

# Chapter I: The Growing Challenge

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**P**overty, race, and strengthening the social fabric by strengthening community institutions – there is broad agreement that these are central issues for the United States. Poverty is growing as increasing numbers of people are being left behind by our economy, our educational institutions, and our traditional system for providing social mobility. Race relations are becoming more complex as our nation becomes far more multicultural and issues of racial justice and racial tensions simmer. Our social fabric and democratic institutions are under strain, as concern grows about the extent to which our community institutions have the strength, openness and leadership to bring and hold people together, creating the webs of close ties, common values, helping relationships and democratic traditions which are so important to successful communities.

**There is also broad agreement that community organizations of various types must be central to any strategy for addressing the interlocked issues of poverty, race, and social fabric.** In this era of government retrenchment it is clear that the public sector will not take the lead in addressing these issues. Nor are large nonprofit institutions well-suited for this task, as they typically work area-wide and must balance many interests and activities rather than focus on particular communities. And the traditional civic concerns and leadership of local business are being weakened as mergers and globalization reduce the number of hometown corporations and local corporate leaders.

There is no choice: Leadership on poverty and race therefore must come from the community itself. Well-led, truly community-based organizations can become uniquely knowledgeable about the community's needs, skilled at involving large numbers of volunteers to work on priority issues, and effective in ensuring that new resources, partnerships, policies and programs are developed to strengthen the community. They also can become vital bridges

for linking people together across racial and economic lines to address issues of race and poverty.

Strong, well-led community organizations are therefore essential to the success of other partners in the process of community change. Without effective systems for involving community residents, efforts to reform public education, increase public safety, or transform the lives and attitudes of community residents will fail. So will initiatives which are designed to improve housing and sustain it over the long-run, or to prepare hard-to-employ people for lives of work and a chance to move up. All these reforms require changes in people's attitudes and the development of systems which are sensitive to a community's unique opportunities, are "owned" by those they are serving, and enlist strong neighborhood backing.

There is growing recognition of these lessons in major public and private institutions. Many police departments, public health and mental health professionals, experts in youth and family development, workforce development specialists, and foundations creating "comprehensive community initiatives," for example, have concluded that they must work through community-based organizations if they are to achieve their goals.

As agreement has grown on the central importance of grassroots groups, there has been very substantial investment in those organizations. Foundations, churches, corporations, government agencies, and others have invested billions of dollars in community organizing, community development and community-building. Low-income people, especially people of color, have invested huge amounts of volunteer time in building organizations through which they work to change their communities and public policies for the better.

The need for grassroots organizations and well-trained people to lead them is certain to increase. As new immigrant groups settle into the United States and as the working poor, people of color, young people and the elderly grow in relation to the rest of the population,

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they will need to band together on the particular issues they face. They will need formal and informal groups through which they can join with their peers, represent their interests, meet their immediate needs, and increasingly serve as partial substitutes for the government agencies which are shrinking as the social safety net weakens. People will therefore be strongly motivated to create a new generation of self-help and mutual help organizations, drawing on the unique American traditions of self-reliance, the building of strong voluntary associations, and vital support for those associations by private philanthropy.

Reliance on grassroots groups will grow as tax cuts, military expenditures, the shaky economy, and conservative social and fiscal policies further reduce support for social programs. Poverty will increase dramatically: government cutbacks are reducing services and income transfer programs, and low-income people of all races are facing growing barriers to advancement because, while the need for a well-educated workforce is growing, they typically face poor schools, the digital divide, and increasingly unaffordable higher education. The gap between rich and poor will widen rapidly unless the political and fiscal situations change dramatically. Because poor people cannot count on the public or private sector or large nonprofits to take the lead in changing this situation, there will be a growing need for strong nonprofits which represent and serve poor and working people.

