

# CONNECTIONS

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# Shared Learning with Uniontown: Lessons in Community Development

By Joe A. Sumners

## Characteristics of high-achieving communities:

- ◆ Strong public life, or civil society
- ◆ Shared understanding of the nature of the problems citizens face
- ◆ Reasonably effective at making needed changes
- ◆ Able to exercise good judgment and experiment in the face of uncertainty

Uniontown, a community of about 3,500, is located in the heart of Alabama's Black Belt, named for a deposit of dark, fertile soil extending from Mississippi's border through the heart of Alabama. This region, once the backbone of the state's agricultural economy, is now besieged by pervasive poverty and economic stagnation — the worst in the nation by most standards and considered by some to be at or below the level of many Third World nations. An area of urgent need, the region faces declining population, insufficient health care, substandard schools, and weak business development. Uniontown is one of the poorest of the many poor communities in the Alabama Black Belt.

Auburn University's efforts to assist the community began in 1999. Auburn's Economic Development Institute first provided assistance by helping create a strategic plan for the community. Auburn next recommended the creation of a Community Development Corporation (CDC) as a way to obtain broader public involvement and provide a structured organization capable of implementing some of the strategic plan's recommendations. The CDC was created, with the mayor serving as president and appointing all CDC members. The mayor also tended to dominate meetings. Citizens who attended strategic planning or CDC meetings often took a passive role and appeared reluctant to express their viewpoints in front of others. They tended to look to a leader — the mayor or some "outside" expert — for answers to community problems. Although the CDC met regularly, it was mostly unsuccessful in its efforts to broaden public engagement or improve the community's quality of life.

In the fall of 2000, the incumbent mayor was defeated in his bid for reelection and his successor was not enthusiastic about the city's strategic plan. The

new mayor rightly felt the group that created it was not representative of the whole community. He also was skeptical about using the CDC (composed of the former mayor and his supporters) as the vehicle for promoting community and economic development. Any momentum that Auburn University had gained in its community-building efforts was stalled.

Auburn's goal from the start was to develop citizens' capacity within the Uniontown community. Despite our good intentions, on reflection, we began to wonder whether we had approached this community with a mind-set that limited our ability to make a positive impact. We had initially viewed the community as a bundle of needs, or problems, that we were going to try to help alleviate. This kind of "outside-in" approach is a common trap for those involved in the development of distressed communities and is effectively described by John Kretzman and John McKnight in *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago, IL: ACTA Publications, 1993):

Negative images, such as crime and violence, joblessness and welfare dependency, vacant land and abandoned land and buildings, can be conceived as a kind of mental "map" of the community. This "needs" map determines how problems are to be addressed, through deficiency-oriented policies and programs. Public, private and non-profit human service systems, often supported by university research and foundation funding, translate the programs into local activities that teach people the nature and extent of their problems, and the value of services as the answer to their problems. As a result, many lower-income neighborhoods ... begin to see themselves as people





The Uniontown Web site, from which these images were taken, is the creation of Uniontown Cares. The Web site contains information about the community, its history, public services, institutions, and businesses.

with special needs that can only be met by outsiders. They become consumers of services, with no incentive to be producers.

Additionally, the only entry into the community available to us was through the mayor. We thus attempted to work with and through the mayor to get things done. As a result, our initial approach was primarily “top-down.” Clearly, this “trickle-down” approach to community development was not working.

We learned our lesson. Initially, Auburn’s efforts were focused largely on providing technical assistance to the Uniontown community to help solve problems. After the incumbent mayor’s defeat, Auburn decided to try a different approach. The new focus was less explicitly on problem solving and much more on facilitating dialogue, listening, and responding to the needs of Uniontown citizens as they defined them. Instead of working through the city’s mayor, we decided to more actively engage ordinary citizens.

