VITAL DIFFERENCE
THE ROLE OF RACE IN BUILDING COMMUNITY

Center for Reflective Community Practice
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

A CRCP Practitioner Knowledge Report
The mission of the Center for Reflective Community Practice (CRCP) is to work toward a more just and equitable society by expanding access to and engagement with the knowledge developed by people working on the ground in disenfranchised, low income communities. CRCP aims to both empower and learn from those individuals who, in the face of injustice, inequality and exclusion, have dedicated themselves to making their communities healthier and more vibrant places to live. The knowledge that is formed in the face of struggles to create lasting change, by those who are least served by society, is significant, sophisticated, and essential for framing and solving today’s most urgent social problems. CRCP believes that the impact of work for social change will increase when the knowledge from community practice is used widely in efforts to address injustice and inequity.

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Vital Difference: The Role of Race in Building Community

A CRCP Practitioner Knowledge Report

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The reflective learning project upon which this report is based would not have been possible without the generous support of the Rockefeller Foundation and the leadership of Dayna Cunningham. Dayna’s remarkable vision set the direction for this work, kept it on track, and deepened it every step of the way – even as she pursued new directions in her career. Our gratitude to Dayna goes well beyond her role in this project. CRCP’s work has been informed by her commitment to the importance of community-based knowledge and the need for supporting practitioners to hold onto their knowledge in the process of working toward social justice.

We are profoundly grateful to the participating communities for allowing us to support them in uncovering the deep knowledge they have formulated about community building and democracy. Without their trust, enthusiasm, and partnership, this project simply could not have happened. Indeed, our understanding of how to support reflective learning and connect it to the everyday work of building democracy has grown immeasurably through our relationship with these practitioners (their names are listed in the last section of this report). We also thank Dayna Cunningham, Ellen Furnari, Alethia Jones, Hubert Sapp and Gerald Torres for taking the time to review and comment on the draft of this report. Their thoughtful insights and input were essential, all the more so given that this report represents CRCP’s first major effort to meet the challenge of lifting up practitioner knowledge.

Last, but not least, we wish to thank the CRCP staff for their tireless work, unshakable “can-do” attitude, and heartfelt commitment to making the Vital Difference report and website a reality. Their teamwork, resourcefulness, and creativity were crucial every step of the way.
Once when asked about the most important thing to emerge out of the civil rights struggles in Mississippi, veteran civil rights leader Bob Moses said “the meeting.” What Bob recognized then is that the voices, insight and knowledge of sharecroppers who lived through the consequences of oppression were essential to understanding, overcoming and reshaping the conditions that created their oppression.

We are beginning to understand now that knowledge constructed by those who are engaged in “organizing for survival” – the struggle for systemic change amid poverty, racism and inadequate services – is unique. As such, this knowledge represents a way of understanding the world that is invaluable for re-imagining the possibilities for creating a fair, just and equitable society. It is this knowledge that informed the Civil Rights Movement and allowed the United States to attempt to meet the demands of its vision of democracy. This knowledge provides a critical source of learning needed to build healthy and just communities.

After three years of work on the essential question of how to support the development of practitioner knowledge, The Center for Reflective Community Practice at MIT has released Vital Difference: The Role of Race in Building Community. Vital Difference is both a call to action and a resource for community building. The call is for the recognition of the importance of practitioner knowledge and the resources required to support the articulation, organization and dissemination of that knowledge. As a resource, Vital Difference provides insight into the powerful knowledge that practitioners offer for understanding the role of race and racial identity in building community and sustaining democracy. Vital Difference rebukes the popular notion that the path to building democracy requires ignoring the reality of race. The practitioners in Vital Difference provide guidelines and insights into the powerful role racial identity plays in increasing participation and building inclusive democratic communities.

Vital Difference is the product of a two-year collaboration with five community organizations from across the country. The work in this report and the corresponding website is the beginning of what I hope will be a widespread recognition that the knowledge of people who work on the ground in disenfranchised communities is vital for framing social problems in their true complexity, crafting effective solutions, and evaluating the essential evidence of success.

Ceasar McDowell, Director and Founder
Center for Reflective Community Practice
In pursuing a public policy agenda to create a more inclusive society, race matters. This year, as the country reflected on the fiftieth anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, among the acknowledgements of progress, there was plenty of lamentation about the current circumstances of many low-income people of color in America. Such circumstances are, to some people, bewildering. After all, the legal barriers to unfairness were removed, so what's the problem? There is widespread acceptance that past legal discrimination put blacks and other people of color at a disadvantage in terms of educational and employment advancement. What is less well understood or accepted is the way that the legacy of discrimination continues to undergird inequality and inequity.

Today, where one lives has become a proxy for opportunity. Low-income people of color who live in inner cities, older suburbs, and isolated rural communities are denied access to the essentials for progress. Consistently, these communities lack good schools and jobs. They are not reaping the benefits of transportation investments, which favor roads and highways over public transit. Health suffers when people live in communities that are overexposed to toxins, lack safe places for exercise and physical activity, and have little access to fresh fruits and vegetables due to the virtual nonexistence of grocery stores.

Living in these circumstances, which represent the residue of the historical racism that the country so desperately wants to forget, makes it difficult to take advantage of legal gains or opportunities that in too many cases are only theoretical. Moreover, sprawling development patterns have led to the abandonment of inner city communities as businesses and higher-income residents fled, leaving behind concentrated poverty. The building of high-rise public housing in communities already experiencing economic decline and urban renewal programs only served to concentrate poverty while further weakening and dividing many inner-city communities.

Sprawl was supported by huge financial investments from the federal government through the Federal Housing Administration. Established in 1934, FHA loans were, for many years, provided on a racially restricted basis that prevented people of color from following opportunity into suburban communities. In numerous rural areas, economic vitality and neighborhood fabric were destroyed. More recently, many
older inner-ring suburbs are being forsaken as new outer-ring communities become more attractive to those who can afford them. Present-day neglected communities are the direct result of policies and practices, many of which are race based.

The long legacy of race-based policy and practice contributes to the conditions that many advocates are now trying to correct. Developing practices and policies that can productively bring the realities of race into the work of creating a more inclusive democratic society has become an imperative. Advocates and change agents working in these communities have been creative and innovative in developing ways to address the racial dimensions of their work. But this is often done in isolation. Knowledge developed from years of work on the ground by everyday folk rarely informs the policymaking process. In part this is because practitioners often lack the opportunity and supportive environment to rigorously examine their practice, to identify and test the knowledge gained and make it available to others.

Over the past three years, MIT’s Center for Reflective Community Practice has been engaged in working with practitioners to design processes and methods for identifying the knowledge in their work. CRCP has understood that knowledge from community practice is an essential tool in the fight for social justice. Vital Difference is the first in a series of products from CRCP’s work with communities across the country to closely examine what practitioners have learned from decades of work and experience in attending to issues such as race and democratic community building. This report demonstrates both what can be learned from attending to practitioner knowledge and what it takes to access it. For those working in the community-building field, it offers a welcome acknowledgement of the work and what can be built from it. For those engaged in policy work, this report demonstrates the value of practitioner knowledge in shaping public policy. Finally, for everyone working to build a just and equitable world, Vital Difference underscores the need for space and opportunity to learn from our ongoing work.

Angela Glover Blackwell
President
PolicyLink
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

_Vital Difference: The Role of Race in Building Community_ is the result of a multi-year collaboration between MIT’s Center for Reflective Community Practice (CRCP) and five community organizations engaged in building democratic participation aimed explicitly at addressing racial exclusion. This collaborative aimed to use the reflective learning process developed by CRCP to enable practitioners from these communities to access the tacit knowledge that is embedded in their practice. _Vital Difference_ demonstrates the power of this reflective process by offering a glimpse into the extensive knowledge developed by the five community-based organizations regarding the role of race in community building. _Vital Difference_ makes the case that (1) practitioner knowledge is critical for advancing the field of community building, (2) race is of fundamental importance in community-building work, and (3) engaging race drives the reinvention of the tools and processes best suited to building meaningful and lasting democratic participation.

The Value of Practitioner Knowledge

_Vital Difference_ argues that the knowledge of individuals and organizations working to build healthy communities is essential for framing problems in their true complexity. This knowledge is unique because it integrates context, personality, history, politics, culture and action, while presenting a complex understanding of how disenfranchised communities work. Despite the importance of this knowledge, practitioners from these communities have endured a long history of seeing their words, knowledge and insight extracted and reinterpreted to misrepresent them and the people they represent. Acknowledging this history, _Vital Difference_ offers a set of six guiding principles deemed crucial to developing practitioner knowledge. These principles are based on the assumption that practitioners will fully engage in a reflective learning process driven by the practitioners’ own questions and analysis of the stories from their experience. An inherent component of the reflective learning process lies in the fact that practitioners control ownership, authority and power over how their knowledge is addressed and explored.

The Role of Race in Building Community

The practitioner knowledge profiled in _Vital Difference_ makes the case for viewing race as a key component of democracy-building at the community level. Recognizing the widespread and damaging use of race as a means of social exclusion, these practitioners understand that race and racial identity are also organizing assets, a means of building a sense of power, and critical to multiracial work. Still, multicultural work can be rife with tensions that include: determining priorities; defining inclusiveness; establishing trust and open communication; and respecting the value of different organizing tactics. Race can be used to derail multiracial efforts and racial difference can be oversimplified, however, racial divisions can be transformed through a multiracial process. Practitioners from the field demonstrate that continuing to engage persistent tensions is precisely what enables multiracial coalitions to build the kind of community that can bring about systemic change. Their stories make it clear that dealing with race in all of its complexities and difficulties can be transformative, not divisive. Further, not addressing race can undermine progress toward social justice.
Race and Democracy

The analysis of practitioner knowledge presented in this report offers a number of important implications for theory and practice. With their clear understanding of the volatility of race, community practitioners collectively create a new body of knowledge regarding the practical problems of organizing around race. Knowledge from community practice does not argue in favor of one theoretical viewpoint, but rather creates valuable linkages across prevailing theories on the role of race in community organizing.

For practitioners, *Vital Difference* highlights the importance of valuing and strengthening racial identity when working in cross-racial alliances and for shifting the practice of democracy in their community. Nevertheless, once racial difference is acknowledged and accepted, members of multiracial coalitions need to adapt and invent tools to engage racial difference, all the while maintaining a willingness to experiment in this reinvention process. A key element of this process involves “excavating” the history and experiences that have led members of multiracial coalitions to think differently from one another. This new knowledge helps create a foundation that allows different groups to better understand one another and to work together toward achieving common goals.

The report concludes by asking funders, policymakers, and practitioners working in the field of social justice to support and join the effort to build knowledge from community practice. Practitioner-generated knowledge can powerfully enhance efforts to remedy injustice and inequity in struggling communities. We need to bring practitioner knowledge to bear on policy, program design, and theory building. While *Vital Difference* highlights many of the successes that have stemmed from reflective learning, the report also outlines a plan to broaden the scale and the scope of this ongoing work.
INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, people working to build healthy and just communities have witnessed an increased demand by funders and policymakers for results driven by data as both evidence of the effectiveness of their work, and as a means for understanding the nature of the work. This demand for data is part of an effort by funders and policymakers to become more efficient in the allocation of limited resources, while strategically advancing the work by disseminating and sharing “best practices” or “lessons learned.”

Unfortunately the growing demand for data-driven results misses much of what community practitioners know, sidelining the evidence of their success. The problem is not the demand for data; the problem lies in the over-reliance on quantitative measures as a means of representing practitioners’ knowledge. In our attempts to capture practitioner knowledge, we too often look for measurable events (number of individuals voting) and then attempt to infer the procedures (how to best mobilize and educate voters) necessary for bringing about those events.

The struggle to hold our knowledge is important. How do we hold, make use of, retain, expand what has happened? How do we access our knowledge so we can really claim it? Then we can move toward having something we can reference and use to inform our work.

—Nelson Johnson,
Beloved Community Center

Yet knowledge derived from community practice is much larger than merely giving voice to stories that people tell about their experience in the struggle for democracy or in trying to make their neighborhoods a better place to live. Instead, practitioner knowledge is the articulation of the tacit knowledge that is embedded in what people do and how they think about their work – but which is often not accessible to them as something they consciously know. It is the discovery and analysis of their tacit knowledge that enables individuals, groups, organizations and communities to “know what they know.” Though there have been a number of important efforts to capture the knowledge of those who live and work in struggling communities, the potential of community knowledge remains largely untapped.

