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Academic Institutions Refueling Economic Recovery

The way in which academic institutions have addressed their civic engagement responsibility has been uneven over time. Today this engagement has taken on new meaning due to the intense interest for academic institutions to act as economic resources to their communities to address the effects brought about by the current recession. The natural effect of this has been a more conscious realization that higher education needs to be an ongoing player in local economies for generating resources, jobs, and ideas to assist with the recovery efforts across the country.

Institutions of higher education are embracing this role in various ways giving new meaning to civic engagement. For example, Northern Illinois University, Rockford College, Rock Valley College, and the University of Illinois formed the Higher Education Alliance for the Rock River Region to strengthen its regional economy by providing training, research, and technology transfer, by identifying the needs of business and industry in the region. The Indiana Innovation Alliance was established by Indiana University and Purdue University to accomplish the same goals. In Idaho, the University of Idaho is partnering with the state government to stimulate and sustain economic development. In Massachusetts, the Berkshire Compact for Learning has spurred partnership efforts among the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, Berkshire Community College and their local governments and organizations to join efforts in addressing current and future economic conditions that are having regional impact. Similar examples of higher education supporting regional economic development are emerging all across the country.

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A Federal Children’s Bureau grant to address the workforce crisis in Child Welfare agencies in New York State was awarded to the Social Work Education Consortium, School of Social Welfare, University at Albany, SUNY in 2003. The grant work was an organizational intervention using a design team approach. This participatory approach was used by an agency-wide team consisting of caseworkers, supervisors and managers to identify and address workforce issues operating within the agency.

As the design team work advanced, a number of agencies requested additional consultation to support and enhance the work. Typical of public child welfare agencies, supervisors deeply identify with their individual units and support each other informally. Also, decision-making tends to be hierarchical, in which there is no consistent mechanism for information to flow from line workers to administrative levels. As a result, supervisors operate with limited support, often feeling powerless to address problematic decisions that negatively impact their line workers. The consultation focus was on: 1) build a supervisor team; 2) develop skills for this team to implement decisions from the design team; and 3) build a proactive middle-management team that identified issues and made recommendations to top leadership.

The consultant engaged participants in team building, information and training, feedback and participatory decision making by utilizing a task-centered, solution-focused approach. Topics and length of consultations were open-ended and decided by the group members. The consultation can be described in three phases. The initial phase established the relationship, format and the boundaries of the consultation; identified issues of concern by the group members; and developed trust among all members and with the consultant. The consultant provided group skill training in: every member’s participation in discussions, active listening and using inquiry communication; developing techniques and communication for controlling individuals dominating discussions/decision making; and using techniques for voting when consensus cannot be achieved. Feedback was initially provided by the consultant who positioned it within inquiry-based communication. As participants became more skilled, feedback and inquiry became a shared group process. Continued on page 3

The second phase involved the group learning to function as a collective, managing differences and conflict, and becoming empowered. This team building process was ongoing as participants developed trust of each other and became proficient in communication and implementation skills. In the final phase, members functioned as a team with a common language, worked efficiently, and developed implementation plans for team decisions and made recommendations to top leadership.

Ongoing feedback was provided during the consultation with the group leaders and to both sponsoring agencies and the consultant as needs arose. The overall goals of the project were met: 1) build a proactive middle-management team that made recommendations to top leadership; 2) build a proactive management team; and 3) build a proactive middle-management team that identified issues and made recommendations to top leadership. The design team work allowed supervisors to interact in a more positive way with both subordinates and supervisors.

Sometimes it takes an outside observer to effect change and bring new ideas.
Embracing Participative Systems to Promote Positive Outcomes in Child Welfare

It is often said that success for individuals involved in the child welfare system begins within the system itself. The School of Social Welfare and Schoharie County Department of Social Services worked collaboratively to promote more productive interactions within the organization.

The desired outcomes of this participative approach were to build better lines of communication within the child welfare unit and also with other units to operationally allow workers with shared cases to work together more effectively. Commissioner Paul Brady described the involvement of the School of Social Welfare as looking for ways to assist the County in clearly defining expectations for staff and get away from “how we (Schoharie County) always did things”. The text boxes below are some of the thoughts provided by Commissioner Brady.

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Professional Development Program

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