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# Capacity Building and Empowerment: A panacea and challenge for agency-university engagement

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Capacity building can be defined as a complex process that can exist at the individual, organizational, and/or community levels, and consists of skills, motivations, knowledge and attitudes necessary to implement programs (Flaspohler et al. 2008). Capacity building involves the transfer of competencies necessary for community groups or individuals to identify their issues and address their concerns. In the case of community-based agencies this involves improving their effectiveness and/or the quality of the services they provide to consumers (Goodman et al. 1998). Through capacity building, agencies may increase their ability to manage, sustain or improve their programs, utilize evaluation findings, and take action to address pressing social problems (Balcazar et al. 1998; Glickman & Servon 2003; Ristau 2001).

To conceptualize capacity building at the agency level one must first ask, 'Capacity for what?' The goals and specific needs of the agency at a particular time must be assessed. Agencies often face many demands from consumers and pressure from funding sources to address specific needs. Subsequently, one area of interest is the development of agency capacity for effective program evaluation.

According to Stockdill et al (2002) capacity building for evaluation is a 'context-dependent, intentional action system of guided processes and practices for bringing about and sustaining program improvement', (p. 8). This process can take place through the use of internal agency resources and expertise or through partnerships with outside collaborators and experts focusing on the transferring of particular knowledge and skills. Although collaborative efforts almost always involve some degree of reciprocity, there is a potential for power struggles in the capacity building process when working in partnership with outside collaborators. However, such issues can be avoided through the employment of empowerment principles in the capacity building process.

The purpose of this article is to discuss an approach to capacity building among university-community collaboration projects that is consistent with empowerment principles and focuses on an analysis of individual, organizational and contextual and cultural factors.

## **BACKGROUND**

In the fall of 2005, the Center on Capacity Building for Minorities with Disabilities Research (CCBMDR) was funded by a grant from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) of the US Department of Education. Its mission was to assist researchers in conducting their work with multi-ethnic populations and to build capacity among community-based agencies to more effectively serve multi-ethnic populations with disabilities. The CCBMDR staff has worked with over thirty community-based social service agencies from eight states. These organizations provided services to people with various disabilities from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. The CCBMDR staff take a two-pronged approach to capacity building with these organizations. They provide participating agencies with evaluations of the impact of their services and work to increase participating agencies' cultural competencies. Among other functions, the Center provides training and technical

assistance through participatory partnerships in which the needs and concerns of the participating agencies were addressed.

Funding requirements and changes in the demographic profile of many communities are placing pressure on community agencies to evolve. For example, many agencies that serve individuals with developmental disabilities in the Chicago area, and its surrounding suburbs, were created in the 1950s and early 1960s by white middle-class families to serve their children. Today, those children have aged and immigrants representing multiple racial and ethnic groups have moved into the communities. The agencies now face pressures to do things differently. Evaluative protocol and programmatic expansion is required to serve their more diverse consumer bases.

One way agencies can address issues faced by these diverse populations is through partnerships with local institutions of higher learning. Such partnerships are mutually beneficial. Agencies gain access to various resources, information and expertise while universities gain, among other benefits, opportunities to conduct research, advance knowledge and train their students (Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2005).

As a community engaged research center within a university, efforts have concentrated on developing capacity at both individual staff and agency levels. Across both levels, the optimal outcomes of capacity building activities are: institutionalization (the establishment of policies and procedures that support the new programs or procedures); mainstreaming (making the new programs or procedures part of the day-to-day activities of the agency); and utilization (verifying that the new programs or procedures are utilized and/or incorporated in service provision) (Stockdill et al. 2002).