Yet knowledge derived from community practice is much larger than merely giving voice to stories that people tell about their experience in the struggle for democracy or in trying to make their neighborhoods a better place to live. Instead, practitioner knowledge is the articulation of the tacit knowledge that is embedded in what people do and how they think about their work – but which is often not accessible to them as something they consciously know. It is the discovery and analysis of their tacit knowledge that enables individuals, groups, organizations and communities to “know what they know.” Though there have been a number of important efforts to capture the knowledge of those who live and work in struggling communities, the potential of community knowledge remains largely untapped.
In 2001, MIT’s Center for Reflective Community Practice developed a Practitioner Knowledge Initiative to design methods for practitioners to uncover their knowledge and use that knowledge to improve practice, inform policy, and shape the public understanding of the work of community building and democracy. The initiative is built on the assumption that practitioners working in struggling communities, through their everyday experiences, are dynamically constructing knowledge essential to strengthening those communities. The Practitioner Knowledge Initiative uses a reflective learning process to assist individual practitioners and groups of practitioners to access the tacit knowledge that is embedded in their practice. In this process, practitioners identify questions that guide their work, describe critical moments that have arisen in their work, and analyze their actions and thoughts in those moments to uncover the knowledge that informs their practice.

Vital Difference is the first report from the Practitioner Knowledge Initiative. The report stresses the importance of practitioner knowledge and the use of reflective learning to uncover that knowledge. Vital Difference states its case by offering a glimpse into the extensive knowledge that five community-based organizations (Beloved Community Center, Greensboro, NC; Texas LEADS Project, Austin, TX; Southern Echo, Jackson, MS; Asian Pacific American Legal Center, Los Angeles, CA; and Conservation Law Foundation, Boston, MA) have developed regarding race and community building. All five organizations are engaged in a similar endeavor – building democratic participation aimed explicitly at addressing racial exclusion – yet they all work in different racial and political contexts and use different methods to tackle this common challenge.

Vital Difference demonstrates the deep understanding these community practitioners have developed regarding race and community building. Although they believe that it is important to articulate the complex dimensions of organizing issues carefully, they also believe it is critical to tackle race head-on. The practitioners whose experiences are represented in this report are building on the Civil Rights Movement’s efforts in framing race as a central component of the struggle for democracy. While many fear that addressing race can be divisive, their stories make clear that dealing with race in all of its complexities and difficulties can be transformative for democracy. Further, ignoring race can undermine progress toward social justice. The learning from these practitioners illustrates how they have found ways to acknowledge race, and to use it as a unifying rather than dividing theme.

In this report, we are not attempting to explore the depths of the knowledge generated by the group of community practitioners who participated in the reflective learning process, nor are we offering the same analytical perspective as race scholars. Rather, we aim to make the case for building systematic bodies of practitioner knowledge, while highlighting the value of that knowledge in efforts to build healthy and just communities. Over the next year, the primary data from the Practitioner Knowledge Initiative, as well as practitioners’ writing on their own work, will become available to the public. For now, we offer Vital Difference with the intention of creating a space for advancing and promoting the grounded knowledge of those engaged in the difficult work of building communities amid poverty, racism, failed policies, and violence. Our analysis aims to show that the stories from these practitioners offer new and important data to the field of community building.

Vital Difference starts with an overview of the reflective learning methodology used to surface and examine the knowledge generated through the work of these practitioners. We begin with the methodology so that the reader can understand the depth and rigor of the process necessary to uncover practitioner knowledge. In the second part of the report, we present a set of four major learning points about race and community building that emerged from the reflective learning sessions. Each learning point is brought to life by practitioners’ stories. The third section situates the practitioners’ knowledge in relation to academic sources of knowledge about race and community building and describes implications for community practice. The report concludes by recapping the importance of this knowledge to the field of community building and the policy world, and proposing a number of concrete ways that the work of building practitioner knowledge can be supported and extended.

Vital Difference is intended to open a dialogue on practitioner knowledge. We encourage readers of this report to visit the Vital Difference website (http://web.mit.edu/crcp/vitaldiff1) where they can contribute their thoughts to the Peer Forum and continue building an analysis of stories from community practice.
Practitioner knowledge is vital for understanding the complex work of community building. Yet simply recognizing its significance is insufficient to guiding the work of uncovering practitioner knowledge. This work begins with understanding that community knowledge has been systematically marginalized and that this has had an impact on the willingness of practitioners to uncover and share their knowledge. This is particularly true for practitioners from poor communities and communities of color who have a long history of having their words, knowledge and insight extracted and reinterpreted to misrepresent them and their communities.

Acknowledging this history, we developed a set of six principles to guide the knowledge-building process we engage in with communities and practitioners. The principles are grounded in our experience that practitioners will fully engage with a reflective learning process if the issues of ownership, authority and power over their knowledge are addressed in the design and execution of the process. For CRCP, this means that a knowledge-building process has to be driven by the practitioners’ own questions and analysis of the stories from their experience, and the results of this work have to be owned by the practitioners. These principles inform the design and implementation of all of the activities within the CRCP Practitioner Knowledge Initiative.

Principle 1: Participants have control in the learning process. In order for participants to deeply engage a reflective learning process designed to uncover the knowledge formed through their everyday practice, it is critical that they have control in all aspects of the learning process, as well as being active partners in shaping that process.

Principle 2: Authentic learning starts with collaborative design. Designing a reflective learning process must start with the recognition that both reflection and learning are universal experiences. Moreover, the design of a reflection learning process must be responsive to the ways that people working together are accustomed to reflecting with and learning from one another. The more the learning process is connected and responsive to the learning needs and culture of the people involved, the greater the chance the process will yield authentic and constructive learning.

Principle 3: Reflective learning originates in the questions of those doing the work. Community practitioners are in part driven by implicit and explicit questions such as: How can we best bring about social change? How can we engage others in this work? How can we integrate our own experiences of oppression with those we serve? The reflective learning process begins with helping practitioners to identify and sharpen their questions, while focusing on struggles and breakthroughs in their work that can create learning about those questions.

Principle 4: Learning is driven by analysis of critical moments in the work. The foundation of the reflection process consists of practitioners’ stories of critical moments that they feel have the best potential for addressing questions they hold about their work. The learning comes from their own analysis of these stories as they are guided to examine how their
thinking shifted after watershed events, and how that changed their practice. The goal of the analysis is to become aware of the reason that particular moments were experienced as significant, and to examine the nature of their significance. Through the identification and analysis of critical moments, the process generates an interlinked network of practitioner stories that function as a unique form of data – not free-floating anecdotes but a purposefully selected set of experiences subjected to careful analysis. The discussion of those stories is aimed specifically at having practitioners themselves probe their stories and build their own cohesive analysis of them.

**Principle 5: A focus on learning supports effective cross-group dialogue.** Participants in a reflective learning process can engage in more effective cross-group dialogue if they first share the learning that emerges from their individual organization reflection sessions. In addition, groups learn about each other’s work most effectively if they speak in terms of struggles and learning, rather than successes and fixed ideas.

**Principle 6: Participants control the recording process and use of recorded materials.** Authentic reflection and learning are more likely when participants do not have to think about self-editing during the process. Such self-editing occurs when participants do not have control of the recording process and the use of recorded materials. Though many research efforts begin by having participants

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**PRINCIPLE IN ACTION: Formulating questions**

Texas LEADS is a parent and community school-involvement program in Austin. Their parent involvement model relies on a parent support specialist from the community who works inside the school while remaining enough of an “outsider” to keep the schools accountable to the parents and community. LEADS does this by creating a distinct physical space for parents on school property and by having a supervisor [Leslie Friedlander] who serves as a buffer between the parent support specialist [in this example, Lupe Montoya] and the school administration. Here, CRCP facilitates as they formulate a question about this issue.

CRCP: Before we get started on looking at critical moments in your work, let’s name the urgent questions and issues you face currently. One way of thinking about your questions is that they might not occur as questions. They might occur as feeling a little bit of anxiety, or as something you see coming up that feels challenging. Out of that, you can usually find a question is lurking.

LESLIE: One of the questions I have is – I’m not sure how to phrase it yet, but how to advance what we’re trying to do while also working on the inside [of the school], and also of more than one institution.

CRCP: So it’s about working from the inside.

LESLIE: Right.

CRCP: And the fact that you are working inside more than one institution.

LESLIE: Right, but it’s most inside versus outside – pushing on reform and pushing on advocacy, while trying to be part of the system. To me, it’s a theoretical issue, but it’s also a really everyday issue. Do the parents who participate in LEADS get stuffed into the everyday work at the school and used by the administration to do whatever is needed, versus doing parent-led activities with other parents?

CRCP: Is there a concern that you’ll be pulled more if you –

LESLIE: We are pulled. And we let ourselves be, and we want to let ourselves be to some extent. But without
losing our focus and, on a bigger scale, losing our public in terms of the engagement of parents and the leadership of parents in the democracy part of our work.

CRCP: Is there also a question of the balance between working as insiders and outsiders?

LESLIE: How to maintain that balance. I don’t have any regret about the fact that we chose to work within the system. It’s just how to get that –

LUPE: It’s hard. It’s hard when the school wants you to do something, and to tell them, “No, I can’t do it,” or “No, I don’t want to do it, because that’s not part of my job.”

LESLIE: How to think about that balance.

LUPE: Right.

The process focused on exploring the relationship between race and democratic community process. All five organizations were engaged in a similar endeavor – building democratic participation aimed explicitly at addressing racial exclusion – yet they were working in diverse racial and political contexts and using different methods to tackle this challenge.

Reflective learning with individual organizations. CRCP began by visiting each organization to introduce its approach to generating knowledge from practice and the principles that would guide the project (as described above). No funding decisions were implicitly or explicitly tied to participation, nor would foundation staff attend the early stages of the reflective learning process. All five organizations chose to participate once they understood how the project would be conducted.

Following the initial introductory visits to each organization, CRCP returned a second time to begin the collaborative process of designing the focus, scope, and specific activities in the reflection process. The collaborative design process dealt with which reflection techniques would best suit the organization’s learning culture while generating desired learning outcomes. Related to this question was the issue of what kind of facilitation was needed and how the reflection sessions should be scheduled. Participants also determined the areas of their work to focus on and named the current questions in their work that would anchor the learning process. Finally, each organization decided who needed to participate sign a blanket consent form (giving permission to be recorded and allowing the researcher control over the recordings), we believe this approach counterproductive to the learning process. Additionally, we believe that more material is approved for public release at the end of a project when there is strong participant control of the recordings throughout. This control includes determining how recordings are performed, choosing which parts of the transcripts are brought into dialogue with other groups, considering whether sensitive material should be removed from transcripts, and deciding which segments should be shared with the public.
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in the reflective learning process related to each of the selected areas of work.

The reflection process in each organization lasted two to three days. This process followed a common pattern of using “critical moments” reflection to recount and explore significant events in particular areas of work, then analyzing those events in terms of the organization’s current questions. Nevertheless, the process took a unique form in each location, both in terms of the number of people involved and the way the critical moments process was organized.

**Cross-organization reflection gatherings.** Following the reflection sessions at each organization, all five organizations were invited to participate in a series of cross-organization reflection gatherings. The organizations were asked to view the gatherings as opportunities to extend their learning with practitioners engaged in similar struggles in other locations. To facilitate this process, CRCP worked with each organization in advance to formulate one or more “learning-edge questions.” Learning-edge questions captured the needs for learning that each organization felt most urgent for advancing their work. Each organization was also asked to select two stories from its reflective learning session that illustrated its learning-edge questions.

PRINCIPLE IN ACTION: Naming critical moments

The Asian Pacific American Legal Center [APALC] undertook a large effort in 2000 to work in a multiracial coalition to redraw voting district lines so that community voting interests would be better represented. In this excerpt, Aileen Almeria and Kathay Feng of APALC work with CRCP to identify a critical moment in the work when the massive level of effort that would be involved to organize across race first became apparent.

AILEEN: And then I think the last [critical moment] that I would name is something that Kathay alluded to before. I think that over the course of our planning, our visioning, of the 2000 [multiracial] redistricting effort, we were making a lot of comparisons to what we had done in 1990 [during the census outreach work], which had such a limited scope compared to 2000. We had no sense of what the workload was and what we were asking staff to do. So, I’m not sure how to catch it as a moment, but over the course of time, it became very clear that we had very ambitious goals without a really clear and definitive work plan, and we were very understaffed. And I think that the program staff had to pay a heavy price in that situation. So for the management to watch that process and then not know how to pull that back was very difficult.

CRCP: Is there a specific moment that you remember or a series of moments related to this?

KATHAY: When you came in at 8:00 AM and you heard that people hadn’t gone home the night before, and things like that.

CRCP: Or where it became a conscious discussion among the management team that this is a problem we have and we’ve got to –
AILEEN: I think it was when we were actually in the process of mapping [each district] and having ongoing dialogue between the [cross-racial coalition] partners. Because what was happening was to the extent that we were trying to accommodate different issues from the Latino community, what it would mean is not just our staff tweaking the [district] lines, but then a whole conversation with the groups in that area to figure out how that worked with them. So I think for myself what seemed like a very straightforward process was actually a much more complicated thing for the staff to carry out. And it wasn’t until fairly late in the game that we really realized what was happening in terms of people’s time.

