INSTITUTIONAL GROUNDINGS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE WORK WITH STUDENTS AND IN SCHOOLS

Kevin Michael Foster<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

Despite local, state and federal funding for compulsory education, educational opportunity is not evenly distributed in the United States. A range of challenges disproportionately face students of color and the poor and lead to uneven achievement outcomes. This essay uses the example of a specific universitybased institute to show how partnerships between universities, schools and communities can improve the likelihood of academic success among minority and impoverished populations. It further discusses an emergent theory of practice that can guide universitybased action-researchers who would hope to harness the resources of the academy and build partnerships that affect sustainable improvements in education. The article discusses purposefully constructing a seamless harmony between teaching, research and service among university faculty in order to facilitate research that directly and positively impacts local communities, generates knowledge, and facilitates the training and development of graduate students. It also argues that community-engaged work with underserved student and family populations includes both contextual and structural dimensions, and that careful attention to both may be necessary for achieving structural

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Institutional Groundings for Transformative Work with Students and in Schools

<sup>1</sup> Associate professor with tenure at The University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Foster is an educational anthropologist dedicated to understanding and accounting for the social, cultural and structural factors affecting students' educational outcomes. He is also the founding director of ICUSP, the Institute for Community, University and School Partnerships.

transformations that ensure that all students will be served well by their schools.

**Keywords:** Partnerships. Minority populations. Impoverished.

# FUNDAMENTOS INSTITUCIONAIS PARA UM TRABALHO TRANSFORMADOR COM ALUNOS E EM ESCOLAS

#### Resumo

Apesar de haver financiamento local, estadual e federal para a educação obrigatória, as oportunidades educacionais não são igualitariamente distribuídas nos Estados Unidos. Alunos de etnias e condições econômicas não favorecidas encaram uma gama de desafios desproporcionais, o que os conduz a resultados desiguais em se tratando de suas conquistas. O presente trabalho utiliza o exemplo de um instituto de base universitária específico para mostrar como parcerias entre universidades, escolas e comunidades podem aumentar a probabilidade de sucesso acadêmico entre as minorias e a população de baixa renda. Discute-se, em seguida, uma teoria emergente sobre uma prática que pode guiar pesquisadoresatores de base universitária, que poderiam aproveitar os recursos vindos da academia para construir parcerias que representem melhorias sustentáveis na educação. O artigo discute a construção propositada de uma harmonia contínua entre ensino, pesquisa e serviço entre o corpo docente da universidade, a fim de que seja facilitada a pesquisa que promova um impacto positivo e direto nas comunidades locais, que gere conhecimento, e que facilite o treinamento e o desenvolvimento dos estudantes de graduação. Argumenta-se, também, que o trabalho comunitário com estudantes e famílias desfavorecidas inclui tanto dimensões contextuais quanto estruturais e que

uma atenção cuidadosa em relação a ambos pode ser necessária para que se alcancem transformações estruturais que garantam que todos os estudantes sejam bem atendidos por suas escolas.

**Palavras-chave:** Parcerias. Populações minoritárias. Empobrecidas. Institutional Groundings for Transformative Work with Students and in Schools

# INSTITUTIONAL GROUNDINGS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE WORK WITH STUDENTS AND IN SCHOOLS

## I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, public high school graduation rates among African American students in the United States have been around 51% (Education Week 2010; Greene and Forster 2003). This compares to a similar graduation rate among Hispanics (52%), and a rate of around 72% for whites over the same period of time. At the same time, students whose parents attended college are more likely to go to college themselves, and children from wealthier families are more likely to go to college than children who grow up in economic poverty (Kane 2001). A wide range of factors contributes to the quality of life of children, which in turn impacts their likelihood of realizing academic success. Factors include housing quality, child hunger and nutrition, early identification of vision and aural health needs, access to healthcare, community safety, school safety, teacher quality, family stability and family income. In the United States, students of African descent and other students of color are consistently at greater likelihood of lower qualities of life in these areas than are Anglo students (Kraehe, Foster and Blakes 2010). In short, the U.S. education system includes predictable differences in student quality of life, academic opportunities and academic outcomes across racial and socio-economic lines.

