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**Evaluating Community Outreach Partnership Centers
as Complex Systems:
In Search of the “COPC” Effect**

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Institute of Urban and Regional Development
University of California at Berkeley

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**Victor Rubin, James J. Fleming,
and Judith Innes**

Inherent in the philosophy behind COPC programs and university-community collaboration is flexibility in instituting models, strategies, and solutions for those partnerships. Evaluating collaborative efforts, however, is difficult because each collaborative project differs according to the university/community need, resources, and goals. One view of the challenge of evaluating such diverse programs is discussed.

Evaluating Community Outreach Partnership Centers as Complex Systems: In Search of the “COPC Effect”

Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPCs) work toward building the capacity of urban communities, which are struggling to remain viable, and universities, which are struggling to remain relevant. These centers, supported by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, offer a way for community and university partners to work collaboratively and to apply their shared and particular resources to serious problems. The goals of the COPC program are to help build and institutionalize these long-term working partnerships, provide models for others to follow, and help change the culture of communities and universities so that positive working relationships become the norm rather than the exception.

The COPC grant program is innovative in that the centers are multidisciplinary, combine research with outreach, work with communities and local governments, and address multidimensional problems. Because of this, each center evolves over time and develops new activities and objectives that could not have been anticipated at the outset. Since COPCs are a new and evolving strategy, a new way of measuring their possible effect

is needed. The objective of this article is to describe a new evaluation design model, which will be able to measure the short-term effects of these partnerships as well as their evolving nature and their second and third-order effects.

Our approach is based on the complexity of the COPCs and the universities and communities in which they are embedded. This complexity presents several challenges to traditional evaluation designs and practices. Partitioning an assessment into discrete parts for analysis could run the risk of producing misleading descriptions, wrong predictions, or partial evaluation results. This kind of evaluation could isolate problems and responses and analyze them as if nothing else were happening in the community, and thereby miss the larger picture. Similarly, measuring short-term results only, or searching for impacts before they could reasonably be expected, could also seriously underestimate or misconstrue the longer-term consequences of the COPC programs.

Any method of evaluation proposed to assess the success of these programs has to take into consideration the scope and diversity of these programs as well as their embeddedness in local issues, politics, and organizational practices. The complex nature of urban problems calls for change in the delivery of services, as described in HUD's 1996 "Reinventing Government" manifesto, which advocated shifts from categorical to system-oriented thinking, and from single-disciplinary to multidisciplinary approaches. More than that, it also calls for changes in thinking about the evaluation of these interventions. Solutions, strategies, and evaluations of both must be tailored to the corresponding conditions. Measuring change in complex systems requires a clever balance between hard numbers and narrative accounts that can put a story behind that string of numbers. Several different measurement tools and processes will need to be integrated in order to evaluate COPC.

The intent of the COPC effort must be understood as a mutually enhancing activity for both the community and the university. The ultimate value of these partnerships is that they help the partners move beyond short-term interests to new strategies and new learning. The purpose of COPC is not only to produce a given number of jobs, businesses, or housing units (in fact, other particular programs may be better designed for these purposes) but also to alter the direction of the system by increasing the linkages among the players. This could, in turn, boost the system up to a higher performance level. This multiplier effect, which will bring about second and third-order effects, is unique to the capacity-building purpose of COPC: it is a "COPC Effect." We think that, as people make connections, build relationships, and work together on common tasks, the outcome will inevitably be better than what would have happened without the partnership. Therefore, we are proposing an alternative framework for evaluation to be used with comprehensive community initiatives such as COPCs.

The University of California at Berkeley was one of three COPC grantees to be awarded a grant from HUD and Aspen Systems in 1997 to develop a design for the national evaluation of the COPC program. In keeping with the collaborative nature of COPC and our desire to include diverse and representative perspectives, many hours were spent in the field soliciting opinions and feedback from COPC

participants across the country. Staff members from the Office of Policy Development and Research at HUD were interviewed. Staff and participants were interviewed at several COPCs, their activities were observed, and documents about the programs were collected and reviewed. The sites visited included COPCs at Temple University, University of Pennsylvania, Howard University, Arizona State University, University of California at Berkeley, Stanford University, San Francisco State University, and the University of Massachusetts, Lowell Campus.