CRCP: So in some sense this isn’t really a moment, it was something that played out over time. But because all the partners really weren’t at the same place of being able to carry out the process, you ended up really playing almost a staffing role to the coalition.

KATHAY: Yes. Yes.

CRCP: And that became not an overt decision, but a decision made along the way?
Aileen: Yes, and as management started to understand that you had gotten into something that was much bigger than you envisioned, the moment of that awareness seemed like it was right when you were getting into this process with the [cross-racial] groups.

KATHAY: We had much more control of the process when we were working with the various APA organizations [in 1990]. And not to say that was an easy process or that it didn’t take a lot of work, but my sense is it was easier for us to facilitate that – we just had more control over that process.

CRCP: But you would locate this escalation of effort around this time of starting to work with the other [cross-racial coalition] groups?

KATHAY: Yes.
PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR LEARNING EDGE QUESTIONS

**ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN LEGAL CENTER:** The Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) works to balance the goal of empowerment of the Asian Pacific American (APA) community with the goal of working across race to make systemic policy change. They see these two goals as complementary and mutually reinforcing. Because of their work with the enormous complexity of APA groups across California, APALC’s learning-edge questions addressed building coalitions across both ethnicity and race:

*How can we build an inclusive statewide coalition of APAs that can speak with a unified voice, given the great diversity within the APA community? How do you build cross-racial coalitions when different communities may be interested in collaborating, but have different policy priorities, organizational capacity, methodologies, and political power?*

**BELOVED COMMUNITY CENTER:** The Beloved Community Center (BCC), in Greensboro, NC is founded on Dr. Martin Luther King’s concept of the “beloved community,” the belief that true change can happen in a community by building a critical mass of people who work together in nonviolence and inclusion. BCC is centrally concerned with building community across many different social divides – including, but not limited to, racial divides. Their learning-edge question asked whether the approach of modeling beloved community in their organizing efforts was having the desired effect:

*If we understand our work to be making community in Greensboro—creating space and possibilities for people to come together, bringing people in, getting people to relate to each other in new ways—to what extent is community being made through our work?*

**CONSERVATION LAW FOUNDATION:** CLF’s Greater Boston Institute is committed to city-building from the grassroots up. Its city-building mission is aimed at ensuring that planning decisions regarding development, transportation, and open space are made by those who work and live in Boston. CLF works to empower those voices and ensure that they are heard in the halls of power. Their learning-edge question reflects the tension in their work between democracy as a process in their work, or as an outcome in itself:

*What would it mean for CLF’s Greater Boston Institute to incorporate democracy work into its core mission? How would we name that work and seek out opportunities to advance environmental democracy apart from substantive environmental outcomes?*

**SOUTHERN ECHO:** Southern Echo is a leadership development and training program working to build the accountable organizations needed to hold the political, economic, education, and environmental systems accountable to the needs of African-American communities in Mississippi. Echo assists local organizations to create a community organizing process through which communities develop more effective and accountable leadership. Members of these community organizations have become successful at winning local elections to school boards, boards of supervisors, etc. Recognizing the tension between this success and the loss of these members by community organizations, Echo identified their learning-edge question as:

*How do we advance new community-based leaders in elected positions while preserving the ability of community organizations to hold them accountable? How do people who move into leadership positions stay accountable to the community and at the same time fulfill their obligations to the elected seat?*

**TEXAS LEADS:** Texas LEADS is a parent-involvement program in two racially and economically diverse middle schools in Austin, and works to create parent alliances within and across the different racial groups at each school. The aim of these school programs is to develop a model for middle-school parent and community engagement that can be replicated within additional public schools. Their learning-edge question speaks to their struggle to reform schools by working from the inside of the system:

*As outsiders seeking to promote change while working inside the school system we are trying to alter, when are we focused on the change we want (developing parent leadership and meaningful participation) and when are we just part of the system (providing services for parents or the school)?*
A premise running throughout the stories in this report is that the topic of race is broad and deep. Race is tied inextricably to history and economics. Race manifests structurally, in the way institutions normalize the exclusion and subjugation of people on the basis of their race. Race manifests interpersonally in the ways that people do and do not feel comfortable with one another. It is also individual, in that every person has a racial identity, whether or not that is consciously acknowledged or explored.

Though there is no question that racial exclusion is a persistent and powerful force that continually shapes people’s lives, there are debates about how community-building practitioners should confront race in their work. How and when should race be engaged? Should race be named, and if so how? How should race be dealt with when working across race lines? The practitioners whose stories are presented in the following sections have a rich understanding of the relationship between race and democracy and what it means to struggle with race - in all of these ways. By seeking to confront how racism operates within societal structures, these community-building practitioners expose the flaws in these structures that lead to social exclusion. In this sense, race is a lens through which the problems of democracy are more clearly exposed.

Within the broader context of this work, this report highlights and examines a particular issue: How do practitioners balance the tension that emerges when racial groups – with different experiences of social exclusion – acknowledge (and strengthen) their own group’s racial identity and interests while simultaneously working to build multiracial coalitions? We have chosen this focus because it is clearly an issue that recurs throughout different contexts of community building and because it directly addresses a set of important questions in the field.

This section presents four major learning points that emerged from the analysis of practitioner stories on race and community building:

- Racial identity is an important and effective tool for building participation.
- Inventive multiracial work is challenging.
- Inventive coalitions bring new possibilities for social change.
- Race can be used to distort as well as transform multiracial community building work.

The analysis reveals how complex and subtle it is to navigate the dynamic between racial identity and cross-racial coalition building. There is no formula for acting concretely in the face of this dynamic. Instead, struggling with race plays a vital role in helping organizers reinvent the tools of democracy building.

Practitioners engaged in the everyday struggle to build more democratic communities in the context of persistent racial exclusion develop knowledge critical to understanding the complex relationship between race and democracy. By analyzing the stories and dialogue that result from the reflective learning process, we gain new insights into this relationship – often challenging conventional wisdom. We also emerge with a heightened awareness of what it means to be committed to working with race issues on the ground.

We’re hopeful that all of these things that we’ve explored through the reflective process are going to help us be able to talk about the state of Mississippi in a different way, talk about what we’re trying to do to make a difference, and how we’re trying to build democracy.

—Leroy Johnson, Southern Echo
LEARNING POINT 1: RACIAL IDENTITY IS AN IMPORTANT AND EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR BUILDING PARTICIPATION

A consistent theme throughout practitioners’ stories is that strengthening group racial identity is essential for building and strengthening multiracial community participation. Furthermore, valuing racial identity builds a sense of power for constructing more effective cross-racial alliances. Once people connect with their own racial identity, they can better connect across race lines. Despite the complexity of racial identity within any community, practitioners see it as critical in their work. Thus, in the experience of the practitioners who participated in the reflective learning process, racial identity is an organizing asset, a means of building a sense of power, highly complex, and a critical part of multiracial work.

Race as an organizing asset. Texas LEADS, a parent-involved program in two racially and economically diverse middle schools in Austin, works to create parent alliances within and across the different racial groups at each school. LEADS views race as an asset that can help people better understand and value themselves, and therefore, be able to recognize the shared connections to other people in their community. In their work, racial identity is an important foundation for using schools as a focal point for building alliances across race lines.

Race as an organizing asset: Gerald Torres, Texas LEADS

Texas LEADS is a parent and community school-involvement program in two racially and economically diverse middle schools in Austin, Texas. Through their work in the two schools, they have explored how to create a successful model that is flexible enough to adapt to the distinct communities surrounding each school.

GERALD: There’s an important comparison between the two [middle] schools we’re in. Fulmore [Middle School] is a heterogeneous community – predominantly Chicano, Mexican-American, but not exclusively. The school also contends with a lot of class differences, so the work in Fulmore has to cross race and class to create the communities that support the school. The school needs to be a center of gravity around which those communities can coalesce and form commonalities that would otherwise not exist.

Mendez [Middle School], on the other hand, is more predominantly Mexican-American and Mexican national and predominantly working class and poor, with a very small business community. So organizing that community is different. And the way race comes up in Mendez is different – because Austin is segregated. In Fulmore, you have African-Americans, Mexican nationals, and Mexican-Americans, as well as some Asians living in one community with more of an economic mix. At Mendez, you have a strong Chicano identity with a distinctly smaller African-American community. So it lacks daily contact with other races and classes. And daily contact makes a big difference, because it gives you a different way to organize.

I think that’s one thing that’s come out of our work: You’ve got to have race as an organizing idea, but you can’t have it as a fixed idea about how you engage it. How you engage it has got to come out of the community that you’re in, as opposed to saying that this is the model we’re going to use to engage race… By an organizing idea, you’ve got to valorize racial identity – that your racial identity is an important asset that you have, because it’s a way in which your fate is linked to others in the community. Not just because you live in this community, but because you share these deeper things.

So at Mendez, where there’s a greater percentage of Mexican-Americans and Mexican nationals, it’s easier for people to see that linked fate. You’ve got to take that idea of linked fate, and build within each racial community in Fulmore – not just the linked fate within those communities, but also the fate of the whole community linked across race and class. So for Mendez, ultimately what we want to get are cross-racial alliances that are community-wide – Austin community-wide as opposed to school community-wide. But how we’re going to get to that place is going to be different, because they are not dealing with the same race and class dynamics in the way they are at Fulmore. So ultimately you want to build the foundation for cross-racial alliances because that’s where the politics for changing the whole community is going to come from.
In arguing that racial identity must be “valorized,” Gerald Torres of Texas LEADS suggests that valuing and understanding one’s own cultural strengths can be a point of departure for realizing that conditions of societal disparity are shared with others. This is fundamentally different than organizing around self-interest. Rather, members of each group have to become empowered in their own cultural and racial identity in order to effectively build coalitions with other groups. By incorporating support into organizing work for people to acknowledge and value their own racial identity, organizers lay the groundwork for helping people understand what they share with others – even when others seem very different.

Nevertheless, practitioners who navigate the complexity of race in organizing work regularly experience a recurring fact: There is no set formula for engaging race when building community. Working with racial identity and racial difference has to be reinvented based on the composition of the community, the focus of the work, and the local history of racial politics and immigration.

Racial identity as a means of building a sense of power. In Mississippi, the work of Southern Echo illustrates how racial identity serves as a basis for building power. Southern Echo is a leadership development and training program that employs a meticulous developmental empowerment process designed to help members of African-American communities realize their values and skills as sources of power. Their work illustrates a challenge facing cross-racial coalitions in Mississippi and elsewhere: How can a coalition move beyond the entrenched power dynamics that it is fighting, if the people in the coalition end up embodying those dynamics themselves?

In telling the story of a cross-racial coalition aimed at forcing the state to improve services for children in special education, Leroy Johnson outlines the role that strong racial identity played in the success...
I’ve been working on trying to get the State of Mississippi to deal with children with special needs, to finally to give them the type of services that they deserve by law. There’s this long-term organization in Jackson. They [in a coalition with other organizations] filed a lawsuit 35 years ago. The State of Mississippi wasn’t doing what they’re supposed to do, and 35 years later they still haven’t done one thing about it. And so [the organization] came to us and said, “We should work together as a coalition.” And my answer was, “Yeah, we should work together, but we shouldn’t be a coalition under your banner.” Their answer was, “Well we can’t be a coalition under your banner either.” We said, “OK, well, maybe what we can do is build an organization together, create a separate organization away from your banner and away from our banner and be the Mississippi Education Working Group, and we’ll create an organization that shares power.”

We have two co-chairs, one black, one white. But we told them that we are not going to be a part of a coalition where you’re in charge of saying what the answers are going to be. And so [working together] we went into negotiations with the state. Now, bottom line was, we got the state board of education to vote through the consent decree with changes, which made the law stronger than the consent decree of the judge.

Now we’ve got a monitoring committee that’s made up of community folk who came out of the process. Not teachers and curriculum coordinators, but community folk who are going through a curriculum now to teach them how to evaluate whether or not the services are being rendered in the way they’re supposed to be rendered. But it could never happen. It could never happen if we hadn’t built the power to be at the table, and so race matters and race matters more when races come together.

of their coalition. Before bringing members of the African-American community into a cross-racial coalition, Southern Echo conducted trainings that strengthened people’s recognition of the power that comes from a strong sense of racial identity. Then, when African-American community members entered into the coalition, they did so as equals, not as subordinate partners. The coalition was able to transcend entrenched racial power dynamics and to work as a strong united force – but one that retained the racial identities of its members. This example from Southern Echo demonstrates that emphasizing racial identity does not prevent cross-racial alliances from being effective. Rather, because race matters when different racial groups come together, using racial identity to build a sense of power is what allows a cross-racial coalition to transcend entrenched power dynamics, making new kinds of solutions possible.