#### **A FRAMEWORK FOR CONCEPTUALIZING CAPACITY BUILDING**

Most of the capacity building literature includes taxonomies of capacity building (see Flaspohler et al. 2008), conceptualizations of capacity building (see Arnold 2006; Fawcett et al. 2003; Wandersman et al. 2006) and discussions of the various dimensions of capacity building (see Chaskin 2001; Crisp et al. 2000; Lord & Hutchison 2003; Nye & Glickman 2000; Ristau 2001). Based on previous research and review of the literature, we developed an empowerment approach to capacity building designed to assist communities in either promoting

social change and/or engaging agency staff and program recipients in the process of program planning, implementation and evaluation (Fawcett et al. 2003; Fetterman 2001; Fetterman & Wandersman 2005). Using an empowerment approach to building capacity focuses the process on identifying staff and agency strengths, increasing stakeholders' capacity to identify their needs, documenting the impact of the programs and increasing the degree of control agency staff have over their initiatives (Balcazar et al. 1998; Glickman & Servon 2003; Nye & Glickman 2000; Ristau 2001; Taut 2007).

To build capacity a culturally appropriate and contextually grounded participatory approach was utilized. We emphasize the interaction between *organizational and individual factors* that impact the agency's level of readiness, awareness, knowledge and skills/competencies for evaluating programs and for providing culturally competent services to consumers. The objective is to build and sustain capacity by promoting critical infrastructures at the *agency and individual* levels. These factors interact with one another influencing an organization's ability to build capacity (Suarez-Balcazar et al. forthcoming).

Agency-related factors that provide optimal conditions and facilitate capacity include: strong and committed leadership; a learning climate; access to resources and support systems for evaluating programs and enhancing culturally competent services; and attention to the context and culture of the agency. We argue that lack of attention to these factors hinders capacity building efforts.

Individual factors are defined as the characteristics of individual staff members in direct contact with participants. Individual factors that optimize capacity building within an organization include: personal readiness (willingness and motivation), level of work competence (knowledge and skills) and the degree of the individual's cultural competence (Suarez-Balcazar et al. forthcoming). Cultural competence factors include, but are not limited to, differences in the languages spoken by consumers and staff members, knowledge of factors that contribute to individual diversity and familiarity with the cultural characteristics of particular minority consumer groups.

In addition to the factors previously mentioned, different contexts also influence both the individual and the organization. Community and organizational history along with the political and socio-economic context in which the CBO is situated may impact capacity building. Organizational and individual factors interact in

varying ways and are embedded in the cultural and contextual elements of the organizations and communities they serve (Stockdill et al. 2002).

Capacity building within this framework is designed to improve services and programs for individuals with disabilities from different backgrounds (Balcazar et al. 1998; Glickman & Servon 2003; Griggs 2003; Ristau 2001; Stevenson et al. 2002; Suarez-Balcazar & Harper, 2003; Taut 2007; Thayer & Fine 2001). To promote capacity building our Center staff provides training, technical assistance and consultation to agencies in need of incorporating evaluation practices within their program operation.

In the case of capacity building for providing culturally competent services, Balcazar et al. (forthcoming) defined cultural competence as the ability of service providers to effectively address the needs of people with disabilities from different ethnic backgrounds and assist them in reaching their personal and/or rehabilitation goals. The focus of our work is on building the capacity of CBO, CIL and VR office staff to provide services that are culturally congruent with the beliefs and values of their increasingly diverse consumer population and which meet their diverse needs.

Experts in the field have identified a need for culturally competent services in part because of the increasing number of individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds who are either underserved or not served at all, and because traditional outreach and service delivery practices are not always effective in either recruiting or meeting the needs of diverse populations (Moffat & Tung 2004). Center staff provide training, consultation and technical assistance to agencies utilizing training materials developed for that purpose.<sup>1</sup> As with our evaluation capacity building work, our involvement and capacity building efforts to improve cultural competence are supported to varying degrees by stakeholders at multiple levels, including agency leaders and both frontline and mid-level staff.

