

CONNECTIONS

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University

Institutions,
Professions, and the Public:
Focus on the
Public-Academy
Relationship

The New Engagement: From Community Relations to Community Partnerships

By *Byron P. White*

The former F&W Publications building, which sits across the street from Xavier University's main campus in Cincinnati, is an architectural marvel. The art deco structure, with its curving, marble stairways, terrazzo-tile floors, and two-story mural, is on the National Register of Historic Places. So it made perfect sense for Xavier University to purchase the building in 2001 after F&W announced plans to vacate. It would provide the university with much-needed space for its alumni relations and marketing functions and guarantee the historic structure's preservation in an urban community already suffering from blight and disinvestment.

At least that was the perspective that Xavier officials shared proudly with leaders in the Evanston community, where the building is located, when the university announced the purchase. However, the news was not met favorably by local residents. At the community meeting I attended, the prevailing sentiment ran more along these lines: "Wow, you can purchase *that* building? What else can you buy in our community?" The more cynical interpretation went this way: "Ah ha! I knew you had a master plan to take over our neighborhood. This is just the beginning!"

The meeting was further evidence that



Byron P. White



Photo by Greg Rust

The former F&W Publications building

**CIVIC MISSION
AND
ENGAGEMENT**



Good will does not necessarily create partnerships or collaboration. That requires not only friendly talk and good feelings, but a more deliberate sharing of responsibility, accountability, and authority.

despite our best intentions, Xavier University is not a peer of the communities around us. That is true for most universities, particularly those like Xavier, which find themselves landlocked in an urban, residential setting among struggling communities. What residents suspect about most of us is true: the university possesses the resources, the clout, and the expertise to win conflicts and, when it suits its purpose, to exploit its neighbors.

Increasingly, universities have realized that such engagement is not a winning proposition at all. Overpowering vulnerable communities does not lead to sustainable improvement for either the university or the community. Rather, it guarantees ongoing entanglements that hinder any long-term progress. For Xavier, this realization has meant a transformation in the very way we think about community engagement from a focus on *community relations* to one aimed at *community partnerships*. It has affected the way we serve, the way we learn, and the way we invest in the communities around us.

Over the past few years, thanks largely to the hard work of Dr. Eugene Beaupré, the university's director of government and community relations, we have made great progress in strengthening relations with the three communities that border the university, particularly Evanston, a predominantly African American neighborhood of about 8,000 citizens. Evanston is one of those teetering urban neighborhoods whose condition ranges from run-down poverty areas to tidy middle-class enclaves. Beaupré has served on many neighborhood committees and is greeted by most folks in Evanston with a warm handshake or hug.

But that goodwill does not necessarily create partnerships or collaboration. That requires not only friendly talk and good feelings, but a more deliberate sharing of responsibility, accountability, and authority. It requires that the university view the community not merely as a place in need of help, but as a treasure chest of assets and lessons that students, faculty, administrators, and staff can draw from

to advance the university's strategic objectives, whether developing curriculum or attracting students. It requires a transparent exposure of self-interests, along with well-defined goals and roles.

In his inaugural speech in September 2001, Xavier President Fr. Michael J. Graham, S.J., identified community engagement as a hallmark of his administration. His speech, entitled "Scholars, Saints, and Citizen-Servants," focused on the integration of the intellectual, moral and ethical, and civic obligations of a Catholic Jesuit university. In his address, Graham posed this challenge concerning the neighborhoods surrounding campus:

What is the great conversation that might occur between us if we found ourselves around a common table, got past our initial awkwardness and silence, leveled with one another the way friends do, [and] decided that it would not be our last talk but only part of a conversation to which we would stay committed? How would we look differently at who we are and what we do as a result? What might we study then, teach then, learn then, research, report, and write about then?

Graham's commitment to deepening the connection between the university and surrounding communities led to the creation of the Community Building Collaborative@Xavier, which operates out of the president's office to bring strategic focus and coordination to the university's community engagement efforts. The work has led to several new approaches.

