

Notes on a conversation with

Jefferson Center board members Beth Rose Middleton and Brinda Sarathy and Jefferson Center staff Sarah K. Loose and Patricia Vázquez Gómez.

Beginning under the leadership of Beverly Brown, the Jefferson Center formed a track record of doing precedent-setting multicultural work with low-income workers in rural communities. Because of the uniqueness of this work, the Jefferson Center has faced a series of challenges that we will describe in this piece. We hope the discussion will provide (1) some history of the Center, and (2) a foundation for sharing and developing lessons learned with organizations doing related work.

Making Connections

Jefferson Center staff enter tightly knit rural communities to accompany rural workers in discussions about barriers and challenges they face. Coming into communities that are dealing with current threats of racism, exclusion, and outright violence or deportation from immigration agencies requires extensive trust building. Not living in the places we are working has an impact, particularly in a context in which external agents have had a history of coming in and causing problems. Oftentimes, it may take months for staff and community members to develop relationships in communities, where there are dense relationships between existing families, networks, organizations, and other community forums. Staff face the challenge of creating sustained relationships with people to address personal issues about labor, family, and place.

Another challenge of this work can be local lack of familiarity with NGO structures on the part of the workers we are accompanying. In the process of building connections and beginning dialogues to facilitate popular education, staff encounter community members who are suspicious of non-profits and what interests these organizations have. If they have not had similar experiences working with NGOs elsewhere, the role and work of the Jefferson Center can seem confusing or disingenuous. Even if they have had experiences with NGOs, workers often expect NGO staff to come in and present them with the answers and solutions, whereas Jefferson Center staff take a radically different approach to community work.

Regional Views, Local Commitments

With a regional view of social justice issues in the workplace, the Jefferson Center has tried to work in at least four communities throughout Oregon and Washington that represent different, but related issues of social justice, immigration, and contingent labor. In part, the challenges we note below represent some degree of conflict between (1) policy/ academic understandings of issues, and (2) addressing their local manifestations.

Because of the depth of engagement with each community, and the time it may take to travel to these communities, it makes sense for staff not to spread work too far over the landscape. However, our theoretical program of work addresses a sector of labor (precarious work in natural resources) that spans multiple locations and workplaces, and

is built on the premise that the synergy and learning possible between workers from different places is an important catalyst for action and change. To build this communication with and between workers from different communities, it is challenging not to want to work in more places than one.

Often, Jefferson Center staff (never numbering more than 3 people, two of whom were part-time) found themselves isolated and stretched too thin, and without ally social justice organizations. Urban groups may find that they have many colleagues working on labor, environmental, and social justice issues, but there are very few of these groups working in rural landscapes. Although the Jefferson Center prides itself on making connections and working with and between multiple organizations, sometimes there just were no other organizations to work with.

In a recent (September 2007) organizational review, Staff Patricia Vazquez-Gomez noted the importance of being realistic about the resources the organization has, and, given those, what work we can do. A better approach for the Center may have been to focus in one community, rather than trying to work in multiple communities at once. While Beverly's vision called for networking multiculturally across rural communities, we found ourselves simultaneously building popular education locally and networking regionally.

With between 1 and 3 staff at any given time, the Jefferson Center was challenged to work in multiple communities. With more funding to dedicate 1-2 staff to each community, and a clear idea of how to operationalize visions of regional issues and change in rural localities, we could work in multiple places. While thinking regionally is necessary, in terms of understanding how social justice issues manifest, play out, and may be addressed from the grassroots, unless the organization is large and flush with resources, it is challenging to work beyond single localities, particularly when utilizing a popular education framework. The popular education vision is really based on relationships, conversations, and people knowing each other on a local, face-to-face level.

Working in multiple communities across the region also has its environmental costs, and thereby clashes with other organizational values. Staff were driving significant distances to get to communities. Although the organization is committed to social change, we were fueling destructive, extractive oil-dependent economies by our traveling. These questions and the toll of frequent trips made staff question the impact of their work. Changing her program of work to focus in just one community made Patricia, for example, feel more "energized, connected, committed, and involved." These issues raise the following question, "how do organizations allocate their resources in a way that matches organizational values and has the largest possible impact?"

Although Jefferson Center staff are similarly committed to bringing workers from different communities together to build energy and analysis, it is realistically very difficult to get people to leave their communities and go elsewhere. Conference calls are still uncomfortable technology for many people. Jefferson Center staff and leadership struggled with how to make cross-community networks happen.

Isolation

Jefferson Center founder Beverly Brown took seriously the call to develop youthful leadership, empowering young people to take on the popular education work of the Jefferson Center. While we have been blessed to have the talents of young women like Director Sarah Loose, and Program Staff Patricia Vazquez-Gomez and Nikki Thanos, these women have also faced significant challenges. For example, Patricia noted the lack of older partners to work with in rural areas. Within the organization, while each Board member has a history of involvement with the Center, members are dispersed and often not directly involved in on-the-ground work. This created feelings of isolation, pressure, and too much decision-making power for Sarah Loose, Executive Director. Loose found herself making key strategic decisions about the Center's work without much assistance. If BOD members had been familiar with the communities as well, we could have discussed our different perceptions of what was happening in communities, and developed plans. An accompanying challenge was figuring out a method for involving community members in regional decisions. The latter issue improved with the addition of community members to the Board.

