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Community Advocate Model: Linking Communities, School Districts, and Universities to Support Families and Exchange Knowledge

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This study demonstrates the effectiveness of partnerships of K-16 and community advocates in improving pathways for sharing information and resources with underserved populations.

The Community Advocate Model: Linking Communities, School Districts, and Universities to Support Families and Exchange Knowledge

Mary D. Burbank and Rosemarie Hunter

Abstract

Increasingly diverse communities that reach across traditional boundaries are on the rise in urban communities in the United States. Changes taking place within these communities also affect K-16 institutions that serve them. As the landscape of American neighborhoods evolves, stakeholders collaborate to forge partnerships and programs that value and reflect these changes. The Community Advocate Model (CAM) presents a unique opportunity for establishing reciprocal relationships between parents from historically underserved populations and K-16 educators. By connecting families, school, community resources, and the university, parents are able to exchange information and have direct access to system educators. Similarly, rapidly increasing immigrant populations enhance these neighborhoods and systems with rich and diverse language and cultures, bringing new opportunities and challenges for local schools and higher education to meet their academic needs. Our research indicates the need for platforms where families, communities, and schools share information on access and success in public school in the United States. Among other areas, families cite the need for information on the developmental and social needs of K-12 students and resources on immigration, health services, and employment.

Introduction

The landscape of America's communities is changing. Nationally, nearly one third of school-age children are cultural minorities, with 16% of the teaching force from non-majority populations (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Projections for the next 20 years identify dramatic changes in national demographics, with 61% of population increases occurring among members of the Hispanic and Asian communities (Hodgkinson, 2002; Stanford, 1999). Response to the rapidly changing demographic shifts has been particularly dramatic in Salt Lake City, which has seen an increase in its minority population of 117% between 1990 and 2000 (Perlich, 2002).

In those years, one in three new residents was a member of a minority community, the Hispanic population more than doubled, and the primary urban school district reported 53% (2006 Salt Lake City district census data) in its non-majority student population. Like many homogenous, predominantly English-speaking communities, Salt Lake City is undergoing rapid demographic shifts resulting in cultural and linguistic mismatches between those working in public schools and the students and families served by K-12 classrooms. For members of this urban community, linkages between multiple stakeholders were essential in providing opportunities for responding to a richly diverse landscape.

This investigation examined the ways an institution of higher education, an urban school district, and a local community, collaborate to build upon the insights of educators, community partners, and families seeking to improve the K-16 experiences of students and families. We describe a model for preparing parents as community advocates and discuss the perspectives of stakeholders in the project. We attend specifically to the roles of a university, school district, and community advocates as partners in building pathways to higher education. Key to the success of the current program was the willingness of those working within a community-based research partnership (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donohue, 2003) to provide support and insights.

Partners in Building Communities and Pathways to Higher Education

When stakeholders come together as partners to exchange knowledge, opportunities are present for members to develop the relationships essential to creating healthy communities. In their text on community-based research, Strand et al. (2003) discuss the components of truly collaborative efforts. Within these partnerships stakeholders work jointly to identify common issues worthy of investigation, with the goal of greater social justice and institutional reform for those within a community. Through the collaborative efforts of partners from a local school district, community organizations, institutions of higher education, and residents, project developers created opportunities for joint goal-setting. The partners developed a systematic plan for evaluating CAM successes and limitations. Along with sharing resources, stakeholders identified obstacles to greater participation in education and shared knowledge of ways to access higher education.

Strengthening K-16 educational experiences through campus-community partnerships has been a primary goal of the University of Utah, the Salt Lake City School District, community partners, and residents on Salt Lake City's west side. In 2002, University Neighborhood Partners (UNP), a university-community engagement initiative, brought stakeholders together to develop partnerships focused on increasing the pathways to higher education for traditionally underserved students. UNP identified multiple avenues leading to public education success and ultimately

accessing higher education.