The complexity of racial identity. In California, the diverse Asian ethnic landscape illustrates the challenge of using racial identity to organize different immigrant communities within that heavily multiracial and multiethnic context. While race is an unfamiliar construct for many Asian immigrants (who tend to categorize themselves along ethnic lines), the Asian organizers who took part in this reflective learning project emphasized the critical importance of race in advancing the broader political empowerment of Asians, while trying to minimize the baggage of stereotyping, prejudice and opposition.

The Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) works to balance the goal of empowerment of the Asian Pacific American (APA) community with the goal of working across race to effect systemic policy change. They see these two goals as complementary and mutually reinforcing. Yet the task of teaching the APA community why race is politically important can be challenging. Asian organizers grapple with a wide array of languages and ethnic histories.
VITAL DIFFERENCE: THE ROLE OF RACE IN BUILDING COMMUNITY

(These groups include Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese, Hmong, Indians, Pakistanis, and Pacific Islanders.) Further complicating APALC’s work is the fact that in Asian communities, ethnic identity interacts significantly with other social realities such as economic class, immigrant vs. refugee status, and political affiliation. Despite this enormous complexity, APALC understands that without first establishing a broad level of political power as Asians, the needs of individual communities may not be served.

APALC’s work in the face of this complexity makes two important contributions to understanding the relationship between race and community building. One is recognizing the difference between race and racial identity. APALC, in their role to bring together groups across the Asian spectrum, employs the social and political construct of race as it exists in the U.S. Nevertheless, as Asian communities tend to think in terms of ethnicity rather than race, APALC’s efforts are not readily supported by racial identity. Racial identity is a concrete psychological phenomenon of understanding oneself as a person with a specific racial affiliation and history. APALC must help their community build an Asian racial identity that encompasses ethnic identity, despite the fact that ethnic divisions can run counter to this goal.

Second, the APALC example illustrates how organizing within a racial community can be as complex as organizing across racial communities. While this challenge may be most pronounced in the Asian community, a different version of this inner-group complexity likely exists for every racial community due to an array of cultural, ethnic, political, and economic factors.

Racial identity as critical to multiracial work. Stories of community practice show that attending to racial identity when organizing around important issues does not prevent cross-racial alliances from being effective, nor do community practitioners experience a conflict between focusing on multiracial work and serving the needs of a particular group. Community practitioners skillfully move between focusing on multiracial work while also serving the needs of a particular racial group. For example, APALC’s work is grounded in the belief that Asian political empowerment and building multiracial coalitions are both needed in order for either activity to be successful.

Racial identity as critical to multiracial work: Stewart Kwoh, Aileen Almeria, Asian Pacific American Legal Center

During their reflection session, APALC is discussing the interdependency between Asian political empowerment and building multiracial coalitions, and the role this view had in the genesis of their community leadership development program.

STEWART: We have a deep commitment to Asian-Americans and their interests, but at the same time, we do see the linkage between our interests and others, and we seek to join them. There are some organizations that see this as a stage process. “Once we get powerful enough, then we can finally hitch up with other people.” We prefer to do it at the same time, whenever possible. Sometimes it’s not possible, and we acknowledge that, but, on the other hand, we’re not just a multiracial group. We need to serve the unique needs of Asian-Americans, not only because they are underserved, but because we want to do multiracial work. If we don’t have a strong grounding in our own community, we cannot bring people along. We try to do both well. It’s really a value. For example, when we did the [state redistricting process], it was inevitable that we would ask ourselves, ‘Well, what did the Latinos think?’ or ‘What did the African-Americans think?’ Because this value is ingrained, it would always come up somehow, rather than us saying, ‘Ok, this is what we need to do for ourselves, let’s do it.’

AILEEN: It’s interesting because it is one of the very premises that LDIR [APALC’s leadership program, Leadership Development in Interethnic Relations] organizes its training on. Before you get to the point of working together, you start out from some introspection about each person: What is my own culture? What values do I have? Where do I come from? Then people plot that out. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a
VITAL DIFFERENCE: THE ROLE OF RACE IN BUILDING COMMUNITY

APALC’s leadership development program was based on their theory that Asian-Americans need a strong grounding in their own community to be effective leaders in multiracial efforts, as well as APALC’s belief that multiracial coalitions are key to the success of broad Asian political empowerment. In designing their leadership development program, APALC recognized the importance of providing a developmental process involved in “working through” one’s own racial and cultural identity and then learning to acknowledge it sufficiently. In addition, APALC saw the need for providing training in interpersonal and group process skills needed for working cross-racially.

Yet while they make a practice of considering the perspectives of other groups, APALC came to realize that their leadership training model was not applicable solely to Asian-Americans. In fact, few people in American society have had the chance to acquire skills for working cross-racially. Community leaders from every racial background could benefit from the support of a program that provides a process for strengthening racial identity as a basis for working more effectively across racial divides.

LEARNING POINT 2: INVENTIVE MULTIRACIAL WORK IS ChALLENGING

Through their stories, practitioners gave voice to the challenges that can arise in multiracial coalition work, often because coalition members have different interests as a result of different experiences of social exclusion. Deciding what issues to work on can be problematic; so is deciding upon a fair process for decision-making. Questions are raised about the deeper meaning of central democratic principles – such as whether there are limits to inclusiveness. Establishing trust and open communication is an ongoing challenge in diverse coalitions. Additionally, coalitions often have to navigate different approaches to community activism.

Ever present is the concern that racial identity might block effective cross-group collaboration, and that narrow group self-interest might characterize the dynamics of even the best-intentioned multiracial coalitions. While responding to these concerns can be frustrating – and sometimes downright discouraging – practitioners stand firm in believing that multiracial coalitions that continue to grapple with such challenges ultimately stand the best chance of bringing about meaningful change. It is the act of staying engaged with the tensions that arise that gives coalitions the potential to build the kind of community that can bring about systemic change. Practitioners’ stories reveal
The challenge of determining priorities when working in collaborations: Veronika Geronimo, Aileen Almeria, Asian Pacific American Legal Center

It can become a challenge for APALC to keep Asian Pacific American [APA] interests on the table when they are a minority within a cross-racial collaborative. This example comes from their work in the California Immigrant Welfare Collaborative [CIWC].

VERONIKA: I think that trying to balance these two principles [of Asian American empowerment and multiracial bridge-building] is a yearly struggle for CIWC. The way the Collaborative comes up with their policy priorities every year is each group goes to their own constituencies and comes back to the larger group to share what our priorities are. Then, where there’s consensus, that’s the issue the Collaborative takes on for the year. But they’re not always that clear cut. And so, issues from the Asian Pacific American community – like language access – have fallen to the second tier of the Collaborative’s work.

AILEEN: There was one meeting I so strongly remember, because it was spent putting out all the issues that could possibly be on CIWC’s agenda on the table, and then we broke out into groups, and we were asked to vote for our priority. Now, there are four organizations in CIWC – we are the only one that focuses on the APA community. Everybody in my group wanted to talk about higher education and drivers’ licenses, and I was the only one that said, “Oh no, language access – this is our issue.” When we brought it all back, and they tallied the votes, all the APA issues were at the bottom, which was very disheartening to us, but this was one of the ongoing struggles of working in a collaborative.

VERONIKA: The other one I wanted to bring up was the California Food Assistance Program [CFAP] and the Cash-Assistance Program for Immigrants [CAPI]. These are two state programs that provide food stamps and SSI benefits for immigrants who were cut off from federally-funded programs. This was a priority for the Legal Center. The majority of the CAPI recipients are APA, and so we heard from a lot of APA groups that this was a priority. Again, it wasn’t as high of a priority for the Latino groups. But it ended up being a top priority for CIWC last year, although it didn’t necessarily mean that all of the groups worked on it equally. And so, there is a tension. Just because the collaborative takes on an issue, doesn’t necessarily mean that each of the partnering organizations takes on equal amounts of work on those issues.

The challenge of determining priorities when working in collaborations. The goal of linking strong racial identity with effective multiracial work is challenging. One example of this challenge is evident in APALC’s work in the California Immigrant Welfare Collaborative (CIWC). This coalition used a voting system to determine the policy priorities for each year. Although each group was invited to put all of their critical issues on the table, the Asian Pacific American (APA) issues received fewer votes due to the smaller number of APA members in the coalition.

Just deciding what issues to work on can be problematic, not to mention deciding how they should ultimately be handled. Is it good enough to vote on priorities? If so, how can smaller or less powerful minorities get enough attention and support for their particular high-priority issues? How would a consensus process work? Despite their frustration when APA issues do not converge with the interests of other groups – and therefore are not selected as coalition priorities – APALC does not see it as a waste of time to participate in the coalition. In their analysis of experiences from multiracial coalition work, APALC stressed that framing and addressing questions about how such coalitions should function is an important part of the process of innovating new models for collaboration.

APALC’s reflection on multiracial coalitions also acknowledged that fears can arise over the possibility that racial identity will impede effective cross-group collaboration. Does a strong sense of racial identity...
The challenge of defining inclusiveness in community coalitions: Joyce Johnson, Lewis Brandon, Ed Whitfield, Beloved Community Center [BCC]

The Beloved Community Center [BCC], in Greensboro, NC is founded on Dr. Martin Luther King’s concept of the “beloved community,” the premise that true change can happen in a community by bringing together a critical mass of people trained to work together in nonviolence and inclusion. In their efforts to build a broadly inclusive peace coalition, the BCC struggled with how to define the limits of inclusiveness for any issue.

ED: We were handing out the peace pledge along the way, marching under our banner, “Not In Our Name,” and people would actually say “I couldn’t possibly have that, I can’t be for peace because I’m in the Reserves, or my son is in the Marines.” To us these were not reasons. And I found the question, “What does it mean if you’re for peace?” quite interesting. I guess one of the things I was curious about was what are we asking people to do in saying that they’re for peace? Does it really mean that they can’t be against war because they’re in the Reserves?

JOYCE: Part of this work of building inclusive community around the conversation of peace is that some people are going to exclude themselves because they think being involved in a conversation about peace means taking a position against a given conflict.

ED: We were not out there holding signs that said the president is an idiot, we shouldn’t support what he’s doing. We were just saying let’s think about what we’re doing and take this approach. That was the position. And that has been a central question: How broad do we make the Greensboro Peace Coalition? In those initial stages, there were some discussions about how we may need to have an ex-Marine represented to get that viewpoint. But we also had some political groups that wanted to be involved with directing our activities from the early stages, and we had to say that we wanted this to be so inclusive that a broad number of people – especially the faith communities – felt involved. And we made decisions through consensus rather than voting, which was important to making everybody under that broad umbrella feel included and that their voices were represented. So of course, some people came with a very clear answer to what was going on. And other people were struggling with what was going on and we didn’t want to exclude any of them. Eventually [a particular socialist organization] pretty much excluded itself from us because we were too broad-based and we weren’t going to let them control the Greensboro Peace Coalition.

LEWIS: There have been other situations where a litmus-test question comes up that we had to get past, like someone wanting to take a vote to make sure that everybody else had a sufficiently correct position on Israel for them to be able to stay. And this got to be a fight, but it again looks at the question of inclusiveness. How do you take a stand? How do you build a community around something without trying to divide? On the one hand people will say good fences make good neighbors, but picking apples together would probably make even better neighbors.

automatically mean that the dynamics of even the best-intentioned multiracial coalition will be characterized by group self-interest? Will different racial groups put less time and energy into a coalition effort when there is less attention on that issue in their community? In discussing these questions, members of APALC constructed a thoughtful view of these realities, not grounded in the reflexive fear of equating racial identity with group self-interest. It is not that the self-interest of racial groups does not factor in a multiracial coalition – it does. Yet, the existence of the coalition holds the tension that is needed for seeking a balance in setting priorities across different sets of interests. Moreover, APALC returned to the theme of the interplay between its interethic work within the Asian community, and their interracial work within their cross-racial coalition; balancing priorities is not solely a function of cross-racial work, but of any collaborative enterprise.

The challenge of defining inclusiveness in community coalitions. The Beloved Community Center (BCC), in Greensboro, NC, was founded on Dr. Martin Luther King’s concept of the “beloved community,” the belief that true change can happen in a community by bringing together a critical mass
of people trained to work together in nonviolence and inclusion. A principle of their work in building diverse coalitions is maximum inclusiveness. Yet during their reflective learning sessions, they spoke repeatedly of the difficult balance between including a broad base of people in their work and the pressure to take a position on an issue which might narrow the range of inclusion.