If we are to provide true educational opportunity to more than just the narrow elite of the U.S. citizenry, the nation needs innovations in schooling practices (contextual interventions), and changes in the circumstances surrounding minority students (structural transformation) so that they are surrounded with the same levels of support as are more robustly supported students. Partnerships between universities,

schools, communities and others with a stake in students' academic outcomes provide a catalyst for improvements in students' circumstances and subsequently in their outcomes. Strategic partnerships can be beneficial for diagnosing vision impairments and learning disabilities, inventorying family and community resources, and assessing the status of other factors that contribute to academic outcomes. Partnerships can also be pivotal for identifying solutions to student challenges and providing students and families with critical services and resources.

This essay discusses the theoretical framework for an institute that brings university and schools into partnership in order to serve typically underserved African American, Latino and lower-income students. The Institute for Community, University and School Partnerships (ICUSP), which is based in central Texas and housed at the University of Texas at Austin was founded in 2006. It focuses on: 1) supporting and developing the capacity of schools and of student-serving non-profit organization; 2) directly serving students who are typically underserved in existing education institutions; 3) studying and writing about ICUSP projects in order to extend their impacts beyond local contexts; and 4) training and funding graduate students who will carry on communityengaged, student-serving scholarship in their own careers. The broad goal of the institute is to promote the academic success of all students, with particular attention to the needs and success of African American, Latino and economically impoverished students who are routinely underserved and whose needs too often go unmet in U.S. schools.

By focusing on the conceptual framework for the Institute and one set of examples of ICUSP's work, this essay demonstrates two key aspects of community-engaged scholarship on behalf of youth: first, that it is possible to conceptualize and engage action-oriented intellectual work in a way that brings teaching, research, and service into seamless harmony; and second, that community-engaged work with Institutional Groundings for Transformative Work with Students and in Schools

underserved populations includes both contextual and structural dimensions, and that careful attention to both can help maximize the immediate and long-term impacts of the projects.

## **II. UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS**

ICUSP collaboratively constructs and subsequently depends upon effective partnerships between universitybased faculty, staff and graduate students on one hand, and central Texas schools and local non-profit organizations on the other. The guiding principles of ICUSP build upon a history of university-school interactions. Thus, it is useful to briefly discuss the broader history of university-community and university-school partnerships in the United States before addressing the work that is designed to address the needs of underserved populations. This positions ICUSP work as part of a larger ongoing intellectual project that many have engaged over the past one hundred and fifty years. The history of United States higher education includes federal legislation that built state-supported institutions to provide collegiate level education, serve regional constituencies, and address challenges facing the nation and its' people. This history, along with expanded experimentation and research of examples in practice, can help citizens, organizations, and states more effectively meet individual and societal needs.

## **Federal Policy**

In 1862, the United States Congress passed the Morrill Land Grant Act, which set aside public land to fund state universities that would educate the agricultural and industrial classes of citizens, and also engage research that would directly benefit the regions in which the universities were located. The Hatch Act of 1887 extended the service reach of these state universities by placing stations in rural regions "in order to aid in acquiring and diffusing among the people of the United

States useful and practical information on subjects connected with agriculture, and to promote scientific investigation and experiment respecting the principles and applications of agricultural science." (U.S. Congress 1887). The Smith-Lever act of 1914 facilitated university outreach through cooperative extension services that placed university outposts in local communities within given states. The purpose of the services would be to ensure that university research findings in such areas as agricultural productivity, technology, and home and community economics would be available to citizens and made applicable to their everyday lives.

Along with laws that promoted university engagement of local communities, there have also been federal dollars allocated towards partnerships to improve critical aspects of the nation's physical and institutional infrastructures. For example, in the 1950's, with the creation of the National Science Foundation and the systematic support of teacher professional development, the United States Federal Government supported university involvement in the ongoing training of thousands of schoolteachers in order to improve student math and science outcomes (Foster, et al 2010). In addition to funding basic research, the Federal Government has also funded research grounded partnerships that would address regional and national imperatives.