In its mission statement, UNP works to "bring together University and west side resources in reciprocal learning, action, and benefit ... a community coming together" (www.partners.utah.edu). UNP's goal is to develop reciprocal relationships where all members' knowledge and contributions are valued. UNP targets seven ethnically and culturally rich west side neighborhoods.

Building on Social Networks

The rapidly increasing immigrant and refugee populations in Salt Lake City's northwest quadrant bring a richness and diversity that open opportunities for community members and local schools to collaborate in substantive ways. Capitalizing on the collaborative efforts of UNP, a steering committee of school district, university, and community partners identified ways of sharing knowledge about higher education that builds upon family and university expertise. The CAM emerged after a yearlong study by west side residents, area K-12 school administrators and staff, and university researchers. The west side's relatively small size (seven neighborhoods, two zip codes), proximity to the University of Utah, and a history of partnerships reflect collaboration where players are more than institutional representatives. A history of working together allowed partners to capitalize on individual expertise where turf setting and second guessing were not on anyone's agenda. CAM's central goal, to increase access to and success in higher education, guided monthly meetings leading to implementation over two years.

In 2004 the partnership program was established to provide parents with tools and knowledge to support their children in education and to share the knowledge that parents bring with educators and the school district. As one of its primary objectives, the CAM addressed some of the challenges faced by many west side families by training a core group of community advocates who live in the neighborhoods and reflected the community's cultural and linguistic diversity. The project advocates came together with University of Utah faculty, community leaders and educators, and family experts to gain the tools and skills necessary to navigate the public educational system with the ultimate goal of sharing their knowledge with other parents and members

of their communities. The specific goals and objectives of the project included the development of resources and services to parents/families and their children through community advocate training that will: (1) identify ways of benefiting from the knowledge parents and families bring to school communities; (2) share information on how parents can successfully work with schools; (3) assist parents in becoming more involved in their child's education; and (4) prepare advocates who will spread their knowledge to other parents.

Our model illustrates the power of collaborative networks in educating new generations of students. It pulls together families, school, community resources, and higher education in mutually beneficial relationships. The partnership goal stems from a philosophy of broadening an understanding where shared knowledge will benefit schools, families, and the communities. By sharing knowledge, goals, and long-term aspirations for education, the partnership supports greater voice and involvement of traditionally underserved parents in the K-16 schools. The partnership provides families with both a public forum for contributing to their children's education and access to the tools for succeeding in contemporary K-16 schools.

The Power of Advocacy Programs

Researchers and practitioners have long known the "funds of knowledge" (Moll and Gonzales, 1997) that students bring to schools should be recognized and celebrated. Through legitimizing backgrounds, life experiences, and ways of approaching work, students, school, home, and community are meaningfully connected. In addition to recognizing the knowledge that children and parents bring to school communities, parent advocacy groups serve as ambassadors linking schools to homes and homes to schools.

Historically, parent advocacy groups served the needs of students receiving special education services. Advocates' roles vary from helping families write letters and attend meetings to sharing information on policies and the law, questioning strategies, and developing educational plans (Wrightslaw, 2006). More recently, advocates serve as communication links for many families whose children are affected by state and national standardization and accountability movements (e.g., No Child Left Behind, particularly within

the context of Title I schools). Advocates assist families in learning more about current accountability issues; they provide parents with information on testing and the ways in which performance is measured; and they share information on how parents and caregivers can access services such as tutoring and special education services (Burbank, 2008).

Community Advocate Program Design

Workshop Training Series. During the 2005-2006 academic year, two workshop series provided members of the west side community with information on education-related topics. The first workshop included a two-day training session for Spanish speakers delivered by members of the school district, community organizations, and university faculty. Funding through a 21st Century Learning Grant provided participants with transportation to the two fall sessions, child care, meals, and stipends for participation. The spring 2006 training was specifically geared toward English speakers and included the same services.