One example of this challenge occurred in 2002, when the U.S. was considering going to war in the Middle East. BCC had introduced a community dialogue on the issue of peace, hoping to convene a broadly inclusive coalition. One of their struggles involved getting past “litmus-test questions” that would require a bottom-line agreement from all members of the group related to the issue. Another challenge stemmed from groups or individuals who wanted to set the coalition’s agenda – in this case, a socialist organization eventually left the coalition because the coalition would not take a clear position. Does being in a coalition require taking a particular position on the issue at hand? Although this is not a question about cross-racial work, BCC described how the same question recurs regardless of the source of differences in perspectives – whether stemming from race, religion, or politics. In fact, they have found that differences are often more charged among different faith communities than across racial boundaries.

BCC’s analysis of their efforts to build a broad-based coalition to discuss peace raises serious questions concerning the deeper meaning of democratic principles such as inclusiveness. On one hand, they

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**Establishing trust and open communication in diverse coalitions:** Alma Purvis, Beloved Community Center

*This example from the Beloved Community Center highlights the way that the concrete practice of hearing different perspectives is foundational to working collectively across deep social divides such as race.*

ALMA: Sometimes people don’t have any idea that somebody else’s perception of reality is totally different. So I’m just amazed when I sit in a group and listen to people’s different perspectives on the same issue and it’s all because of where you come from. It is because of your culture. It is because of your race. It is because of your experiences. So all of this misunderstanding is real because we all come from different places.

We started the Community Dialogue on Education group… We had one particular issue around a black high school. The superintendent, the school board wanted to tear down the last high school that was all black. Probably, there were only three schools left in North Carolina that were traditionally black high schools. And so this particular high school has a history that is so rich and powerful and still impacts the community today. So the people in the dialogue group could not understand why anybody would not want a brand new state-of-the-art high school. So it took three months of trying to help people like the CEOs understand what it means to a black person to have something that’s been a historical site for all of their lives. Something that they identify with. Something that has pride and connection to their whole history.

And then finally one day, Lewis, one of the guys on the staff said, “I know you don’t understand this, but this is not just a building. Buildings carry identification.” And he just went on to explain to these people why this school meant so much to this community. This school is located in a community where the grandmothers sit on the porches. And when the kids walk home from school in the afternoon, the grandmothers talk to them, give them cookies, and watch them safely go along their way. And the grandmothers went to that school, and so when the games are happening, the grandmothers get off the porch and they go and sit in the stands, and they cheer for the kids. So we’re talking about generations here. And so as we began to talk on that level, the people’s understanding began to open up. And so then we got the support of all of those top-level business people who then went back to the school board and the superintendent and said, “We support renovating Dudley as opposed to tearing it down.” And so that’s the plan now.
saw that the stated goal of a particular coalition can exclude those who make assumptions about who can and cannot be included in that group (such as people who assume that they should not be part of a peace coalition simply because they have relatives active in the military). On the other hand, seeking maximum breadth in a coalition can exclude those whose interest in joining the coalition was to advocate a particular principle (such as the socialist organization that excluded itself from the peace coalition).

By examining how these principles play out in their concrete work of building community according to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s notion of “beloved community,” BCC began to find answers similar to the APALC’s struggle with being a minority member of cross-racial coalitions. It is staying engaged with these tensions – whether decisions should be made by consensus or voting; whether there are limits to inclusiveness – that gives coalitions facing differences the potential to build the kind of community that can bring about systemic change.

Establishing trust and open communication in diverse coalitions. As BCC is centrally concerned with building community across different social divides – including, but not limited to, racial divides – their experiences offer rich insights into the challenge of acknowledging these divides while also transcending them. Just as there is no recipe for organizing using racial identity, there is no formula for working in a coalition that crosses significant social divides. Instead, practitioners’ stories describe successes achieved through principles such as tolerance, respectful listening, and displaying an authentic desire to transcend differences and work toward change. When bridging racial divides, the experience of marginalized groups is often misunderstood or wholly unknown. Building inclusive community requires the concrete practice of drawing out the contrasts of lived experience that have given rise to entrenched social divisions.

In their reflective learning session, BCC described their efforts to find tools for building trust across social divides. Differences in perspective are real and often strongly held, but these differences are constructed through specific experiences. One story that illustrates the difficulty of overcoming perspective involved a traditionally black high school in Greensboro, NC. The school was slated to be torn down because it was old and in need of upgrades. Whites in the community could not understand why blacks were so strongly opposed to tearing down the school in the face of getting a new, modern school. In discussing the issue of the black high school, it took stories about how generations of blacks in the community identified their history and sense of community in relation to that high school. After hearing these personal stories, the white members of the coalition could begin to understand why the school was so important to blacks – because it was more than a school. The racial divide was not simply due to a different set of experiences, but to the fact that the experience of blacks in the community was simply not known to others.

This example illustrates the challenge of finding practices that work within cross-racial coalitions. In the multiracial coalition that BCC had convened to deal with issues related to education, the group had set ground rules requiring people to listen respectfully to one another. By recounting the ties that blacks in Greensboro had with the historically black high school – which led to a difference in perspective across race lines on whether to tear it down – the group was able to reach consensus on keeping the school.

With respect to racial divides – where the experience of marginalized groups is often unknown or misunderstood – building an inclusive community requires painstakingly drawing out contrasts in lived experience that have given rise to social divisions. When different groups develop an understanding of what divides them, it then becomes possible for them to understand how to connect.
Respecting differences in organizing tactics: Randy Johnston, Beloved Community Center; Hollis Watkins, Southern Echo

When working in cross-racial coalitions, differences must be acknowledged; when they are respected they often create the broader base needed to achieve a larger goal.

HOLLIS: We had a situation in Mississippi which showed the importance of a broad base and the relevance of culture. We were trying to stop a waste facility that was going to be accommodating seven different counties up in the Golden Triangle area and was affecting both the poor white and the black community. And these communities came together and they were all excited, but there was a tremendous difference in the way they thought that things needed to be done. But as they were all focused on stopping the thing from coming in, they were willing to trust the methods that each of the different communities had been accustomed to using. You know the white community was accustomed to, well, you know this elected official, you go whisper into their ear and you talk to them and get them to see what is really going on and then they'll back out of this. So that's what they did. Black folk was used to, hey, we get a bunch of them and scare the hell out of them and they'll back off of this, you know. And the white folks were scared to death of that. So when one of the [white] ladies says, well, I've known the head man for years. As a matter of fact, I babysat him. I know I can talk to him and show him to get it to move.

But when [the white community’s] approach did not work, they stayed in the process and supported the method coming from the black culture. And getting large numbers of people involved in that process, including attorneys and large numbers of folks rallying to the judges in their various means ultimately enabled them to prevent [the waste facility] from coming in. So culture is extremely important, you know, as we move through the work and the inclusiveness of everybody in that process. So you had two different cultures in leadership but they had the single focus, the single vision, which was to stop that facility from coming in and it was ultimately successful.

RANDY: I think that's been the same experience in Greensboro where the separate cultures, black and white, do come together around specific school issues where they each have an interest and a stake in the community and worked together. And they did. They used the strengths of each culture. But as soon as the issue was resolved, they kind of went back to their own places. And I think one of the questions is how can you sustain that?

Respecting differences in organizing tactics.

In addition to challenges related to how decisions are made, how inclusiveness is defined, and how differences in perspective can be understood, there are differences within cross-racial coalitions that come from diverse – even contrasting – strategies for community activism. These differences sometimes run along race lines, however, there is no single organizing strategy for any racial group. The decision to listen to and prioritize divergent organizing tactics clearly presents a challenge to a coalition that is bent on success. Nevertheless, by being willing to consider the strength of each group’s method, difference can be acknowledged and perhaps even seen as vital to success.

An example of this challenge comes from the story told by Southern Echo of an organizing effort against in which blacks and whites in Mississippi came together in a coalition to fight a waste facility. Each group happened to favor a different approach to taking action – blacks favored mobilizing large numbers of people to protest while whites were biased toward trying to persuade their elected officials to oppose the facility. Since white members of the coalition were sure that their way would work (and because they were uncomfortable with mobilizing large groups of people, particularly blacks), the coalition initially decided to adopt this approach. When it did not work, the other approach was used, and was ultimately successful.

Facing the challenge of contrasting approaches used by different groups in a coalition can require the coalition’s members to acknowledge as well as examine the strengths of other groups’ methods.
Furthermore, by agreeing to act on the black community’s approach of mobilizing large numbers of people, their white counterparts faced the challenge of overcoming their fears and prejudices regarding black political empowerment.

What tools and practices allow multiracial coalitions to transform the success over an issue into a broader community-building agenda? What further challenges arise for multiracial coalitions in the long term? Community practice stories demonstrate how new successes necessitate and drive the reinvention of old tools to accommodate new creative tensions in multiracial work.

LEARNING POINT 3: INVENTIVE COALITIONS BRING NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

While new challenges constantly present themselves throughout cross-racial coalition work, coalitions that take on these challenges find themselves in an exciting and unknown place, navigating how to best work together in an inventive and meaningful way. Coalition partners who work together creatively can help each other build new capacities and skills in each other’s organizations. Multiracial coalitions discover

Building new capacities through inventive collaboration: Kathay Feng, Dan Ichinose, Asian Pacific American Legal Center

The Asian Pacific American Legal Center [APALC] undertook a large effort to work in a multiracial coalition to re-draw voting district lines to better represent the voting interests of each district. This example illustrates how they responded to the Supreme Court’s decision that race could no longer be a primary factor in redistricting by organizing around communities of interest.

KATHAY: One of the first critical moments was identifying our key partners and persuading them that it was not too early to think about redistricting. This was around April 2000, and one of the most common responses from folks was, “God, that’s at least a year off, why are we creating coalitions right now? We won’t be able to sustain interest.” For coalition building, I think one of the critical things was to begin developing personal relations with MALDEF [Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund] and the LDF [NAACP Legal Defense Fund] folks. With MALDEF, that meant meeting with their key attorney who had been around since the ‘80s and ‘90s doing redistricting. I met with her and we discussed the structure of a redistricting unit [for MALDEF] that would be able to complement our unit. And so we were there when they hired the person who was going to anchor it. We didn’t choose the person, but we helped figure out who they wanted to hire. Then, once that person was hired, we all sat down and said, “OK here’s how we’re going to do it.”

So we helped them decide upon a structure, and then also what their outreach plan was going to be. This outreach model or the community data collection model, was really developed in coalition. We can talk about a lot of frustrating parts of the process, but this was definitely positive. We did a lot of talking about legally what the changed landscape was. And it was very clear that the Supreme Court was saying to us that race can no longer be a primary factor. In the 1990s, MALDEF had gone to the [community-based] groups and superficially asked them, “OK, what do you want.” But then in the end, they had experts in a room looking at maps of the different pockets of racial groups, building 51 percent [majority minority] districts. We now had to
that learning skills and group process techniques not only make their work more possible, but often lead to more innovative solutions. The practitioner stories from the reflective learning process yield examples of new possibilities that arise when persisting with work across differences, including building new organizational capacities as well as bringing a learning process into community work.

**Building new capacities through inventive collaboration.** Working through the challenges of multiracial collaboration can be mutually strengthening to individual groups and organizations. The Asian Pacific American Legal Center [APALC] undertook a large effort to work in a multiracial coalition to re-draw voting district lines to better represent community voting interests following the 2000 census. During redistricting, racial groups traditionally attempt to form as many districts as possible representing their own community. However, the Supreme Court decided that race could no longer serve as a primary factor in redistricting. This forced APALC and its partners to build a non-race based argument for the districts they proposed, forcing them to invent a new community engagement process. No longer would it be enough to gather a minimum amount of input from community-based groups on their needs and desires. They needed a more elaborate strategy – one in which rigorous data collection could take place to defend the non-racial basis for new districts, while also remaining clear enough for people to engage one another. Moreover, it made sense to work in deeper partnership with other coalition members. APALC was able to do this as a result of the multiracial relationships it had formed during the census outreach process.

While challenges exist throughout cross-racial coalition work, coalitions that accept these challenges find themselves in an unknown place, trying to balance making time for collaboration while figuring out how to best work together in an inventive and significant way. In the early stages of their collaboration, APALC and MALDEF (the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund) created a deeper, more inventive process by designing and aligning their community outreach approaches, rather than simply agreeing to coordinate their efforts on a superficial level.
VITAL DIFFERENCE: THE ROLE OF RACE IN BUILDING COMMUNITY

At the level of the multiracial coalition, the redistricting process brought partnership and innovation in strategies for working with communities to define their interests, both in terms of racial identity and lines of interest cutting across race. In this way, the work of meeting the challenge of multiracial collaboration was mutually strengthening to both organizations.

**Bringing a learning process into community work.** People do not automatically know how to interact productively in the face of differences. Dynamics of opposition and competition are more familiar and more strongly reinforced by social norms. These dynamics not only risk impeding a multiracial coalition’s work, they can also reinforce divisions among groups. Practitioners emphasize the need for constant reinvention of ways to encourage and enhance democratic dialogue, allowing differences to drive the ongoing advancement of social justice and broader community-building goals.

