The College and the Small Community: An Account of Collective Decision Making

Helen F. Bruner, The University of Wisconsin

How do you deal with conflict in a highly explosive situation? "Town" and "gown" hostilities have existed in small communities for many years. However, the rapid growth of colleges, compounded by the influx of black students and other minority groups and social unrest, has led to volatile confrontation in some communities between the campus population and townspeople. The author presents a case study in which the group process Program Planning Model was the problem-solving technique used. She describes how representatives of both segments of the community were involved in working together to solve their conflicts. Can you apply and use this model in your work as an extension professional?

"You have to accept the University. It sure as hell isn't going to move out."[1] These were the words of the president of the City Council of Whitewater, Wisconsin, in March of 1970. They sound shocking, but how many citizens of university communities in this era of turbulence resign themselves to just this kind of negative acceptance of the institution in their midst?

Fortunately, Whitewater hasn't given up, but is trying to make "town" and "gown" and the diverse elements of each, including the black students in this all-white community, understand each other. They're using an original approach to problem solving developed by Delbecq and Van de Ven of The University of Wisconsin School of Business and put into practice by the Center for Community Leadership Development, University Extension, The University of Wisconsin.

Background to Confrontation

This community, the home of one of Wisconsin's nine state universities, is located in Walworth County, an excellent agricultural area in southern Wisconsin. Surrounded by rolling land, lakes, and streams, it has potential for good living, good working, and good recreational opportunities. It looks like a pleasant place to live.

But in late 1969 and early 1970, events at the university defied the tranquil appearance. Old Main, the most venerable of campus buildings, was destroyed by arsonists. The black culture center was closed when the university took it over for classrooms without asking the black students. Tempers flared. A physical confrontation took place between blacks and whites at the all-white Phi Chi Epsilon fraternity, resulting in the expulsion of two blacks and suspension of seven others for their part in this episode. Demonstrations were held protesting the disciplinary action.[2] Whitewater was indeed feeling the effects of campus unrest.

Back in 1868, when the original Whitewater Normal School opened its doors, 48 students enrolled for the 2-year teacher education program. In a community of 4,000, they were hardly noticed. Fifty-nine years later, the 2-year normal school became a 4-year state college, offered a degree, and enrolled 500 students.

Two other organizational changes have occurred since then. First, in 1951, the name was changed to Wisconsin State College at Whitewater with an authorized liberal arts program added. At that time, students numbered about 1,300; the city population was 3 times that many.

The second change took place in 1964, when, as part of the reorganization of the state college system, the school became known as Wisconsin State University-Whitewater. That year its enrollment was 4,901. The population of the city was 6,256.[3] In the fall of 1969, the year most of the turbulence began, 9,759 students registered. The population of the city was about the same. Of that 9,759 students, 106 were black.

In this small city, as in many similar cities, there has been a dearth of contact with blacks. Historians can find only four other black people who ever lived in Whitewater . . . and in this century never more than one at a time. Gordon Parks, university archivist and history professor, gathered some facts about two of them from local residents. One was elected as sealer of weights and measures in 1867 "assuring us a front seat in the reconstruction business." The other was abandoned in Whitewater, reared by a local family, and believed to have graduated from high school in 1902. He was accepted, according to one resident, "because nobody ever thought that anything he did could affect them." Whitewater residents didn't feel quite so secure with 106 black students on the campus in 1969.

Compounding the problem of on-campus turbulence was the problem of off-campus attitudes.

People reared in a small homogeneous city are being forced to cope with people who are different; people who are black; male students whose hair is shoulder length; professors who teach four classes a week and make more money than residents who have spent a lifetime working a farm; young professors with

beards who talk of a right not to wear the uniform of the country.[4]

Said one former campus minister:

It's a small town that has suddenly had a large university thrust upon it. It's been a town of retired farmers and all of a sudden there is a great influx. Even without the black students there would be problems.[5]

The complexity of the situation demanded more than simply meeting each crisis as it occurred. The university and the community both needed a broadened perspective and a general policy.

The previous year a university human relations committee had been named to "further guarantee that the quality of human relationships remains high in our scale of values and that the channels of communication are kept open between students, faculty and administrators." Its membership included nine faculty and eight students. Reports indicate it was ineffective. And since its membership was confined solely to the university, it wasn't prepared to deal with the most current problems. Concerned citizens, both from the college and the city, saw their best hope in a university-community relations committee.