As the interview process progressed, the topics for investigation multiplied. The guidelines for the proposed self-studies by the partners became more complex, and some of the categories for discussion used here (including the qualities of effective partnerships, contextual variables, and design features) emerged as useful ways of framing the ongoing search. For example, one author (Rubin) presented an overview of evaluation issues at the COPC grantees' meeting in Tempe, Arizona, and preliminary drafts of the evaluation design with some of its underlying theory were presented by another (Fleming) there and at the annual conference of the Urban Affairs Association in Toronto, Canada. Feedback after these presentations was integrated into subsequent drafts.

This conceptual proposal is rooted in our community development experiences with the University-Oakland Metropolitan Forum and the Bay Area Community Outreach Partnership Center, has a foundation in the current literature on university-community partnerships, and is based on the insights gathered through these recent interviews and site visits. In addition, many of the ideas for this article were originally developed in a paper by Judith Innes and David Booher entitled, "Evaluating Consensus Building: Making Dreams into Realities," presented at the Association of European Schools of Planning in Nijmegen, Netherlands, in May 1997.

Evaluation Challenges Posed by the Evolving, Diverse Nature of COPC Projects

The qualities of the COPC partnerships that make them so interesting also present considerable challenges for systematic documentation and comparison. The COPC program is built on an understanding that solutions and strategies must be tailored to the conditions, resources, and people in particular places at particular times—that one-size-fits-all policies really fit no place. COPCs provide opportunities for community leaders to work closely with people in local universities and colleges who have a range of expertise, to jointly produce strategies and actions that make sense in the local context. Categorizing and systematically accounting for the demonstrable short-term impacts of several hundred activities run by these 40 projects would yield a great deal of important data. COPC programs are educating and organizing residents, improving the practices and capacity of community-based and governmental agencies, designing homes, planning neighborhoods, and carrying on a multitude of other actions that represent tangible connections between campus and community.

If these centers work as intended, they will start a long-term learning process that will synergistically build the capacity of communities to help themselves and of the universities to be constructive participants. Communities gain access to

intellectual resources that they can apply to their concerns, while universities and colleges develop the capacity to teach and conduct research more effectively, as well as to develop better relationships with their surrounding communities.

Many, if not most, COPCs are embedded in broader coalitions or pre-existing initiatives. Moreover, these centers are relatively small elements in the life of their communities and represent only one of many factors that affect the well-being of those communities. The many threads of COPC-related activities can be followed to some degree through detailed narrative in order to show how one action is tied to another and another, but they can rarely be fully disentangled to show a clear, unique, cause and effect relationship. Aside from being intertwined with other efforts, the COPC approach is collaborative and flexible. Participants often hold to different objectives for the partnerships, or may have trouble articulating their own goals, much less those of the partnership. Specific criteria for success (as distinguished from the broader process and institutional criteria) will inevitably differ from one grantee to another. A strategy that works in one place and time, and with one set of participants, to produce desirable results, is likely to be inappropriate or ineffective in another context, and this limits the generalizability of performance measures. Each project, moreover, evolves over time, developing new missions and activities that may not have been anticipated at the outset, so even a COPC-specific performance measure established at the outset might well fail to capture the important consequences. If one takes seriously the goal of creating long-term change, then second-order and third-order COPC effects are even more important than the first-stage objectives.

COPC grantees include comprehensive state universities, large public and private research universities, community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and historically black universities and colleges, as well as consortia that link partners of all these types of institutions of higher education. There are urban campuses working on projects with their immediate neighbors, and rural campuses working with neighborhoods located a hundred miles away. There are COPC programs that represent the start of a new partnership, and those that reflect a new stage of growth and development for partnerships of long duration. COPCs are administered by many different entities in the universities and colleges, from the president's office to research institutes to community affairs agencies, and sometimes they embody a consortium within a campus that is every bit as complex as the partnership within the broader community.

There are many COPCs that work in just one neighborhood, some that cover most or all of a city, and still others that work in several cities or towns across a region. The three COPCs that operate in the Rio Grande valley colonias (unincorporated housing settlements) have obvious differences from those in central cities, but even among urban areas there is great variation in the size of the community and the nature of the issues. COPC projects feature work at virtually all levels of the community: from support for individual youth and families, to neighborhood plans and development projects, to citywide policy research and community education. The

partners include local governments, school districts, business groups, labor unions, community development corporations, grass-roots organizing campaigns, and many other entities.