There is by now a rich body of experience with different strategies for strengthening low-income communities. These include community organizing, community development, and approaches to reforming the public and private sector policies which have such an impact on neighborhoods and on each person's chance to

get ahead.<sup>1</sup> **There is much to learn, and it is essential that people who lead these vital efforts have opportunities to learn from the experience of their predecessors and peers. Informed with this knowledge, they will have a far greater chance of succeeding in bringing about significant social and community change.**

### **The Crisis in Leadership**

**D**espite the growing consensus on the critical importance of grassroots organizations, and despite this major investment and growth, the field of community change faces a mounting crisis of leadership. There is a severe shortage of people who are fully prepared for key positions in the field – whether leading grassroots groups or providing vital support to them from other sectors. The infrastructure for learning is still pitifully weak, with people expected to learn on the job, through trial and error, with little access to the lessons others have learned in tackling similar challenges. Nonprofits typically are so overstretched that few can either hire people as apprentices to their top leaders or invest significantly in other forms of training and mentoring.

To build a strong community-based sector which fully responds to these needs, **far greater priority must be given to developing a pipeline which can generate the skilled leadership community groups will need. It will be particularly important that growing numbers of young people from immigrant populations and other families of color be prepared for challenging jobs in community-based nonprofits**, as their backgrounds give them unique advantages for understanding and leading their communities. Their backgrounds also increase the likelihood they will

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this paper, “community development corporations” are defined as nonprofit organizations which create and manage housing and/or economic development programs. “Community organizing groups” are those which stress organizing a mass-based constituency and building power for collective action and advocacy, rather than running their own programs. “Community change” is the process of engaging people in reforming broad policies and systems and changing the behavior of major public and private institutions with the goal of increasing opportunities for low-income people and other disadvantaged groups.

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make long-term rather than fleeting commitments to the neighborhoods and people who most need their help.

**Community change is, in short, a tough and demanding job requiring a broad background, analytic and strategic skills, and practical experience in understanding and motivating people and moving them into action on strategies which will lead to growing success. It is a tremendously challenging – and exciting – responsibility, at least as complex as any other profession. Like other professions, it requires extensive preparation, well beyond what people can learn on a job without a serious educational component, mentoring and guidance.**

**This challenge is greatly heightened by the major leadership transition now underway.** Many grassroots groups and support organizations are now going through a wrenching generational change. Organizers and leaders who emerged from the activism of the 1960s – a unique period in American history when the civil rights, Chicano, antipoverty, and women’s movements stimulated a surge of community organizing, alternative social service and community development efforts – are now retiring or otherwise stepping out of management roles, leaving leadership positions vacant.

In many ways this transition is healthy, bringing new energies and ideas to the work. But the trend also has great dangers. The older generation is often passing the torch to people who are 25 or 30 years younger because there is a “missing generation” of people who would now be 40-55. When that generation was young, few entry-level jobs were available as grassroots groups were reducing their budgets in the face of a poor economy, backlash against the activism of the 1960s, and reduced philanthropic giving and government support. Furthermore, those who found jobs with community groups often found their path to advancement blocked as founders stayed on and budgets remained static. Many therefore moved to jobs with greater upward mobility –

politics and government, other nonprofits with higher salaries and benefits, foundations, and corporations and banks concerned about their affirmative action and community reinvestment obligations. This brain drain has left many groups with such a large generational gap that they now have no choice but to shift to much younger leadership as their founders move on.

Second, as the variety of approaches to community change has multiplied, most people have been forced to specialize in just one somewhat narrow aspect of the work. They have specialized in housing development, or anticrime efforts, or health care, or tenant organizing, with relatively few people having an opportunity to broaden their knowledge and analytic skills beyond what they learn in carrying out their particular duties.

**This is unfortunate as it is increasingly clear that the highly complex work of community change requires a mix of approaches – community organizing, community development, coalition-building and policy advocacy among others. It is also apparent that communities require multi-issue, increasingly comprehensive strategies rather than concentrating on a single issue.** You cannot, for example, solve the housing problem without addressing issues of jobs and income, schools, public services, safety, and public and private investment in the neighborhood as a whole. Furthermore, those issues require working at the citywide, metropolitan and statewide levels as well as locally, a challenge which requires strong political skills and alliances.