#### University-based initiatives

Along with Federal initiatives to fund sustainable university-school partnerships, individual researchers and academic institutions have theorized and actualized partnerships to emphasize the means by which needs are identified and solutions collaborative forged. Among the longstanding contributors to the academic literature on this area is John Goodlad, who defined partnership as "deliberatively designed collaborative arrangement between different institutions, working together to advance self-interests and solve common Institutional Groundings for Transformative Work with Students and in Schools

problems" (Goodlad 1988:13). His work, and those of others, combined theory and practice, and frequently included the development of university sub-units – centers that operated under the umbrella of a university and brought together universities and communities, and that effectively extended the reach and engagement of the universities in ways consistent with 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century federal legislation.

More recently, university-based centers, institutes, programs and individual faculty members have built bridges between university research and student efficacy and outcomes. In the U.S. southwest, university-based or affiliated centers the serve under-represented students include the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development in south Texas (Guajardo, Guajardo and Casaperalta 2008), The Dana Center in central Texas, The Social Justice Education Project in Tucson Arizona (Cammarota 2009) and ICUSP. All promote partnerships between universities, schools and communities in order to promote student achievement by directly serving students, developing schools, developing school teachers and identifying and helping secure additional resources to meet student needs.

## **III. ICUSP PHILOSOPHY OF PRACTICE**

#### **Intersectional Intellectual Action**

ICUSP was founded as an effort of a junior faculty member at The University of Texas at Austin to directly serve school children and local communities while fulfilling his requirements to teach university students and conduct research that would result in academic publications. The model that emerged is a variation of the Venn Diagram (Figure 1). It captures and draws attention to the figurative space where areas of interest and action overlap. In this case, the areas that needed to come together were research, teaching and service – the traditional responsibilities of U.S. academics. Each of

these areas can exist in isolation or can overlap. The concept of working in ICUSP is to seek out, design and engage projects that simultaneously: provide opportunities for teaching and learning; serve local communities; and provide the basis for research that generates new knowledge. Service occurs in the sense that ICUSP projects directly serve students in K-12 (kindergarten through 12th grade) settings. Research occurs when the ICUSP team creates programs within a research context - measuring baselines and outcomes, and tracking participant growth throughout the life of a project. Teaching takes place not just at the K-12 level (which is in this context part of service), but also at the undergraduate and graduate student levels. This occurs as university students participate in the projects on different levels, including as researchers or project leaders. ICUSP team members work to produce positive student outcomes - especially among students who are typically underserved in our education system and who are at the greatest likelihood of being figuratively imprisoned by social reproduction that maintains them in positions of poverty and disempowerment.



Figure 1. Intersectional Intellectual Action. The overlap of the three traditional arenas of academic work creates a nexus where all three can be coherently, simultaneously and fruitfully engaged to the mutually reinforcing maximization of each.

# Contextual and Transformational Interventions, Structural Transformation

As ICUSP programs have developed, the ideas of "Contextual Interventions," "Structural Interventions," and

Institutional Groundings for Transformative Work with Students and in Schools

"Structural Transformation" have become descriptive of our efforts. Meanwhile, in spaces where we work – spaces where students of color and others are systematically underserved or mistreated – Structural Transformation has emerged as our ultimate goal. Contextual interventions are actions that respond to and account for circumstances in context and include adjustments to action oriented practice and research such that the work responds in real time to inequities and challenges facing students. Structural interventions are new or alternative programs, policies, or practices that address immediate problems.

For an example of contextual and structural interventions, we can look at a teacher's response to persistent physical hunger among children in her or his classroom. In a situation where several of her students are routinely distracted from learning by hunger and malnutrition, a contextual intervention would be for the teacher to keep nutritious snack food in her or his desk and to give it to students who don't get enough to eat. The intervention interrupts the structural reality of persistent child hunger within society. The intervention does not, however, alter, or even challenge, prevailing structures or problems. A contextual intervention with a structurally resistant dimension would be for the teacher to allow students to take food from the school cafeteria even if it was against the rules. Sometimes, good food is thrown away at the end of lunch periods and children are not allowed to take food with them. If a teacher breaks rules in order to facilitate a contextual response to help solve an immediate problem, and moreover, implicitly teaches students to value their own health above the rules of the state, they embody and are teaching strategies of resistance to structural oppression. This is a contextual intervention with a resistant dimension. Once again, however, the practice is limited in impact, although the training of students to honor and protect their humanity above the governance of the state is important insurgent action.

