

# **The Downtown Education Collaborative: A New Model for Collaborative Community Engagement**

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## **Abstract**

*The Downtown Education Collaborative (DEC) is an innovative collaborative which includes public and private colleges working with community organizations in interdisciplinary community service learning. This article reviews DEC's development, from its inception as a shared vision aspired to by its partners, to a functioning collaborative. We evaluate DEC's unique elements, consider challenges confronted through this model, and propose the exemplary facets of DEC for the collaboration of other small colleges and community organizations.*

Lewiston, Maine, does not look like a college town. Though there is a “downtown,” there are no art-film theaters; no independent bookstores; and, walking its downtown streets, you are more likely to see a Somali woman with her children, or a foreman on his way to work, than co-eds wearing college sweatshirts. Yet, diagonally across from a renovated public library and down the street from African and Indian restaurants is the new home for the area’s innovative higher education collaborative, the Downtown Education Collaborative (DEC), which is bringing a new model of community engagement to the area.

This article will discuss the history of DEC, an innovative inter-institutional collaborative, noting how its history, context, and foundational values contribute to its uniqueness. We will describe DEC’s exemplary characteristics, critique its challenges, and propose it as a model of collaboration for relatively small regional colleges and communities.

## **The Downtown Education Collaborative (DEC)**

Born of a North East Regional Campus Compact Conference in November 2005, DEC is an educationally focused partnership of Lewiston-Auburn’s four institutions of higher education (collectively referred to as “The Colleges of the Androscoggin”) and three other community partners. The core partners are the University of Southern Maine Lewiston-Auburn College, Bates College, Central Maine Community College, and Kaplan University (known until May 2010 as Andover College), as well as the Lewiston Public Library, Lewiston Adult Education, and Empower Lewiston, a nonprofit community organization established to serve Lewiston’s downtown neighborhood.

DEC’s Mission Statement describes our goals and vision for the Collaborative:

[DEC] brings together the knowledge and resources of its partners to strengthen community-engaged teaching, learning, research and service in order to effect beneficial social change. . . . The primary purpose of the Collaborative is to create an innovative model of community-based education and enhance the role of education to empower communities and effect beneficial social change. . . . [T]he Collaborative has developed three core goals: 1) Bringing the resources and skills of the Colleges of the Androscoggin into partnership with the downtown community . . . ; 2) Fostering inter-college collaboration, and developing usable models of inter-college collaboration; and 3) Creating a common space for democratic dialogue, learning and action. (Downtown Education Collaborative 2009)

### **DEC's Partners**

DEC formally began early in 2006 by taking on a collaborative name, convening regular meetings, and expressing a common vision. However, the collaborative was the culmination of many relationships over many years. The founding partners decided that DEC's focus would be the community integration of higher education, so we determined membership based on this orientation and included all the local institutions of higher education. We decided that our initial focus would be the Lewiston area and thus invited the Lewiston-based educationally centered organizations, such as the local public library and adult education, but not those from neighboring towns. In addition, as recent tensions raised concerns that community members might feel less trusting of an organization seen to be associated with government, we decided not to include local government or public school administrations in other than an advisory capacity. Thus, from DEC's beginning, decisions about who to include in partnership and at what level (collaboration only for discrete projects or fundamentally to the collaborative) have been integral to our functioning.

**The University of Southern Maine Lewiston Auburn College (USM LAC)** is the local campus of the state university and includes community service as integral to its mission. The campus serves approximately 1,250 students, all commuters. In addition to being "non-traditional" in age (average age is 30), nearly all of USM LAC's students are economically challenged (90 percent receive financial aid), 75 percent of the students are female, most are first-generation college students, and many are also single parents (Vazquez Jacobus and Baskett 2010).

**Bates College** is a private liberal-arts college with approximately 1700 predominantly traditional-age students, approximately half of whom pursue community-based academic work during their Bates career and two-thirds of whom perform volunteer public service each year.

**Central Maine Community College (CMCC)** is one of the seven colleges in the Maine Community College System. There are more than 2,300 full- and part-time students studying in twenty-five program areas and many students transfer to

baccalaureate programs. CMCC works to provide quality, accessible college education and support community vitality.

**Kaplan University** is a proprietary institution that serves a diverse student population of approximately 1,100 adult learners in seven majors. Most Kaplan students are “non-traditional,” with an average age of 32, and are employed in full- or part-time jobs while enrolled. Kaplan is committed to service learning and continues to move forward to develop more service-learning experiences in every major.