Third, **the shortage is especially great among people of color** whose leadership is essential because communities of color are disproportionately poor, neglected and cut off from opportunities. Educational gaps, stubborn patterns of white dominance in key institutions, and the appeal of jobs offering greater security and upward mobility continue to limit the number of people of color in grassroots leadership positions.

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### **The Need for Action**

**T**he success of this transition depends in large part upon whether there is a significant expansion of programs to prepare two cohorts of professionals to lead community change efforts.

**For the long-run there must be great expansion of *programs to prepare college-age young people for work in community organizing, community development and social change organizations, and then link them to careers in that field*** so they can lead community change efforts in ten or twenty years. It is especially important to support programs which attract people from communities in distress as those students start with both a deep understanding of those communities and a greater likelihood they will make long-term commitments to them.

**For the short-run, considering the massive leadership transition already underway, immediate attention must be given to *mid-career programs which broaden the knowledge and deepen the skills of already experienced practitioners*.** They soon will be assuming broad-gauged responsibilities which require that they master issues and adopt strategies which are now foreign to their experience. Their ability to make this transition successfully will determine the future success of grassroots efforts to bring about substantial social and community change.

It is therefore crucial that steps be taken to help prepare both age groups for their new challenges. However, with a shaky economy and strict constraints on philanthropic giving, it is not a good time to launch heavily funded, wholly new initiatives to meet these needs. Instead it is an era for making judicious investments to reinforce good programs which are already underway and help them expand their impact. **In addition to providing direct support for prototype educational programs for young and mid-career people, efforts to *build and strengthen networks through which now-isolated academic programs and practitioners can work together to***

**refine and expand their current educational and training programs would contribute significantly** to mutual learning and mutual support across institutions and disciplines. That strategy underlies this scan of the current state of university education related to careers in community change.

### **Background on This Search for Solutions**

**T**his scan focuses on the preparation of people for careers leading and supporting community change efforts. Their role may be to lead community organizing, community development or community-driven coalitional efforts to influence policies, or to work on those issues from within government, major nonprofits, philanthropy or business. Whichever role they play, they will need to develop extensive knowledge and skills with which to foster significant change in low-income communities and expand opportunities for poor people and people of color. This requires that they develop –

- broad knowledge of the interrelated issues poor people and their neighborhoods face;
- an understanding of how major public and private institutions relate to those communities and how they might be reformed and strengthened;
- strong analytic skills;
- a strong sense of strategy and skills for leading change within an organization, a community, and its environment;
- expertise in involving community residents and developing their capacity to analyze the issues they face; and
- skills in building strong organizations to represent low-income communities and become full partners in decisions which will determine their future.

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In addition, community change agents need in depth knowledge of the particular specialty they will concentrate on most, such as housing and community development, workforce and economic development, community organizing, or community planning.

## The Role of Universities

**W**hy focus on universities as potential help for this alarming shortage of practitioners? Aren't universities so removed from the realities of low-income communities and the practical difficulties of running complex organizations that they are incapable of educating people for community change work? Doesn't their entire reward system militate against the kind of multifaceted, multidisciplinary knowledge and skill-building which is needed?

**It is clear that universities are not the only answer to the crisis. There is great potential in building up the nonprofit sector's capacity to provide much more extensive training and mentoring, building on the expertise and systems which are already in place. But they cannot handle the crisis by themselves as they have strict limits in their access to resources, their access to young people, and the range of their expertise.**

Against this backdrop, as part of a broader strategy for responding to the crisis of leadership, there are four reasons for focusing on universities.

