Communal Participatory Action Research as a Strategy for Improving Universities and the Social Sciences: Penn's Work With the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps as a Case Study

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Communal Participatory Action Research as a Strategy for Improving Universities and the Social Sciences: Penn’s Work With the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps as a Case Study

LEE BENSON,
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As the 20th century closes, a key question is: What can the social sciences do to help solve the problems of our society and world? The authors identify the principal causes of the crisis in the university and the social sciences to be intellectual fragmentation and a structural contradiction that is built into the American research university. They then propose a radical reorientation of American universities toward helping solve real-world problems—particularly those in a university’s local community. The authors suggest that such an orientation can be achieved through communal participatory action research projects designed to help change society. This research strategy, they argue, will significantly advance both general knowledge and human welfare. The article explores, in detail, a communal participatory action research project initiated at the University of Pennsylvania and draws conclusions from this case study that might be applied in other research projects.

IN the last decade of the 20th century, a core problem for the social sciences is: What can the social sciences do to help solve the awesome problems

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affecting our society and world? It is a question that has been posed with increasing frequency over the past few years, indicating the failure of social science and universities to fulfill their stated mission of advancing and transmitting knowledge to improve human welfare. Quite simply, if we were doing our job well, the question would be answered by our practice—by what we do and what we clearly contribute.

The claim that we are not doing what we should is no longer coming from outsiders alone but from the very center of the disciplines. Richard Berk (1988), for example, sketched the rise of the “insider critique” in sociology. Noting criticisms from Rossi, Whyte, Duncan, and Lieberson, Berk writes that these criticisms provide “a prima facie case . . . that mainstream sociology is in serious, and perhaps unprecedented, trouble” (p. 57-58). Berk’s conclusion is by no means idiosyncratic. An entire issue of Contemporary Sociology (Calhoun & Land, 1989) devoted to assessing the Handbook of Sociology (Smesler, 1988) finds a series of distinguished scholars raising serious questions about the discipline’s contribution and direction.

The critique of the university follows a similar pattern. Since 1981, with that year’s publication of Boyer and Hechinger’s Higher Learning in the Nation’s Service, there has been a growing criticism that “higher education in America is suffering from a loss of overall direction, a nagging feeling that it is no longer at the vital center of the nation’s work” (p. 3). Furthermore, Bok (1990) claims that this criticism has reached a new level of urgency and significance. From his paramount insider position within the higher educational system, Harvard’s former president concludes that “most universities continue to do their least impressive work on the very subjects where society’s need for greater knowledge and better education is most acute” (Bok, 1990, p. 122). Bok’s analysis leads to the conclusion that the American university has failed to do what it should. In short, esoterica has triumphed over public philosophy; narrow scholasticism over humane scholarship.

What accounts for the rise of insider critiques of the social sciences, the professions (law, medicine, business, etc.), and the university in general? Stated directly, the crisis in American society has highlighted the crisis in and the failures of the American academy. The pervasive problems in all of our societal systems, exemplified by the interrelated plagues of crack, crime, AIDS, and homelessness, are increasingly producing a change in the stance and dominant culture of the university. For an urban university, it is difficult to be triumphant as its neighborhood collapses around it—unteenable to be an island of affluence in a sea of raging and deepening despair. More generally,

and Davydd J. Greenwood of Cornell University, and Francis E. Johnston, professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. Their work in both the academy and the wider society has significantly influenced our thinking and practice.
the unremitting poverty and deprivation that affect a scandalously large number of Americans support the conclusion that universities need to do much better for both their own and society's sake.

The crucial question, of course, is how do we move from where we are to where we should be? The body of this article is devoted to addressing that question. The first step in moving from here to there (from narrow scholasticism to humane scholarship, in this case) is to have some idea of the cause of the problem. The next step is to attempt, in Francis Bacon's words, "to run a course aright," by offering proposals for action and change. We will try to follow these steps in the discussion that follows.

We identify principal causes of the crisis in the university and the social sciences to be the intellectual fragmentation that characterizes institutions of higher education and a structural contradiction that is built into the American research university. We then propose a possible strategy for improvement. It is a strategy that calls for a radical reorientation of American universities, involving a serious turn toward helping to solve concrete, immediate, real-world problems—particularly the problems that exist in a university's local geographic community. A way to achieve such a reorientation, in our judgment, is through communal participatory action research projects consciously designed to help change society. This research strategy, we argue, will significantly advance both general knowledge and human welfare.