Understanding COPC Projects as Complex, Self-Organizing, and Adaptive

The COPC program is intentionally a complex, adaptive, self-organizing effort, the purpose of which is to build the capacity of each partnership and develop actions and strategies appropriate to the resources at hand and responsive to the conditions they confront. The body of work known as complexity theory offers concepts that are more helpful in framing this evaluation design than the principles of the more familiar mechanistic models of change. Indeed, complexity theory lies behind the “reinventing government” movement, which proposes that government can be better managed if participants track a variety of performance measures to get feedback and make constant internal adjustments, rather than imagining that there are simple answers for complex and uncertain conditions (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993.)

The cities that are home to COPC partnerships are undergoing substantial social and economic change, as is the larger society. Uncertainty and unanticipated events are the norm. It is not farfetched to think of this as a system at the edge of chaos, where adaptiveness and system learning are essential to help develop the capacity locally that is needed to deal with change and challenges. Certainly a model of change that assumes a static, machine-like system that receives inputs and produces outputs captures neither the nature of COPC nor of the local conditions in which it works.

A COPC program is intended to adapt to and alter its environment, in order to build the capacity of its participants. As one of the university institute directors we interviewed said, “It [COPC] has increased the university’s capacity to do partnerships and has helped the faculty to become more aware, comfortable, and competent with using the community as an opportunity for learning—the community has, in some ways, become a co-teacher.” A mechanistic model does not help us to understand how a process like this could work. In a system with so much feedback, nonlinearity, and interactiveness of relationships, an evaluation based primarily on the input/output concept or a search for a simple cause and effect relation between program inputs and community outcomes will miss much of the actual dynamic and consequences of COPC.

Qualities of Effective Campus/Community Partnerships

The characteristics and results of successful partnership can be defined more precisely. The experience of the COPC program suggests to us that there are three significant aspects of collaboration between communities and institutions of higher education that can and should be examined in an evaluation.

Building Capacity

COPCs are intended to build capacity at the local level and help to create a robust and adaptive partnership that learns over time and responds productively to change in the environment and to opportunities and challenges that emerge. There are at least four types of capacity that COPC can help to build. These include the capacity of communities to solve problems and improve the opportunities and quality of life for residents; the capacity of universities to teach and conduct research relevant to the community, provide effective assistance and outreach, and take appropriate leadership roles; the capacity of the partners to work in a synergistic combination that benefits both community and university in ways that working alone could not achieve; and ultimately the capacity of these partnerships to become an integral, enduring part of the urban fabric.

Mutually Advantageous Collaboration

Collaborative relationships, in general, are valued by the participants when all who are involved are learning, and when the partners do things together that they could not have done otherwise. Often these are things that the partners together can do because of the new networks, that they have developed. Community participants must be convinced that the knowledge, ideas, and energy from the university side can assist them with things they would otherwise not be able to do. Faculty and students must be persuaded that their research, teaching, or practice and internships are improved as a result of the partnership. University administrators must be convinced not only that community outreach is good public relations, but also that the partnership brings significant improvement to their core missions of preparing students and conducting valued research. Thus, one intermediate measure of COPC success will be the degree to which each of the partners regards the partnership as being in their interest to continue.

Sometimes cooperation allows a complex issue to be tackled that no one player could do. Sometimes discussion among the partners generates innovative ideas that individual players would probably not be able to generate on their own (Innes et al., 1994). Ultimately the value of the partnership lies not only in that it helps each of the partners serve their immediate interests (improving the community and improving the university), but that it helps them collectively to move beyond those short-term interests to new strategies and new learning.

Creation of Social, Intellectual, and Political Capital

Our contention is that capacity is built through the creation of three kinds of capital—social, intellectual, and political (Gruber, 1994)—and that successful COPCs generate this capital. Part of the evaluation should document and roughly estimate the degree to which specific COPCs, or the COPC program as a whole, have built such resources. Social capital is the trust, along with personal and political relationships that allow communication and cooperation, and even make it an attractive way

to work. Intellectual capital is the shared learning that partners build about what the other wants and needs and what will work for them, as well as a shared pool of knowledge about the problems and issues in the community. Political capital is the muscle necessary to turn communally arrived-at agreements into meaningful collective action.

We expect that there is no single best model that a successful COPC must follow, and that there is no set of strategies, actions, or performance measures that is appropriate to all contexts and conditions. However, we do anticipate that some characteristics will be common to successful COPCs. Table 1 identifies seven distinct aspects of the work of partnerships. When these aspects are realized, they represent significant change and progress. Not only are the more effective partnerships responsible for some immediate, tangible community development outcomes, but they also generate momentum for new activities, stronger relationships, and different ways of accomplishing shared goals. The partnerships that are successful in this respect are then also, we believe, more likely to institutionalize their new practices and resources, on campus and in the community.