**Empower Lewiston (EL)** came into being in 1998 when, due to its extensive economic and poverty challenges, Lewiston was designated as a Rural Enterprise Community by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. EL was the nonprofit organization established to oversee the federal funding that came to the city to address these issues. EL’s funding cycle concluded in 2009 and the organization no longer exists. Finding a way to replace this vital community connection is one of DEC’s primary challenges.

**Lewiston Public Library (LPL)** offers the typical range of public library services and they are particularly committed to the Connecting Our Community part of their mission. As such, they not only offer a forum for public meeting places for the community, they host a wide variety of informational and cultural programming, usually in collaboration with one or more community groups.

**Lewiston Adult Education (LAE)** provides lifelong learning opportunities in three key areas: academic skill building, workforce development, and community education. Typically, LAE enrolls 6000–6500 students per year in programs ranging from adult basic education to community enrichment.

### **DEC’s Beginnings**

The confluence of ideas from USM LAC, Bates, and EL came together in the fall of 2005. However, the collaborative did not, like Athena, spring fully formed from the head of one of its partners, but was in gestation for some time. Until 2005, local colleges often partnered on specific projects with one or two collaborating local agencies.

We began talking about a multi-college collaborative at a Campus Compact conference whose theme was university-community partnerships. Naturally, then, our goal from the nascent stages of the organization was a model of what Schramm and Nye (1999) describe as an “empowerment or capacity-building model,” engaging local community residents and university personnel in a “reciprocal learning process at each stage in the research and planning process, from problem identification to data analysis to program implementation and evaluation” (Reardon 2006, 97). We envisioned applying this model not only to research, but to community-based intervention, education and program development as well. Thus we arrived at a shared vision, including mutuality and common interest in community growth and sustainability.

Neither the DEC coalition [nor any of its constituent partners] defines

community engagement primarily in terms of service or uplift, with “the community” supplying problems and “the academy” solving them. Rather we frame public work as collaborative practice, with educational and community partners bringing both needs and resources to the table. (Scobey 2007)

In addition to the common understanding of mission, the partners recognized the need to respond collaboratively to growing community challenges. Though Lewiston has never been an affluent city, the closing of its mills in the 1960s and 1970s reduced its industrial base and brought increased unemployment and poverty (Vazquez Jacobus and Harris 2007). Downtown Lewiston comprises two of the poorest census tracts in Maine: as of 2008, the poverty rate in these areas was nearly 40 percent (USDA 2008) and, as of October 2009, 97 percent of the students in nearby Longley Elementary School, the school which serves these downtown census tracks, received federal Free Lunch support (Maine Department of Education 2009). Added to this bleak financial picture, educational attainment in Androscoggin County (the county which houses Lewiston) has been quite low for some time: only 16 percent of working age adults in 2000 had a college degree, and only 25 percent had a postsecondary degree of any kind (Phillips and Macri 2009). Recently, Lewiston High School’s drop out rate of 8.6 percent was reported as the highest in the state of Maine (Washuk 2010a, A3).

Since 2001 Lewiston has also developed an increasingly complex demographic picture with the influx of a large number of immigrants, mostly from Somalia, changing Lewiston’s racial and cultural make-up from a city which was approximately 1 percent people of color as of the 2000 census, to one which is estimated to be nearly 10 percent people of color as of the 2010 census (City of Lewiston 2007; P. Nadeau, personal communication, October 20, 2010). Nearly 20 percent of children attending Lewiston’s public schools are English Language Learners (Washuk 2009, A1) and 65 percent of children attending Longley Elementary are immigrants (Washuk 2010b, A1).

In response to these obvious social needs and rapid cultural changes, several community projects had been launched to address the changing requirements of Lewiston’s residents. However,

[i]n many cases, these efforts began with a limited focus, utilized expert derived consultation, and analyzed problems using deficit models. They also tended to be aimed at problem analysis, as opposed to community capacity building. Further, many interventions followed crisis response models, rather than addressing the community’s long term needs and assets. (Vazquez Jacobus and Harris 2007, 202)

Thus, working in the midst of this diversity and rapid change, the “DEC collaborators realize[d] that effective community work required us to craft a new strategy for academic engagement” (Scobey 2007). Representatives from each of the collaborative partners, including Maine Campus Compact, met regularly through 2006 and 2007 as the group matured from a misty vision of community reciprocity and collaborative leadership aspired to by a few of its members, to a functioning collaborative working

actively to foster community engaged learning and build community capacity. We established a common vision statement and reached consensus on the collaborative's mission and goals (DEC 2006; DEC 2009).

