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Bridging the Community and Police Divide through the Planning Table

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Abstract: The focus of this discussion is how an urban higher education institution used its capital to develop a police training program that met the needs of the police departments and communities they serve.

Context

In the United States, there are tensions between police departments and the communities they serve. Between 2015 and 2017, 30% of Black Americans and 45% of Latino Americans reported having a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the police compared to 61% of White Americans (Norman, 2017). Additionally, a Pew Research poll found only 36% of Black Americans expressed confidence in police treating them fairly versus 71% of White Americans (Drake, 2015). Many of these differences in perceptions are rooted in experiences of racial disparities within the criminal justice system (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018). The federal government and state governments have formed taskforces to recommend best practices for police departments, such as broadening continuing education (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). The purpose of this roundtable discussion is to highlight how an urban education institution developed a police-training program that met the needs of the police departments and communities they serve.

Community Partnerships

Public universities may also help improve community confidence in the police. Universities can create transformational projects that contribute to the public good, bring people together and undertake public service programs that benefit our communities. Cleveland State University (CSU), a public institution in the heart of Cleveland, Ohio, is one such institution. CSU has used its capital to create mutually beneficial partnerships in the co-creation of educational programs that produce educational, social and political outcomes for a variety of stakeholders (Cervero & Wilson, 2006). One of these programs is the police officer training program, Building Mutual Respect and Community Trust (BMRCT), for which planning began in 2014, to improve the quality of interactions between officers and the public.

The Planning Table

Planning is a social activity in which planners need to negotiate and juggle multiple interests from a variety of stakeholders within and outside of the university (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Cervero & Wilson, 2006). According to Cervero and Wilson (2006) "who sits at the planning table matters because there is a causal relationship among whose interests people represent there, the practical judgments that these people make, and the specific features of educational programs" (p. 91). Built within the development of the finished BMRCT program were the review, feedback, and evaluation of the training from university, police, and community stakeholders. However, originally the program did not have this feedback process. The initial program team also did not include police officers as part of the planning table and therefore would most likely lacked credibility with officers being trained.

Murk and Walls (1998) suggest planning training does not always follow a linear path and that organizational and external environments may influence the planning process. The

BMRCT planning table had evolved based on the political dynamics of the institution. The initial planning table included faculty and staff members from graduate programs in diversity, social psychology, and communication. The program was initially piloted to police chiefs and representatives from CSU, who thought the training should include the perspectives of community members and be more applicable to the everyday interactions of officers. The training program was then taken over by a centralized division of the university, which had more human and capital resources. This division assembled a team of diversity professionals, adult educators, government officials, and a retired police trainer to redevelop the training to be more inclusive of the needs of the community and increase the practically of the training. The redeveloped training was then piloted to representatives from community organizations, including the Urban League of Cleveland, The LGBT Center of Greater Cleveland, the local ACLU, the Organization of Chinese Americans Cleveland Chapter, OpenNEO (a non-profit that promotes public access to data), and again to police officers. Having all three groups (the university, community, and police departments) represented and engaged at the planning table ensured that the mutual interests and experiences of all were integrated within the final training program and confirmed the training was applicable to police officers. The BMRCT program was successful, as multiple training sessions were presented, training over 200 officers from 20 different police departments, and having the support of community organizations. However, changes in the university's central division leadership resulted in the training transitioning to management outside the university.

Lessons Learned

Universities can use their economic power, social capital, and human capital to create training programs to meet the needs of communities; however, they must also consider all stakeholders who should be at the planning table. Including representatives, or at least integrating the feedback of community members, is essential because it ensures that the training is inclusive of the problems faced by communities. Planners within universities also need to understand the politics of the university and ensure that the right individuals from the university are brought to the table before the training is developed.

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