Recruitment. Under the guidance of a community advocate working collaboratively with the program director, participants from the community were recruited as members of an existing group that met regularly to discuss issues related to education and services for families. The fall 2005 training delivered in Spanish served 14 participants, and the spring session served 18. Families were provided with workshop sessions that focused on community schools, advocacy for children, building relationships between families and schools, accessing school services, healthy habits, and information on resources for children receiving special education services. Additional sessions were geared toward the developmental needs of children from birth through adulthood and higher education.

During the spring 2006 workshops, 18 participants took part in two half-day workshops delivered in English. The workshop content of the spring series mirrored the fall presentation. Participants shared extremely positive feedback including their reactions to sessions that focused on how to interact with their children, suggestions for effectively communicating with their children, and ideas on how to engage in activities other than watching television. Participants commented positively on the workshop presentations on effective strategies for communicating

with teachers and ideas on how to become more involved in their children's schools.

Workshop presentations on strategies for self-care and self-improvement practices within their own education or career goals were also highlighted positively. Participants also cited as particularly useful their newfound knowledge regarding their rights as parents.

Methods

To answer our research question regarding the impact of a workshop series on family advocacy, we collected data from three groups of participants: (1) families from the local community who took part in the workshop series; (2) leaders of the advocacy training sessions; and (3) stakeholders from the university, community, and school district steering the project. The first evaluation was conducted from data gathered from parent participants in the 2006 workshop series. A program evaluator and graduate assistant from the university facilitated the evaluation. A total of 13 workshop participants were present and contributed to the evaluation. Focus group participants were asked to evaluate the quality of their experiences in the workshops, to make suggestions for future workshops, and to develop plans for incorporating the information gained into their daily lives and communities.

Quantitative data on the surveys completed by project stakeholders were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Because of the low total ($n = 20$) no statistical analyses were performed. To analyze the qualitative data we began by having each research team member examine the content of focus group transcripts, meeting transcripts, and interviews. Using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we determined dominant themes using a form of triangulation (Denzin, 1989). Table 1 summarizes the major qualitative findings of the workshop series.

Results

Family Participants

Participants generally gave extremely positive feedback regarding their workshop experiences. Content areas received positively included how to interact with their children, strategies for increased communication with their children, ideas for engaging in activities other than watching television, tools for improving communication with teachers, suggestions for becoming more

involved in their children's schools, and suggestions for engaging in self-care and self-improvement in conjunction with their own education or career goals.

Participants also indicated that attendance at the workshop series helped them understand their rights as parents better. Parents reported that the information they learned was very valuable and that they would share the information with other parents, neighbors, family members, and friends – indicating a knowledge ripple effect within the community.

Suggestions for improving the workshops included infusing strategies for interventions related to behavioral problems or gang issues, inviting teachers to speak about their perspective so that parents could learn from what teachers have to say, and identifying how, from the perspective of classroom teachers, to become more involved as parents

Partners in Collaboration – Workshop

Trainers' Perspectives

A focus group of workshop session leaders was held to evaluate their perceptions of the success of the series. Focus group questions asked workshop coordinators to identify whether the series was a success, including strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for future sessions.

Asked about the utility of various workshops, a trainer who shared information on life in middle schools reported that the parents who participated in the trip to her school “loved the meeting at the middle school.” The parents were reported as being “in awe” of the school. Prior to their visit they had been intimidated to go into the building. One of the mothers said she was glad to hear that the glass in the building was shatter proof. A group of parents whose children currently attend a local elementary school reported that the middle school tour served as an opportunity to understand what their children had to look forward to as they moved to middle school. The tour provided information on after-school programs, and participants reported being very excited to learn about the organization of the school. A discussion on the school's middle school teaming approach gave parents a feeling of support. They were particularly interested in understanding campus safety and security and how the school system worked.