During this developmental period, we took on collaborative projects, most significantly, an interdisciplinary, multi-institutional community food assessment of the Lewiston area. We discussed and debated leadership, procedures, and whether to establish the collaborative in an independent space, offsite of any of the partner institutions. We considered whether we could sustain ourselves through collaborative leadership or whether we needed to hire a director to facilitate the collaborative's mission. Finally, in the spring of 2008, we hired our first DEC director and, in the fall of 2008 we officially launched the collaborative by opening the downtown space for DEC.

Since that time, DEC has been housed in a storefront center in downtown Lewiston that serves as a base for community research, service-learning, and student internships; as well as a meeting place for college courses associated with such projects. It is also a place for training, mentoring, and clinical services offered by DEC members and serves as a "public square" for community discussions. The collaborative is operated on a day-to-day basis by its director and a VISTA volunteer, and DEC's funding primarily goes to salaries for DEC staff and rent for the building. Representatives from the collaborative partners meet, as a kind of board, on a monthly basis and continue to discuss mission, goals, and ongoing projects.

### **DEC Projects**

Consistent with our mission, the collaborative takes on projects indigenously as community members and partners recognize need. Projects are facilitated by the DEC director to bring in resources from the partners and students collaboratively as appropriate to our member's assets. DEC projects are generally long term and involve multiple community partners and colleges.

**Local Food for Lewiston: A model project.** In the spring of 2006, just as the fledgling collaborative was taking its first steps, we were approached by a local health center about collaborating to conduct a community food assessment of the City of Lewiston. Consistent with models of Community Based Participatory Research (CPBR), this interdisciplinary assessment opened with the cooperative planning of a multi-year project that proposed action to enhance nutrition and food security (Israel et al. 2001; Merzel et al. 2007). The project began with student teams from USM LAC's Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Applied Social Policy classes working together to map the nutritional needs and assets of Lewiston, using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods (See Vazquez Jacobus and Harris 2007). The assessment continues, drawing in turn from different partner academic institutions and community organizations as appropriate to respond to availability, emphasis, funding and community need. Most recently, we have been focusing on the diverse food-ways of the downtown's multicultural population and the differential access afforded particularly vulnerable populations, such as single parent families.

Examples of some of DEC's other current projects include:

**Promoting Academic Success.** Including college students from all four of its member colleges, DEC coordinates college students in providing afterschool homework help to middle and high-school youth at the Lewiston Public Library.

**Bridging the Digital Divide.** Drawing on college student expertise, DEC is staffing the downtown computer labs, providing one-on-one mentoring, and offering skill-building workshops.

**Envisioning Lewiston: A Photo-voice Project.** Bringing Lewiston community members together to adorn the walls and launch DEC's downtown space, this project brought a local public artist in to work with students, staff, and community members.

## **A New Model of Collaborative Community Engagement**

DEC is an interdisciplinary, interinstitutional, community-based collaborative which integrates community engagement through its member institutions and infuses education through the community. Like Lewiston itself, on its surface, this hardly seems unique. Yet what makes DEC extraordinary is the synthesis of all of these factors, together in one unified independent entity, whose mission is generally to serve the changing needs of the community through education and engagement, direct service and coordination.

### **A Multi-institutional, Community-Integrated, Public-Private Collaborative**

There is a long history of collaboration in service learning because, arguably, collaboration is foundational to community engagement; for any college to engage with the community it must work with a community partner. Recently, colleges are collaborating to enhance resources and provide more opportunities for their students, as well as to provide academic coordination to extend their curricular offerings. Multi-college consortia provide facilitation of cross-registration for classes and coordination between academic programs and administration of inter-college programming (Boisvert 2007; Peterson 2002). Cross-college cooperatives are used to coordinate college student volunteers for public service (Brungardt and Arnold 2009) and bring greater resources to their students beyond the spatial limits of their campuses (Michigan Community College Association 1998; Sambrook 2008). Colleges also collaborate to share academic resources, research and training, as well as faculty professional development (Anthony and Austin 2008; Gilroy 2003; Quotah 2009). In some cases, multi-college collaborations have an independent joint space that they share for their cooperative work, which also allows students easier access to their resources (Aurora Higher Education Center 2010; Oklahoma Downtown College 2010).

In the literature of service learning particularly, there are numerous examples of colleges collaborating to better serve a community need or project. It has long been recognized that social justice, morality, and effective pedagogy mandate that community service work include the community partners (Kendall 1990; Reardon 2006; Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999). The growing field of Community Based Participatory Research emphasizes the unique benefits of multiple methodologies and mutual relationships which can be maximized through the interdisciplinary work of social and health sciences (Downs et al. 2009; Israel et al. 2001; Merzel et al. 2007).