First, **universities are the best point of contact with the young generation which the community change movement desperately needs.** There are currently over fifteen million students in institutions of higher education. Because of their tuitions and proximity community colleges, state universities, and commuter colleges are particularly good places for reaching people of color and low-income students who might devote their lives to this work if they were influenced by experiences and a curriculum which drew them into this

fascinating and challenging field. However, there are many students at elite universities – whites and people of color, people from middle-class backgrounds as well as low-income – who can make enormous contributions to the movement, and there are many examples of programs in those universities which offer courses and service opportunities which provide invaluable backgrounds.

Second, it is by now abundantly clear that **nonprofits will never get the resources which are needed for the intensive, long-term educational programs which are needed.** In the community change world, it is extraordinarily difficult to attract funding for more than a three or five day training program. A few organizations are funded to offer three or four weeks of training over a year, usually coupled with a research or action project related to the trainee's daily responsibilities. Some community organizing networks provide three months of training through workshops and experience working on an organizing campaign. Most groups have no choice but to hire the best people they can find and train them on-the-job.

Third, while the vast majority of universities offer few courses which are directly relevant to community change work, **universities do have great potential as sources of education and training for this field. This has been demonstrated by the best programs which already exist on different campuses.** Those programs illustrate how much can be gained by drawing on universities' enormous resources for teaching, research, and partnerships with communities. They can reach undergraduates, regular postgraduate students, and – as they do in other professions – mid-career professionals. And they have prestige, stability and continuity which are particularly appealing to people who are interested in career development and upward mobility.

Fourth, **this generation of students has a strong orientation to service which is causing universities to give new attention to community needs.** Again and again people

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interviewed for this scan remarked on how anxious young people are to provide services to people who need help. Cynical about politics, skeptical about major reforms happening in their lifetimes, many are excited by opportunities for community service. This has fueled the “service learning movement” which over 900 university presidents have endorsed and which, despite its weakness on most campuses, does have great potential as a focal point for educating people about community change.

Some educators like former Harvard President Derek Bok see a new emphasis on participation and civic values as an important counterweight to market forces as decisions are made concerning university curricula. Bok, for example, is deeply concerned about how university education is increasingly “market-driven” rather than oriented toward the common good, and very committed to efforts to increase the emphasis on service and civic engagement.

**This scan of university programs related to community change looks very broadly at the wide variety of programs which currently exist. It attempts to grasp the entire picture and to understand broad trends and patterns while learning of especially promising prototypes. This exploratory paper seeks to identify opportunities for relatively modest investments which could make a substantial difference over time.** Investments in good programs which need greater stability and some chance to grow; investments in helping key people network with others who are struggling with similar issues and are isolated from peers and other experiences; investments which will lead to incremental gains and, over time, to a gradual strengthening of university-based education for people working in the field of community change.

### **Universities – The Broad Landscape**

**I**n general, there is a somewhat surprising number of university programs which provide some courses related to community change. However, these programs are isolated from each other, usually on the margins of a university, and vulnerable to changes in leadership, institutional politics or the loss of vital outside funding. Most focus on only one or two aspects of community work, but a few are broader and more geared to give people a fuller background for working in low income neighborhoods. Collectively they give a glimpse of the potential and possible scope of more thorough curricula for college-age students and mid-career practitioners.

Several patterns are clear from this scan.

First, **the gulf between practitioners and academics is even wider than generally acknowledged.** Even among those who share a strong common commitment to grassroots community organizations as key institutions for addressing issues of class and race, there is little contact between practitioners and academics. They live in parallel universes, participating in different meetings and conferences, rarely reading the same materials, and not even knowing each other’s names. It is rare for research and other materials to be shared across these lines despite the fact that both universes conduct extensive research on community issues. Despite talk of “partnerships” there are relatively few examples of close collaboration between academics and community leaders, even on research on community issues and student placement – two issues on which they have potentially strong common interests.

Universities are in general heavily biased against experiential education and skill-building, viewing them as somehow being inferior and contrary to the traditions set by research universities (despite adoption of clinical models in such other graduate institutions as medical and dental schools and some business and law schools). Even when there are field placements with community groups, the obstacles to having practitioners co-teach with academ-

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ics are immense. Those which have introduced co-teaching have often reversed themselves when their leadership changes and a new dean or chairman reintroduces a more “academic” approach.