Table 1

Successful Partnership Characteristics
• Capacity building—being able to do more individually and in a group as a result of the partnership • Leveraging effects—seed money encourages ongoing funding or initial activities encourage growing programs • Catalyst effects—enabling other activities to start • Innovation—new, qualitatively different, joint projects or cooperative activities • Second and third order effects, and spin-off collaborations—new partnering relationships among subsets of the partners or growth of the original partnership to be more inclusive • Institutional change—changes in practices, routine ways of working, organizational structure and mission, expectations and norms • Directly attributable and measurable outputs—jobs created, training completed, enterprises started, etc.

Previous research (Innes et al., 1994), along with our interviews with COPC participants, show that collaborative efforts that take place where there is a substantial history of working together tend to be more successful than those that are just beginning to build a partnership. It takes time to build trust and shared knowledge and for participants to learn how to work together. In fact, the process may take several years to mature. Thus the evaluation will need to take into account the fact that some places have more experience and history to begin with than others. It will also have to take into account the fact that new collaborations may take several

years before there are significant outputs that are measurable or obvious. However, the study can provide evidence about the direction of a newer partnership in terms of the aspects of the relationships that are emerging. It can also provide feedback to HUD and to the partnerships themselves that can help them to change the trajectory of a given program if it appears to be needed.

An unsuccessful COPC is one that does not become a true partnership, one where the partners do not benefit individually or collectively. An unsuccessful COPC is not one where the partnership makes mistakes, but rather one where the partners do not learn from what they attempt. Indeed, a COPC that takes some risks, and sometimes begins projects that never get implemented, but that pays attention to what went wrong and improves in a second stage or learns better how to implement its plans, should be regarded as more successful than one that does only routine, risk-free work. A COPC where trust and understanding do not develop among participants is also unsuccessful. Such a COPC is unlikely to have long-term benefits within communities or universities.

Important Contextual Variables in the COPC Program

Multiple contextual factors seem likely to play a key part in influencing the possible effectiveness of a partnership in a particular city with a particular university or college. The evaluation should take into account at least the factors listed in Table 2. We anticipate that successful strategies are likely to be found in all types of contexts and organizations. The variables not only describe the current situation but also the history of how the partners may or may not have worked together previously. We recommend that evaluators develop typologies that can encompass the breadth of COPC settings based on these factors.

Table 2

Important Contextual Variables for COPC
• Type of university—size and nature of the institutions • Size and socioeconomic characteristics of the surrounding community, including recent change—nature of critical issues, demographics, and level of organization among community residents • Characteristics of leadership and institutions in the university and the community—level of trust in/with community • History of working together—mutually cooperative experience between the partners

Design Features of COPC Projects

Several features of the design of campus/community partnerships should be examined in order to identify and define the various models of successful COPCs. In Table 3 we list five dimensions along which the current array of COPC grantees show considerable variation. Each of the following may be an important design

feature, and it should be possible for a national evaluation to systematically describe and sort the projects along these lines.

We also anticipate that certain types of leadership, collaborative strategies, organizational structure, attitudes, and networks of relationships will be associated with more successful COPCs. An evaluation that found that successful COPCs have evidence of some or all of these characteristics would provide rich interpretive information about how different strategies lead to success. The list of features would be helpful to HUD as a guide to the design and RFP for future COPC grants. Detailed accounts of different types of successful practices will be of great value as models and sources of ideas for future COPCs, or for revised ones. They will also provide all who are involved with a greater understanding of the complexity of the task and the range of strategies for adaptivity and creatively designing an effective partnership.

Table 3

Critical Design Features of COPC Projects	
• • • • • •	Numbers and types of projects—neighborhood organizations and projects involved; faculty, students, and campus organizations involved
	The structure of the COPC relationships and location within the university—level of active involvement on the part of multiple key players at the university
	Degree to which the COPC is decentralized vs. centrally controlled—description of decision-making structure
	Type of leadership—facilitators, conveners, or authorities
	Degree of networking and communication among partners, and among partners and other players in the university and community—mutuality of information exchange and access to updated material

Methods for Documenting and Analyzing the Partnerships

These three categories listed above—the qualities and effects of successful partnerships; the contextual variables relevant to university/community collaborations; and the design features of COPC projects—can be the basis for data collection and the systematic development of questions, expectations, or hypotheses. Such hypotheses would serve to guide the questions to ask in each of the research steps of the national evaluation.

