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## Community Outreach Chaos

*Kathryn Hammond*

Dr. Janet Schuman was thrilled when Montville College was awarded a large grant from the National Metropolitan Development Agency (MDA) to develop a Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC). COPC grants assist colleges and universities in providing technical assistance, training, and applied research to address the expressed needs of urban communities. It strives to take advantage of the knowledge and enthusiasm of students, faculty, and community partners to mobilize the assets *within* and *between* the campus and community.

While preparing the grant proposal, Dr. Schuman paid careful attention to all of the specified guidelines in the request for proposal. Universities and colleges are required to define and describe a target area (or urban community) via census tracts and other reliable data sources. Urban areas must have a minimum of 2,500 residents. Proposed projects should match the initiatives of MDA while tapping the resources of the university or college. The residents themselves should identify community needs. Funds are awarded to the institution of higher education and cannot be paid directly to citizens during implementation. All COPC applicants are required to have written support from the organizations and local governments with which they partner.

While gearing up to write the proposal, Dr. Schuman sought the support of the town mayor and council to meet some of the MDA requirements. She was pleased when the mayor suggested that one of the councilmen appoint a steering committee of local leaders and activists to help identify neighborhood needs and the strategies to address them.

Dr. Schuman rounded out the steering committee with members of the college who were committed to undertaking this kind of community-based project. During their first meeting, the steering committee spent a significant amount of time discussing the grant, its parameters, and the critical issues of the neighborhood it would address.

The Elm Street neighborhood seemed the appropriate target area for the grant proposal. It was an enclave that residents thought of as a “community within a community,” with characteristics separate and distinct from other sections of Montville. When taken as a whole, Montville is well known as a relatively prosperous town serving as a national model of diversity and integration. Much of the African American population, however, is concentrated in and around the Elm Street neighborhood. In more detail, the target neighborhood consisted of all of census tract 16 of the Township of Montville. Tract 16 has a population of 2,794 in an area of 0.3 square mile, with 2,298 African American residents and 496 white residents. The median household income of the Elm Street neighborhood is \$25,658 (an income dramatically lower than the median household income of \$74,588 of the larger Montville).

Intensifying the stark disparities exhibited between the Elm Street neighborhood and the larger Montville was the construction of the “Montville Link,” a rail connection offering a direct ride to a major metropolitan city. Making room for the rail line called for ongoing construction and the demolition of 19 houses in the Elm Street enclave, with the displacement of 27 families. In addition, 48 housing units were vacant and would remain so until the completion of the Montville Link, at which time rent was expected to increase significantly, reaching far beyond the means of many neighborhood residents.

Dr. Schuman felt confident that the Census Bureau data and transportation developments clearly pointed to a community in need. She and her colleagues feverishly began the process of designing projects that included hosting workshops highlighting the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants and neighborhood forums to foster linkages among residents to address local needs. Community members of the steering committee reviewed the proposal before submission. Most seemed pleased with the result and agreed to work on the project in the event it was funded. The group disbanded, awaiting the funding decision of MDA.

The time had finally arrived for the proposed activities to be put into action. After funding, a majority of Dr. Schuman’s work as the COPC director involved organizing resources and reorienting her team to the proposed activities and timetable for implementation. The funding received

local coverage in the *Montville Record*, a popular weekly town newspaper. Headlines emphasized the sizable \$400,000 grant awarded to Montville College. A majority of the accolades went to the mayor and college administration. Steering committee members and community partners were not highlighted in the articles. Although Dr. Schuman was not particularly pleased with this oversight, she assumed the good work of the COPC team would become the central theme of future headlines and stories. Such optimism, however, would not quell the grumbles among well-known community residents and activists. Although some of the steering committee members and residents called Dr. Schuman to voice their concerns, she still pushed forward with arrangements for the upcoming workshops and neighborhood forums.

A workshop for tenants was the first of the COPC activities to be implemented. Montville faculty presented information to residents covering landlord/tenant rights and responsibilities. Dr. Schuman was disappointed when only four residents attended. She had concentrated on an extensive outreach effort that included a flyer mailing and newspaper announcements. A reporter for the *Montville Record* was present and recounted the abysmal attendance in an article titled "Renters are a No-Show at First COPC Sponsored Workshop." The low resident turnout and newspaper coverage launched a campuswide buzz. Dr. Schuman's colleagues warned that this kind of negative coverage would lead to a backlash from college administration. The college, after all, had spent a number of years engaging and developing partnerships with organizations in the community.

Resident attendance, however, didn't seem to be a problem for the subsequent Neighborhood Forum. Contrary to the scarce turnout at the recent workshop, this event was crowded with residents, local activists and leaders, COPC team members, college faculty, and students.

Dr. Schuman and her COPC colleagues were informally introducing themselves to the residents. Yet rather than breaking the ice and discussing ways to work together on community issues, residents outwardly expressed their reservation about the project. It was clear a core group branded the COPC efforts as patronizing and ill equipped to handle the *real* needs of the community.

Some directly questioned Dr. Schuman as to how their Elm Street neighborhood was selected as the "targeted area." Others, such as Rhonda Howard, a well-respected and often outspoken activist wanted to know why she wasn't chosen to be part of the steering committee. She asked some other attendants in a voice loud enough to be heard by many at the

session, “How are these college professors and their naïve students supposed to solve our problems? They probably got lost getting here tonight while they were coming down from the college on the hill.”

Frank Jerome, the president of the Montville chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was questioning who was getting paid from the grant funds, and why the COPC team did not reflect the diversity of the town. There was a sign-up sheet circulating the room prompting folks to join an ad hoc committee to investigate the COPC. Meanwhile the local reporter was interviewing residents and taking pictures for the next edition of the *Montville Record*.

In the midst of this chaos, Dr. Schuman had to compose herself, for she was just about to move to the podium to introduce the project and the evening’s activities. She walked up to the podium and looked upon angry faces. She saw the local reporter with pen and paper in hand. As she began to greet the participants, the NAACP president interrupted her. The first of a battery of questions was coming her way. How was she going to address them in a way that would represent the good intentions of the COPC project? But more importantly, what was she going to do tomorrow?

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