Second, **many of the most interesting programs have emerged in non-elite institutions.** Most are located in less well-known institutions, including community and commuter colleges and the less prestigious branches of state university systems. These institutions suffer less than elite universities from overwhelming pressures to ape the major research universities by publishing pathfinding research studies in academic journals. Their faculty members are often more free to create the practice-based and interdisciplinary approaches and university/community partnerships which are central to community work. They also are more entrepreneurial and accustomed to responding to markets for specialized education and training and offering courses at times and on terms which are attractive to adult learners.

Third, **university norms usually limit programs to a single discipline such as planning or social work or public health.** Because of the “tyranny of the disciplines,” promotion is dependent upon a teacher’s academic achievement in his or her field. They seek tenure in a single discipline, and earn it through conducting research which meets that field’s standards and is published in journals grounded in that discipline. This militates against cross-disciplinary work – an approach which is essential to researching or working on multifaceted issues in complex communities. As a result, very few university programs have a truly multidisciplinary approach despite the need to use techniques from different disciplines to analyze and address the complex and interrelated issues of poverty, race, community and public policy.

Fourth, **there are tremendous problems of isolation and lack of communication and sharing among university programs related to community work.** Interviews with over fifty people in universities revealed the extent to which they see themselves as on the margins of their own institutions and isolated from others trying to teach and involve students in community change studies.<sup>2</sup> Again and again interviewees expressed their desire for information about other college-based programs related to community change.

One factor contributing to the isolation of community-oriented university programs is that they are scattered in so many different places within institutions. In many universities, a thorough review of the course catalog reveals a surprising number of courses relevant to low-income communities, but they are in different departments and not linked. The undergraduate pattern is often a crazyquilt of courses in such departments as sociology, social psychology, political science, urban studies or anthropology. Similarly postgraduate courses are in schools of social work, urban studies, planning, public policy or public service, divinity, law, public health, sociology, economics and regional economic development, and leadership studies. To add to the complexity quite often some of the most relevant courses and research are concentrated in a “center” which is related to one or more departments.

Needless to say, this scattering of programs aggravates their isolation. Faculty-members often are unaware of other courses which also focus on low-income communities, especially those in different departments or based at a center with little visibility. **Students have no way of knowing that, with careful planning or guidance, they could piece together a series of courses which would give them quite a strong background for community work.**

<sup>2</sup>This sense of being marginalized is not confined to the United States. At a recent conference at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex (IDS), there was a consensus among academics who teach “participation” and community-oriented courses in seventeen countries that they all – including IDS – were working on the margins of their universities and feeling isolated and vulnerable.

## *Efforts to build and strengthen networks through which now-isolated academic programs and practitioners can work together would contribute significantly.*

There are also few opportunities for faculty to interact with people teaching similar courses in other universities. Because the major professional associations are dominated by traditional academic interests, their conferences, materials and working groups stress highly “academic” topics and research with little emphasis on community service. They seldom provide fora which help faculty deeply involved in community studies to learn from each other and explore common issues and strategies. In some disciplines like social work and planning, however, there are smaller formal or informal associations which provide opportunities for like-minded faculty to learn and support each other’s efforts. Unfortunately, these associations typically lack the resources to be robust sources of help on curricular development and the development of strategies for growing the field.

With all these gaps, it is easy to understand why there is no forum for bringing together faculty from different disciplines and different campuses to discuss how they might collaborate to develop the emerging field of community change studies. There are few opportunities for them to explore how they might work together to expand teaching, research and community work which is –

- Linked to real partnerships with community people and the organizations and institutions which represent and serve them;
- Participatory and designed to strengthen communities and community leadership, building on the assets which already exist;
- Multidisciplinary in analyzing and responding to community conditions and needs;
- Grounded in both theory and practice; and
- Designed to develop the students’ knowledge base, analytical capacities and practical and process skills by using theoretical and experiential teaching methods, practitioners as well as academics as teachers, and participatory action approaches to research.

