neutrality. Thankfully, many of our participants walked away having developed trust in our organizing strategy. One community member reflected,

One of the things that I think was positive for us here is I did see people who are now I think more open to dialogue as a —



at least an initial process . . . so I think one lesson learned was how effective the dialogue process, when done appropriately, can be in generating both ideas and in generating the kind of conversation that can — I mean it's just not conversation for conversation sake — that can lead to action — in fact that's where we are. We had the dialogue, and now we're taking all the input from the dialogue and we're trying to look at what are the actions that the conversation suggests in this community.

Another community member offered additional thoughts on this issue;

When I did a health care forum ... everyone was saying we need to do this, and we need to do that, and dadada. I let them go on for a while, and at the end of the forum . . . about 15 minutes from the end of the forum, I said 'who's we?' There was like dead silence in the room. And then they took it on. They formed a health committee, and then they had a forum again, somebody did with a social work issue or something. But I think it can be a function of moderating as to what does the group want? Where do they want to go with it? Maybe that question isn't asked. I don't know the structure of what happened in those communities. I know people were frustrated at one of the forums that they didn't have the answers in two hours.

The previous quote illustrates another important point about the differences between a moderator and facilitator in developing relationships of trust, as defined by Corbett and Offenbacher (2008). A moderator works to ensure community voice, and the facilitator works with the community to figure out appropriate next steps. As Corbett & Offenbacher suggest, it is hugely important that community members are trusting of the process and those leading the dialogues.

In Brightmoor we again had to work to build a relationship of trust with the community. Access to Democracy taught us that one of the most important parts of creating sustainable and trusting university-community partnerships is to begin by truly understanding the needs and history of the



community (Rowley, 2000; Cherry & Shefner, 2004). We have also worked to ensure that all our conversations with local leaders and community members have been bi-directional, where both sides had the opportunity to share and learn from and with each other (Mulroy, 2004). In choosing to enter Brightmoor we intended to continue our commitment to building trust through shared learning.

Brightmoor is a community that has been of interest to university scholars and groups for several years. Depending on their research or programmatic goals the different university groups would connect with the community with varying levels of commitment. Given these past experiences, it is understandable that we were initially greeted with some skepticism.

Trust as a Conditional Asset

The work in Brightmoor and our general commitment to university-community partnerships spanned several generations of students at the National Forum. While we have benefited from the fact that many students from diverse backgrounds have stepped up to become involved (over five years perhaps as many as 30 students in some capacity), the challenge of maintaining continuity of effort and sustaining trust was always on our minds.

We were very fortunate to have one doctoral student, Elizabeth Hudson, who served as a consistent and tireless champion for this work and who enjoyed enough respect in both the community and in our organization that she could mentor new students as they became interested in serving the community. We also benefited from the presence of UM faculty from other academic departments who were steadfast in their support for the community and well known for their contributions. In the end, of course, trust is not a transferable asset. It must be earned. One of the organizational challenges we faced was to pass along values, learning and access over time and to ensure that, even if new people came and went, the values that were at the heart of the relationships were passed along.



One key ingredient to building trust is a commitment to developing long-term partnerships. We have found that relationships based on short-term goals, meeting for one particular dialogue for example, have proven less fruitful. We have worked to construct university-community relationships for the long term. Sure we could acknowledge our short-term goals, but we needed to demonstrate to the community that their relationship with us would remain for a long time to come. Even as our own staff has changed, community leaders could reach out to the University of Michigan and the National Forum and expect to be greeted as friends and colleagues.

The changing economic climate has meant that some of the state and federal grants that we were able to support in Brightmoor have diminished. Our relationship with the community will continue to shift as we adapt to address this new economic reality. As we move forward it will be important for us to live up to our commitment to a long-term community partnership with Brightmoor. We are dedicated to maintaining relationships of trust even as our economic relationships are forced to evolve. It is important that our Brightmoor partners to know the individual connections and institutional resources we built together are available for support for years to come.