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**Bringing a learning process into community work:** Alma Purvis, Beloved Community Center; Stephanie Pollack, Conservation Law Foundation

*In a small group discussion, Alma Purvis of Beloved Community Center [BCC] and Stephanie Pollack of Conservation Law Foundation [CLF] discuss strategies that they have used to teach people the necessary skills to engage in listening to different voices.*

ALMA: The vision of the beloved community [is] helping people to believe that it’s possible that we can have a community, a city, where everybody is valued, where everybody is respected, where everybody is given the opportunity to have a voice. Every program that we do, everything that we try to initiate lies at the heart of that. The homeless ministry is going to function because the people who are working in that ministry are modeling community themselves. If the education mission is going to be powerful, then we have to model community among those people who are working within that group.

We need to be able to help people say “We can’t be against the business community, we’re not fighting them, it’s going to take all of us to make this thing work.” The rivalry can’t be part of the plan to have a better community. The message is that we’re trying to bring all people together so that we’re working in unity and not competing against one another. And in doing that, we find it difficult to enable people because that model of “I’m right and you’re wrong” is so powerful, and we’re having trouble breaking out of that.

STEPHANIE: That totally resonates. We tried to do a coalition on transit issues, and the neighborhood people wouldn’t sit in the room with the big employers. And we kept saying, “People who have a lot of employees need the transit system to work because people have to get to work, and a lot of their employees can’t afford a car or can’t afford to drive and park it everyday. And you want the transit system to work because your neighborhood isn’t getting the transit service.” And still they said, “But they’re businesses.”

So we practiced something called “group learning.” What we try to do in these conversations, especially the ones that involve very disparate stakeholders is to spend time at the beginning creating ground rules, including things like “I am open to changing my mind,” sometimes making people sign a piece of paper at the

(continued on next page)
beginning of the process that says this. And we’ve had people walk out of processes. But at some point, if they’re not willing to sit at that table and say, “I’ve considered the possibility that I’ll have a different opinion at the end,” they’re going to be thorns in your side.

Another thing that I’ve heard other people do – and I find it’s very powerful – is to make people state the other side’s position. We would ask the grassroots person to talk from the CEO’s position, telling them, “OK, you’re the CEO of Kmart. For the next five minutes – you’ve been sitting here in this room for three weeks and we’ve been talking about this – I want you to get up and make the best case for the Kmart position.” And if people take it seriously, it’s a very powerful experience. Then we would do the same thing to the Kmart executive, asking him to say, “I’m the worker, this is my wage, my back got hurt because I had to schlep around this big heavy refrigerator.” It’s sort of a literal walking in each others’ shoes, but in a structured way.

So a lot of it has to do with who’s at the table, but also with how you train them to be at the table. What sort of expectations do you create for them about changing their minds? It’s a very fundamental thing.

How do multiracial and other kinds of diverse coalitions invent ways of working together that help them overcome the tensions inherent in dealing with significant differences? Groups working inventively in these situations have discovered that it is important to make group learning an explicit goal. By framing the challenge of working across difference in terms of what kind of development or learning is needed by the group, there are suddenly new possibilities for concretely addressing this challenge.

If new dynamics are needed in groups in which significant social divides exist, how can those dynamics be introduced and developed? In carrying out a group learning process, practitioners have found it helpful to set ground rules for interaction, where members of the group have to agree to be open to changing their minds. In addition, role-playing – stating the perspective of another person or group as though it were one’s own – can help interrupt oppositional divides. Both techniques are developmental and require group members to adopt new behaviors that uphold the principles of democratic community.

Experiences from community practice show clearly bringing together a multiracial group is not enough. Groups must learn to behave in ways that will lead to new possibilities for social change – instead of reinforcing entrenched dynamics of opposition and competition. This retraining can be a challenge when urgent issues are at stake and differences seem insurmountable. Still, in addition to gaining new possibilities for effecting social change, people also acquire new skills for democratic community participation.

LEARNING POINT 4: RACE CAN BE USED TO DISTORT AS WELL AS TRANSFORM MULTIRACIAL COMMUNITY BUILDING WORK

Practitioners working for social justice in their communities regularly confront an opposition that uses race to distort or derail their work. Multiracial community-building efforts can be put down as being “driven by race,” or simply dismissed as unimportant. Additionally, multiracial efforts are often minimized as working toward the self-interest of a particular racial group, thereby distracting from larger issues and further perpetuating existing problems. Nevertheless, practitioners believe race has to be directly engaged in a meaningful way in order to mitigate and transform the negative effects of race-based distortions in community building and social justice work. Stories from community practice reveal that while race can
be used to derail multiracial efforts (sometimes by oversimplifying racial difference), racial divisions can be transformed through a multiracial process.

**Race is used to derail multiracial efforts.** As part of the reflective learning process, members of the Beloved Community Center (BCC) told the story about the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project, a multiracial coalition of community leaders brought together to cultivate reconciliation and understanding of the events of November 3, 1979, when Ku Klux Klan and Nazi Party members opened fire on a Greensboro civil rights demonstration. This story illustrates a primary goal of BCC, which is to surface the persistently negative assumptions and values that accompany race in our culture so that they cannot be hidden or used to devalue an effort.

After considerable work had been done by the organizers to bring together a multiracial coalition of community leaders to oversee the Truth and Reconciliation Project, a newspaper editorial stated that the only person of standing involved in the process was the white mayor. By ignoring the presence of numerous prominent black leaders involved in the effort, the editorial effectively discounted their role. Thus, the entrenched assumption that blacks are less important than whites was used to distort the efforts of the multiracial coalition.

In this case, the work of the multiracial coalition is aimed at raising questions about how racism was a primary factor in legitimating the violence that took place against a labor-related demonstration. The organizers of the coalition believe that race has to be engaged in order to transform how racial dynamics operate in a community. In other words, to change how people relate across racial lines, it is critical to explore how race is used to distort and derail community building and social justice work.

There is more than one way that race has the power to distort. One way is to belittle community building efforts (such as the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Project) as “driven by race.” Another way is to deny that race has played a role in the distortion of reality, such as denying that race was a factor in the outcome of a trial that concluded that the acts of the Ku Klux Klan in the attack were not motivated by race. Community practitioners, such as those leading the effort in Greensboro, believe that the extent to which race is used to distort reality must be brought to the surface in order to change deep-rooted racial dynamics. In engaging with and examining these distortions, communities can begin to transform and mitigate the negative effects of entrenched racism.

**Racial difference can be oversimplified.** Talking about race can distort and oversimplify reality. Community-building practitioners in the reflective learning process spoke of their struggle over how to best address race in their work. They talked about how people of color in the U.S. often experience race distinctions fundamentally in terms of black vs. white, such as Asian-Americans who feel pressured to “act white” to avoid being perceived as aligning with blacks. Race categories, such as Asian, White, Latino and Black can be meaningless – all of these groups are inherently multiethnic. However, even oversimplified categories (such as Asian and Hispanic) are needed to keep everything from being mapped onto the black/white dichotomy. In other words, racial categories are artificial and overly simple, but without them, community practitioners argue that race would be even more oversimplified or more often overlooked.

Stories from community practice describe how race is experienced as both artificial and real. At one level, race distinctions are not about reality, but about classifying people for a political purpose. At another level, people do suffer real economic, social, health, and other consequences because of their race. During a particularly lively reflection process dialogue session, participants stressed that despite the
Racial difference can be oversimplified: Dayna Cunningham, Rockefeller Program Officer; Karin Wang, Asian Pacific American Legal Center; Gerald Torres, Texas LEADS; Nelson Johnson, Beloved Community Center

*When a conversation about race between Race and Democracy Project participants becomes dominated by the black/white construct, the organizers step back to look at reasons that race is often represented as a predominantly black/white issue as well as how race and economics are intertwined.*

DAYNA: I noticed in this conversation that we started out talking about race in a lot of different ways, and then the weight of the conversation just tipped very heavily over to black people. And other people here, all of whom are “of color” in one way or another – everybody has a color, everyone has a race – got silenced. And I think we [blacks] tend to own this issue. We tend to take it. There’s a history and there are reasons, but I’m just wondering what impact that has on our ability to unearth the working parts of racism, as well as on our ability to build cross-racial coalitions.

KARIN: I don’t think there is an answer right now, but you were getting at the southern vision of race and you summarized, in a lot of ways, what I want to say. I grew up in the Midwest, and people didn’t know what to call me, and so I actually got asked if I was Mexican. I think people knew I wasn’t black because my skin wasn’t dark enough, but I clearly wasn’t white. I’ve always been boxed into that kind of paradigm, and so I struggle with trying to acknowledge what I think it must mean to be black, and I cannot say that I understand what it means to come from a history of slavery, to come from that kind of perspective as a community. But being on the West Coast now, in many ways it’s about trying to find common issues, communities of interest to work around, whether it’s language or immigration policy. But we’re always being boxed back into the race thing when it’s not necessarily the right box to be in. One of the frustrations I have with how Asians fall into this paradigm is that we often get painted as being white, because the choice is to be white or black. And I think that’s how Asians get played out in the media because we are “the good people of color,” therefore we’re actually really white.

GERALD: What occurred to me as we’re all talking is that one of the things that we’ve witnessed in our lifetime is the triumph of the southern vision of race as the dominant vision of race in America. I mean by that two things. One is that it’s a way to discipline nonblack racialized groups by saying, “Look, the measure of your social progress is your distance from blackness.” So that pan-Asian ethnicity is becoming a faux racial category just like Hispanic is a faux racial category. But the idea is, unless we have these broad categories, we can’t think, “There’s black, there’s white.” White’s a multiethnic category, right? But it’s not a multiethnic category because it’s defined against blackness. Yellowness is a multiethnic category except when it’s defined against whiteness and blackness. The same thing with brown. We’ve got to talk about race because we’ve got to take race back from the people who want to bury race. Because everybody says that race isn’t real, race isn’t real. And if you just stop dealing with it, it will go away. It’s real when it has economic consequences, and to cut it free from the economic foundation is to act as though it’s something only in some people’s hearts. And then it’s no longer about the way you organize society. That’s what’s really critical.

NELSON: There’s an almost inextricable connection between race and economics – people would prefer to talk about race if you could separate those two. It would make people more psychologically comfortable with each other without engaging the use of race in this country beginning with slavery, with how people use history to build up economic benefits and so forth. When you unhook it from that, it becomes a kind of Rodney King, “let’s all just get along,” thing without dealing with all of these other complex matters.
Transforming racial divisions through a multiracial process: Karin Wang, Kathay Feng, Asian Pacific American Legal Center

The following is from a discussion of a legal case that APALC took on regarding workers’ rights in the garment industry. It illustrates the importance of a multiracial response to systemic injustice, as well as how the media often distorts multiracial efforts—in this case, by reducing this story as an Asian incident.

KARIN: Multiracial work tends to get simplified by the outside as being only about a particular group’s self-interest. Nevertheless, I think you’ve heard from a lot of my colleagues that one of our visions, one of our driving principles, is coalition building. We can’t get stuff done, especially in multiracial, multiethnic California—especially L.A. [Los Angeles] County—unless we build coalitions.

KATHAY: We have to build a society where social justice brings everybody up together. If there’s a single group that’s left behind, or, if we’re only championing one group at the expense of another, we will not achieve true social justice because somebody will always replace that bottom rung with a new group and that group will always become the new downtrodden, which will impact all of us.

KARIN: And so we have explicitly tried to organize on multiracial and multiethnic levels, and there’s so many examples. As many of you know, our agency got on the map in many ways because we represented Thai garment workers who were imprisoned in a garment factory east of Los Angeles. The attorney, Julie Su, made a very explicit decision along with the workers that this was going to be a Thai and Latino workers’ case. Because of their immigration status, the Thai workers were actually held and enslaved behind barbed wire. The Latino workers—they were women, primarily—worked in a front shop that was a little bit different. They weren’t enslaved, but they were denied proper wages and they had horrible working conditions.

KATHAY: There was also a lot of distrust from Latino workers because sometimes the factory owner would be Asian and so they would associate Julie with their oppressors. She felt that coalition building was important because ultimately the reason why the garment industry is so exploitative is because it will always find an immigrant group or some other group that can be exploited. So if it isn’t the Thai garment workers, it’s going to be the Latinos. If it isn’t the Latinos, then it’s going to be somebody else who comes along and so if you don’t reform industry-wide and change their practices, then you’re always going to have it fall on somebody’s head.