One session facilitator mentioned the impor-

Table 1. Major Project Findings

Workshop benefits for family participants	Valuable content in areas such as communication strategies, at-home activities for families, and parental rights. Reducing “fear of the unknown” in U.S. schools.
Workshop limitations for family participants	Information on the developmental needs of children and adolescents. Information on how higher education can be a part of their lives early on. Specialized content sessions based upon family needs.
Workshop benefits identified by workshop trainers	Opportunities for sharing information in a less structured setting. Feelings of camaraderie for participants. A way for parents and children to connect.
Workshop limitations identified by workshop trainers	Smaller customized breakout sessions. Shorter sessions using interactive formats with opportunities for conversations versus more formal presentations. Attention to immediate needs such as documentation status, access to financial resources, and daily living.
Workshop benefits identified by community stakeholders	Opportunities for parent networks through collaboration and parent involvement. Knowledge of mutual concerns across groups. Strategies for navigating the educational system. Increase confidence where parents contribute to their children’s education.
Workshop limitations identified by community stakeholders	Time constraints for parents and families. Need for in-depth work with families to ensure transfer of workshop information into families’ daily lives. Content must be broadly applicable while simultaneously individualized.

tance of providing opportunities for parents to become a part of the process of learning about school and being a part of their children’s lives in schools. She also noted that parents in attendance felt a camaraderie with each other. According to the middle school facilitator, participants were “overwhelmed by the resources” the school was able to offer.” One mother commented on the merits of community education through classes as being a “great opportunity” for a mother and daughter to complete coursework together.

In addition to the general school tour a group facilitator suggested the need for more time to share information on all that the school had to offer. Increased time was suggested with a specific

focus on the components and strategies for navigating the school experience. Further suggestions included the need for grade level tours on how to navigate public education at various stages of a child’s school career. Suggested workshop topics included providing help with tasks such as reading a report card, understanding concepts such as GPAs, and strategies on how to navigate the school system.

Future Workshops: Topics and Formats

The focus group participants discussed additional topics of interest for parents attending future meetings. Specific suggestions included sessions on the social and behavioral needs of ad-

olescents. One facilitator noted that parents are often aware of the social and behavioral changes in their children and are not always aware of how to respond to the specific needs of teenagers. Another noted that many parents require information on “normal” behavior for adolescents and found that reassuring. Sessions on the developmental needs of students at various age levels could be discussed during separate sessions based upon the grade levels and ages of students. Parents were reported as eager to learn whatever information is available.

A suggestion was made for future workshops where parents could be provided with information on opportunities to understand that students’ needs vary over the course of the school experiences. These sessions would provide parents with information on how higher education, and education in general, can be part of their lives.

This emphasis on higher education was called significant by a facilitator: “If families don’t know anyone who has ever been to college, then the families may need connections with those individuals who have the ability to make additional connections.” Additional suggestions shared by the workshop facilitators included: (1) using parents and advocates as facilitators in future projects and workshops; (2) holding separate sessions for parents needing information related to the individualized education process; (3) discussing open classrooms as examples of ways in which parents may become involved in school sessions; (4) teaching parents and care-givers skills that help them assert their rights or encourage greater empowerment; (5) understanding the special needs of immigrants. (One facilitator noted that simply moving to the United States brings a complex set of challenges and stressors. Facilitators suggested attention to the stress factors that children experience just by moving into a new system. Issues of work status and legal standing were suggested as areas for future discussion.); (6) examining work schedules and pressures of life and their impact on follow-through; (7) considering topics on such matters as gang intervention, delinquency issues, and step by step information on attending college.

A question was posed regarding the size and composition of workshop sessions. Facilitators suggested smaller sessions where parents have greater choice in attendance. Additional facilitation of the sessions was suggested: Small group

sessions could follow a general meeting format followed by breakout sessions that align with individual interests and needs.

Participant feedback identified the need for a friendlier presentation format. Mothers didn’t like sitting in uncomfortable chairs. They expressed the need to move around a bit more and to make the daily schedule shorter. Other suggestions included taking away barriers such as tables to encourage participants to talk more about issues and needs. The parents who participated in the 2005 series were open and willing to learn.

We discovered from participant feedback that facilitators need to be aware of differences in needs based on immigration and documentation status. Some parents were documented, some not. Concerns of undocumented parents were often related to their own status, as well as to their children’s needs. Facilitators suggested bringing in aides who could provide more explicit information.