Lesson # 4: It is important to incorporate a variety of leadership styles into community dialogues

When we brought community leaders together we noticed they consistently fell into distinct leadership roles. In an effort to examine those roles more clearly we interviewed community members about their experience



working with other Brightmoor leaders. Those interviews resulted in hundreds of pages of transcripts which allowed us to identify five categories of community leadership styles: Visionary, Believer, Empowerer, Convener, and Resource Sharer (see Appendix B: Including Community Voice to Improve Community Campus Partnerships).

The Visionary leader has the big picture in mind and helps the group keep focused on the goals of their relationship together. A Believer is concerned with the group morale and reminds participants to reflect on the progress they have already made. The Empowerer is mindful of the voices that may not be at the table and works to ensure that important partners are not left out of the decision making process. Conveners are focused on bringing existing local partners together and gathering the wisdom, ideas for change, and resources that are already present in the community and mobilizing them to reach their goal. Lastly, the Resource Sharer works to bridge the resources of the university with those of the community and helps them to work together in the most efficient way.

Each of these roles plays an essential part of the university and community development process. The various leadership styles ensured that when conflict arose no one particular person was able to dominate the decision making, instead because a variety of leaders were looking out for an assortment of interests a balance was maintained. Additionally, having leaders from different backgrounds helped ensure that the general voice of the community was represented — as people from different backgrounds were



given an equal seat at the table. It is the diversity of leadership styles that has helped Brightmoor make significant strides in improving educational access, and we anticipate that the same would be true in other university and community partnerships.

The approach to leadership we observed was especially appropriate in light of the form of democratic participation that came to characterize the Brightmoor effort. While there were regular — generally monthly — community meetings at which any resident could voice an opinion or concern, the agency of community organizing and representation was frequently placed in the hands of a relatively few people. The Brightmoor Alliance served as the official voice of the community. It is organized with a large and active board. Local pastors and leaders of area non-profit groups exert considerable influence in the Alliance, in part because they are regularly involved in meetings and in part because of the respect they receive from community members. There are few trappings of democracy in the traditional sense (very few issues were resolved by voting and the Brightmoor Alliance is a self-perpetuating board) but many expressions of democratic engagement nonetheless were in evidence.

Lesson # 5: There is value in learning through doing

Every step of the way from Access to Democracy to our relationships in Brightmoor we have chosen to learn about community building by participating in it. We quickly engaged communities, met with civic leaders and citizens, always listening and learning along the way. Choosing to “dive



right in” has often been a bit messy at first as we have settled into our own best practices.

Through Access to Democracy we documented our learning of how to best build strong university relationships (See Table 1).

Necessary Conditions	Good	Better	Best
Community Connection	Create individual, trusting relationships	Take time to build trust with new networks	Tap into existing, trusting networks
Participant Motivation	Incentivized participation (Rice Krispie Treats; Workshops)	Professional dedication to the issue	Personal and professional dedication to the issue and the process
Staff Buy-in	Interested and available staff	Passionate staff	Staff that relates to community and is passionate
Local Promotion	Flyers in public community Spaces	Flyers, local contacts spreading the work, and Web promotion	Varied multi-medium promotion including deliberate action by ‘gatekeepers’
Community Information	National data about local education	National Data, industry information, and geography of community groups	National Data, industry information, geography of groups, and inside perspective

Table 1. Evolutionary Development of Natural Conditions (Adapted from Phase 1 Interim Kettering Report, April 30, 2008).

Sometimes we entered into a community already having learned the “Better” or “Best” practices, sometimes not. There are risks in choosing to learn through participating in community building. We knew we were deviating from the more traditional academic research model where a scholar investigates a community from a distance. We consistently had to ask



ourselves: What if we mess up? What if there is an important piece that we are missing? How would the personal relationships we developed influence our findings? However, despite the risks, the benefits of this learning process were great. We were compelled to remain consistently open to learning from the community instead of coming in with our own prescribed ideas of what a community needed out of a university partnership. This openness and willingness to adapt is part of what allowed us to have such successful dialogues and university and community relationships.

