Community College-Local Church Interaction: What Makes It Work?

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A hot topic of debate in the media these days seems to be the question of the separation of church and state. This discussion may be of particular interest to us when we in public community colleges have an opportunity to form partnerships with local religious organizations. In thinking about colleges and churches, some administrators may assume that, like East and West in the Kipling poem, the twain must never meet. On the other hand, you don't have to talk to very many experienced community college people before their considerable anecdotal evidence suggests that there is quite a bit of this kind of interaction.

There are many ways that colleges are currently benefiting from working with local churches. Some schools offer credit and noncredit courses in areas such as religion, biblical studies, and theology. Colleges are also finding space for volunteer clergy to offer pastoral services such as counseling, worship, and informal study groups on campus with direct personal benefits to students. Colleges benefit from an increased visibility and information exchange when they invite local clergy to participate on advisory boards and as adjunct faculty.

There is simply no doubt that this sort of thing is going on. What *is* in doubt are the specific factors that make interaction work. In the face of a very limited literature base, this study was conducted in an attempt to pin down the variables that have the most influence on college-church interaction.

What's Actually Happening Out There?

To get a feel for what happens in colleges, the study focused on a single college and the churches in its service area. The data needed included attitudes as well as facts, so the study began with the interviewing of college administrators at as many levels within the college as possible. To get a better historical picture, the researcher searched the college's archives for clues about when and how interaction with churches may have begun.

Learning about church attitudes was a larger task. Here, the starting point was a written survey sent to 50 churches selected at random from the telephone book. The survey was followed up with in-depth interviews with clergy in churches that interacted with the college. Analysis of the interview transcripts proceeded

in the usual way with qualitative data: from the general to the specific as key phrases were sifted from replies. Assertions were constructed from key phrases, variables were defined from assertions, and patterns of interaction began to emerge from the data. From the data, it was apparent that this service area showed three distinct types of interaction.

Types of Interaction

In the first type of interaction noted, the college was an active agent while the church's role was passive. In this case the college used empty church facilities on week nights to offer its noncredit continuing education classes such as painting and cake decorating. The college kept control over almost all aspects of each class, reducing the church to the role of a silent partner responsible only for supplying space, heat, utilities, and janitorial services.

The second type of interaction saw both college and church as active participants. Here, the college worked with the church to offer Adult Basic Education classes (ABE) to the community. As in the first type of interaction the church provided rooms, light, heat, and cleanup. Sometimes, though not always, church members actually joined the ABE classes. In this case, the churches were more active in the success of the class; they supported the aims of ABE so they recruited students and teachers from the nearby community.

The third type of interaction occurred when a church or some other service agency in the community requested that the college set up ABE classes in centers such as adult day care facilities that were often located in church facilities. In this case, the college was reduced to a fairly passive role while the church or service agency retained much more control over the college's offerings just as they did over all of the other activities that took place in the center.

What Influences the Way It Happens?

In this setting, a number of distinct variables appeared to have an effect on interaction. First, the role of chief executive officer was crucial. If the person at the top approved of interaction and wanted it to occur, then at least the possibility for interaction was there. The CEOs in this study who were in favor of interaction were quite clear about it in the interviews. The irony of the situation was that even if the president or minister was strongly in favor of interaction it did not always take place. The reason was that, in each case, interaction was initiated or carried out at lower levels in the organization.

The second variable was that the more complex the

organization, the more important the attitudes of individual lower-level administrators appeared to be. For example, in this study although the college president strongly favored interaction, he had not established any official policies to encourage or discourage interaction. Therefore, individual vice presidents were left to pursue interaction wherever they felt it appropriate or they saw potential benefits. The vice president ultimately responsible for continuing education took the view that interaction with churches violated the separation of church and state and was, therefore, not appropriate. The dean of continuing education, for his part, appeared to act independently in establishing the type of interaction described above.

A third variable concerned the motivation of leaders directly involved in interaction. The college leaders who worked with churches appeared to do so out of a strongly held philosophical commitment to community development. In the case of the ABE program, the feeling was that they had a good program that they wanted to take to the people who could best use it. Church leaders, particularly those in the black community, expressed similar feelings about community development in theological terms. Because they felt a sensitivity to the needs of their neighbors and church members, they saw interaction with the college as a way to benefit their community as a whole, and in so doing, to serve God.

Another variable of interaction appeared to be the presence of a vision and a formula for community development shared by both college and church leaders. In the service area studied, leaders in the black churches, and administrators in the college responsible for ABE, appeared to believe that people in the community needed basic literacy and computational skills. The college was in a position to offer the needed courses; the church was in a position to offer the needed space and to get the word out. Interaction was the result.