A fifth factor is also extremely important. **The programs which exist are highly vulnerable.** Their future often depends upon their ability to attract sufficient “soft money” from outside the university to justify their existence. When that funding dries up, the programs typically shrink or die.

The future of these programs also often depends upon the leadership of one or two people who have carved out space for their programs over a lengthy period of time. In some cases these are tenured professors who use the security of their tenure to free themselves for community work and community-oriented teaching, but who have not institutionalized their work to ensure it will continue after they retire. Since many of these professors are veterans of the 1960s, they are now retiring without assurance their legacies will continue. While there are outstanding instances of a university president, dean or chairperson of a department giving priority to community-based service learning, there are countless examples of failure to institutionalize these efforts so they last beyond that person’s leadership. As a result many such initiatives have been swept away by a successor who returns the school to more traditional academic priorities.

Why do people teaching these community-oriented subjects feel marginalized? In contrast to the 1960s, when students joined with the civil rights, antipoverty and other movements to press universities to meet community needs, the reward system for university faculty now is even more heavily dominated by the priority on research and publishing. In the interviews one professor after another reported that teaching is valued less than research, and that work benefiting the community gets little credit when decisions are made on promotion, tenure, and budgets. With universities suffering from tight budgets and cutbacks in personnel, teaching staff are pressed to concentrate on what’s most essential to their careers, leaving little time for serving the community.

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### **Three Responses to the Crisis**

This scan began with interviews of a cross-section of about twenty people to learn from their experience and their views concerning the potential for university-based education for people leading and supporting community change efforts. These initial interviewees included directors of community organizing groups and CDCs as well as academics. The interviews provided the basis for developing initial conclusions concerning the types of interventions which would be most useful in expanding educational and training programs for community change agents. These ideas were then tested and refined through additional research and interviews.

The interviews surfaced many ideas, of course, but there was broad agreement on three important points of intervention.

First, in preparing for the future, **there is great potential in building upon the current remarkably strong interest in service learning and expanding civic engagement to foster development of undergraduate curricula which introduce students to the field of social and community change.**

Second, throughout the interviews it was apparent that **now-isolated programs would benefit greatly from being more closely linked to experience elsewhere.** In speaking with people on more than forty campuses, it was abundantly clear that much could be gained by increasing contact among people who teach similar courses or engage in quite similar research and service projects. One element of an overall program for supporting the expansion of community change education would be to provide funds to expand the networks which currently link people within a single discipline.

Third, to begin meeting the immediate need to strengthen the skills and knowledge of people who are now assuming responsibility for leading community change organizations, there was broad agreement on the **great value of creating Master's-level programs for**

**mid-career people, and that those programs should be multidisciplinary and geared specifically to strengthen people's ability to lead community change efforts.** To maximize their practical usefulness, they must involve experiential as well as academic learning. This is facilitated when a faculty includes practitioners as adjuncts.

### **Conclusion**

Over the last four decades, as America has struggled with issues of poverty, race and opportunity, there has been a growing consensus about the central importance of strong and creative grassroots community organizations. They bring low-income people together to address issues which matter to them and their neighbors. They create new ties among neighbors, build social capital, and strengthen neighborhoods. They develop leadership, build self-reliance and skills, and represent the interests of people who would otherwise be marginalized and ignored. And many are important vehicles for delivering responsive services and launching important community development projects.

**If these groups are to grow and be sustained so they can handle all these crucial responsibilities, high priority must be given to supporting university-based efforts to prepare the next generation of leaders and top staff for grassroots organizations and the networks and institutions which are critical to their growth and success. This is a central challenge for foundations and other funders, for top staff of community groups, for support organizations and for other leaders in the field.**