Lesson # 6: Dialogue is key to communities' understanding of democratic participation

Throughout each stage of our research we might have preferred to be able to study a linear process with the opportunity to trace where a particular relationship was able to influence a particular action within a community, or identify one component which led to sustained community building. However, the process of beginning and sustaining conversations in Brightmoor and in Access to Democracy was far more dynamic. As we have described here we found that many aspects of building productive conversations and community relationships are interrelated. For example building a productive dialogue between community leaders is not just about bringing community members to the table, it is also about considering who is not at the table and why they are not there. And successful community groups are not built on one leadership style, but are sustained and grow because of a diversity of personalities and views.



One consistent finding in our work is simply the importance of conversation — engaging as many groups as possible. It is true that talk for its own sake is often criticized as being too removed from action, however, that position undervalues the importance of deliberation to promote democracy. In both Access to Democracy and in Brightmoor the more often we held dialogues between community partners, the more participants were able to make their own connections between dialogue and policy goals.

One of the reasons that conversation is so important is that it allows individuals and community groups to negotiate their interdependence to one another. As we described in our March 2009 revision of our “Community organizing strategies for promoting deliberation in diverse community settings” report, the interdependencies of social, economic, political, educational, and health systems demand that community and campus work towards democratic problem-solving partnerships (Glass & Fitzgerald, 2009).



Ongoing Questions

Our time working with Access to Democracy and in Brightmoor help us think critically about how universities can effectively connect with communities to improve educational attainment. However, there remain several questions that invite future research:

- What makes a university a positive community partner?
- What does it mean for a university to act locally?
 - For the University of Michigan for example, is Ann Arbor “local?” Detroit? All of Michigan?
 - At what point does the interaction change from being a local one and how does that change the organizing strategy?
- Our knowledge comes out of a partnership that began only a few years ago. What does a sustained relationship between a university and a community look like? Do the challenges remain the same? Do they evolve — how so?

These are just a handful of the questions available to other researchers to explore both in the Brightmoor community and beyond. The relationship between universities and the communities in and around them is indeed an area rich with potential for scholarship.



Concluding Thoughts

In his famous book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Harvard University sociologist Robert Putnam describes the fall of community associations in America (Putnam, 2001). Yet, our work in Brightmoor and in communities across the state has demonstrated an alternative trend. Citizens are eager to come together, engage in participatory democracy, and actively work to improve life in their own backyard — that of their own generation and that of those to come. The passion that community members brought to the table in Access to Democracy and in Brightmoor has been inspiring. We have brought that energy back to Ann Arbor with us and it continues to motivate us as an organization.

We have indeed learned a lot from our time working with community leaders and organizations, scholars within the University of Michigan, and our foundation partners. Many of these lessons arose out of focusing on specific questions while others developed organically as our relationships in Michigan communities evolved. We have learned about the ways in which democracy plays it self out in university and community partnerships, and this learning has opened the door to future possibilities for scholarship.

Our current work in Brightmoor has evolved tremendously over the past few years. Where we were once the driving force in helping community conversations happen, it is now community leaders that are initiating meetings. Where we were once one of a handful of groups looking for grants to bring to



Brightmoor, now several community and organizational partners look for funding themselves. Given that Brightmoor community leaders have “taken the reins” our role will need to change. We know we do not want to simply abandon our relationship with the community, and we also know we want to continue to empower them to decide their direction. What exactly will our relationship with Brightmoor look like in a year or five years or ten years? We cannot know for sure, but we do know that we want Brightmoor community leaders to know that we are always an ally in their important work.

We entered Brightmoor planning to be different. We did not want to come in and tell Brightmoor what to do from our position in the ivory tower. Instead, we listened to what their concerns were for themselves. We worked to understand their evolving understanding of “community” and tried to earn their trust. Perhaps our success is best measured by the fact that decisions about Brightmoor are not being made from Ann Arbor, but from within Brightmoor itself. Our evolving relationship with Brightmoor is indicative of the potential of university-community partnerships, and it is our hope that the lessons contained in this report can help other campuses in developing thoughtful community relationships.



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Appendix A

A Summary of Previous Reports between The National Forum and the Kettering Foundation

“Higher education for the public good: A report from the National Leadership Dialogues” (2003).