INTELLECTUAL FRAGMENTATION AND THE STRUCTURAL CONTRADICTION OF THE AMERICAN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

Although many reasons account for the difficulty of providing higher learning in the nation's service, perhaps the most prominent among them is the intellectual fragmentation that results from departmental and disciplinary divisions. These divisions not only prevent universities from effectively meeting societal needs but also isolate them from the larger society. A report of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) puts it succinctly: "Communities have problems, universities have departments" (Center for Educational Research and Innovation, 1982, p. 127). Beyond being a criticism of universities, this statement neatly indicates why universities have not contributed as they should. Quite simply, their unintegrated, fragmented structure and organization work against understanding and helping to solve highly complex human and societal problems.

In its most fundamental form, the fragmentation of universities is expressed in the separation of its three missions of research, teaching, and service. Nearly every admissions brochure, commencement address, and convocation exercise makes reference to the significance of each of these
missions. These missions are, moreover, presented as a piece, a seamless web that exemplifies higher education’s noble purpose. Those associated with a university, of course, know that only research is generally considered in tenure and promotion decisions, and a wide division exists among the three missions. This separation has had most unfortunate consequences, resulting in, among other things, less effective research, teaching, and service. All three missions have been impoverished by what might be termed a false trichotomization.

This false trichotomy has contributed to an enormous imbalance in the production of knowledge. For example, dazzling advances have occurred in university-based research in science and technology. New ideas, concepts, technologies, approaches, and techniques are developed with ever-increasing rapidity. Although designed to improve human welfare, the application of scientific advances too frequently results in new and more forbidding problems. For example, the wondrous possibilities of new medical technologies have become distorted, helping to create a health care system unresponsive to the “low tech” preventive needs of the vast majority of citizens.²

Integrating research, teaching, and service will be particularly difficult because of a fundamental contradiction in the structure of the American research university itself—a contradiction that occurred with its very creation. That is, the American research university is a product of a combination of the German research university and the American college. Gilman, the founder of Johns Hopkins and central architect of the late 19th-century research university, claimed that one of his proudest accomplishments was “a school of science grafted on one of the oldest and most conservative classical colleges” (Gilman, 1898, p. iii). Although referring specifically to the merger of the Sheffield Scientific School with Yale College, Gilman felt that this achievement exemplified his contribution to American higher education.

Gilman did not make reference to the institutional contradiction that necessarily resulted from a merger of two markedly different entities. The research university was dedicated to specialized scholarship and to providing service through the production of specialized inquiry and studies. For the American college, on the other hand, general education, character building, and civic education were the central purposes. Service to society was provided by cultivating in young people, using Benjamin Franklin’s phrase, “an Inclination join’d with an Ability to serve” (Smyth, 1907, p. 386-396). The research university has, of course, dominated this merger, creating an ethos and culture that rewards specialized study rather than more general scholarship and the work of educating the next generation for moral, civic, and intellectual leadership.
Given the structural contradiction built into the American university, and nearly a century of increasing specialization, fragmentation of knowledge, and separation of scholarship from direct service to society, it will not be easy for any higher educational institution to effectively integrate research, teaching, and service and to substantively increase its contribution to knowledge and human welfare. Certainly, the significant problems facing American society and the pressures for change coming from a variety of constituents will necessitate a forging of new directions in the social sciences, indeed in all areas of the university. The direction we have chosen, communal participatory action research, builds on insights from the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Whyte. Our approach emphasizes a mutually beneficial democratic relationship between academics and nonacademics, in which academic researchers learn from and with the community, conduct research with and not on people, and contribute to the solution of significant community problems. Put another way, we believe that West Philadelphia, where the University of Pennsylvania is situated, should serve as a natural social and cultural laboratory in which participatory action research (PAR) functions as a humanistic strategy for the advancement of knowledge and human welfare.

TYPES OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND THEIR USES

It is necessary to place PAR in a broader context so that it may be differentiated from other forms of social science. One typology, particularly useful for differentiating what we are attempting to do, classifies social science research as scholastic social science and action social science, which includes professional expert action social science, participatory action social science, and communal participatory action social science (Benson & Harkavy, 1991). It would be difficult at this stage in our work to describe these categories in detail. To clarify the typology, we will, however, cite at least one example and a few generic traits of each kind of research.

Scholastic social science is nonparticipatory, nonapplied, and directed almost exclusively to the internal debates of the discipline. (Smesler’s 1988 publication serves as an example of this kind of social science.) It is also virtually always conducted by professional social scientists. Action social science, on the other hand, focuses on application and solving of problems in society. There are, however, important differences among the three subtypes we have identified. For example, professional expert action social science is nonparticipatory in design and research practice. Given that we have summarily cited the two dominant types of social science research, readers might expect us to proclaim the wonders of PAR. We will, however, resist the temptation to do so. Quite simply, we and our colleagues at Penn
are relative newcomers to the approach. Lippitt (1961) and Whyte (1986, 1991a), distinguished PAR veterans, have each described the benefits of research with practitioners. What we can perhaps add to their arguments is a distinction between types of PAR.