To do this, Auburn identified and recruited about 25 individuals represent-

ing all segments of the community to participate in a focus group. This biracial group of citizens representing a wide range of age groups, income levels, and occupations now meets on a biweekly basis. In order to create a sense of shared identity, we encouraged the citizens to give their group a name. They selected the name “Uniontown Cares.”

Since the creation of Uniontown Cares, citizens have taken advantage of new public space to talk about community issues in a deliberative way, identify and take ownership of community problems, and connect with one another and with their community. As members of the Uniontown community discuss local problems, they are beginning to realize their capacity for doing something about them. Talk is being turned into action. And these actions have led to results — cleanups of parks and cemeteries, creation of an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter, creation of an adopt-a-park program, among many other successes. Those residents who have been engaged through Uniontown Cares are beginning to feel good about themselves and their sense of

*“Uniontown Cares is a group of community residents working in a cooperative manner to promote effective community collaboration and development. We are a diverse group of citizens that care about Uniontown and continue to work to make it a great place to live.*

*We meet regularly to discuss issues of importance to our community. We have been involved in numerous community projects and continually work to identify new projects and areas where we can offer our help. We are an ever-growing and continually active group that welcomes your input and involvement.”*

— Excerpted from the Uniontown Web site, [www.uniontownalabama.org](http://www.uniontownalabama.org)



## Shared-Learning Agreements

As a research organization, the Kettering Foundation has an evolving set of questions it is trying to answer. Those questions relate to the study of *practices* — ways that citizens, communities, and institutions can work together — that hold the promise of making democratic public life work as it should. One way the foundation develops insights is through learning agreements with organizations that have a shared interest in those questions. Such organizations have two characteristics: First, they have decided, for their own reasons, to explore how to do what they do differently, due, in part, to their recognition of Kettering research into the nature of effective political practice. Second, they are interested in learning from their efforts and sharing what they learn in a systematic way. The shared-learning agreements do not fund the organizations in doing what they decide to do, but are intended to support the preparation of reports of what was learned, which are based on mutually agreed-upon lines of questions.

Auburn University's Economic Development Institute is an example of an organization in a shared-learning relationship with the Kettering Foundation. In his report for *Connections*, Joe Sumners briefly recounts some of the lessons that have come from the institute's efforts to reimagine the role of university outreach efforts. The report has implications for understanding how communities work, how external organizations can affect a community's politics, and the relationships between the qualities of community practices and community economic well-being.

— Randall Nielsen

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*Uniontown's community playground was the beneficiary of a cleanup project sponsored by Uniontown Cares.*

efficacy is increasing. They are now beginning to see themselves as citizens — public actors — who can do something to improve the quality of life in Uniontown.

The new mayor is participating as a member of the group, and the dynamics of local politics have changed for the better. Uniontown Cares is making a difference and others in the community are beginning to notice. More and more members of the community have joined the group. In fact, they have outgrown their original city hall meeting room and have moved to a new public library, which Uniontown Cares' members helped renovate and stock with new books and computers.

In the first phase of the Uniontown project, Auburn focused on working through an existing institution (the city government) and attempted to create a new one (CDC) to help strengthen the community. This approach met with only modest success. It was not until Auburn changed its approach that we began to see real progress in “community-building.” The lesson here is that real and lasting change requires an “inside-out” and “bottom-up” approach, in addition to “outside-in” and “top-down.” The lesson is not that economically disadvantaged communities need no external assistance or resources. They do. We remain convinced that university outreach efforts and other external resources can play an important role in bringing about positive change in communities. However, outside help will be much more effectively used when the community is itself fully engaged, and if it can define the agendas for which outside resources will be used.

The horrendous problems of the Alabama Black Belt remain. The Uniontown community has made little economic progress in the past few years and future prospects look dim. But for the people participating in Uniontown Cares, things are looking better. They now see themselves as citizens instead of victims, as public actors instead of clients of services. They see that they can control many things about their lives and community. They are creating small ripples of hope in a community where hope has been in short supply.

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