What makes DEC unique is the combination of multi-institutional collaboration combined with community integration in the creation of an independent entity that follows a holistic mission of multiple goals. In most university-community partnerships, the collaborative is formed to fulfill a specific, pre-determined community need, such as creating Neighborhood Schools Centers (Ferguson 2009), connecting community research and social work practice to inform state policy (Anthony and Austin 2008), or promoting higher education or job preparation generally (Anthony and Austin 2008; Gilroy 2003; Quotah 2009). In many of these collaborative undertakings, although they are multifaceted, the college partners' involvement is largely limited to community-based research (Channels and Zanonni 1999; Downs et al. 2009; Weinberg 2003).

Although collaboratives could be found which are more comprehensive in their scope, they are usually supported through substantial funding or connection with a large, complex research university. Many of the community-university partnerships that we reviewed as models were founded through outreach partnership grants provided by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (Farrant and Silka 1999; Reardon 2006). Similarly, many multifaceted collaborations are sited with major research universities that use their resources for the founding and support of the organization (Anthony and Austin 2008; Merzel et al. 2007; Reardon 2006). However, Lewiston is a relatively small city and is without a university of this scope; none of the local colleges has more than 2,500 students. Lacking such a resource in our area is all the more reason why our collaboration is essential to enhance our resources, as well as to be able to afford a full panoply of offerings to fully serve the community (Vazquez Jacobus and Baskett 2010; Weinberg 2003).

### **A Place of Possibility**

Even before it had a physical gathering place for its action, DEC focused a place of possibility for the community engagement of its partners. It is DEC's mission, as much as its site, which creates this place. The collaborative formed after many smaller cooperatives, among academic partners as well as community organizations, had built the foundation. In addition, emerging after the first wave of refugees moved to Lewiston, and as Bates and USM LAC were taking greater initiative and dedicating more resources to community engagement, DEC formed as a group almost organically, after a long history of collaboration in the community. What is more, the collaborative did not begin in response to a particular community need or in reaction to a specific

academic project, but more endogenously as a group with a common interest in working collaboratively. Aspiring to be a kind of academic Highlander Center, we formed with a common mission of developing a “citizen school” to act as a catalyst and forum for grassroots education, advocacy, and capacity-building efforts (Eisenberg 2008; Highlander Research and Education Center 2010). We formed to take our lead from the community and to be responsive to its changing direction. Thus we began as a metaphysical Place of Possibility, molded with a general philosophical commitment to community empowerment and academic integration, but without a preset agenda, and open to possibilities that time and place might afford our mission.

Whereas other collaboratives are founded in specific identifiable goals, DEC is more grounded in values and vision. We take root in fundamental values of education, diversity, social justice, empowerment and positive social change, and from these draw our mission. How and why we take on projects is rooted in this unique frame of values. As described by one DEC partner:

We have developed a process of evaluation of recommendations and proposals and weighing them against mission and outcome. This has served us well and has allowed expansion into areas of need we might not have seen. (E. Giles, personal communication, February 2010).

Included among our guiding values is recognition of the import of process and the value of discourse to make concrete the disparities in power (Reardon 2006, 107).

In addition to the philosophical place of possibility, since the fall of 2008 DEC has also included a physical space located in the heart of downtown Lewiston, which is a site of possibility. The space is not only the center of DEC’s collaborative work, but also a neutral and safe gathering place intended to foster community capacity building, present a forum for discussion, and provide occasions for reconciliation and inspiration. In this vein, the DEC space has been used by community organizations to discuss challenges the city has faced in response to racism, to plan culturally sensitive educational programs for immigrant youth, and as a site for youth to gather to develop their own organization and leadership.

### **Collaboratively Shared Leadership**

DEC’s model of collaborative and shared leadership, as opposed to leadership open to participation and shared decision making (Fletcher and Kaufer 2003), is one of its extraordinary assets. Shared mutual co-leadership, where a number of co-directors cooperatively and equally lead an organization, is a relative rarity in modern organizational structure (Kramer 2006). Where the term “shared leadership” is used in the literature, it usually refers to a leadership structure where a “vertical” leader shares her leadership and decision making with leaders working under her (Pearce and Sims 2002). Our original experiment with DEC sought to share leadership amongst the representatives of our seven partner organizations, and to do so as mutually and equally as possible. Thus, through the first three years of our existence, DEC had



seven co-leaders, each purported to have equal weight in decision making and comparable influence over collaborative decision making. Similarly, although now facilitated by a director, it is still our vision that our leadership is shared among our steering group of peer partners.