Both participatory and communal participatory social science are directed toward problems in the real world—concerned with application and, obviously, participatory. They differ in geographic orientation and the degree to which they are beneficial and necessary to the organization or community studied and to the university. In a direct sense, the University of Pennsylvania’s self-interest is tied to the success of efforts in the West Philadelphia community. Proximity and a focus on social problems that are institutionally significant to the university have encouraged sustained, continuous research involvement.

DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNAL PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

At the University of Pennsylvania, PAR is a key element in an institutional strategy directed toward the reinvention of the American research university and, ultimately, the revitalization of the American city. Our approach at Penn has been to advance academically based community service—service rooted in and intrinsically tied to research and teaching. Among other things, PAR seeks to integrate the research, teaching, and service missions of the university, while also spurring intellectual integration across disciplines. We have found that the very nature of concrete, real-world problems, particularly the problems of the university’s immediate geographic community of West Philadelphia, encourage interschool and interdisciplinary collaboration. No single component of the university can significantly help understand and reduce the complex, myriad, interrelated problems of the urban poor. In combination, however, significant advances can be made. That combination must necessarily go beyond the various components of the university to include public schools, businesses, unions, community organizations, government, and voluntary associations.

Our work builds on Dewey’s proposition that knowledge and learning can most effectively be advanced through working to solve major societal problems. For Dewey (1910/1933, p. ii), “thinking begins . . . in a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives.” In effect, our forked-road situation is the intellectual problem of what can be done to overcome the deep, pervasive, interrelated problems affecting the people of West Philadelphia.

To a significant extent, our work can be viewed as testing the validity of Dewey’s proposition about how we learn and think. Even more fundamen-
It tests the validity of Francis Bacon’s central proposition that knowledge advances most effectively when the "relief of man’s estate" is made the true end of knowledge. According to Bacon, knowledge should be sought not “for pleasure of the mind, or for contention, or for superiority to others, or for profit, or fame, or power, or for any of these inferior things; but for the benefit and use of life; and [all should] perfect and govern it in charity" (quoted in Benson & Harkavy, 1991, p. 4-5).

How are we to know whether a Deweyan-Baconian approach is indeed superior to the traditional scholastic model that dominates the American university? For Bacon, the test was simple: By their fruits shall we judge modes of inquiry and thought. In other words, to what extent does research change the world for the better? Dewey (1948) praised Bacon for his brilliant analysis of the sociology of knowledge and his call for cooperative research.

To Bacon, error had been produced and perpetuated by social influences, and truth must be discovered by social agencies organized for that purpose. The great need [Bacon proclaimed] is the organization of cooperative research, whereby men attack nature collectively and the work of inquiry is carried on continuously from generation to generation. (pp. 36-37)

We are well aware that our test of a Deweyan-Baconian approach is modest indeed. It represents a case study within a single community. Our assumption, however, is that there are lessons to be learned from Penn’s work with the public schools and neighborhoods of West Philadelphia. More generally, we assume that local does not translate into parochial. The regional, national, and global processes at work in West Philadelphia are similar to those found in other urban areas, particularly those adjacent to research universities. Reflecting upon and analyzing our own efforts should prove instructive to those concerned with university-community relationships as well as with the potential of communal participatory action research.

The following section describes the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC), a university-assisted neighborhood and school revitalization program. The discussion includes (a) historical background on WEPIC as a PAR project and (b) illustrations, that is, particular details of PAR studies in West Philadelphia. We begin with the main decisions and events that led to the formation of an integrated, multidisciplinary effort at Penn to direct academic resources toward the revitalization of the university’s immediate geographic neighborhoods.
WEPIC did not originate as a community-focused PAR project but emerged instead from interest in three interrelated questions: (a) How can social science make genuine contributions to society? (b) What can be done to reduce the fragmentation among the social sciences and to stimulate a more interdisciplinary, integrated social science? and (c) How can undergraduate education help young people both learn how to learn and learn to put their ideals into practice?