The challenge for community researchers is finding out how to engage in capacity building efforts without patronizing the community, all the while adhering to the key principles of empowerment. The construct of empowerment is often defined as the process groups and individuals go through in order to gain control

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<sup>1</sup> Copies of the staff training guides are available from the first author upon request.

over relevant resources that impact their lives (Zimmerman 2001). The empowerment process involves the principles of community participation, equal partnerships between universities and communities, participatory action research and respect for cultural diversity among others (Fawcett et al. 1994). The essence of community research using an empowerment approach is to promote community autonomy and power redistribution. With the growing popularity of capacity building, it is advisable to utilize empowerment principles so that agency staff members can gain control of decisions that impact the quality of the services they provide to consumers.

Based on reviews of the capacity building literature (see for example Flaspohler et al. 2008), literature on community-university engagements (such as Rubin 2000) and field notes taken during the last three years of the CCBMDR's technical assistance and consultation for capacity building, we offer the following principles to promote capacity building from an empowerment perspective.

#### **KEEPING CONTROL OF THE CAPACITY BUILDING PROCESS**

Most of our work is conducted in collaboration with staff from agencies serving people with disabilities. Executive directors, program officers and key staff become our partners. They then identify the issues and areas of interest in which they want to increase their knowledge, skills or competencies. If training on evaluation or cultural competence is required, the staff from the community-based organization selects the areas for training, organizes the training and often facilitates the training along with CCBMDR staff. Working with a few key members of the organization, instead of just one, facilitates building capacity that can be sustained over time. Suarez-Balcazar et al (2004) identified several steps that help maintain the control of the project in the organization including: letting the stakeholders identify and define their own needs, developing ownership over the process, taking a participatory and action-orientated approach to the collaboration and maintaining the voice of the stakeholders present throughout the capacity building project.

In most of our capacity building work thus far, the stakeholders of interest have been the agency staff or managers, while program consumers have not participated. For example, a recent collaboration with a State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services focused on a

need expressed by several managers: developing and monitoring plans for outreach to people with disabilities from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Office managers identified their goals and action plans and then tracked staff outreach efforts toward multi-ethnic populations with disabilities in their community.

#### **DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES THAT MATTER**

The focus of capacity building should be on providing training to build new skills, exchanging new knowledge and overall developing competencies needed in a given agency. These competencies must be salient to management, staff members and the agencies' consumers and have a long-lasting impact at the individual and organizational levels. In our projects, participants identify both areas of need as well as the skills and areas of development that are important to them. In this way we work to assure the relevance of the process to those involved.

In an empowering approach, the area of focus of the capacity building activities cannot be imposed on the agency. The focus needs to come from the staff and key stakeholders, such as consumers, in order to have an impact that can be sustained over time. Furthermore, agency staff are more willing to acquire and utilize new competencies when the knowledge and skills address perceived areas of need, when staff members feel invested in the process and when they take an active role in pursuing such competencies. Therefore, our projects are driven by agency staff who willingly collaborate to meet their agency's needs.

For example, a large local agency that serves adults with developmental disabilities contacted us for cultural competence training for their staff. After discussing their needs and logistical difficulties within agency-wide training sessions, we agreed to start the process with the management team. This involved close to one hundred managers in two separate training events. At the end of the training we asked participants to set specific goals for each program they managed. Several follow-up phone contacts suggested that some teams made substantial progress in meeting their goals (such as translating critical program information into Spanish), while others made little progress. Those who made little progress towards their goals alluded to obtaining little to no support from their organizations in the way of resources, willingness to discuss the

issues, time and effort. We attributed the differences in goal attainment to the degree of investment and commitment of the agencies to the change process.

#### **PLAYING VARIOUS SUPPORTIVE ROLES**

Embracing an empowerment approach to program evaluation has also led CCBMDR staff to be ready to play various roles within an agency as the need arises. It is imperative for us to be willing and ready to shift and change roles as the capacity building process unfolds. The process of working with a partner agency is neither linear nor predictable and expertise is present among both facilitators and recipients (Nyden et al. 1997). In capacity building, researchers must strike a responsibility balance. They must be flexible enough to play diverse roles while allowing agency staff to develop ownership of the process. Recognizing the expertise of the stakeholders within the organization and shifting the role of expert from the university to an organization's staff, depending on the circumstances, can facilitate the maintenance of the partnership (Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2004).