The dynamic of peer leaders is one of DEC's transformative attributes: our collaborative, democratic, and egalitarian leadership ideal. As opposed to the faculty or staff meetings we might each attend at our "home" institutions, when we come to the table at DEC, we view each other as peers, each bringing a valuable and critical voice to the conversation (Begun et al. 2010). Thus, whether tenured or not, faculty member or not, there is "collegial participation in an atmosphere of trust whe[re] the input of every team member is valued in constructively critical ongoing analyses of team performance without fear of reprisals and without undue competition" (Jameson et al. 2006, 950). This "round table" of mutually valued colleagues also presents fertile ground for innovative thinking. Unencumbered by entrenched administrative procedures, the "glacial pace of university decision making . . . and the Byzantine nature of university governance" (Reardon 2006, 106), DEC cultivates a rich interdisciplinary environment in which to hatch innovative community engagement projects. With fewer cultural and academic norms imposing on us, many of us feel freer to suggest creative approaches or to challenge traditional norms where we sit at a table of co-leaders, than we would at a faculty meeting where we may feel judged by our superiors, or a staff meeting where we are answerable to our supervisors. In fact, the democratic, flexible, and collaborative environment encourages the kind of creative, "out-of-the-box" thinking required in our modern technological and global society (Anthony and Austin 2008; Jameson et al. 2006).

### **The Sum Is Greater Than the Parts**

Likely, members of any well-functioning collaborative would attest that their sum, as a collaborative union, is greater than any of their individual contributory parts, for without this there is little reason for a collaborative. DEC partners uniformly agree that the work we can accomplish as a unified entity reaches farther than any of our individual institutions working alone. For example, one DEC partner notes:

Because of DEC we can bring varied resources around a particular issue. For example, we don't have a nutritionist at Bates, but CMCC has a Culinary Arts program and Public Health's technical aspects are offered at [Kaplan]. So when we are working on food related projects, we can bring resources from varied programs to address an issue. Because of the nature of the four institutions, the breadth of the work is more expansive. Bates could never offer this breadth alone. (H. Lasagna, personal communication, February 2010)

In our collaboration, we maximize the relative social capital and assets of our respective institutions. USM LAC, CMCC, LAE, and Kaplan are part of the community; they can do the first outreach to community members. Bates has a positive reputation and longstanding relationships with several local community organizations

and institutions. Working across our institutional presence, as a collaborative we are infused throughout the community. We have members whose children attend local public schools, participants who face the bureaucratic hurdles of applying for food stamps, and partners who sit on the boards of directors for powerful local agencies.

In addition to affording partners the opportunity to enhance their own resources, the collaborative allows them to offer more services than they could before they were part of the collaborative. DEC has also positively transformed some of our member partners' relationships:

DEC takes typical competitors and allows us to take away the competition so we can contribute and work together for a larger goal. We can put in a little and create so much more than what we each contribute individually. When we are working, we are not competing. We are really working as partners. (E. Giles, personal communication, February, 2010)

## **Challenges of the DEC Model**

Full assessment of DEC as a new model for collaboration requires due consideration of the challenges presented. Indeed, it is in DEC's very uniqueness that our most challenging experiences arise. Downs et al. (2009) note the challenges of managing such a multi-faceted, holistically-approached program, and the difficulty of articulating such complexity to the public. We must consider whether we do not find more similar models because they may be unsustainable. We must ask ourselves: are we taking on too much?

In this section we explore the challenges presented by DEC's unique model and consider how these challenges contribute to DEC's identity. This exploration is most critical to our analysis because, in our responses to our multiple challenges, we find the core strengths of DEC as a model.

### **Community Integration**

Our community partners are theoretically and logistically integral to our existence. Though we had three "non-academic" community partners in our membership, one of our founding community partners, Empower Lewiston, no longer exists and the other two, the Lewiston Public Library and Lewiston Adult Education, are educational institutions themselves. We have always debated how and which community projects we take on, discussing whether they need to always have an "educational" mission and whether we could play a role in social service interventions where the connection to academia is less clear. In addition, as four of our now six partners are academic institutions, we must consider whether we really do have integrated community partners and adequate representation from the community in our membership. Interestingly, in response to the concern of losing community input with the loss of Empower Lewiston from our membership, the former Executive Director of EL responded as follows:

DEC is fully integrated in the community because USM LAC, CMCC, Andover and LAE *are* the community. Their students are community members: they live locally, commute to school, and deal with the challenges of life in this community, from poverty, to parenting, to finding a job. (A. Stone, personal communication; February, 2010)

We must also contemplate who we are referring to as “the community.” Though we may be integrating the community through our institutional constituencies, DEC’s leadership does not fully integrate all local voices. One DEC partner articulated this concern: “When you look around the table, we are not a very diverse group. We say we speak for the grass roots group, but I don’t know how we are connecting to the elderly French, Somali, Hispanic, or Bantu in Lewiston” (C. Lashua, personal communication, February, 2010).