A New Approach to Service

The voice mail from the president of Xavier's Phi Alpha Theta chapter made me grimace. The history fraternity had decided to tutor junior high school students as a community service project and wanted me to suggest a school with whom they could work in the nearby Norwood community. It sounded like another generic service project that positions

the university in the classic role of expert and portrays the community as ignorant. We understand history; neighborhood kids don't; they need our help. More importantly, it did not seem to capitalize on the imagination and creativity of our students. These young people could tutor and do a terrific job. But what else might they do that would generate greater excitement and benefit?

After some prodding, the organization's president conceded that what the group really wanted to do was to get children fired up about history, a far more exciting proposition. We also considered that interest in history might actually already exist in Norwood, a blue-collar community with a rich Appalachian heritage. Perhaps the most useful role for Xavier would be to identify an indigenous source of enthusiasm and elevate it. After some discussion, we concluded that a love of history probably already flourished in the

hearts and minds of Norwood's elderly residents.

Armed with this new thinking, the campus organization revamped its tutoring project. In the end, members worked with a newspaper club at Norwood Middle School to conduct interviews of elderly residents at a senior center. The oral history project served the group's objectives, while affirming the role of seniors in the community. Meanwhile, the Xavier students gained a new appreciation for Norwood, which had been a flash point for town-and-gown friction.

A New Approach to Learning

Faculty members are often full of great ideas about what they or their students might learn from a community, although these ideas frequently do not coincide with what the community wants to learn

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LESSONS

ASSETS

COMMUNITY



For the past several years, universities have focused on getting along better with the communities that impact their campuses. Today, the focus is on achieving specific outcomes that aid both the university and the community.

about itself. However, one need only talk to Sharon Muyaya, president of the Evanston Community Council, to understand that the community's initiative is at the heart of an ongoing public relations project that a Xavier PR management class has been conducting over the past two years.

"I came down and told the class what I was looking for, about the history of Evanston, and what we're doing here," Muyaya said in an interview in the student newspaper. "And through that history, we came up with a plan." The community's primary goal was to increase involvement and membership in the community council and to find new sources of revenue. About 30 students from the senior seminar, led by communication arts professor Tom Schick, have worked on the project.

As a result, membership has increased in the council, with about 60 new members coming from among university employees. The class has helped the community produce a newsletter, an awards banquet, and an annual "Taste of Evanston" fundraiser. Students remain involved in the project even after their class concludes, with many serving as volunteers. And in the ultimate gesture of collaboration, Evanston residents recently elected Schick treasurer of the community council.

A New Approach to Community Investment

Community relations efforts typically do not encourage universities to divulge their institutional goals to the surrounding community. The fear is that they might be misinterpreted or, worse yet, that the community might interfere. However, self-interest is an essential motive for collaboration. Besides, since the community knows full well that the university has selfish motives, residents get suspicious when they don't hear them articulated. Thus, the well-intentioned purchase of a building appears to be the initial move in a plot to take over the neighborhood.

At Xavier, we have realized that when it comes to collaboration around community investment and revitalization, the work must be rooted in a plan, with measurable outcomes and clear mutual benefits. We have developed such a plan with Evanston. It involves four focused objectives: re-creating a public elementary school; developing a section of the neighborhood business district; implementing a retention and recruitment home ownership strategy; and enhancing neighborhood leadership. Each of these areas grows out of the stated self-interests of both the university and the community.

The community, for instance, wants a new school to better educate its children and attract young home owners. The university is looking for a facility to institutionalize its early childhood education curriculum and provide day care for children of staff members. The plan calls for clear expectations of what the university and the community will deliver — and gain.

For the past several years, universities have focused on getting along better with the communities that impact their campuses. Today the focus is on achieving specific outcomes that aid both the university and the community. For the university, it means providing practical opportunities for academic learning as well as creating a campus environment that is safe and attractive. For communities, it means tapping into a source of expertise and economic resources that have long been considered off limits outside the academy's gates. Achieving these outcomes requires strategic partnerships, in which both university and community are looked to for expertise and leadership. Those are the only conditions under which unequal players can begin to operate as peers.

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