The work of WEPIC, based on social science research from the 1950s forward, revolved around the theme of how best to change the social sciences to change the world. As a result, the program began to focus its attention on ways to link academic work to the problems of Philadelphia. This turn to a till-one’s-own-garden approach in its early stages, from 1982 to 1984, bore little formal resemblance to PAR in its current form. Focusing their work on undergraduates (the population of the university least affected by narrow specialized training), the program of study that would evolve into WEPIC included undergraduate seminars and research internship programs that engaged honors students in research on specified problems in the university and in the Philadelphia area. Notwithstanding significant improvement in the quality of undergraduate research, the formation of relationships with various organizations in the city, and the creation of an organizational home for the program (the Office of Community-Oriented Policy Studies, or OCOPS), progress was slow. Movement toward the project’s wider goals was hardly noticeable. The failure to substantively connect the students’ various research projects to one another and to create an overall intellectual coherence to the seminar discussions caused some concern. In short, these problem-oriented, real-world-directed seminars exhibited some of the same problems as more conventional, inward-directed seminars.

In retrospect, the cause and sensible resolution of these problems should have been obvious. The Philadelphia areawide scope of our efforts, the geographic dispersion of the student projects, and the particular needs of the various agencies naturally hindered a sense of common purpose among the students and fostered the very fragmentation we were trying to reduce. The West Philadelphia research, on the other hand, produced a different response; all the students could, in one way or another, relate to the subject, and the policy implications directly affected their university and the area in which they lived.
As is the case with many urban universities, Penn is located in an area marked by deep and pervasive poverty and despair. In the spring of 1985, OCOPS turned its attention to improving the quality of life in West Philadelphia. Only after focusing on that pressing real-world problem did meaningful real-world and intellectual progress occur. It occurred even more rapidly after the creation of WEPIC, which emerged in the spring of 1985 during an OCOPS honors history seminar. Each undergraduate in that seminar focused his or her research on a problem in the West Philadelphia community. Four students, for example, studied the issue of youth unemployment. Their research resulted in a proposal to create a better and less expensive youth corps—a youth corps that would utilize existing agencies and resources.

The proposal received financial support, and a program involving 50 youths in five West Philadelphia neighborhoods was set to begin in July. The MOVE fire on Osage Avenue in West Philadelphia in May of that year radically changed both the size and schedule of the program. Community leaders asked WEPIC to involve all of the young people affected by the fire, beginning the 1st week in June. Needless to say, the program’s visibility was significantly increased. WEPIC focused much of its activity around the Bryant School, a neighborhood elementary school. Murals were painted around the school building, trees were planted, and a general clean-up of the area occurred. From the positive reaction of the neighbors, Penn faculty members and students began to see that public schools might function as centers of neighborhood revitalization. During the fall of 1985, WEPIC began an after-school program at Bryant. From the elementary school, the project grew over the next 10 years to include two large comprehensive high schools, four middle schools, and five other elementary schools.

Today, WEPIC is a year-round program that involves over 4,500 children, their parents, and community members in education and cultural programs, recreation, job training, community improvement, and service activities. The program is coordinated by the West Philadelphia Partnership, a mediating organization composed of institutions (including the University of Pennsylvania) and community groups, in conjunction with the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition and the Philadelphia School District (see Harkavy & Puckett, 1991a). Other partners in the effort include unions; job training agencies; churches; community groups; and city, state, and federal agencies and departments.

A summary of WEPIC’s development provides a succinct statement of Penn’s work with the West Philadelphia public schools. It masks the complexity, messiness, wrong turns and directions, and fortuitous circumstances that characterize the effort and hides from view the process of project development as well as the learning that results from and in that process.
Among the lessons emerging in Penn's work with WEPIC is that the project, as well as theoretical understanding and development, is best characterized as a continually emerging, reinforcing process. This lesson has forced us to discard tried-and-true assumptions that fail to meet the test of real-world experience.

Penn's involvement with WEPIC can be classified into four general phases. Each phase is in some sense arbitrary because no formal cutoff date marks one period from another. Yet real-world events in the project's history—events closely tied to conceptual and theoretical developments—do provide useful points of demarcation. These four phases can be described as follows: (a) initial engagement, 1985-1988; (b) beginnings of a community school, 1988-1990; (c) toward a community school-based health program, 1990-1991; and (d) recent events and communal participatory action research studies.

Initial engagement. From 1985 to 1988, the research and teaching agendas of WEPIC were shaped by the real world as opposed to the internal academic world. A broad (and therefore diffused) Philadelphia-wide focus led the program to concentrate its efforts on a single community. The turn to a PAR approach occurred following the active engagement of faculty members and students with the WEPIC project. With the project's creation, community leadership became actively involved. An organizational structure was in the process of forming, as were the personal relationships that would be crucial to future activity.

With an evolving organizational structure and the ongoing growth of the project, colleagues from the Annenberg School for Communication, Social Work, Education, and Nursing developed seminars that were linked to WEPIC's activities. The benefits of focused engagement and of democratic partnerships with practitioners became increasingly apparent. There even appeared to be progress toward answering some of the initial motivating questions.