In addition to our membership, the community is integrated in the way we take on projects. For substantial comprehensive projects such as the community food assessment, we partner with area agencies through all stages of the project itself: the community organizations are integral partners in the initiation, design, and implementation of the project. They are the leadership for this project, as well as the fiduciary overseers and the resource center. However, the leadership of community agencies does not necessarily represent the voices of the community, especially those most marginalized. Thus, as it is primary to our mission that the community be integrally infused in our work, taking greater steps to elicit community-based leadership is vital to our continued collaborative viability. It is critical that we continue to discuss how to take on projects, inspired by community need or institutional interest, as that will substantially impact the extent to which the community partners have a truly mutual place in the collaborative. We are beginning to institutionalize community input into our process by intentionally inviting others in: we are hosting a series of community conversations and forming a Community Advisory Board.

In integrating community, we have also experienced the ongoing tensions between our academic and public missions, which are not always complementary (Begun et al. 2010; Merzel et al. 2007). Collaboratives of diverse voices and agendas cannot be rushed and they cannot be forced. This reality, however, is not always consistent with local needs to rapidly address crises. Correspondingly, the elasticity of relationships and timelines are often inconsistent with academic schedules, where students’ coursework needs to be completed in a four-month semester and junior professors are expected to produce measurable results for publications to meet tenure guidelines (Forrant and Silka 1999; Merzel et al. 2007). The time and energy involved in nurturing these relationships and building common missions is not always convenient and it is rarely accepted easily by the institutional leadership behind the partners (Israel et al. 2001; Merzel et al. 2007).

We also face challenges in the realm of academic integration. We would like to do more of the typical work of a higher education collaborative: facilitate cooperation among the students and staff of our academic partners. As DEC is a collaborative that includes a

community college, a public state university, a private selective college, and a proprietary college, there are significant administrative hurdles to cross-listing our classes or sharing faculty. In addition, the disparate backgrounds of our students, as well as the different perspectives afforded by their academic preparation, may create tensions in a class environment. One vivid example of this contrast occurred recently when we had students in an USM LAC Applied Social Policy class learning how to apply for funding through grant applications. These students authored an application that was reviewed by a class of Bates students whose applied project was to review and award these same grant applications to learn about how funders make such determinations.

Despite the possible tension, the learning potential afforded by the diverse range of perspectives is a benefit worth the administrative hurdles. Further, drawing upon diverse student groups allows us to have student community members working with more traditional students so that relative strengths can complement each other. When we do mix students from our different institutions to work on community engagement projects, we find that the reciprocal education is profound. The non-traditional students from the public colleges often bring a wealth of life experience and community expertise to their work; the traditional college students usually bring strong foundational academic skills and vibrant energy.

Many of us would also like to see greater institutional and academic staff engagement from our academic partners. Though well connected in the community, DEC has a way to go to be well-infused in our colleges. The people primarily involved in DEC projects are the DEC members themselves and, in most cases, we see inconsistent and limited engagement from other personnel at our member colleges. However, DEC is still a relatively young organization, having only initiated our institutional existence two years ago. We are increasingly seeing our projects extend beyond the borders of our collaborative membership. Empowerment/capacity-building partnerships take a substantial amount of time and energy to develop, as well as to nurture and build the kind of trust and reputation necessary to make progress in building capacity (Begun et al. 2010; Israel et al. 2001; Reardon 2006).

We hope that the positive experiences of those who have been involved with DEC's projects will serve as the most powerful testament of its value to our institutional partners. Our work in bringing together students and faculty from across campuses may be the first steps toward more extensive and sustainable academic partnerships (Brungardt and Arnold 2009). In establishing these networks and relationships, we are setting the ground work for possible multicampus programs, cross-registered classes, and many of the academic collaborative programs which are the pride of other multi-college consortia. Particularly as our institutions face more challenging economic conditions and are required to eliminate low-enrollment academic programs and costly extracurricular activities, it becomes more compelling to realize the potential of our collaborative to offer richer resources as well as recruit and retain students and faculty interested in a diverse array of offerings (Vazquez Jacobus and Baskett 2010).