An example of a *Structural intervention* in the hunger example would be a local policy change to allow students to bring food from the cafeteria to their classroom or home. A deeper structural intervention would be a funded program to provide free or reduced cost meals to students who suffer from chronic hunger. Such structural interventions constitute reform, but also fall short of fundamentally altering prevailing conceptions and policies unless they are coordinated and carried out in conjunction with complementary structural interventions. For example, the impact of policy changes will be limited if they are not coupled with efforts to change institutional culture (Kutal, Rich, Hessinger, & Miller 2009) such that the changes are embraced and supported by constituents and leaders instead of resisted or openly opposed.

Finally, *structural transformation* is the product of strategic and accumulated structural interventions and constitutes a fundamental change in the material, procedural and cultural landscape. Just how elusive is structural transformation becomes apparent when we consider the persistence of child hunger – locally, nationally and of course, globally. The transformation is incomplete until the day: 1) that child hunger is anomalous to society; and 2) that when individual instances of child hunger do appear society has quick and ready mechanisms to eliminate them. Figure 2 provides a linear, graphic representation of the spectrum from *Contextual Intervention* to *Structural Transformation*.

#### Contextual Intervention

 Tactical: Requires
Competence & Creativity to conceive and enact alternative approaches

#### Structural Transformation

 Tactical and Strategic dimensions: Same requirements as Contextual and Strategic Interventions, plus

 Ability to elicit or build structural and social support throughout the organization for the new reality

Figure 2. The agency and influence required for desired impact is greater with each type of intervention and is greatest for success at affecting transformation.

Structural Intervention

Strategy & Organization

Institutional Groundings for Transformative Work with Students and in Schools

#### **IV. ICUSP PHILOSOPHIES IN PRACTICE**

So far this essay has discussed university service and partnerships that have informed the existence of ICUSP as an effort to address challenges facing students. It also has provided emergent philosophies of practice that have guided the programs and practices of the Institute. These critical philosophies of practice were *Intersection Intellectual Action*, and engaging work in terms of *contextual and structural interventions* in service to the possibility of *structural transformation*. This section describes the activities of one set of ICUSP activities in order to show examples of these philosophies of practice. The example is that of the birth and development of COBRA and VOICES, which are ICUSP programs that provide direct service to students and that respond to student needs and interests in the communities that ICUSP serves.

COBRA, which stands for Community of Brothers in Revolutionary Alliance, was initiated in response to interactions and dialogue with Black community members and leaders in central Texas. The program's roots go back to an organic process that started with The African-American Men and Boys Conference, a monthly community meeting spearheaded by a local activist to discuss the plight of Black boys and men in society. The collective effort to engage and support Black male students led to a school-university-community partnership and has spurred a number of student academic and leadership development programs in central Texas Title I

schools<sup>2</sup>. These programs exemplify the synergic roles different groups can play in promoting Black student success.

COBRA. The African-American Men and Boys Conference is community-led, and has been supported by many organizations, including ICUSP. It is held monthly during the school year and deals with various issues affecting the Black community, primarily those of boys and men. The conferences include a keynote speaker, lunch, a vendor fair and workshops. The vendor fair features health and human service providers, employers, university recruiters and others. Workshops cover such topics as conflict resolution, preparing for college, handling peer pressure, and balancing sports and school. Events for adults include opportunities to meet school board members, lessons on communicating with teachers, and conversations on helping children avoid peer pressure. The conferences are free and attended by a wide range of community individuals and institutions. Although they do not solve all of the challenges students face, the regularity and focus of the gatherings enhance shared social capital among students, parents, youth-serving adults and school leaders, as well as cultural capital among parents and students, which may enable more effective navigation within the school setting. Additionally, they help connect people to available resources that can have a positive material impact on students' preparedness and the quality of life for Black families.