The focus on social problems in a common locality had spurred cooperation among colleagues. Some integration of the social sciences, indeed general academic integration across the institution, began on a minimal, tentative basis. The very complexity of West Philadelphia's problems made it evident to all involved that a disciplinary approach was inadequate and constraining. Problems of the community evolved and changed in the very process of being studied; new issues and concerns were emerging, requiring new approaches and combinations of disciplines, technologies, and theories.

This process was discovered through a rediscovery of the community school. We found that the role of schools as institutions affected not only students but entire neighborhoods. As WEPIC increasingly became a school-
based program, and as the teachers in the program expanded their roles to encompass community leadership functions, schools began to function as the strategic and catalytic agents for community transformation. As the program developed, the initial problem of youth employment became subsumed under a more comprehensive problem: How can schools effectively function as genuine community centers that lead to the organization, education, and transformation of entire neighborhoods?

Since John Dewey described the community-oriented school in 1902, there have been significant attempts, indeed movements, to have schools function as community centers. Particularly during the first two decades of the 20th century, community schools were a visible alternative on the educational landscape. From 1934 to 1956, Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem, New York City, an action-oriented community school, linked the school’s academic curriculum to community revitalization (Peebles, 1980). This historical example could have served as a model for what Penn faculty members and the teachers and community members were trying to do; at that time, however we were unfamiliar with the Benjamin Franklin High School experience. This lack of knowledge reflected a literature in which community schools—despite their real significance in American educational history—were relegated to footnote status and minor mention in American historiography.

Our attention to real-world practice with practitioners in an action research project led us to the work of Dewey, and from Dewey to the literature on community schools in general. A genuine sense of intellectual excitement and discovery developed as Penn faculty members and the teachers learned of the historical antecedents to their efforts. This experience provided all WEPIC partners with a sense of their place within a larger tradition, enabling them to draw inspiration from previous attempts and to learn from past successes and failures. Most centrally, the rediscovery of community schools helped practitioners and academics to better understand what they had been groping toward conceptually and in practice.

**Beginnings of a community school.** Through the fall of 1988, WEPIC operated on a relatively small scale. It had expanded significantly over time, operated city, state, and national demonstration projects, and gained some degree of attention among policymakers in the United States and Europe (Nothdurft, 1989). There was, however, only a limited influence on the university, and no WEPIC site had taken dramatic steps toward becoming a community school.

With a major grant from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, however, WEPIC began to develop comprehensive community schools in West
Philadelphia. Largely because of the interest and leadership of the principal of the John P. Turner Middle School, this site was chosen as the primary center of activity. Hence the Turner School became the focal point for the engagement of Penn resources. The project increasingly drew on William Whyte's pioneering work in PAR, and on his and Kurt Lewin's emphasis on the need for democratic relationships between academics and practitioners to do good social science. The full significance of that earlier PAR was not realized until work to create a community school had actually begun.

The daunting task that faced our work at Turner School—its transformation into a radically different kind of school—hopefully would have the effect of bringing academics and practitioners closer together. The common goal of creating a community school clearly depended upon the ability of university faculty members and students to work with the principal, teachers, and neighborhood leadership. A significant degree of nuanced and tacit knowledge would be required if faculty members were to be able to make useful suggestions and proposals. But our colleagues knew that this kind of deep, policy-necessary knowledge was hard to come by. The information they needed would be inaccessible even to an extremely talented ethnographer who merely observed, but did not assist, the community. Therefore, the Whyte-Lewin style of PAR would be required for the project to succeed.

One deterrent to success was the burden of history. To put it mildly, Penn's relationship with the West Philadelphia community had not been a positive one. Like nearly all major urban universities, Penn had seen itself as in, but not part of, the community. Battles over university expansion in the 1960s were still fresh in the minds of community leaders. A pervasive distrust of academics existed because in West Philadelphia, graduate students and faculty members had studied and written about the community, only to leave it in the same or worse shape than it had been before they arrived. Real-world results over a 3-year period, the development of face-to-face, ongoing, mutually beneficial relationships, and assistance in providing access to and securing resources for WEPIC had, however, begun to produce a shift in the community's attitude.

The test of that shift arose with the planning and implementation of the community school. In the winter of 1989, a working seminar of practitioners and academics was formed involving the Turner principal and two Turner teachers; a similarly constituted group from West Philadelphia High School, another significant WEPIC site; a researcher from the School District; WEPIC administrators; a group of Penn faculty members from the education, social work, history, and dentistry departments; and the director of academic planning from the medical school. Dubbed a think tank, the seminar group began to define the kind of school all partners would be working to achieve.
The concept of staff-controlled and managed, university-assisted community schools, for example, was introduced at the first session.