Facilitators suggested the need for more time to talk about the broader issues families are facing. Presenters and planners were encouraged to consider the viewpoints of many immigrant families with regard to work and education. There is an assumption that once a degree is obtained all doors open, and parents often expect to see money coming back to the family. Families are often unaware that the payback from education is not as substantial and immediate as expected.

Some participants thought too much content led to levels of restlessness and side conversations by some participants. To combat this concern, participants suggested greater opportunities to actively participate and a need for addressing learning styles within the presentations to actively engage in content by talking about issues, applying content to their lives, and brainstorming plans for putting ideas into action. Participants noted the importance of a conversation style versus lecture presentations. Language differences didn’t seem to matter as much as the delivery.

Partners in Collaboration

Stakeholders’ Perspectives

In addition to gathering feedback on the workshop series from parent participants and workshop facilitators, Families United steering committee evaluated the work of the Families United workshop series. Using closed- and open-ended questions, we gathered feedback from uni-

versity, community, and school district partners. While there are 73 official members of the network, there are 20 network members who regularly attend meetings. Assuming a pool of 20 would have likely responded to the spring 2006 survey, a return rate of 60% is reported. Overall, responses were very positive and reflect general support of the project.

Close-Ended Questions

Network members were asked to rate the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “not at all,” 3 being “somewhat,” and 5 being “completely”; responses were all toward the positive end of the scale:

1. Would the workshop series provide representatives from the community with the knowledge and skills necessary for learning more about the local educational system (mean = 3.75, sd = .45)?
2. Would the series assist in developing and facilitating a community advocacy training program that will: (a) educate parents on how to successfully work with schools (mean = 3.67, sd = .65); (b) assist parents in becoming more involved in their child’s education (mean = 3.75, sd = .62); (c) produce advocates who will spread their knowledge to other parents (mean = 3.42 (sd = .51); (d) build a network through collaboration between area schools, the university, and community organizations (mean = 4.00, sd = .60)?

Respondents indicated as strengths the basic information and resources available to parents; parents coming together and sharing knowledge of mutual concerns; preparing parents to work with schools; preparing parents to support their children; and giving parents an overview on how to navigate the educational system.

They described the instructors brought in from the different agencies to mentor and teach as “wonderful,” and they affirmed that the series empowers people who live in the community and provides opportunities for sharing new ideas and skills.

Regarding limitations, they noted the challenge of covering many worthy topics within the time constraints of parents; that some topics are not pertinent to all parents and others need ad-

ditional discussion time; and the need for additional training for parents to become trainers of other parents.

Asked to explain how the workshop series helped educate parents on how to work successfully with schools, they indicated that because schools, nonprofits, and the university are involved in planning the training, schools are prepared to engage the parents once they get community advocate training. They were also aware that parents can become engaged in their neighborhood schools and can become aware of what is available at their schools. Because school personnel are an integral part of the training, more follow-up and mentoring may be necessary.

Members were asked to identify the ways training would assist parents in becoming more involved in their child’s education. They indicated that the training helps to increase parents’ confidence that they can support and advocate for their children; gives them contact names if they encounter challenges; gives them examples and opportunities for involvement; helps them become aware about the need to become involved in their child’s education; reduces their fears about becoming involved; and teaches them about a variety of ways to become involved.

Members were asked to list ways in which advocate training would transfer to the wider community. They indicated that the parent advocates will educate neighbors and friends about what they have learned and make more resources available; through word of mouth, parents will influence other parents to become involved and may pass along some of the training to other parents; and the parents who were involved may be seen as leaders within their different family and community networks.

Next Steps

While the primary goal of the first year was to develop and implement a workshop series, long-term goals are focused on the development of sustained frameworks designed to encourage participants to share their newfound knowledge with members of the community. Parents shared that the workshop information was very valuable and that they plan to share the information with other parents, neighbors, family members, and friends, indicating a larger ripple effect within the community.