On the other hand, where a vision for development was not shared by college staff and community leaders, little interaction occurred. A good example of this was in the area of continuing education. Even though it did not appear to be looking for ways to expand its interaction with churches, the college's continuing education unit was quite active in seeking interactions with the business sector of the community. This happened because the continuing education leadership did share a vision of development with leaders in business and industry, but did not share the vision of church leaders. One of the reasons that this occurred was that administrators had the attitude that space for classes was all that churches had to offer the college and that any other kind of interaction was either unnecessary or inappropriate.

Other reasons appeared to be that offering classes to churches, a largely unproven clientele, represented a risk of resources with no guarantee of return. Perhaps one of the most critical reasons for lack of interaction was that the college did not conduct formal needs assessment. As a result, administrators may not even have been aware of the needs of local churches and the ways that continuing education could have responded to those needs.

The fifth variable involved informal links between institutions. Networks of people within the black community who held the shared values mentioned above appeared to extend both into the community college and into local churches. This situation may have made interaction easier by enhancing communication. A typical example would be that someone from church A, where an ABE class is in full swing, tells someone from church B all about it. The word then spreads informally throughout church B until the pastor or other leaders hear about it. Before long, a consensus is formed that ABE classes would be a good thing in church B too. Eventually, church B's interest may be passed along by word of mouth to an employee of the college who transmits it to the ABE leadership where it may or may not be acted upon. Where it worked, this sort of informal communication system was adequate. Where it didn't work, interaction was hindered.

Why Doesn't It Happen More?

As the last variable may have made evident, the most crucial variable found in this study was communication. On the college side, administrators appeared to expect that churches would make the first contact and present their specific needs. Local church leaders, on the other hand, were well aware of the needs in their congregations but did not feel informed about what the college had to offer to meet those needs. Ministers seemed to be waiting for the college to come to them, evaluate what they needed, tell them about opportunities available through the college, and perhaps suggest what sorts of classes could be offered.

As we have seen, where communication did happen, often it was established through individual church members who were either members of the college faculty or knew someone who was. The needs, ideas, concerns, or availability of their churches for interaction were passed informally along from individual to individual, but in the process they may have been filtered by what each person thought was important. As a result, the college's possession of important information may have been limited by this method of communication.

It was evident from this study that the college and the churches each had resources that could be shared to the benefit of both, and each side was waiting for the other to make the

first move. In the absence of hard information about what churches wanted and needed, the college's continuing education unit proceeded with its own limited idea of interaction, while the churches waited passively for something more to happen. Even in ABE, where wider interaction with churches was an accepted fact, opening the lines of communication took place in a way that was tenuous at best.

Conclusions

Several points are suggested by the results of this study. The first is that partnerships with local churches can help colleges carry out their missions more effectively, particularly in the areas of community and student development. This happens when colleges and churches are able to share what they have in the way of fiscal, physical, and human resources. The college also stands to gain valuable public relations benefits by showing the community that the college is willing to take a leading role in interaction of all kinds that benefit the community.

A second conclusion is that college policies need to be clearly established in writing by the president. When the president fails to establish policies concerning college-church interactions, individual administrators are left to draw their own conclusions about the college's official stance. Moreover, if college-church policies are established in the same way as other policies, questions about church-state separation can be successfully answered.

Colleges should take the lead and actively identify the needs of churches and other volunteer organizations in their service areas. After all, if we don't know what they want, how can we give it to them? Similarly, colleges should take the lead in initiating communication with churches about mutually beneficial partnerships. This is a situation where the college has much to gain and very little to lose by taking the lead in initiating interaction.

Once interaction is initiated, however, both parties appear to gain from being active participants. Of the three types of interaction noted in the study, both sides appeared to be most content with the situation in which each partner had something to offer. In the case where the church was the passive partner, interview data showed that the churches were not very happy with their limited role as resource provider with little input into the number and kinds of courses offered in their facilities. When the church took the more active role and the college was reduced to providing a teacher at an appointed place and time, the college lost valuable opportunities to offer expanded course offerings and gain additional public relations benefits. Each

side appeared to gain in direct proportion to the degree of its active participation in the interaction. If the college initiates interaction, then it must be prepared to encourage active participation on the part of its church partners. An expected result would be that both sides would experience a greater sense of ownership of the joint venture, communication opportunities would be enhanced, and the degree of satisfaction with the partnership would be increased for both parties.

Further study is needed to validate the variables found in this study. The small sample size and the limitations of geography may have influenced the results in unforeseen ways. Similar studies conducted in other regions may add appreciably to our understanding of the factors that influence college-church interaction. This study uncovered areas that influence interaction but offers very little about how to make things work better. Once the variables that influence interaction are known, further studies may look for ways to maximize effectiveness in each area.

There should be no doubt that more can and should be done to make effective use of potential partners in our communities. Understanding of the variables that influence the way these partnerships are formed and grow gives us a tool with which to forge the kind of cooperation that can turn dreams of community development into reality.