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Training Leaders for Multiracial and Multi-ethnic Collaboration

by James Jennings

Due to changes unfolding in urban demographics, along with continuing social and economic problems in many cities, there is a growing need for a cadre of community-based leaders to work in, and on behalf of, communities of color. Developing such leaders requires understanding of the factors that determine the nature of racial and ethnic relations between African-American, Latino, and Asian communities. Unfortunately, training programs in higher education designed to equip African-American, Latino, and Asian urban leaders to work with each other and become effective change agents in their communities have not been widely established, even at institutions with strong urban missions. The Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership represents a pathbreaking model that suggests new ways of pursuing effective training for multiracial and multi-ethnic collaboration while strengthening and expanding the professional and organizational skills of the participants.

The Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership was founded in 1992 by Dr. Gloria Bonilla-Santiago with the support of the School of Social Work at the Camden Campus of Rutgers University. The mission of the center is to “foster the understanding and acceptance in American leaders of the importance of providing new organizational environments and strategies, and building bridges and partnerships between urban communities and academia to deal effectively with race relations and urban development.” The center provides arenas and forums for the analysis and assessment of policy issues that impact on urban minority communities. Additionally, the center seeks to encourage the generation of new knowledge, and participants, in the development of strategies and practices for community and economic development, fundraising, and coalition-building, particularly among African Americans, Latinos, and Asians.

The center has a number of training components for graduate students as well as individuals seeking advanced professional training. The training components include: the Hispanic Women’s Leadership Institute, which trains Latina women for government positions; the Latino Fellows Leadership Institute, which broadly trains Latino undergraduate students in New Jersey; Project LEAP (Leadership, Education, and Partnership), a program which provides technical assistance to two local public schools; and, the Leadership Management Urban Executive Institute (LMUEI), which focuses on training public servants in coalition-building and organizing collaborative projects across racial and ethnic boundaries in local communities.

The purpose of the LMUEI program is to prepare potential future leaders from communities of color to work together cooperatively and collaboratively, to develop the organizational and political skills necessary for professional effectiveness in the social, economic, and cultural milieu of urban America, and to understand how such skills can be applied to a broad range of community and civic problems. Although the institute has been in operation less than four years, it has already started to develop a foundation that could represent one of the most exciting efforts in utilizing higher education to train urban leaders and activists to become more effective in local and state political and civic arenas. The aim of the training provided by the institute, to encourage leadership within a context of multiracial and multi-ethnic collaboration across communities of color, responds to a vacuum in American higher education. Many academic institutes and programs, even the most prestigious ones, have not responded effectively—or at all—to the growing need to train urban activists to work across communities of color. The LMUEI recruits African-American, Latino, and Asian individuals who are in leadership positions, or who have developed professional experiences that reflect leadership potential, in order to provide them with training in professional and organizational skills within a context of the goal of building bridges between communities of color. The mission of the LMUEI is the selection and training of potential and actual African-American, Latino, and Asian leaders in urban settings in ways that encourage multiracial and multi-ethnic collaboration.

There is a growing need for a cadre of community-based leaders to work in, and on behalf of, communities of color.

Training is generally aimed at developing the personal, professional, and organizational skills of the participants, enhancing the participants’ sensitivity and understanding of the significance of community service, and encouraging activism within a context of building bridges of communication and collaboration between communities of color, particularly among black, Latino, and Asian communities.

This program has a number of specific objectives aimed at achieving its goals. These include:

- Strengthening the professional, personal, and political skills and motivation of African-American, Latino, and Asian leaders;
- Promoting an understanding and appreciation of racial and ethnic diversity;
- Enhancing the negotiation skills and effectiveness of program participants in developing relations with governmental, corporate, and private institutions;
- Motivating program participants to recognize and utilize their potential talents in the pursuit of community and public service;

- Providing skills for participants to communicate more effectively with institutions that impact on the quality of urban life;
- Providing insight and sharing experiences about how to mobilize resources targeted at neighborhood issues; and,
- Encouraging program participants to consider the pursuit of advanced education in graduate and professional studies.

The institute seeks to meet these objectives through the following activities:

- Comprehensive orientation session and interviews with the director and program staff;
- Four, intensive, three-day seminars offered quarterly; these seminars utilize carefully selected presenters and facilitators who rely on short presentations, role-playing techniques, various kinds of values-clarification exercises, and small group discussions designed to familiarize participants with the following topics: 1) *identifying dimensions and dilemmas of leadership in urban settings*; 2) *identifying obstacles and barriers to appreciating and exploiting positively ethnic diversity*; 3) *introduction to negotiation and conflict resolution*; 4) *skills training in building partnerships and coalitions*; 5) *providing an understanding of politics and power in cities*; 6) *providing hands-on experience in the development of mobilization strategies for influencing and implementing public policy*; 7) *providing an appreciation of the role of technology in urban life*; and, 8) *developing strategies for enhancing access and democratic participation in community and civic settings*.
- Program fellows are required to pursue a community service project relevant to their professional, civic, or personal interests. At the end of the year, each fellow must write a comprehensive paper, and present and discuss their project synopsis and paper before all the fellows and observers, focusing on the significance of the project, an analysis of local community and government factors impacting on the project, and commentary regarding leadership issues and multiracial and multi-ethnic concerns discussed throughout the year;
- Educational field trips are organized for program fellows in order to introduce them to national and state advocacy organizations;
- Program fellows must make seminar presentations about their projects, ideas, and concerns; they must also maintain a journal of observations to record experiences while working in their communities; and,
- Mentors are assigned to some of the fellows in order to provide assistance and guidance while they work on their selected community projects.