KARIN: A lot of people have totally focused on the fact that this was a Thai garment workers’ case. Julie [also] speaks Spanish and she works with both communities. She has tried really hard to make it a multiracial organizing campaign, and I think she was very frustrated during that case that the focus rested so heavily on the Thai workers. It was always about exploiting Thai workers—even the Latino press in our own city did an article where they completely ignored the Latino workers. And so it’s interesting that even though we tried to organize across racial lines, we were often painted as only speaking up for Asians.
The Conservation Law Foundation (CLF) recognized that Boston neighborhoods generally represent distinct racial groups. During the early stages of a major development planned for the Boston waterfront, race – couched in terms of neighborhoods – was implicitly used to try to prevent people of color from having a voice. Public meetings were planned in a white neighborhood in South Boston, where blacks and other people of color from the adjacent neighborhood were traditionally unwelcome. This lack of openness in the public feedback process reinforced the entrenched perception in Boston’s neighborhoods that what happens in another neighborhood – even if it is next door – is no one else’s business. This cycle of exclusion and separation has long perpetuated racial divisions across the city and tended to derail attempts to build community across those divisions.

CLF found a legal hook in the Public Waterfront Act, which they used as a tool to bring neighborhoods together across racial lines. Since the act stated that the waterfront belonged to the public, decisions about how to develop the waterfront should involve all of the public – not just certain neighborhoods. By organizing across the racially segregated neighborhoods of Boston, CLF created an opportunity to transcend Boston’s entrenched race and class divisions. This story shows that although race can be used to accentuate separation and difference, it can also play a vital role in building an empowered community. CLF’s work illustrates how attention to race can create a more transformative model of civic engagement.

A different example from APALC also illustrates the potential for multiracial coalition building to initiate systemic change. In California, APALC took on a legal case involving the violation of workers rights in the garment industry. A group of Thai workers were imprisoned in a garment factory east of Los Angeles. APALC made the explicit choice to construct its case as multiracial because they viewed the real problem as the exploitative practices in the garment industry. Therefore, they included the Latino workers who worked under less extreme – but still exploitative – conditions in the same factory.

This choice made APALC’s job much harder in several ways. Plaintiffs spoke different languages and the Latinos had to overcome their suspicions about Asians that stemmed from their oppression by Asian factory owners. APALC’s choice to construct a multiracial case also made it more difficult to win because the rights of the Latino workers were not as clearly violated as those of the Thai workers.

Nevertheless, APALC believed that this case represented an example of the kind of multiracial work that is fundamental to systemic change of many real, underlying problems in community and in society. Their perspective from efforts to implement the principle of coalition building was that race is often used to distract people from the larger issues, and therefore perpetuates them. In the garment workers case, there were a number of race-based distortions of APALC’s multiracial work. The press – even the Latino newspapers – portrayed the case as a story of Asians working in their own self-interest when it was explicitly a multiracial effort. On a larger scale, the case was portrayed as a localized problem – enslavement of Thai workers in one factory – when the systematic exploitation of immigrants from all countries contributes to the garment industry’s practice of maximizing profits.
The knowledge represented in this report does not argue in favor of one theoretical viewpoint, but rather creates valuable linkages across prevailing theories on the role of race in community organizing. In addition, the lens of community practice helps us see the specific form that ideas discussed in the literature take on the ground, as well as providing a vivid depiction of the challenges of productively engaging race in complex, high-stakes situations.

For example, stories from community practice support the argument that Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres make in their book, *The Miner’s Canary*, namely that race must be defined as inherently political. Using a political definition of race allows for an evolutionary process where individuals “see and address injustices to people of color and, beyond them, injustices to other oppressed groups such as poor whites.” In this process, individuals gain consciousness of their own race, understand that their disadvantaged position is not unique vis-à-vis the positions of other racial groups, and eventually transcend race by calling for political and social measures that comprise a broader social justice agenda. Despite their belief that racial awareness is an evolutionary process that eventually leads to a reformulation of how people think about race today, Guinier and Torres argue that racial awareness and solidarity is a necessary starting point for this process. The data and analysis from community building work presented in this report illustrates that practitioners address racial identity as both an organizing tool and a point of departure for multiracial collaboration.

In acknowledging the political reality of race, practitioners in the reflective learning process made clear that a white-black view of the world is inadequate for working in the complex multiracial world of community building. Their stories converge with the thinking of Angela Blackwell, Stewart Kwoh, and Manuel Pastor, who, in their book, *Searching for the Uncommon Common Ground: New Dimensions on Race in America*, argue that the conventional white-black racial divide is an anachronistic lens through which to view today’s organizing climate. These authors suggest that – unlike during the 1960s and 1970s – many of today’s community organizers work in “the absence of a clear, focused vision for racial justice.” While conceding that “an understanding of the persistent disadvantage due to race that permeates the black-white context is necessary but not sufficient for exploring the full dimensions of racial justice,” Blackwell, Kwoh and Pastor argue that community and labor organizing initiatives must focus on asset and wealth accumulation across races to improve circumstances for any one race. Through policies described as “targeted universalism,” the authors suggest that the fight for social justice is best pursued through fighting for policies that benefit the majority of Americans, while giving a particular lift to disadvantaged minorities. The analysis of stories from community practice reveals the thinking and challenges that groups face as they work in multiracial coalitions toward such policies.

With their clear understanding of the volatility of race, community practitioners collectively create a new
body of knowledge regarding the practical problems of organizing around race. Despite their recognition of the challenges of addressing the persistent problem of racial exclusion, the stories from these practitioners contrast markedly with William Julius Wilson’s and Paul Osterman’s argument that effective community organizing is necessarily race-neutral. Speaking about the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) model in his book *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide*, Wilson argues against framing organizing strategies around race because “it is possible that defining an issue as a Latino issue or as a black issue runs the risk of provoking marginalization: if this is a black (Latino) problem, let African-American (Mexican-American) citizens solve it.” Instead, Wilson maintains that organizing efforts should take advantage of the fact that gains in the U.S. economy have occurred disproportionately to the upper ranges of the population, resulting in the poor and working classes from all races continuing to have a hard time making ends meet. Similarly, Osterman suggests that to organize successfully, organizing issues need to be inclusive and therefore, non-race based.

Although the practitioners whose experiences are represented in this report believe that it is critical to carefully articulate the complexity of organizing issues, they also believe that it is important to tackle race head-on. Their stories make it clear that dealing with race in all of its complexities and difficulties can be transformative, not divisive. Further, not addressing race can undermine progress toward social justice. Race is too significant as both a divisive social force and a generative source of creative resistance to be put in the background of organizing strategy. The learning from practitioners described in this report illustrates how they have found effective ways to acknowledge and confront race, and to use it as a unifying rather than dividing theme.

For practitioners who work in community building and face similar challenges in dealing with racial difference and cross-racial collaboration, the stories in this report offer the following recommendations:

1. **Value and strengthen racial identity in constructing more effective cross-racial alliances.** When people connect with who they are, they can better connect with and understand what they share with others. Sometimes this is important to do before starting multiracial work, if strengthening racial identity will help overcome problematic power dynamics. This can also be a valuable ongoing process alongside participation in coalitions.

2. **Use a developmental process to strengthen and value racial identity.** Disenfranchised groups often benefit from support and encouragement in building confidence and self-esteem connected to their racial identity. A process of growth and development works to break down the sense of invisibility that can impede effective participation in a multiracial coalition.

3. **Recognize the unique ways in which partners in multiracial work bring value to collaborations.** Often each partner brings a different set of experiences, and therefore different strengths, to the coalition work. Identifying the value of each partner’s contribution is critical to maintaining a dynamic of mutual learning and advancing the work.

4. **Learn to interact productively in the face of difference.** Opposition and competition are more familiar strategies when a group is confronted by difference. It is helpful to remember that differences in perspective arise from differences in experience of social exclusion. Ground rules that promote honoring differences as valid (such as not disagreeing with them) and learning about the source of differences in perspective (such as asking questions about the origin of those differences) can teach people new forms of interaction in the face of difference.
5. Become aware of the connection between acknowledging difference and finding common ground. Particularly in the case of racial divisions, the experience of some groups is often unknown or misunderstood by others. In a multiracial coalition, it can be transformative to “excavate” the source of experience that has led to a particular viewpoint. When members of a multiracial group learn what has led them to think differently from one another and how racial exclusion has affected them in different ways, they can better understand how to connect.

6. Reinvent the strategies for engaging racial difference. Every coalition brings a different set of challenges related to racial difference. What has worked in the past often needs to be adjusted based on an issue, a shift in power relations, or when entering a new stage of collaboration. It helps to think in terms of creativity and experimentation – mistakes and struggles regularly inform the reinvention process.
CONCLUSION

This report began with the assertion that knowledge of people who work on the ground in disenfranchised communities is vital for framing social problems in their true complexity, crafting effective solutions, and evaluating the essential evidence of success. We argued that the knowledge constructed through the struggle for systemic change amid poverty, racism and inadequate services fills a gap in the data that currently exists in the social justice field. Without developmental knowledge – formulated by those who do community work over time and integrating context, history, politics, culture, and place – we lack a critical source of learning needed to build healthy and just communities.

This report illustrates that practitioners possess a wealth of knowledge and that through reflective learning this body of knowledge can be excavated, analyzed and captured. Furthermore, this can be done in a manner that supports and enhances the work of practitioners while also expanding the knowledge base used to drive policymaking and inform funding programs.

The more I got into the work and into watching what you all were doing, I could see that … it’s not just about identity and social difficulty in trying to communicate about what race is, but it is also about the work that race does in the various struggles you all are engaged in.

—Dayna Cunningham, Rockefeller Program Officer

Additionally, the work in this report demonstrates that the knowledge derived from community practice is vital to extending – and in some cases revising – existing knowledge in the field of community building with respect to the role of race. In particular, the analysis of community-building experience illustrates the importance of engaging racial difference and racial identity on the ground. Looking across diverse geographic and racial contexts, we learn that strengthening racial identity and grappling with differences within multiracial coalitions can be transformative to the work of building democracy at the community level. Moreover, practitioners know engaging race is required to build healthy and just communities in the face of persistent racial exclusion.

The key lesson from this analysis is that engaging race helps drive the ongoing reinvention of democracy-building tools and process. Thus, race plays a significant role in redefining and often transforming the broader struggle for social justice. This does not mean that engaging race is easy – it is hard but unavoidable work. Without the knowledge constructed through an analysis of practitioners’ stories, this important lesson regarding the role of race in building community would not be as clear or as palpable to those either inside or outside of community practice. The stories depict the specific forms that racially inclusive democracy can take, the practices that are used to invent and foster grassroots democracy, and the theorizing that practitioners carry out in taking on the challenges of race in community building. Only by engaging practitioners in excavating and exploring what they have learned from doing the work can we access this valuable data. This data not only reveals what community practitioners do, it illuminates how they think about their actions.

We conclude by calling for funders, policymakers, and practitioners working in the field of social justice to support and join the effort to build knowledge from community practice in the following ways:
1. We urge funders to distinguish between evaluation and knowledge building, and to make provisions in grantmaking for building knowledge regarding the nature of community practice. Documenting what has been effective in community building work is different than building knowledge about the issues and challenges that shape the work, the thinking that goes into the work, and the broader learning that emerges from day-to-day practice. Knowledge building is supported by a different set of processes than evaluation, and both are important. In fact, evaluation relies on being able to clearly define key parameters of effectiveness. Knowledge building through reflective learning supports practitioners in refining – and sometimes redefining – what it means for them to be effective in their work. Practitioners need support from funders to be able to create spaces for re-strategizing and retooling their work.

2. We call on funders and policymakers alike to commission practitioner knowledge in addition to academic knowledge to inform the design of new programs. As demonstrated in this report, the knowledge derived from on-the-ground community practice provides an important analysis of issues facing the field. Practitioner knowledge is too critical as a knowledge resource to be left out of the formative stages of policy and program development.

3. We urge the academy to acknowledge the importance and validity of practitioner knowledge by creating opportunities for reflective learning with local practitioners. Most academic institutions do not have strong intellectual alliances with local practitioners. Moreover, the academy does not make use of its primary mission (the advancement of knowledge) to support communities in uncovering the knowledge from their practice. Without this assistance, practitioners are left to articulate the learning that they have managed to excavate from their experience without adequate time or space for a more systematic effort. Furthermore, the academy could support and encouraged faculty and students to work with practitioners to capture and organize the learning from a collaborative community project to make it accessible to others beyond the project.

4. We appeal to practitioners to view reflective learning as a critical form of action. We hope that they will demand of themselves, their colleagues and others the space and time required to properly excavate and analyze the learning from their community practice. The practitioners who participated in the reflective learning process that gave rise to this report felt that it had a clear benefit in their work. Not only did it give them better visibility and the space to think more deeply about their successes and struggles, it resulted in a tangible body of stories and learning to be an ongoing resource for their work.

This has been a fantastic learning experience. We have expanded our ways of thinking.