Initiating Collective Decision Making

In March of 1970, the Baptist minister arranged a meeting which included himself, the university president, and the head of the state Equal Rights Division. That the problem of racism on the campus and in the community needed to be dealt with and that the university should take the first step in that direction was the consensus of the meeting.

Several suggestions were made at that meeting about the form the problem solving should take: a series of forums or symposiums sponsored by the university, the newspapers, and industry; small meetings where administrators, faculty, and townspeople could get together with an outside person as a facilitator; a new human relations committee that campus blacks would have a hand in selecting. Another suggestion was to contact University Extension's Center for Community Leadership Development (CCLD) which has an interracial staff experienced in dealing with problems of minorities in mostly white communities.

The university administration, eager to avoid another racial crisis, arranged a meeting with the Center for Community Leadership Development two weeks later. Two staff members from the center, one black and one white, along with the former head of the Equal Rights Division, met with a college group on April 8. The Whitewater representatives included administration, faculty, and students. The prime focus of this meeting was to find out what the problems were, not how to solve them. The *how* would be a long-range program.

Community representatives were invited to subsequent meetings of this group. On May 19, they prepared a list of community and university names as potential participants in a "multicultural approach to improve university community relations in Whitewater." To choose a broad-based, representative group was the task of the May meeting. It was basic to the success of the program that the black community feel a part of it.

Eighty-five people were finally invited to "establish better communication dealing with problems inherent in a multiculture community such as exists in Whitewater" by attending a series of conferences "to jointly explore the areas of mutual concern." Included in this 85 were members of the Whitewater University Administrative Council, the Board of Regents, a representative sample of students (black, white, and other minorities), faculty members representing a cross section of status and opinion, ministers, law enforcement officers, city government officials, and businessmen. The involvement of many different kinds of people in making decisions might commit a broad base of the population to solving the problems.

Of the 85 invited, 72 accepted the invitation to attend 2, 3-hour sessions—the first the afternoon of September 24, the second the morning of October 1. Hopefully these two meetings would initiate the implementation of some long-range objectives which would make Whitewater a more comfortable place to live in—for both blacks and whites.

Goals to be Reached

The long-range goals of the Whitewater project were: to reduce the number of interracial conflicts in the community and on the campus, to reduce negative feelings about black students using Whitewater stores and recreation facilities, to increase the number of black students graduating from Whitewater, to increase the positive interaction between blacks and whites, and to increase the ability of all to respect different life styles.

These goals were ambitious, but not unrealistic. They addressed the problem of basic everyday interaction in Whitewater. For since no black families live in Whitewater, residents had learned about blacks through newspapers, television, and, more currently, from black students. Most of the last, many feared, came straight out of the militant youth commandos in Milwaukee. So just by opening up lines of communication, these first two meetings were a major step toward improving university-community relations.

On September 24, 7 months after the burning of Old Main, the first human relations conference met on the Whitewater campus. Sixty people attended, including eight black students. (Most of those who had accepted, but failed to appear were students—both black and white). As one reporter wrote:

All the explosive elements which brought this community and Whitewater State University to a near state of emergency last year were thrown together yesterday into one room. The results of that meeting may bring harmony. . . .[6]

Program Planning Model

This harmony would be sought through an original approach to problem solving developed by Delbecq and Van de Ven of The University of Wisconsin School of Business, based on their studies of planning in government and human service agencies. Known as the group process Program Planning Model (PPM), it has been widely used in organization and task force situations. But, it's possible this was the first time it would be used in a combination university-community setting.

In developing the model, Delbecq and Van de Ven were particularly concerned with situations where a variety of groups, fragmented in terms of vested interest, rhetorical and ideological concepts, and differentiated expertise, needed to be brought together for a program to emerge or change to take place. They were also concerned with providing an orderly process of structuring decision making at different phases of planning.[7]

In this case, the structure provided for three distinct phases on three different days. Phase I identified problems. Phase II, a week later, explored solutions. Phase III,

two weeks after that, developed proposals for implementation.

Phase I: Identifying Problems

Guided by 7 staff members from CCLD (4 black and 3 white), the 60 people were divided into heterogeneous groups—insofar as possible representing each category present—to participate in Phase I of the model. In this phase, it should be emphasized that the purpose is to *identify* the problems and needs perceived by the clients, *not* to explore solutions. It's a deliberate structured process to identify problems by means of the nominal group technique. A nominal group, as explained by Delbecq and Van de Ven, is one in which individuals work in the presence of others, but don't verbally interact.