## **Balance of Power**

DEC was formed to be a union of integral partners governed through collaborative leadership. From our first conversations we functioned without one designated “leader” and emphasized our value in equality and balance in representation from our various institutions. In iterating our process we vowed to function democratically and to make decisions by consensus whenever possible. We recognized the potential for the better resourced institutions to differentially sway the collaborative’s culture, as well as for the academic institutions to dominate the agenda (Israel et al. 2001). To avoid these pitfalls, we have actively sought out the minority voices in our midst and rallied to supplement their relative influence.

Despite initial ideals of collaborative leadership and a “balance of power” among the members, the relative influence and input of partners is disparate. In addition, the lack of full community participation and representation in DEC is paralleled in our representative input. Although there are as many opinions as partners regarding whether and why imbalances exist with DEC, and most importantly if they “matter,” arguably the disparities in relative influence are among the most significant factors compromising DEC’s full integration in the community. Downs et al. (2009) note that “power imbalances are inevitable in CPBR work and need to be mitigated” (1037). Bates College, the one elite college in the membership, holds the collaborative’s purse strings, both because they have the most financial and personnel resources and because they undertook the role of fiduciary for the partnership. Bates personnel took leadership in applying for, and now administering, the funding sources for DEC; they employ and supervise DEC’s Director and staff; and they administer DEC’s operating expenses. In addition, since DEC’s beginning, Bates has been relatively better represented at DEC meetings, having two to three staff members participate where other partners, working from very limited resources, are fortunate to be able to send one.

Bates is [DEC’s] fiduciary . . . so without a [Memorandum of Understanding] there is a danger that the collaborative process could be weakened. There are also issues of a lack of balance of fiscal power. For example our DEC Director is paid by Bates and evaluated by the Harvard Director. It’s handled well, but if another Harvard Director were to come on, it might not work as well. (C. Lashua, personal communication, February, 2010)

It is also critical to note that, without Bates’ generous and vigorous role, DEC as it stands would not exist, and would likely not have any funding or personnel to continue its mission. There would be no independent location, no funds for a director, and far fewer collaborative projects. One founding DEC partner noted “the ones who care about DEC’s balance of power are those who feel it is imbalanced. What matters is whether the community’s needs are being met.”

There are substantial balances in our system that moderate the potential of our collaborative reverting to hegemony; chief among these is the genuine interest of the members themselves in equity and balance. The DEC partners consistently raise this

issue at decisive moments at which this power imbalance has the potential to influence our actions. In addition, the DEC director is sensitive to this challenge and makes efforts to buttress the less influential partners and to use her station to balance relative contributions. In the director's hiring, her role as an autonomous facilitator of a complex collaborative was emphasized and her understanding of this dynamic has been exemplary. Thus, in the director's own leadership, which could tip our delicate balance to a more hierarchical leadership structure, she has the potential to sustain our equilibrium in a way that seemed unrealistic had we remained a truly collaboratively led organization.

In order to maintain this balance, it is vital to have the robust discussion and diversity of viewpoints foundational to DEC's functioning. The representative membership must be present at the table to take part in the discourse. We each represent our respective constituencies in our participation and thus "act in the role of a constant gardener to maintain the communication and political balance within the partnership" (Collins et al. 2009, 410). If indeed we are relying on debate and discussion to check our sway, then it is critical that the diverse voices be present to fulfill this role. "Members cannot be partners on the periphery. This work requires active membership—not just advisory" (E. Giles, personal communication, February, 2010).

### **Viability and Sustainability**

Just as DEC maintains its balance of power through individual members' active engagement, a chief concern is how well this balance will be maintained when different people are representing the member institutions. Thus far, with the exception of our director, we operate without formal documents such as Memoranda of Understanding between our member organizations. Aside from the two DEC-dedicated staff, partners are not compensated, nor is participation with the organization accounted for by our employers as part of our contracted time. Thus, much of our most essential processes and accords rest on rather tenuous ground.

For the most part, our membership still includes the founding members themselves, all devoted to DEC's original mission and vision, as well as to equality and diversity in participation. However, in order for DEC to be sustainable, it must go beyond the individual people in their current roles. We have been fortunate to have in our Bates partners, members who act as fiduciaries and who are proportionately better resourced, yet wield this power with caution. Currently, we have a director who is gifted in her ability to facilitate the partners' mission and contributions without allowing DEC to become hierarchical. Such an intricate dance is a fine one, and not one so easily performed by any director in this role. If DEC is what we hope it to be, its life may well go beyond the respective terms of its current partnership. Clear Memoranda of Understanding, and other formal agreements, such as collaborative bylaws which memorialize our understandings, may go a long way to clarifying our respective roles and expectations (Begun et al. 2010; Merzel et al. 2007), but much of our viability is founded in the unique assets of the people who are our membership.