A recurrent topic that arose out of The African-American Men and Boys Conference was the inadequate supports for Institutional Groundings for Transformative Work with Students and in Schools

<sup>2 &</sup>quot;Title I schools" refers to schools that have high numbers of low-income families and that are thus eligible for federal financial assistance. "Title I" refers to federal provisions for providing "Financial Assistance To Local Educational Agencies For The Education Of Children Of Low-Income Families" as authorized in the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (Public Law. 89-10, 79 Stat. 27, 20 U.S.C. ch.70 and periodically reauthorized since. The latest ESEA reauthorization is Public Law 107-110 – An act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind. This law was signed in January 2002 and is commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

students between each gathering. Additionally, a local school principal was deeply disturbed by the disciplinary referral rates, grades and attendance rates of Black boys on his campus. After continued deliberation at the conferences between the ICUSP director and principal, COBRA was birthed.

COBRA is an academic and leadership development program that serves students in high poverty, central Texas high schools. The name was chosen by the students and adult founders in dialogue, as was the meeting format and as were the group's aspirations. Originally held after school, the program now meets weekly during the school day. The group adopted six "coils," or foundational principles of action, to ground and guide them:

- 1) Academic engagement
- 2) Brothers supporting brothers
- 3) Inter-group solidarity (e.g. racial, ethnic, gendered)
- 4) Conflict resolution
- 5) Critical consciousness
- 6) Self-definition

COBRA's meeting format was established in the second year of the groups' existence and follows that of a college student group that the boys observed during a fieldtrip to UT. During the visit, they observed a group of predominantly Black male college students in professional dress conducting a meeting that included a time to vent their frustrations, a time to hold one another accountable for their actions since the last meeting, a time to engage their business activities, and a closing. When the high school students returned to their school campus, they suggested that COBRA sessions should follow that format, a request facilitators were happy to oblige. Since then, several of the members of the college student group have built strong relationships with COBRA members

and ICUSP and are now COBRA facilitators, as well as tutors and mentors in local K-12 settings. With this groundwork, COBRA today is in several high schools across central Texas, along with VOICES, an all-female group originated by high school students and enabled and expanded by ICUSP.

To the extent that COBRA helps low-income students and students of color develop skills that help them navigate school and that prepares them for college to an extent above and beyond that which is normally provided them, the program facilitates contextual interventions. Examples would include students being taught: how to avoid situations where they might get into trouble; how to seek redress if they feel wronged by peers or teachers; and (in settings where college guidance is inadequate) how to think about and apply to college and financial aid. However, as the program becomes institutionalized, it moves towards structural intervention and has the potential to fuel structural transformation. Structural interventions occur as school communities see value in the programs and offer systematic support for the programs and its practices, and as they seek to expand the programs to more students and to more schools. The structural intervention deepens and moves towards structural transformation as the program practices are understood and replicated by other teachers and school leaders. Replication occurs as individual teachers alter their practices, and as schools develop programs that are based upon the COBRA model

*VOICES.* An example of how the idea of one program can influence practices more broadly is the creation of VOICES. Like COBRA, the story of VOICES highlights the organic process by which ICUSP's programs take shape and provides a parallel example of contextual interventions that lead to structural intervention and the possibility of structural transformation. The narrative also speaks to the need, desire and capability of young people to take a lead role in the development of youth-centered, transformative initiatives. Institutional Groundings for Transformative Work with Students and in Schools

VOICES was initiated in spring 2007 after three young African-American women at a local high school took note of their school's COBRA chapter. Independent of each other, these three students decided to investigate COBRA by visiting the group's open session. COBRA's student-centered space of youth empowerment proved to be just the sort of environment that the three had been seeking. Little time passed before the three women decided to establish a comparable female group on campus. In the process, they encountered difficulties in carving out time and space to build purposeful relationships and networks to support females on their school campus. The three also felt that well-meaning teacher-led programs were disconnected from student interests and undermined student agency. As one of the co-founders stated, "In school in order to start something you have to have an adult. And most of the time adults try to get stuff together, like advisory, and they don't give us enough credit to be young adults."