The National Forum organized three major conversations involving education, policy and community leaders to talk about the role that higher education might play in a changing society. These discussions took place over a period of sixty days in Wye River, Maryland, Oxnard California and Minneapolis, Minnesota. At the suggestion of the Kettering Foundation, the National Forum asked Scott London to capture the findings from these discussion which he did in three monographs and a summary report.

“Community organizing strategies for promoting public deliberation in diverse community settings,” Phase I report, April 30, 2008.

This paper analyzes community members’ thoughts on their experiences participating in a dialogue as a part of the Access to Democracy project. It examines five of the communities that participated and makes suggestions for developing future successful university and community partnerships.

“Community organizing strategies for promoting public deliberation in diverse community settings,” Stage II: A scholarly article, December 21, 2008 (Revised March 2009).

This report describes community members’ evaluations of the process of organizing community dialogues about educational attainment. It focuses specifically on how community expectations help universities consider their role in such a partnership.

“Community involvement on continua: “Step sons” and civic professionals within community-based coalition’s democratic practice,” May 13, 2011.

Through a series of interviews and meeting transcripts, this paper looks at the organizational development of the Brightmoor Career and College Access Network (BCCAN) as a case study to consider the evolution of a community-based coalition as they work to improve educational access.



Appendix B

Including Community Voice to Improve Community-Campus Partnerships



This poster highlights often-unvoiced community perceptions about higher education engagement with local communities.

- researchers gathered data in 2008 from an evaluative component of institutional engagement practices focused on one local community
- researchers asked interviewees questions about the challenges and success of working in the community, with the university, and what they would do differently
- researchers openly coded all of the data and created categories based on the unique emergent themes
- ten community members were interviewed by National Forum staff to assess the community-campus relationship and how they perceived the university's role
- researchers transcribed the interviews to more than 300 pages of interview data
- researchers identified five complementary roles of partners in community-campus partnerships

PRACTICING PARTNERSHIP

Community-Voiced Roles & Expectations

Visionary



Creates and sustains the ideals for the partnership

- focus on long-term aims of the community

“So we do a two-year project or a one-year project when the issues are systemic? So the whole sense of saying, “Well fine, we have some dialogue,” when you have a systemic issue within communities and you need to have systems that can be systemic to continue to work on certainly a one year project is not sufficient...”

Believer



Keeps up group spirits through active or passive engagement

- making lists of “incremental steps” of change
- staying involved with the partnership’s aims and goals

“One main challenge that we have is getting people... to buy into the fact that progress is going on because the community has been in such a disarray for such a long period of time, it’s hard to get people to see change. So... on a monthly basis, printed out all of the progress that has taken place each month, so that people can have a documented, hands on view of what some of the great things that are going on in the community.”

Empowerer



Encourages community voice in the partnership process and allows room for marginalized voices to emerge

- let communities know their voice will impact change
- allow room for marginalized voices to emerge

“They gotta feel like they’re being listened to, and they gotta feel like they’re talking to somebody who can affect changes, who can affect the policy. So I think that’s an effective partnership if you can - I don’t know how you can measure that - but I people like to feel that they are given the opportunity to talk and that they’re talking with somebody who can, indeed, effectively go about making changes.”

Convener



Brings together groups from the community toward a locally defined goal

- convene groups from the community toward a locally defined goal
- tap into existing social networks

“All they have to do is make a request, and we have, whether it’s [the electric company], whether it’s lending, whether it’s the downtown development, we’re already networking with a number of other organizations. I don’t know if anybody new came into that. We just turned to those existing partners and said, “What do you think? Want to participate?”

Resource Sharer



Trades the university’s human and financial resources with the community organizations’ human resources, local expertise and real-world context.

- work with community to spend resources in a way that aligns with their needs
- combating competitiveness for grants that leads to redundant efforts and resource waste

“It’s bringing people resources in [for]... lot of these schools just don’t have the money for... People can see right in front of their own eyes a role model.”

“Being able to keep out those individuals who want to come and just receive money because there’s grant opportunities, but have no vested interest in the community.”