A complementary set of viability questions considers DEC's utility to the community. If indeed DEC is vital and unique, how can we make it sustainable and independent? Cobbling together a series of time-limited, relatively small, "soft" money sources means that, as an organization, DEC is usually functioning somewhat "hand to mouth." A great deal of the director's and the organization's time and energy are dedicated to seeking out further funding to maintain our collaborative. It is challenging to arrive at a long term plan of viability and sustainability when so much attention must be paid to short-term priorities. "Without sustainable sources of funding, community programs do not build community" (Ferguson 2009, 96).

Perhaps the only way to institutionalize ourselves for more sustainable and autonomous existence is to more fully formalize our status. However, most of the DEC partners believe that taking steps to administratively institutionalize would not be best for the collaborative. Further, the undertaking in such an administrative step to incorporate or establish ourselves as a nonprofit would certainly strain our already limited resources. Were we to take such a step, the collaborative would have to devote virtually all of its time and resources to organizing this effort and, for a time, would be less able to engage in the actual work of community engagement. In addition, though much might be gained in the increased autonomy afforded by such a formalized arrangement, a great deal would also be lost.

As with most significant determinations regarding our collaborative, the best choices about how to move forward will likely take a creative approach that eschews the either-or scenarios. We might consider alternating the role of fiduciary among our member partners or dividing up leadership roles so that personnel, financial, and logistical administration are held by different partners rather than having them all held by one. We should also consider formalizing some elements of our partnership in MOUs and other more permanent agreements so that the strongest and most significant elements of our partnership are more clearly documented for perpetuity.

Although there are many issues regarding DEC's functioning about which the constituent partners disagree, there are several overarching accords. The most profound of these is our understanding that it is not necessary, or even beneficial, to resolve all the philosophical conflicts and practical challenges. As we debate and revisit, we have come to recognize that these differences are in fact our strengths. These variations are integral to a collaborative like DEC and are necessary to keep us well-balanced, accountable, and responsive to the changing and diverse needs of our community. Thus, it is important for us to wrestle with exactly how and why our disappointments about DEC can be integrated into guidance about how to design and implement a fully successful collaborative. Ongoing reflection, self-critique and analysis in an open and non-judgmental environment (Jameson et al. 2006) are critical to our sustained success as well as our ability to continue to meet the goals of our vision.

## **Conclusion: DEC into the Future**

Though there are many questions to be resolved and many more lessons to learn, we believe that DEC is both vital and sustainable as a collaborative and exemplifies a model which is imitable by other small colleges and community organizations. DEC aspires to embody the philosophy of community engagement which recognizes that community service learning programs simply cannot and should not be administered or planned exclusively by the academy (Zlotkowski 2002). This philosophy also reflects a necessity of the modern world and higher education. Given twenty-first century technology, diversity, globalization, and economics, as institutions of higher education we can no longer compete to be the brightest ivory tower on the hill. We have to have interdisciplinary, inter-institutional cooperative projects in order to remain viable, and in order to offer our students the best opportunities—especially in small, relatively low-resourced communities like Lewiston (Peterson 2002; Vazquez Jacobus and Baskett 2010; Weinberg 2003).

Collaboratives like DEC are a metaphor, a parallel process, revealing a new understanding of the contract for social responsibility inherent in our obligations as educators (Zlotkowski 2002). The reciprocity, regard and collaboration modeled among our inter-institutional partners mirrors our interactions among community members in our projects: mutual recognition of expertise; common interest and esteem; and a value in mutually beneficial development, growth and learning. By bringing together the contrasting voices of public universities and private colleges to converse with other social institutions of the community, we embrace a renaissance of collaboration. We call on our partnerships to voice their challenges and to recognize the value in their difference and discourse. We believe that higher education must reach beyond the “town and gown” divide, and that the false dichotomy between a college which is isolated and entowered, versus one which is mutually engaged with its home community, is equally dismissible. In order to remain viable, competitive, and sustainable in a global market and a technologically advanced society, we need to bring these varying voices together and recognize their unique place as varying voices.

Lewiston, Maine, is *not* college town, but it *is* an integrated college community—not the possession, the instrument, or the sole locale of any one institution of higher education. Rather, it is the integrated home and the partner of several.

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