The selection of fellows is rigorous and highly competitive. The fellows are chosen by the program director and a committee of staff assessing the following qualities reflected in the application and several interviews with the candidate:

- Current or potential leadership in professional, civic, community, or political arenas;

- Substantial contributions to the candidate's local community as evidenced by active participation in political, community, and civic issues;
- Interest in working in minority communities and in addressing issues related to ethnic tensions in urban settings; and,
- Future plans for public service or education, business entrepreneurship, civic work and volunteerism, or work in the corporate sector.

Because one of the goals of the institute is to develop bridges of communication and collaboration between representatives of various communities of color, the composition of the program fellows reflects racial, ethnic, and geographical diversity. In the 1994 class there were thirty-eight fellows: seventeen were African American, sixteen were Latino, and five were Asian. Very importantly, within these broad racial and ethnic categories, there is much ethnic diversity. While most of the fellows reside and work in cities in New Jersey, there are also fellows from Pennsylvania, New York, and Delaware. The occupations of the fellows reflect an array of professional work and interests, an asset in terms of sharing professional and community experiences among the fellows.

One of the major challenges currently facing urban leadership in the United States is how to resolve potential and actual ethnic conflict between communities of color.

All potential program enrollees are asked to consider and respond to the following preprogram queries:

- How would you define *leadership* in an urban context?
- What are the most important traits or characteristics of urban community leadership?
- Are there skills, or characteristics that define a leader in an urban community? Are these qualities different or similar for members of communities of color?
- What positive or negative experiences have contributed to your motivation to learn about, and reflect, leadership in your professional setting?
- What kinds of issues do you consider to be of greatest importance for urban communities?
- What are the major problems and challenges regarding ethnic and racial relations in urban America?
- What do you consider to be your strongest leadership skills?
- What do you consider to be your most significant weakness in terms of developing leadership qualities in an urban setting?

These questions are posed before the seminars take place in order to alert participants about some of the issues they will be discussing, and also to begin encouraging them to think concretely about what is, or should be, the nature of urban leadership in communities of color. Such questioning begins to move the fellows towards acknowledging important issues that are much broader than their immediate, daily professional challenges.

Program fellows have reported great satisfaction in facets of their personal and professional growth as a result of participation in the institute activities. The following are the major reasons for the fellows' satisfaction:

- Fellows have opportunities to define what they believe is important to their own development;
- Fellows obtain new information about their own and related areas of endeavor through the trainers and seminar presenters and structured discussions;
- Fellows have opportunities to network and exchange experiences within a context of learning and appreciating the significance of developing leadership directed at empowering their communities;
- Fellows can apply new learning to concrete situations in ways that allow them to bring back information to the seminars; and, finally,
- Learning takes place within a context of professional growth; that is, participants do not engage in activities to "pass a course" or get a higher salary, but specifically to strengthen what they consider to be important leadership qualities.

Participants in institute activities also appreciated being exposed to a broad range of tools and professional techniques that can be applied to their own settings. This was accomplished through the seminars, but also as a result of the community service projects pursued by each of the fellows. These projects gave each of the fellows an opportunity to develop investigative and managerial tools that, in some cases, were totally new to them. As a result of acquiring these new skills, including investigative and managerial tools, the fellows believed that their potential for continuing professional development was enhanced considerably.

The following are some of the professional tools obtained by fellows who completed this training program:

- Understanding how to set realistic management goals and expectations, including greater appreciation of time constraints, funding issues, and human interaction;
- Introduction to conducting needs assessments and surveys, improving interviewing techniques, and conducting focus groups;
- Strengthening public speaking skills;
- Learning to develop business plans;
- Enhancing fundraising and grantsmanship skills;
- Introduction to negotiation and conflict mediation skills;
- Learning how to utilize various kinds of audiovisual tools;
- Understanding how to organize and mobilize community resources, including networking with others;
- Utilization of census data and technology;
- Utilization of interactive theater and role-playing skills; and,
- Utilization of art and photography.

Although all of the fellows did not use each of these professional skills, they were exposed to these kinds of professional tools through the sharing of information about the community-service projects during seminars and meetings.

Conclusion

One of the major challenges currently facing urban leadership in the United States is how to resolve potential and actual ethnic conflict between communities of color. While there is growing acknowledgement of this issue, as indicated by an emerging academic literature, programmatic efforts to ensure collaboration and communication between African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and others, have yet to be developed, systematized, and institutionalized. The Leadership Management for Urban Executives Institute is one of the few efforts in the nation that is attempting to train urban leaders and activists within a context of encouraging the building of bridges between communities of color. There are several features of the institute's mission and goals that also allow it to stand out in terms of the relationship between higher education, professional and leadership development, and community service.

The philosophical approach of the institute to leadership development is holistic and interdisciplinary. Fellows are exposed to a broad range of intellectual tools in order to build appreciation of the systemic factors that shape living conditions in urban communities. There is strong orientation in all the institute activities, furthermore, to approach theory and praxis as interrelated in the learning process. Students are encouraged to understand theory as it might be applied to concrete political, economic, and social situations. The background of the fellows, as individuals with grassroots experiences in a variety of professional and civic settings, is another important feature of this model. Many are "street-level bureaucrats"; others are community and neighborhood organizers who have a wealth of practical experiences but may lack opportunities to conceptually organize their thoughts and concerns for public action. The combination of these features offers the institute vast potential to play a leading role in the area of training, higher education, and community service.

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