The complexities of the partnership phenomenon and the great diversity among the COPC projects call for a study design that includes a variety of methods of data collection and analysis. There are six techniques, listed in Table 4, that would contribute complementary dimensions to a national evaluation. They would elicit the information about context, design features, activities, and both immediate and longer-term outcomes. They would, if undertaken as a group, provide for the perspectives of many different types of observers and participants, as well as many forms of

information. There would be opportunities for local participants to contribute to and describe their own work, as well as for peer review and the assessments of a national panel of stakeholders and experts. There would be cross-checks of different sources, and a healthy mix of quantitative and qualitative data. There would be a substantial information base on all the immediate impacts of the COPC program, as well as a first articulation of what could be known and projected about important second and third-order effects.

Table 4

Data Collection Components of COPC Evaluation
• Profile of COPCs and the communities where they operate—systematic, quantitative gathering of data including work plans and quarterly reports augmented by demographic information • Self-studies—comparable to reports that professional academic programs do for accreditation, explaining research and outreach activities • Interviews—open-ended but following broad guidelines as a follow-up to key points from the self-studies • Site visits—used as a crosscheck of self-studies, interviews, and surveys • Survey of participants—nationwide random cluster or stratified sample survey of COPC participants from all sectors • Focus groups—discussion of commonalities and patterns across sites, as well as lessons learned

Two brief examples can illustrate the kind of findings and implications that could be derived from individual cases and then compared across sites, moving from immediate outcomes to longer-term changes. If, in one example, a COPC grant enabled the effective teaching of conflict resolution to adolescents in an inner city neighborhood, it might in the process also lessen the social distance between the university and the neighborhood youth and lay the groundwork for future collaboration. Both aspects—the direct results of training and the creation of relationships that support future cooperation—should be assessed, because the effects on the young people, on the town/gown relationship, and potentially on the neighborhood as a whole, are pertinent. For another example, if a COPC-sponsored program of management assistance for nonprofit organizations reached 50 groups over two years, it could be evaluated in terms of its impact on those organizations and their clients as well as on the graduate students who provided the assistance and their school. But such a program could also (intentionally or as a by-product) create or strengthen a network of nonprofits across the city that then worked on other projects with the university.

In both these cases, the second-order effect of establishing the conditions for future action was as much a consequence of COPC as was the direct service.

The evaluation would establish whether or not there were such longer-term networks or new relationships created, and whether any new activities had at least started as a result. Then, the different design features, contextual variables, and characteristics of the partnerships could be analyzed in order to learn the extent to which they had enhanced or hindered the possibilities for future growth. For example, it might be posited that a history of pre-COPC collaboration is essential in creating a more complex partnership such as the citywide network of nonprofits. Even if that hypothesis were borne out through several types of data collection, a second researchable question logically follows: apart from the historical ties, what new, unique elements did the COPC support bring about to build more complete relationships and a wider range of future action? In both examples the evaluation could uncover evidence of the campus resources that were most helpful in stimulating new activities beyond the initial COPC work plans. With a sufficiently rich and systematic data base about the COPC projects, there are opportunities not only for evocative case studies but also for comparative analysis that would reveal a great deal about what works, or does not, and why.

Conclusion

HUD's goal in this program is to develop the capabilities of communities and universities to respond effectively, in innovative partnerships, to the conditions they face. This emphasis on creating robust learning institutions while contributing directly to neighborhood development is critically important, and both kinds of outcomes should be part of the evaluation of success and impact. As the director of a nonprofit agency active with a COPC project said in an interview for this study, "Funders want to know about the nature and benefits of the relationship after the seed money is gone....If we solve a problem today, it will return next year, but a vehicle for continuing to discuss these issues will allow for continued learning and mutual adaptation. We will be able to create sustainable long-term learning communities."

Suggested Readings

- Gruber, J., *Coordinating Growth Management through Consensus-Building: Incentives and the Generation of Social, Intellectual, and Political Capital* (Berkeley: Institute of Urban and Regional Development, University of California at Berkeley, 1994).
- Holland, J., *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity* (Reading, MA: Helix Book, 1995).
- Innes, J., J. Gruber, M. Neuman, and R. Thompson, *Coordinating Growth and Environmental Management Through Consensus Building*. Prepared for California Policy Seminar (Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley, 1994).
- Kauffman, S., *At Home in the Universe: The Search for Laws of Self Organization and Complexity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- Osborne, D., and T. Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

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