—Kathay Feng, Asian Pacific American Legal Center

Practitioner-generated knowledge can powerfully enhance efforts to remedy injustice and inequity in struggling communities. The demonstration of the richness of this intellectual resource in this report was designed to stimulate greater awareness of the need for bringing practitioner knowledge to bear on policy, program design, and theory-building. Priority must be given to understanding how funders, policy advocates, academics, and practitioners can work together to tap the wealth of knowledge from community practice.
NOTES

1 Lee Farrow, personal communication.
2 CRCP defines a community practitioner as anyone who works with, or on behalf of, under-served communities to improve conditions for people who live there – not just paid staff members in a community-based organization, but residents and volunteers as well.
6 Further work of this kind includes:
8 Two excellent examples can be found in the work of the Veterans of Hope Project, which has created an extensive video library of interviews with “veterans” from a variety of ethnic, cultural and religious communities who have worked to bring about compassionate social change (http://www.veteransofhope.org) and in the work of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, dedicated to eradicating extreme poverty. For a collection of stories from people who have mobilized communities and institutions to act against poverty and social exclusion of the extreme poor, see Rosenfeld, J. & Tardieu, B. *Artisans of Democracy: How Ordinary People, Families in Extreme Poverty, and Social Institutions Become Allies to Overcome Social Exclusion*, New York: University Press of America, 2000.
9 CRCP will be releasing a searchable online database of practitioner-generated stories and dialogue in 2005.
Although early in the process there was some consideration given to having an outside researcher or journalist document the “objective” story of the work in each community, this was soon abandoned as inappropriate to the goals of the project. In fact, an independent expert would lack the capacity to assess what the practitioners in these five sites were trying to assess in their own work.

CRCP defines a critical moment as experiences that stand out for the individuals doing the work. These experiences can be significant events, difficult struggles, important breakthroughs, or even periods of inactivity. The reflective learning process begins with the members of a group each naming those moments that they experienced as significant in a particular area of their work. The next step is for the group to narrow down to a subset of critical moments to examine in depth. This decision is based on which moments will produce the learning that is most related to the urgent questions in their work. For the selected critical moments, the story of each moment is told collectively by those involved, followed by a collective analysis of the moment – what shifted, why, what led to the moment, what happened as a result. Through analysis, the meaning of the moment to those who experienced it is identified and explored.

This contrasts sharply with evaluation and other documentation efforts that ask practitioners to respond to a set of pre-existing questions, or that bring in an outside researcher or journalist to document the “objective” story of the work in a community. In fact, outsiders lack the capacity to assess what practitioners find most relevant to assess in their own work.

The project was initiated by Dayna Cunningham, Program Officer for the Rockefeller Foundation’s Working Communities program.

Program funding for the next year of work was guaranteed for each site regardless of its decision to participate in the reflection project. We learned that some of the sites chose to participate because the project was initiated by the foundation; however, all of the sites later said that their continued participation was based on the benefits they experienced from the learning process.

In order to be able to create reports and support the dissemination of the knowledge generated during the reflective learning process, CRCP had to retain the legal rights to the recordings. Nevertheless, the releases developed in partnership with the organizations gave full control to the organizations in determining how the recorded material would be edited, which segments could be shared publicly, and ways in which the material could be used. Although this was an extensive process, both the organizations and CRCP felt it was crucial to the Practitioner Knowledge Initiative for practitioners working in disenfranchised communities to have control over organizing and sharing their own knowledge.


Guinier & Torres, 2002, pgs. 94-95


Blackwell et al., 2002, pg. 198

Blackwell et al., 2002, pg. 49


Wilson, 1999, pg. 91

Hair, 2001.
The practitioner knowledge presented in this report came from a reflective learning project that engaged five organizations from different regions across the U.S. to document the learning and critical questions arising from significant events and shifts in their work. All five organizations were engaged in a similar endeavor – building democracy through participation aimed explicitly at addressing racial exclusion – however, they were working in different racial and political contexts and using different methods to tackle this challenge.

**Asian Pacific American Legal Center***
Los Angeles, CA  (http://apalc.org)

The Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) works to balance the goal of empowerment of the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) community with the goal of working across race to make systemic policy change. They see these two goals as complementary and mutually reinforcing. APALC was established in 1983 and has become the largest organization in Southern California providing API and other communities with multilingual, culturally sensitive services and legal education. Their mission is to advocate for civil rights, provide legal services and education, and build coalitions to positively influence and impact Asian Pacific Americans and to create a more equitable and harmonious society. APALC’s staff has expertise in a variety of areas, such as immigration and naturalization, family law and domestic violence, immigrant welfare, anti-discrimination, and building inter-group relations. APALC’s language capacity includes Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), Hindi, Ilocano, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Malayalam, Punjabi, Spanish, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu, and Vietnamese.

APALC works with a diverse coalition as advocates for fair voting rights and redistricting plans to ensure that key communities are not divided and that their respective political needs are addressed. APALC’s Voting Rights Unit plays a critical role in strengthening API communities’ participation in democracy by advocating for full access to the ballot, and advocating around key election policies. Through their Demographic Research Unit, APALC informs community programs and advocacy through data collection, analysis, and mapping. Projects have included ongoing analyses of census data and exit polling to better understand the growing API electorate. APALC’s Workers’ Rights Unit strives to end sweatshop conditions and establish corporate accountability in the garment industry. They use strategies of impact litigation combined with policy advocacy, public education, coalition building, cross-racial organizing, and local outreach efforts with and for garment workers, thus creating a new model of litigation for social change. The Immigrant Welfare Unit works on welfare and health issues affecting low income immigrants at the local, state, and federal levels. Through policy advocacy, analysis, training community-based organizations, educating immigrant communities, and developing multi-lingual education materials, the Immigrant Welfare Unit continues to secure the welfare and rights of low-income immigrants.

*Reflective Learning Participants:*

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<tr>
<th>Aileen Almeria</th>
<th>Dennis Kao</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kathay Feng</td>
<td>Stewart Kwoh</td>
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<td>Veronika Geronimo</td>
<td>Karin Wang</td>
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<td>Dan Ichinose</td>
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Beloved Community Center*
Greensboro, NC  (http://belovedcommunitycenter.org)

The mission of the Beloved Community Center is to foster and model a spirit of community based on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision of a “beloved community,” the belief that true change can happen by bringing together a critical mass of people trained to work together in nonviolence and inclusion. In this spirit, BCC envisions and works toward social and economic relations that affirm and realize the quality, dignity, worth and potential of every person nonviolently, creatively, and with full respect for the humanity of those who must be resisted for the good of all.

The BCC Board of approximately 25 active members was transformed into a Village Council of about 50 active members, which meets once a month. Furthermore, the Jubilee Institute was organized by the BCC to broaden the movement for social change. Its focus is capacity and institution building. The Jubilee Institute has also served as management and fiscal agent for six community-based organizations.

Among their diverse areas of work, BCC engages in the struggle for quality education. Several BCC members provided leadership in the Greensboro/Guilford County educational reform movement, especially in the struggle for parental and community involvement in decisions concerning public education. Community Coalition for Educational Excellence members visited and volunteered in schools throughout the county, organized community parent associations in several neighborhoods, and participated in numerous public education covenants.

The BCC participated in many other coalitions and partnerships, including those committed to prison reform, citizen review of police conduct, housing reform, and living wage standards. The BCC participates in numerous dialogues, vigils, and other activities committed to greater understanding and community-building in the global village. The BCC also helped to organize the Greensboro Peace Coalition in response to the war, as well as the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Project to foster genuine reconciliation and understanding throughout the community.

Reflective Learning Participants:

Lewis Brandon       Randy Johnston
Kay Doost       Alma Purvis
Z. Holler       Rosemarie Vardell
Joyce Johnson       Ed Whitfield
Nelson Johnson       John Young
Conservation Law Foundation’s Greater Boston Institute*
Boston, MA   (http://clf.org)

The Greater Boston Institute (GBI) is a part of the Conservation Law Foundation’s (CLF) Communities Project. Founded in 1966, CLF works to solve the environmental problems that threaten the people, natural resources, and communities of New England. CLF’s advocates use law, economics, and science to design and implement strategies that conserve natural resources, protect public health, and promote vital communities. CLF is a nonprofit, member-supported organization that operates advocacy centers in Boston, MA; Montpelier, VT; Concord, NH; Rockland, ME; and Providence, RI. In coordination with this geographic structure, CLF’s work is organized into five major project areas: the Communities Project; the Marine Resources Project; the Energy Project; the Agriculture Project; and the Natural Resources Project.

GBI is committed to city-building from the grassroots up. GBI works to capture Boston’s opportunities in partnership with a diverse, talented and effective collection of community partners (both individuals and organizations). GBI unites all of the expertise and passion of CLF in the service of its city-building mission: to ensure that planning decisions regarding development, transportation, and open space are made by and for those who work, live, and play in Boston. Through GBI, CLF listens to those voices and works to empower them and ensure that they are heard in the halls of power.

*Reflective Learning Participants:*
- Scott Darling
- Doug Foy
- Bennett Heart
- Toni Hicks
- Seth Kaplan
- Stephanie Pollack
Southern Echo*
Jackson, MS    (http://southernecho.org)

Southern Echo is a leadership development, education and training organization working toward developing new, grassroots leadership in the African-American communities in Mississippi and the surrounding region. Echo’s core work involves delivering comprehensive training, as well as technical and legal assistance to community leadership and relevant organizations. This effective community organizing work has carried Echo staff into 65 of Mississippi’s 82 counties and into southern local communities in 11 other states. Echo assists local leadership and organizations to create an organizing process through which community people can develop more effective and accountable leadership. Additionally, Echo helps build the accountable, broad-based organizations needed to hold the political, economic, education, and environmental systems accountable to the needs and interests of the African-American community.

Southern Echo emphasizes the active inclusion of young people, in an inter-generational model of community organizing. Echo believes that young people are less dependent upon the past, have the least fear of change, and have the best potential for creating a broad vision of a fair and just society. By bringing younger and older together in the same training and work, Echo hopes to galvanize younger participation as part of the evolving leadership process. When older leadership cannot carry on anymore, younger people will already be in place with the knowledge, tools, skills, experience and commitment to sustain the work.

Echo believes that its goals cannot be achieved unless a new generation of empowered, accountable community organizers is created to work at the grassroots level to develop, educate, and train additional new leaders and organizations across the state and region. Their new leaders and organizations are armed with a clear vision of empowerment and accountability, as well as effective strategies and programs of work to implement that vision through broad-based, grassroots participation in the struggle.

Reflective Learning Participants:

- Action for Community Education Reform
- Citizens for Equality Education
- Concerned Citizens for a Better Greenville
- Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County
- Drew Community Voters League
- Indianola Parent-Student Group
- Southern Echo, Inc.
- Tallahatchie Housing
- Mildred Conley
- Richard Gardner
- Brenda Hyde
- Johnnie Johnson

- Leroy Johnson
- Jerome Little
- Lonell May
- Nora McClinton
- Meredith Medine
- Roderick Moore
- Betty Petty
- Janus Saulsberry
- Mike Sayer
- Mattie Stoddard
- Carolyn Talley
- Hollis Watkins
- Al White
- Melvin Young
Texas LEADS Project*
Austin, TX  (gtorres@mail.utexas.edu)

The Texas LEADS Project was formed to address access and equity issues that resurfaced in 1996 when the Texas legal system prohibited the use of affirmative action to promote diversity in admissions at the state's largest universities. Texas LEADS (Local Empowerment for Accessible and Diverse Schools) aims to affect the educational pipeline by improving public education in order to make higher education more accessible to all. It does so by using processes of public engagement and participation.

In 1998 and 1999, Texas LEADS hosted community meetings across the state to discuss the access and quality of public education. Participants also discussed race as well as parent and community involvement in education. While each community discussion was different, Texans in these meetings clearly agreed that parent and community involvement at the school level are essential for student success. They also emphasized that middle school is a critical point for students and parents – a point at which decisions are made that affect a child’s decision about completing high school and pursuing college.

As a result of these meetings, Texas LEADS decided to focus on parent and community involvement at the middle school level in two Austin-area middle schools. The aim of these school programs is to develop a model for middle-school parent and community engagement that can be replicated within additional public schools.

Key elements of the LEADS parent and community involvement model include an emphasis on parent leadership and decision making; assessment of community perceptions and needs; a parent-driven program in which parents determine the agenda for activities and programming; staffing by a parent coordinator who is a member of the school community; and providing physical space for parents at the school.

*Reflective Learning Participants:*

- Leslie Friedlander
- Ray Lopez
- Lupe Montoya
- Gerald Torres

*Note: Further description of the organizations marked by an asterisk can be found in the Rockefeller Foundation report Louder Than Words: Lawyers, Communities, and the Struggle for Justice*