The push to establish VOICES occurred just as ICUSP was seeking gender parity among its youth programs. In the spirit of organic partnership, ICUSP responded to the desires of the young women by pairing ICUSP project directors with them as adult facilitators. With ICUSP facilitators providing background support, the young women prepared weekly discussion topics and activities for their eager peers. One of the co-founders told us that, "Y'all just sit back and y'all just have that 'take it away' attitude, but y'all also help us out and give us suggestions. . . . You're like guides for us, but y'all don't overwhelm us. Y'all don't take over." The initial contextual intervention by ICUSP was to work to create space for the young women to enact their vision. The work did not involve a policy shift among school campuses, but rather conversations that lead to one school principal agreeing to give students space and a time to meet during the school day.

Since VOICES' conception, the program has expanded to several high school campuses. Its mission, as elaborated by the group, is to "empower each student member to become

leaders in their daily lives and communities." The principles, or "beams," by which the program operates are:

- 1. Peer empowerment
- 2. Embracing diversity
- 3. Academic/college preparation
- 4. Community service
- 5. Embodying leadership

While VOICES' co-founders exercised leadership qualities, the group was conceived as a space to cultivate collaborative leadership among all participants. When the founders of the group reflected on their school experiences and family histories, they described a culturally rooted and service-oriented understanding of leadership, which had also been shaped in part by negative experiences that they had come through. As with COBRA, through the growing acceptance of the possibility of students as creators and leaders and the replication of VOICES on additional campuses, contextual interventions are moving towards structural intervention. The structural transformation the students seek is to attend schools that systematically and routinely listen to and respond to student voices and that allow space for students to help author programs and practices that will help them grow in ways that are important to them.

Excellence in these programs can be measured in the number of students who go on to post-secondary education (113 out of 119 seniors in our programs from 2007-2010) and by indicators of expanded horizons and possibilities for students, including the numbers who have trod unique pathways that have led them to pursue a college education outside the state. Among the schools to which students have been accepted are The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Massachusetts), The College of William and Mary (Virginia), Pratt Institute (New York), and Dominican University

Educ. Foco, Juiz de Fora, v.21, n.3, p. 607-626, set. / dez. 2016

Institutional Groundings for Transformative Work with Students and in Schools

(Illinois). Students hve also gone on to The University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University, and several other Texas universities.

Even as COBRA and VOICES travel the path from contextual to structural intervention, the philosophy of intersectional intellectual action is also threaded throughout. While high school students who engage the programs develop skills and dispositions for academic success and leadership, they are guided by ICUSP project directors and also participate in research projects designed to understand and further develop effective processes and practices among students in schools. For the ICUSP director, his graduate teaching is woven throughout ICUSP's work. Each ICUSP project director is also a student pursuing a doctoral degree. Through their participation as project directors helping guide COBRA or VOICES they develop critical skills in community engaged scholarship, student empowerment, program design and program evaluation. What they are taught in traditional graduate seminars are embodied in practice through their participation in ICUSP. At the same time, the ICUSP director, the ICUSP project directors (and in some cases, the middle and high school students served by ICUSP programs) conduct action research that (we hope) generates new insights and understandings and leads to publications that impact fields of student learning. In this way, COBRA and VOICES like ICUSP programs generally, bring teaching, research and community engagement into a seamless harmony that is grounded in community, shared experience and shared knowledge.

#### Challenges and opportunities

As ICUSP promotes intellectual work that marries teaching, research and service and that operate on contextual and structural levels, the Institute faces challenges that could hinder the work and that must be accounted for if initiatives

are to prove successful. These same challenges, however, are also spaces of opportunity. Successfully addressing the challenges constitute contextual intervention that can lead to structural transformation. Among the challenges that ICUSP faces are: university policies (including tenure, graduate student compensation, and the logistics of travelling to and from campus); publications (including choosing where to publish what content); and community relationships (including building on the symbolic capital of the university, while overcoming it's history of complicity with the marginalization of minority communities). Such challenges, however, are to be expected. With a solid intellectual grounding the Institute, and other like it, are best positioned to engage actions that concretely benefit traditionally marginalized students while simultaneously advancing knowledge in the same areas.

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