The degree to which our efforts are supportive of the organization can have important implications for establishing equal relationships, building trust and facilitating adequate lines of communication or catalyzing power struggles within an agency, resulting in the eventual failure of our work to build capacity. Whether documenting the impact of programs or providing culturally competent services, empowerment approaches to building capacity employ the researcher as a coach, a partner who provides technical assistance, and/or as an agent, assuming multiple roles to facilitate the enhancement of new skills and knowledge, promoting organizational learning and programmatic change (see Fawcett et al. 2003; Fetterman 2001).

For instance, we are currently working with an organization that serves Latinos with developmental disabilities. This is a large organization that offers multiple programs. Once the partnership was established with the staff, senior management decided to develop the agency's evaluative capacity. After the agency management selected a program to begin the capacity building process, a series of trainings on logic model development, setting measurable goals and developing and utilizing tracking systems was initiated over an eighteen month period that included follow up technical assistance. During this time one of the agency's staff members took on the role of



trainer. She mastered the development of program logic models and trained other staff on how to develop logic models for their individual programs. After further training from CCBMDR staff, she is now teaching other agency staff how to use logic models. Another staff member shifted out of her role as trainee at one of the training sessions and offered to facilitate a focus group with program participants. The CCBMDR staff are providing technical assistance and support to agency-wide dissemination efforts but no longer leading the training.

#### **MAINTAINING A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO CAPACITY BUILDING**

One of the principles of community engaged participatory research is a strengths-based approach to partnerships (see Duffy & Wong 1996). Similarly, an asset-based approach, as articulated by McKnight (1997), focuses on the strengths of community organizations rather than their limitations or deficits. While the term 'building capacity' implies a set of skills or competencies that is either inadequate or is absent altogether, capacity building requires the identification and employment of assets of an organization, its staff, and the community in which it is situated. In our evaluation of capacity building work, for instance, we have seen that the presence of organizational factors such as strong leadership, a positive learning climate and resources allocated to the initiative (like staff time, ongoing training and assistance), along with individual factors such as staff motivation and willingness to learn as well as their skills and competencies, both maximizes and expedites the process of building capacity. The more strengths an agency brings to the process, the more likely that capacity can be built.

We have conducted cultural competence (CC) trainings with more than eighty agencies from around the Midwest over the last three years. As part of our capacity building strategy for CC training, we have incorporated goal setting as an integral component of the training process and provided technical assistance to agency staff for up to six months after the training event to support goal attainment. Participants are free to set their own goals, either agency-wide or program-specific, depending on the staff members present at the training event. We have noticed consistent differences in goal attainment based on whether or not agency management supports

the change efforts. In agencies where managers or supervisors are invested in the attainment of goals, change can happen. This is a key finding in that facilitating change in organizational cultural competence often requires fiduciary commitment. Agencies are often required to hire bilingual staff members, pay for the translation of outreach materials or allow their staff 'flex time' so the staff members can be available to meet with consumers and/or their families during evenings, on weekends or as otherwise needed.

#### **FOCUSING ON SUSTAINABILITY, INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND UTILIZATION OF ACQUIRED SKILLS**

As stated earlier, we have engaged in two types of capacity building efforts: providing staff training to promote culturally competent services and assisting staff members in evaluating the impact of their services and programs. These efforts require special attention to maintaining the skills, knowledge and overall competencies acquired at the agency level so that staff can utilize and sustain learned competencies when our involvement and capacity building efforts cease. Due to this, the capacity building partnership can last well over two years, involve training multiple staff at different organisational levels in either evaluation or cultural competence and provide one-on-one technical assistance and consultation as needed. To this end, instructional guides can be written in collaboration with agency staff.