At Whitewater that day members of each group sat silently writing for 15 minutes, responding as specifically as possible to this question asked by the group leader: "What problems have you personally experienced in relations between the university and the Whitewater community?"

Following those 15 minutes of silent writing, the leader asked each member, one at a time, to read one item, which was then recorded on a flip chart exactly as it was read with the leader numbering each item. The verbatim recording avoids time-consuming editing at a stage in the process when this is unimportant.

Proceeding round-robin, each member had an opportunity to have

every one of his items recorded. This round-robin procedure makes it easier for less secure members, who may hesitate to bring problems before the group in a conventional interacting situation, to express their ideas. It also facilitates increased balance in participation.[8]

If several members had the same item, it was suggested they raise their hands so this could be indicated by a check mark. But, to avoid debate, related items were recorded on the chart rather than rewording an earlier item. As sheets were filled, they were taped to the wall so that all material could be easily seen.

Justification for this part of the Phase I format is based on the knowledge that more conventional group interaction inhibits rather than encourages the performance of its members. Participants may be distracted from generating their own ideas when involved in a give-and-take procedure. They also tend to be comfortable in sharing only well-developed ideas, particularly in a new group, and to modify early ideas rather than verbalize new ones.

The nominal group technique produces many relevant problems because each member is given the time and opportunity for reflection and is forced to record his thoughts. Evaluation is avoided while problems are being generated and the group isn't dominated by strong personalities. The round-robin procedure ensures participation even by less vocal members.[9]

Also, in this particular setting many kinds of occupations and levels of status came together to participate, probably for the first time, as equal members of a group. The dean, the student, the university president, the sheriff's deputy, the downtown merchant, and the banker found themselves working together in one group. Some had never seen each other before, but in this group process model each had an equal chance to contribute.

Although nominal groups tend to be superior to conventional groups in generating a greater quantity, quality, and variety of information than interacting groups, studies show that the interacting group is superior in *evaluating* information.[10]

Thus, when all items were recorded, discussion followed—the first group interaction allowed in this strictly structured model. At this point all were given an opportunity to elaborate, explain, modify, or add new problems to the list. The leader then asked participants to vote privately by number of item on what each thought were the five most crucial problems. These votes were recorded. Before that first session closed, all groups met together to see what each had produced.

This first phase of the planning model yielded a problem list of 176 items, which all participants received copies of within the next few days. Of particular significance was the fact that town-gown conflict received as much attention as black-white relations, despite the fact that racism on the campus and in the

community had seemed to be, at the outset, the primary concern.

From the 176 items, 6 major problem areas could be identified by the CCLD staff, which had the responsibility for putting the lists into usable form so participants could begin to develop a program around them—a program that would meet the specific needs of this university-community situation.

Phase II: Exploring Solutions

The same 60 participants met a week later in Phase II of the plan to cope with these 6 identified problem areas.

Those present were divided into groups according to interests and occupations and then assigned to six smaller groups to wrestle with one of the following: (1) the news media plays a vital role in representing views of many factions in society; (2) the Whitewater community isn't fully accepting many factors inherent in the university culture; (3) what the university can do to help the community understand it better; (4) it's very difficult to understand and accept people different from oneself—culturally, racially, and socioeconomically; (5) fear of physical violence and destruction has an important effect on the thoughts and actions of the Whitewater community; and (6) traditionally the church has been the focal point of social awareness, but today, the church itself is in a period of change and polarization on certain issues.

In this second phase of the plan, CCLD put into operation a problem-solving approach called force field analysis. The late psychologist, Kurt Lewin, developed this approach for an educational situation. Working independently, Gunnar Myrdal used a comparable approach for diagnosing social phenomena. This method is based on the theory that a condition for which a modification is to be tried is the result of the simultaneous operation of several factors or forces. In planning a change, therefore, the first step in diagnosis is the identifying and defining of the several forces that determine the present condition. A diagnosis will reveal that some of the factors affect the condition in a negative direction, but those negative forces can be counterbalanced by positive forces that can lead to constructive change.[11]

For instance, for the problem area listed as number 3 above—what the university can do to help the community understand it better—the group first considered negative forces . . . those forces working against solving this problem. Among the 20 negative items mentioned were: the law isn't enforced when dealing with students, individuals and groups attack the university without knowing the situation, "good" students don't express their feelings, much property has been removed from the tax rolls because of university expansion, faculty attack the community but don't help to improve it, there's a suspicion of individuals with different life styles.