Direction and Board Involvement

Because of the small number of staff, program staff found themselves involved in strategic planning and leadership decision-making with the Director. While this might have been empowering, it was fraught with confusion because program staff were not clear on the overall program of work. According to Vazquez-Gomez, "We spent a lot of time talking in staff meetings to figure out the direction of the work, and we got a little more clarity but never left a general state of confusion." While the structure of ideological leadership, networking, and a dispersed but committed Board worked for the founding Director, Beverly Brown, it was not an easy fit for a new, younger director. Sarah remarked, "Being new to the region and not from the communities we were working with, I wanted more input and direction from rural workers, from the staff who were accompanying these workers on a daily basis, and from the Board about the role the Jefferson Center should be playing in the region. Instead, I often found them looking to me to articulate the Center's vision."

Board members that Beverly had attracted were not necessarily personally familiar with communities, but they were committed to achieving rural social justice with a popular education approach. Beverly had a strong vision, but it wasn't always clear to new administrators and Board members how to best implement this vision, and personalize it for a new Director. According to Sarah, when the organization changed hands to her leadership, "Bev's vision was not a perfect fit for me, but I didn't come with the vision and experience to have my own vision yet. I might be closer now, but that is after 4 years, and I still don't know if I would be ready to start my own organization."

Board members also struggled with the change in roles. Accustomed to serving as a "sounding board," rather than consulting on particular challenges and decisions associated with distinct communities, they struggled to provide the support and guidance that program and executive staff needed.

Organizational direction is often articulated in reference to the work of other organizations. Because of the unique character of the Jefferson Center's application of a popular education approach, it was hard for the Center to find organizational colleagues. Even at popular education gatherings, few other organizations were using the same approach. Sarah asked, "Who do we get to talk to to figure this out?" The lack of organizational colleagues fostered a sense of isolation.

A "Third Space" Social Justice

The Jefferson Center has occupied a unique space in social justice change work—while we are not a "grassroots community group," we have been doing direct organizing and popular education work in communities where there are no existing grassroots groups. In some communities, the Center has catalyzed the formation of grassroots groups. However, several social justice funders have been reluctant to fund the Center since we aren't a traditional grassroots group. Struggling with how to communicate the Center's role, staff and leadership have found some success in bringing funders to communities and get familiar with the concrete outcomes of the work and how these are achieved over time.

Accountability

In order to enhance the accountability of the Jefferson Center to communities, and to encourage regional networking, the Jefferson Center has invited local leaders to serve on its organizational Board. As an organization, we have debated whether or not we are asking already active and stretched local leaders to take on too much by joining a regional board. Is it realistic for new grassroots leaders to serve in both local and regional capacities? Some of these recruited Board members, while committed to the Center, also feel that their time is needed more urgently locally.

It seems that many social justice organizations are trying to attract community members to their boards, but not asking the question about whether this makes sense for the leaders themselves. The logic is that the people most affected should make the decisions; so community members need to be involved in leadership capacities. The Jefferson Center has worked to develop a new Board culture that can increase participation, rather than call on people to fit a model. Part of our organizational culture has been to have Board and community meetings in multiple languages, using simultaneous translation. Boards experimenting with greater inclusivity also need to be very clear on how decisions get made so that the process is transparent and easy to enter.

A challenge we have faced in our organization has been over-dependence on the Executive Director to coordinate between board members. This forms barriers to grassroots participation, in terms of people's lack of familiarity with calls and/or infrequent meetings. Despite any language, distance, or other barriers, organizational board members need to find ways to communicate with one another.

Funding concerns

Foundations don't immediately "get" the role of the Center in seeding and encouraging the grassroots organizations that many foundations want to fund. The way funding guidelines are written doesn't leave space for this work, nor distinguish it from the work of organizations that only work with existing groups. Given this dynamic, organizational staff and leadership felt frustrated with the amount of time spent convincing funders of the importance of our work, rather than just doing it. As many of our supporters know, the Center is doing work that no other organizations are doing, but just being honest about our work didn't seem to be enough for funders.

In order to prevent burnout, and to honor the commitments of staff, it is necessary to provide adequate compensation to the Director and program staff. The Jefferson Center has struggled to provide competitive wages.

Our work is not about the Jefferson Center, it's about community groups and workers who are making a difference and doing work. Funders ask you for media hits, i.e., "send your press releases." Our philosophy of work is contrary to "organizational advertising." We believe that people from communities should be out front, and building that capacity takes time.

Funders want to hear about deliverables, but, according to Board President Brinda Sarathy, "I would feel uncomfortable saying that we 'are in the business of creating new grassroots groups, and in the next year we will create three more.' But it's what they want to hear."

The very philosophy of popular education is humbling; it's not about any one individual reveling in the glory. It's similar in the academy—a written piece is a collective process composed of interactions and dialogues with others—but one name goes on it. There is no way to recognize that process. We've had to wrestle with the importance of explaining the role of the Jefferson Center to the media.

We have to find a way to be transparent about how the popular education, community organizing, grassroots group formation process works, so that people can replicate it.