In the seminar and in the more significant, informal, day-to-day interaction that followed, the participants found this research partnership indispensable. In the community school-creating phase of the PAR project, the university’s role in the entire WEPIC effort was redefined and sharpened. To advance the project—to create community schools and to acquire the information needed for good research and useful policy—the university had to make a long-term commitment.

As the Turner Community School progressed and as organizational structures were put in place, the community school coordinator, a Turner teacher, requested and received additional Penn resources. Seminars, studios, practicums, and research projects in the School of Arts and Sciences, education, social work, fine arts, dentistry, Wharton, and the School of Medicine were developed to focus on the Turner School project. To a considerable extent, Turner Middle School had become a vehicle for academic integration across the university.

*Toward a community school-based health program.* The first community school component, the wider use of the Turner school, was initiated in the spring of 1989. Some of the community programs in operation at Turner by the 1990-1991 school year included a Saturday school involving over 250 students and adults; a Wednesday evening adult program with over 100 participants; and after-school job training, enrichment, remediation, and homework programs. A school-within-a-school involved four teachers and 120 students in a sixth- through eighth-grade open classroom, with a focus on service-learning projects to improve the health of the Turner community.

The turn toward issues of community health was part of the larger process of creating a community school at Turner. A year or so prior to the opening of a community school, a survey found that neighborhood residents were most interested in education, job training, health, and day care programs. At the suggestion of the community school coordinator, undergraduates in Penn’s 1989 public service summer internship program examined school-based health and day care provision.

Although work with WEPIC gained increasing recognition and acceptance at Penn, a predominant view of the PAR project was that it functioned as a show, useful for publicity and community relations, but was unconnected to the real academic purposes of the institution. The expanded university-wide effort in WEPIC, particularly at Turner but also at West Philadelphia High School, led the dean of arts and sciences to create the Penn Program for Public Service (a successor to the more limited OCOPS) to coordinate all WEPIC-linked activities. (For a more extensive discussion, see Harkavy &
Puckett, 1991b.) Nonetheless, the concept that academically based community service, service rooted in and intrinsically tied to teaching and research, could significantly advance all three university missions had only a relatively small band of faculty adherents.

It soon became obvious that health was a strategic issue not only for the community but also for achieving the goal of creating a university-wide PAR project that could help transform West Philadelphia and research and teaching at Penn. The undergraduates’ summer research projects revealed that a real-world community health issue could unite faculty members from across the university. Besides nursing, medicine, dentistry, and social work, there were faculty members from the School of Arts and Sciences, Wharton, Annenberg School for Communication, law, and fine arts with a research and teaching interest in health. Moreover, the medical school is the high-prestige school at Penn, with the largest faculty and a large percentage of the total university budget (University of Pennsylvania Office of Research Administration, 1991; University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, 1990). The medical school is part of a larger medical center that includes the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania and is also affiliated with Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

Despite knowing that the issue of health care would be crucial to Penn’s serious engagement in West Philadelphia, the question remained of how to engage Penn’s plethoric resources in the health field. A crucial step forward was taken when Jack Ende, director of ambulatory care education in the School of Medicine, agreed to organize a free hypertension screening for community residents at the Turner School. A series of decisions followed. The Turner School received a small grant from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to develop a community-centered curriculum in conjunction with the University of Pennsylvania. During a 6-week summer institute, four Turner faculty members were enlisted to develop the curriculum with 20 students considered to be at risk. After being informed of Ende’s offer, the community-school coordinator and her colleagues refocused the plans for the summer institute. It would be devoted to developing a community health-focused curriculum, using the hypertension screening as a project-focused learning vehicle for the students. The 1990 summer internship program also was refashioned so that undergraduate research revolved around the theme of how community health and student learning could be improved through the development of a health care program at Turner. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also agreed to provide financial support for three medical students to work on the project. The summer institute functioned as the single most effective WEPIC activity, having substantial visible and immediate effects on all participants (Rosenberg, 1990).
Recent events and communal participatory action research studies. Since 1991, the WEPIC summer institute has included, in addition to other activities, a school-to-work component, involving significant on-site experience for at-risk Turner children at Misericordia Hospital (a local community hospital) and the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (HUP). Health institutions, the largest employers in West Philadelphia, have indicated that a trained, locally-based workforce is among their greatest needs. Summer institute students learn about and practice (to a limited extent) real occupations, in real institutions, in their own neighborhood. As part of the current academic year program, eighth-grade students participate in an allied health careers project at Misericordia and HUP, rotating through various departments of a hospital (e.g., dietary, nursing, respiratory, community outreach, patient representative, and hospital administration) and participating in discussions related to the education and training required for various hospital personnel. The summer institute's health education and adult screening program has extended to the day school curriculum. Each quarter, seventh graders learn about a community health topic (e.g., hypertension, nutrition, HIV/AIDS education, drug and alcohol abuse) and then host a community Health Watch, where they present information about healthy decisions and habits. At these public forums, WEPIC coordinates appropriate student and adult screenings and makes available professional advice related to the Health Watch theme. Services provided by local health facilities and programs include free, anonymous HIV screening during the AIDS/HIV Health Watch and free breast cancer screenings and mammography vouchers during the Cancer Health Watch.