In the case of capacity building for evaluation, CCBMDR staff work with agency staff to assist in the development of materials and procedures (such as evaluation planning forms, logic models and assessment tools) tailored to the particular needs of the agency. The goal is for staff to be deeply involved in these activities, utilising existing materials while simultaneously focusing on developing materials to address future evaluation needs of the agency. Maintaining ongoing contact and follow-up has also been a part of our efforts for building sustainability. This is the strategy used in our cultural competence trainings where participants can receive technical assistance for up to six months (for more information see Taylor-Ritzler et al. forthcoming).

Another way in which we are building sustainability is through a train-the-trainer model with large organizations. For instance, we have collaborated with the Illinois Department of Human Services' Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) to train their vocational rehabilitation counselors in cultural competence. The DRS is

responding to large increases in the diversity of the consumer population and disparities in the achievement of rehabilitation outcomes among minority groups, especially Latinos and African Americans (see Atkins & Wright 1980; Baldwin & Smith 1984; Capella 2002). After several one-day training sessions with groups of counselors, we began training DRS staff who, in turn, provide training, technical assistance and ongoing supervision related to improving cultural competence at regional VR offices throughout the state of Illinois. Our research indicates that this model is effective (see Taylor-Ritzler et al. forthcoming).

In a large bureaucratic agency it is often difficult to facilitate organizational change. Sometimes the top administrators support such efforts but direct service providers may be skeptical of their motives or resist change altogether. And occasionally the opposite is true, where direct care employees may want to implement change but are not supported by their supervisors. We have been fortunate to find little open resistance to change, in part because both managers and direct service employees recognize the need for improvements in their respective agencies. As more employees participate in cultural competence training and realize their role in organizational change, their support for the process increases. We chose not to impose change from the outside but to let agency staff and their leadership set their own goals and take the necessary steps to achieve change in their respective offices. For capacity building to be sustainable and for it to have lasting impact at the agency level, control of the process needs to rely on the various agency stakeholders. If it does not, the knowledge and skills taught are likely to dissipate after the capacity building work has ended.

Overall, sustaining capacity building requires systemic changes in the organization. Such changes take time. Patience and high tolerance for frustration are perhaps desirable qualities for those involved in capacity building (Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2005). This is certainly true for both agency and university staff because unanticipated challenges often occur.

#### **PAYING ATTENTION TO CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL ISSUES**

To be consistent with empowerment principles, capacity building activities must attend to the culture and context of the community and the organization of interest as SenGupta et al (2004) observe,

‘culture shapes values, beliefs and worldviews.’ Social programs are infused with cultural elements that often relate to the very issues the programs were created to address. Culture impacts how the problem they seek to address is conceptualized and how and why particular types of services and service-based approaches are offered. Sometimes these services and approaches are consistent with the culture of agency consumers. In these instances the agency’s efforts may be successful. Other times they are not, in part because the services offered by the agency fail to meet community needs.

The cultures of both the organizations and the communities they serve operate within social, historical, economic and political contexts (SenGupta et al. 2004). Contextual factors, such as the existence of differences in power among evaluation stakeholders, disparities in the economic resources of the organization and the community, the relationship between the organization and community residents, the historical development of the organization and its impact on the community and differences in resource distribution among various social programs, must be taken into consideration when engaging in capacity building efforts. In agencies that serve individuals of diverse racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as ability levels, attention to cultural factors is most critical (SenGupta et al. 2004).

An example of the importance of cultural and contextual factors in building capacity is our experience working with a Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Program (TVRP). We observed that when program leaders felt that the evaluation was ‘for someone else’, especially if it was perceived that evaluative efforts were for a US government funder or a university researcher, program staff members were less likely to mobilize others for action around evaluation activities. Contextual factors, such as the long history of US oppression, especially related to tribal self-governance and land-ownership, impacted evaluation practices including data collection and the utilization of findings. Cultural factors related to beliefs in self-reliance contributed to a lengthy process of building trust in our Center’s motivations and methods of capacity building. We had to show that our intentions were to support their goals as a tribe and the capacity building project would only happen on their terms. Understanding, respecting and attending to cultural and contextual factors were critical in our work with leaders and members of TVRP.

