

**Academic and Community Engagement at Occidental College: a model based on
relationality and stakeholders' ownership of, and participation in the
implementation of the model.**

Maria Avila

In 2001 I was asked to create a model of academic community engagement that would fit the interests of Occidental College and its surrounding communities in Los Angeles. The request came from then President Mitchell and a group of faculty from a number of disciplines including Politics, ECLS, Anthropology, Math, Theater, UEP, and Sociology. A small group of this faculty was particularly clear in the strong role they wanted community voices to be integrated with institutional voices. My community organizing background came into play, and I began to assess the terrain through scores of 1-1 meetings on and off campus.

As I learned the national state of the discourse of civic engagement, a strong argument began to take shape for me regarding reciprocity in academic community partnerships. Using community organizing practices, I built a model of civic engagement at Occidental and in partnership with surrounding communities in Northeast Los Angeles, based on relational one-to-one meetings; a participatory process for defining and shaping the vision and details of the model; and implementation of the model based on participants and stakeholders' interests, skills, and resources.

Through my experience in community organizing I have known that unless those affected by an issue are involved in the creation of the solution, efforts to create change are not likely to last. Thus from the beginning of my work at Occidental I aimed at the creation of a model of civic engagement that would include participation from faculty, students, administration and community organizations and schools.¹

Regional civic engagement

In 2002 I presented the idea of building a cluster of schools and organizations, including Occidental, in the northeast region of Los Angeles, which neighbors the college. My proposal, presented to a politics professor, a founder of a group of charter schools, and a principal of a High School was:

Would you be interested in exploring the possibility of building a regional cluster focused on education related issues, and which can become a key player within the power

¹ For more details on the model, see Avila, M. *How Community Organizing Can Build Reciprocal Academic Civic Engagement: Stories and voices from Occidental College*. A forthcoming (November 2008) compendium of resources on partnerships between community organizations and higher education, online publication of Portland State University's Center for Academic Excellence.

structure of the region? The key word here being *exploring*. I told them in my organizing career in Mexico and in the US, I had seen many community efforts to build alliances, task forces, and other forms of networking come together around specific issues, but who couldn't sustain their network beyond a few meetings, with often only a few of the founders remaining involved.

I described the vision I had of a network that would evolve based on a process of learning about each other's stories and their reasons for being interested in education: the merging of their vocations and avocations; their professions and their passions; their challenges and successes. I further described the process including meetings where we would discuss our stories, readings, and possibly write together. Together we would be learning and creating knowledge, and eventually engaging with those in the power structure of the region, including Occidental.

I suspect they agreed to begin the journey with me mostly out of trust in my vision, even when the vision may not have been completely clear to them. The idea of being able to create a space that allowed them to share their stories, challenges and successes, in and of itself was something they all welcomed. The possibility that they would be founding a cluster that could join forces in improving education for the children of Northeast Los Angeles was a strong glue and incentive for all of them.

Northeast Education Strategies Group

Thus was born the Northeast Education Strategies Group. While the group started with three institutions, it now includes representatives from 12 schools, and it is affiliated to One LA.² At the beginning I played the role of facilitating learning within the group regarding community organizing practices, including identification of leaders and their interests within their institutions, through one-to-one relational meetings. Today, the main role One LA plays with the network is to provide training on these and other skills related to building relational, long-lasting power.

Through the past six years, (2002-08), outcomes of the network include a number of community based learning classes and research, as well as internships and college tours. One of those classes is a Math class designed to jointly by Occidental's and Franklin High School teachers and administration, in response to the high numbers of students who fail to pass Algebra 1 by 9th grade. The networks formed by this class have recently expanded to include Luther Burbank Middle School, are in communications with other public schools of the area, and have become part of the efforts to start a Los Angeles cohort of The Algebra Project³.

The concept of power is central to the network. Therefore, in 2005, the group spent a semester learning about the concept of power, who has it and who does not have it,

² An affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a national network of community organizations founded by Saul Alinsky in the 1940s in Chicago.

³ Founded by Civil Rights leader Robert Moses, based on the belief that "Math literacy is the key to 21st Century Citizenship." <http://www.algebra.org/whowere.php>

sources of power, and how to use it individually and as a collective. In the spring of 2006, the group put their new knowledge about power into practice. First, they were part of a meeting with Occidental's Trustees to voice their thoughts and ideas about engagement between the college and the community in the process of searching for a new college president. Second, the group invited then new Occidental president Susan Prager to a dinner at one of the schools in the community, and shared their stories and roles in the community, the history and purpose of the Northeast Education Strategies Group, (NESG) and asked her to share her story and vision for engaging with the community surrounding the college. The president engaged with the group with an interest in maintaining an on-going connection around their vision, and was especially interested in the emerging work around Math to improve high school graduation possibilities for students in Northeast Los Angeles. This meeting also resulted in more clarity for President Prager regarding the role of the Center for Community Based Learning on and off campus, and turned her into an advocate for the Center's work for the remaining of her tenure at Occidental.

In the summer of 2007, the group approached newly elected School Board Member Yolie Flores-Aguilar, and asked to meet and exchange visions and stories around education for the children in her district. Her district includes Northeast Los Angeles. The School Board member agreed to meet, and asked if the group would be interested in organizing a community forum with her, using the relational format that has become part of the culture of NESG. The group took advantage of the opportunity to further their relationship with the School Board member and organized a community forum with about 150 participants including educators, principals, board members and staff, city elected officials, funders, parents, Occidental faculty staff and students. The public meeting was based on pre-selected members of NESG including faculty, principals, parents and students, who told their stories related to who they are, and to the education systems and ways in which they have failed them. Then the group asked the School Board member if she could commit to working with them in the improvement of education for all children in Northeast Los Angeles. She not only agreed to this request, but asked to be kept informed and involved in the NESG's further actions and projects. Today, Yolie Flores-Aguilar is working with NESG and One LA to support the formation of the Algebra Project Cohort in Los Angeles.

The NESG continues to meet regularly, and has sustained itself for the past six years mainly glued by deep relationships and trust based on the power of the exchange of their stories as they relate to their interests and commitment to education.