Parents’ suggestions on how to improve

the workshops included incorporating more intervention strategies with regard to behavioral problems or gang issues. They also suggested including more teacher-speakers so that parent advocates could learn from the experiences of educators. The perspectives of educators were recommended as mechanisms for helping families learn as much as possible from teachers. Two project goals have been identified as mechanisms for broadening the audience with whom the information will be shared. To begin, a series of general follow-up activities was suggested as a way of sharing the workshop information with friends and neighbors. Suggestions included topics for parents such as:

- Taking parents from your child's school on a tour of the school.
- Setting up a meeting with the principal of your child's school to talk about the training and identify how you can become more involved at the school.
- Signing up to volunteer at your child's school as a tutor/homework helper.
- Reading to/with your child three times a week, and then after a month, four times a week and then five times a week.
- Planning a trip for you and your child to the art museum, planetarium, or natural history museum.
- Spending 10 minutes each day talking with your child about what he/she learned in school that day.
- Deciding how much TV your child is allowed to watch each day and then making a list of activities your child can do instead of watching TV.
- Signing your child up for a dance, art, or music class through city-based activities.

The second plan for extending the impact of the work series is to provide these newly trained advocates with opportunities to work within the local school district. Plans are in place for community advocates to use their training to benefit other families. Participants will be recognized for their participation as school-based advocates through free educational opportunities for advocates and their children.

Summary

Increasingly diverse communities that reach

across traditional boundaries are on the rise in major urban communities in the United States. Changes taking place within these communities are also occurring in the K-16 institutions that serve them. As American neighborhoods evolve, stakeholders collaborate to forge partnerships and programs that value and reflect these changes.

After a year-long collaborative study by the University of Utah, an urban school district, and community partners, the Community Advocate Model emerged as a campus-community partnership focused on connecting families, schools, and community resources to empower families living in northwest Salt Lake City to support their children's success in education. By training a core group of parent advocates, the program addresses and fosters better understanding of the challenges facing families in these neighborhoods. Advocate training sessions were conducted by university faculty, community leaders, educators, and family experts. The workshop content was designed to equip families with the tools necessary to navigate the public educational system with the ultimate goal of sharing their knowledge with members of their communities. During the 2005-2006 academic year, two workshop series provided 32 members of the west side community with information on education-related-topics. The fall 2005 training delivered in Spanish served 14 participants with the spring session serving 18 community members.

Overall, family participants shared positive feedback, including their reactions to sessions that focused on how to effectively communicate with their children and with teachers and regarding strategies for self-care and parental rights. Additionally, parents reported that the information they learned was very valuable and that they would share the information with other parents, neighbors, family members, and friends. Family participants' suggestions for improving the workshops included adding strategies for interventions related to behavioral problems or gang issues; inviting teachers to speak about their perspective so that parents could learn from what teachers have to say; and identifying how to become more involved as parents from the perspective of classroom teachers.

Presenters identified providing opportunities for parents to become a part of the process of learning about school and being a part of their children's life in schools as one of the strengths

of the program. Overall, presenters shared that participants were particularly interested in learning about how school systems operated and ways to support their children in education. Facilitators' suggestions included social and behavioral development of children and adolescents; information on higher education and a variety of topics geared to provide immigrant parents with information about how systems in the United States operate; and how to achieve greater voice and empowerment.

Community partners also provided a positive assessment of the workshop series, reporting that the content of the workshop would educate parents on how to successfully work with schools and provide parents who will share their knowledge with other families in the communities. When examining limitations, members identified the need for more interactive training and additional information on developmental and behavioral issues. Presenters suggested sharing the series with a broader audience and adding topics for follow-up information sessions.

The Community Advocate Model presents a unique opportunity for establishing reciprocal relationships between parents from under-represented populations and K-16 educators. By connecting families, school, community resources, and the university, parents are able to exchange information and have direct access to system educators. Similarly, rapidly increasing immigrant populations enhance these neighborhoods and systems with their rich and diverse language and cultures, bringing new opportunities for local schools and higher education to meet their academic needs.

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