In general, culture and context can have a significant impact on maintaining harmony between capacity building efforts and

empowerment principles. In particular, approaches to capacity building must be consistent with the cultural norms of the agency and the communities they serve, otherwise the community and/or agency will be less likely to adopt the skills and knowledge offered. One of the agencies with which we have collaborated, located in a predominantly Latino urban neighborhood, wanted to obtain feedback from community residents about its programs, one of which was a leadership and mentoring initiative for Latino youth. When discussing possible methods for data collection, it became clear that we needed to consider cultural and contextual issues. Based on experience, agency staff believed that community residents would not answer a mail survey. Instead, staff members suggested door-to-door canvassing would be a more appropriate way to collect data. They believed one-on-one contact with residents to be a more culturally sensitive research approach. The staff also expressed appreciation that our interviewers were bilingual and bicultural, and as a result the Latino community would be more receptive to participating in the study.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Capacity building for program evaluation is a complex process that involves a number of organizational and individual factors. Historically, program evaluation has been perceived by agency staff as a threatening process designed to examine individual performance. This article presents an empowering approach for developing agency and individual capacity, one that includes principles to help guide its implementation. This is an appropriate approach for capacity building because the construct of capacity building itself implies collaboration and active participation. In order to promote empowerment, the issues discussed in this article should be considered. Building capacity effectively at agency level enhances and improves the quality of service provision, promotes the professional development of staff, increases satisfaction and the likelihood of change implementation and promotes innovations at both individual and agency levels.

The value of recognizing that capacity building can be practiced congruently with empowerment principles facilitates greater control of the process for agency partners. Capacity building enhances agencies' ability to address social issues that are important to the

communities they serve. When capacity building is approached from an empowerment perspective, the knowledge and skills shared with agency stakeholders may be used and maintained for the betterment of the agency and its clients. This process implies university and agency staff work together in a collaborative and reciprocal manner in which both groups benefit.

Building optimal capacity for evaluation and culturally competent services represents an opportunity for community agencies and university centers to work collaboratively and share experiences, thus making contributions to best practices and services. Potential barriers and hurdles, such as power struggles, limited resources (including time), staff allocation, funding for program evaluation and the academic partners' inability to develop truly collaborative partnerships, are some of the challenges identified in the literature (see Fawcett et al. 1996; Author et al. 2003; Wandersman et al. 2006). Further challenges include differential time constraints and agency staff turnover.

In our experience, challenges arise when agencies and university partners have differing timeframe expectations for their capacity building efforts. Universities usually work with students and academic calendars that often generate pressures on partner agencies to move through the process quickly. Agencies on the other hand have their own pressures and timelines that often do not match those of the university. For instance, program evaluation often takes lower priority than developing funding proposals or dealing with state regulators. We initially anticipated that our capacity building partnerships would last between twelve and eighteen months with each agency but we have found that it takes two to three years to reach desirable results. Finally, in one of the state agencies where we have been working for over three years, our partners and closest collaborators were promoted to positions, retired or left the organization for other reasons. These departures created a vacuum in leadership and brought the process to a halt. We are now examining how to help the agency re-energize the training division, re-train the staff and continue the training goals that lie at the heart of our collaboration. Starting over is not unusual in this process because of unforeseeable circumstances.

Overall, empowerment values enhance and promote capacity building. It is a process that can build strong communities and solid community agencies that share a sense of responsibility towards their

constituents. Capacity building for program evaluation can allow organizations to improve their services while simultaneously increasing the degree of knowledge and control of direct service staff. Staff and agency leaders can discover that their increased capacity may be a tool to improve the way they do their jobs and the effects they have on their consumers. Agencies are realizing that in order to improve the impact they are having on the people they serve they have to better understand the needs of their consumers and develop skills sets to improve their practices. Capacity building becomes the mechanism by which agencies and consumers come to realize their common goal of attaining a better quality of life through culturally appropriate and high quality services.

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