Counterbalancing these negative forces were positive factors to change the condition in a desirable direction: certain university services and resources are made available to the community; knowledge available at the university could be tapped more; public schools work with education majors on field work; faculty serves in many community affairs—such as service clubs, city council, school board; some townspeople do appreciate faculty and students; efforts are being made by the university information office to explain programs and policies.

The technique used for listing these items was again the nominal group method with time allotted for silent writing, round-robin recording, and discussion. From the flip-chart material, each participant balloted on three items he felt could be intensively and constructively dealt with in the next two months. From these three items, the group narrowed their choice to the *one* most feasible. In small groups of three or four, a brainstorm session ensued, where participants, dealing with this one most feasible item, tried to come up with *all possible* methods of implementation and then pick the best. Finally, the larger group of 10 dealt with each subgroup's best method by answering the practical questions of who, what, when, where, why, and how to carry it out.

Following this very intensive small group session, reports were made before the entire gathering of 60 on how each group had dealt with the problem of decreasing neg-

ative forces, strengthening positive forces, and methods of implementing possible solutions. The two people chosen to make the report from each group were to comprise an overall task force charged with setting other forces in motion to cope with the respective problem areas.

At this point the conference faltered slightly. Some members of the newly chosen overall task force complained that their group of 12 wasn't large enough to represent a cross-section of the entire community. Several members also said they lacked confidence as they'd been elected without really knowing what was expected of them. A re-grouping took place and a new 19-member task force was elected—which was satisfactory to the whole group and expressed confidence as a team.

Phase III: Plan for Action

Phase III of the plan was a meeting of the task force two weeks later to decide on specific action to deal with both major areas of concern—racism and the problems that arise when a university is located in a small city. As a result of this meeting, three proposals were outlined for immediate implementation—which they hoped would involve many students of varying ethnic backgrounds. The first proposal was that 1,000 students be invited to have dinner in Whitewater homes. The second, that the Chamber of Commerce invite students to meet at their regular weekly breakfasts to discuss mutual problems—a kind of

ongoing rap session—and finally, that a meeting of landlords and students be scheduled to discuss mutual concerns.

Tagged "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," the first proposal went into action in November. The *Royal Purple,* the campus newspaper, printed an article on how students could "help solve university-community polarizations and misunderstandings." It included phone numbers, through which names of prospective host families could be found. It explained that task force members would be present at churches, civic club meetings, business group meetings, and at a table in the university union—to give out names of families who had requested students as guests for dinner on November 23.

Three hundred students, black and white, were randomly assigned to host families. Reactions were enthusiastic, although numbers fell far short of hopes. Many of those involved indicated an eagerness to make this an annual event. Other programs haven't been completed yet. Further task force action must point the way.

This account has been presented without any claims of leading to Utopia. But it does describe two important elements in planning and implementing a program. First, a method of involving disparate groups in the planning process. Second, a model for a planning sequence that can get a program going in a reasonable amount of time.

To be a member of the dispa-rate group that arrives at a collective decision can lead to a kind of commitment unobtainable without such broad-based involvement. Many plans, rather than being a cooperative effort on all levels, will have been completed at the top. When introduced to those who will be affected, they're resisted. On the other hand, if the planning has been done jointly among those involved, there's likely to be a strong desire to succeed.

A loosely put together planning procedure can bog down in weeks of discussion. The structure this model builds in at different phases of the planning process encourages action.

Footnotes

1. *Milwaukee Journal*, March 19, 1970, "Ideals Prolong Whitewater Feud," p. 18.
2. *Milwaukee Journal*, March 15, 1970, "Campus Tremors Shake Whitewater," p. 2.
3. *Whitewater Comprehensive Plan* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Planning Consultants of Milwaukee, 1968), p. 8.
4. *Milwaukee Journal*, March 15, 1970, "Campus Tremors Shake Whitewater," p. 1.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Janesville Gazette*, September 25, 1970, "Human Relations Conference Brings Hope to Whitewater," p. 4.
7. Andre Delbecq and Andrew Van de Ven, "Program Planning in a College or University Setting" (unpublished paper, The University of Wisconsin, School of Business, 1970), p. 3.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 11 and 13.
11. Max R. Goodson, "Nine Postulates Concerning Planned Educational Change." Reprinted from Occasional Paper #3, *Project Models: Maximizing Opportunities for Development & Experimentation in Examining the Schools* (Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin R & D Center for Cognitive Learning, The University of Wisconsin, 1967).