Community health is the major integrative theme for the development of a community-centered curriculum. In the fall of 1993, the WEPIC house (a middle school analog to a high school charter) began operations, expanding the earlier WEPIC school-within-a-school, which involved four teachers and 120 students. The current house has 12 teachers and over 360 students, roughly one third of Turner’s students, and is divided into four teachers and four classrooms for each of grades 6, 7, and 8. The goal is not only to improve the intellectual development of students and their ability to make healthy decisions but also to help them become agents for change in their community and to be educators of their peers, family, and community members. Community-specific interdisciplinary projects integrate the basic content areas of math, science, social studies, and language arts. Peer education, community outreach, and work-based learning are embedded in each set of activities. Examples of these projects include nutrition education and a school store curriculum for sixth graders; community health watches for seventh graders; and a community history, mapping, and desktop publishing project for eighth
graders. The Turner School curriculum work is directly supported by, and integral to, a University of Pennsylvania Department of Anthropology undergraduate seminar on nutrition and a Graduate School of Education seminar on curriculum development.

PAR studies provide direct or indirect support to these curriculum efforts. A crucial issue, of course, is the degree to which such locally based research projects result in general knowledge. We would argue that local does not mean parochial and that the solution to local problems necessarily requires an understanding of national and global issues as well as an effective use and development of theory. Two research projects, one conducted by a physical anthropologist at Penn, another by a graduate student in psychology, exemplify these propositions and the multidisciplinary nature of the Penn approach.

Francis Johnston, former chairperson of Penn’s anthropology department, carries out research in the Turner Nutritional Awareness Project (TNAP), a joint community/university-sponsored PAR project at the Turner School that is designed to improve the nutritional status of the community. Johnston describes TNAP as “dealing with nutritional assessment, with instruction in concepts of nutrition, and with the collection of a broad range of related information, including such areas as knowledge, preferences, and attitudes concerning food, food streams within the neighborhood, and other sources of information (merchants, media, etc.)” (Johnston & Hallock, 1994, p. 742). Turner School teachers participate in the design of the intervention, its packaging, and its presentation. Sixth-grade Turner students participate in the nutrition education program; as seventh graders, they teach elementary school students about basic nutrition and healthy habits.

In a recent study, Johnston and his undergraduate anthropology students collected measurements of physical growth status and dietary intakes from 11- to 15-year-old African American youth. Data for the former were collected on 136 individuals; for both sets of indicators, data were collected on 113. A nutrition software package was used to calculate the nutrient values of students’ dietary intakes, and individual records were merged into a single data set for computer statistical analysis. Data analysis supported the following conclusion:

Overall, the data indicate a population with a very high prevalence of obesity, and diets high in saturated fat and low in polyunsaturated fat. Also of potential concern is the indication of low intakes of zinc and high intakes of sodium. Given the increased health risks of urban African-Americans, these findings on young adolescents suggest the development of programs designed to improve diets and enhance health in general in this age group. (Johnston & Hallock, 1994, p. 741)
Johnston's work with undergraduates further distinguishes the Penn approach from other varieties of action research. PAR creates or restructures academic courses to include an explicit community focus and action component. The assumption is that embedding community service into courses, research, and general intellectual discourse will lead to positive changes in the institutional climate, providing a linkage between service, morality, and education.

As another example of PAR, Karen Reivitch developed and tested the Coping Skills Program, a school-based intervention for inner-city children at risk for depression. Working under the direction of Professor Martin Seligman, Reivitch recruited 95 Turner School sixth and seventh graders, half of whom were randomly assigned to a coping skills group, half to a control group. The treatment group (subdivided into groups of 10-12 children) participated in twenty 1-hr sessions led by Reivitch and a team of undergraduate assistants. Reivitch summarizes this program below:

The Coping Skills Program teaches the children concrete skills for overcoming adversity and depression. The children are taught how to evaluate the accuracy of their perceptions so that they take responsibility for their problems without blaming themselves for things they cannot control. The children learn to challenge hopelessness and pessimism and how to take an active approach in problem solving. An emphasis is placed on helping children express their feelings regarding familial conflict and strategies for dealing with stressful situations are discussed and practiced. The program structure relies on role-plays, games, and group discussions to introduce and practice the coping strategies. (Reivitch, 1993)

One week prior to the treatment, Reivitch and her assistants administered a packet of questionnaires to the children in the treatment and control groups. Pretest measures were obtained to assess depression, conduct, and several related constructs. The same measures were administered at the conclusion of the program and will be obtained again in a 6-month and 1-year follow-up (the latter will assess the program's effectiveness in maintaining treatment gains and preventing depressive symptoms). To measure if the program alleviated depressive symptoms, Reivitch ran an analysis of variance (ANCOVA) on children who scored above the median for depressive symptoms at baseline, covarying depressive symptoms as a pretest control for the initial level of symptoms and reporting one-tailed p-values.

Results from this analysis indicate that of the children who entered the study program with above-average depressive symptoms, those who completed the Coping Skills Program were significantly less depressed than the children in the control group ($F = 2.86, p < .05$). Also, symptomatic children who participated in the program
reported significantly fewer negative thoughts (as measured by the automatic thoughts questionnaire) than children in the control group ($F = 2.62, p < .007$). Contrary to expectations, however, the treatment did not have a significant effect on the children’s attributional styles. Thus preliminary analyses indicate that the Coping Skills Program reduced depressive symptoms and negative thoughts in the children who were currently experiencing depressive symptoms. (Reivitch, 1993)

As our examples of PAR are designed to suggest, genuine discovery has occurred in the forked-road situation of West Philadelphia, engendering new ideas, concepts, and approaches to school and community development. We believe that we have made a good start. The interaction of faculty, staff, and students attempting to solve immediate, concrete, real-world problems has fostered an unprecedented degree of academic integration at Penn, and promising developments have occurred in the schools and neighborhoods where we have worked. We want to emphasize, however, just how extraordinarily difficult it is to change the university and its community. Even after 10 years, our work is still in an early, developing phase.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued for the reinvention of the American university and the social sciences. We have proposed PAR as a strategy for mitigating the intellectual fragmentation and structural contradiction that are the principal sources of the crisis in American higher education. We also have described a PAR project involving the University of Pennsylvania and schools in its community of West Philadelphia, highlighting some of the results of that project.

Our central argument is that the focus of the social sciences needs to shift from internally driven critique to real-world engagement, practice, and critique, with all three components operating more or less simultaneously and continuously. The thrust of the argument is captured in Lewin’s (1964) proposition that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (p. 169). Lewin, in effect, called for an empirically and reality-tested, goal-directed, theory-oriented social science. That antipositivistic, antischolastic approach resonates with Dewey’s emphases on both learning through dynamic interaction with the external world and the development of an open, experimental, genuinely scientific approach to problem solving (Kolb, 1984).

Communal participatory action research, we contend, puts the focus on the real world and engages the researcher in an open, democratic, continuous learning situation designed to contribute to continuous problem solving. As Whyte (1991b) has emphasized, it is an approach that encourages new findings and creativity, conceptualizing theory as a guide for action and
research rather than as a dogma to be debated and reinforced. Real-world settings, practice itself, and the views, approaches, and theories of practitioners all can contribute to an open-ended process that produces better approximations, conclusions, theories, and practice.

NOTES

1. For citations and a discussion of the work of Bacon, see Benson (1978).
2. For a discussion of environmental threats posed by science divorced from social, moral, and ethical concerns (in this case, quantum mechanics and molecular biology), see Bernstein (1987).
3. For discussion of academic specialization and the separation of social science from its reformist roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, see Bulmer and Bulmer (1981), Hackney (1986), and Ross (1991, p. 319-326).
5. The process needed to create our community school was deeply influenced by the work of Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn W. Sherif and their development of superordinate goal theory. The theory emphasizes that a common goal is not a sufficient condition to produce intergroup cooperation. A common goal is more likely to result in intergroup cooperation if reaching the goal requires the combined efforts of each group and if the goal is of high significance to each group. See, for example, M. Sherif (1966) and M. Sherif and C. W. Sherif (1948/1969, especially pp. 255-261; 1953).
6. James Bessin (1990) published an essay on Penn’s relationship with the community since 1945. The relationship was especially contentious in the late 1960s. For details, see Bugos (1984); Fowler (1969); Goldstein (1986); and University of Pennsylvania (1968a, 1968b).

REFERENCES


