

## Community Organizing with a Purpose

NHI has long used community organizing as its chief means of achieving its goals of working with high potential Latino youth in leadership development. As new staff join the National Hispanic Institute (NHI), they must also learn to use community organizing principles and practices as their way of conducting their work and, as a result, achieving the Institute's community goals. In the information that follows, guidance is provided for first time professionals at NHI. Included is guidance in community organizing as NHI's chief means of actively and consistently engaging communities and cultivating the support needed to yield the caliber of student participation that NHI wishes to embrace through its work.

NHI Basic Mission and Purpose:

- Our basic mission and core purpose is to replenish, supply, and expand the reservoir of skilled and educated corps of young people from which a growing and diverse Latino community and its sector interests may draw its community leaders.
- To achieve its aims, NHI identifies, mobilizes, and engages high potential high school youth in order to expand their networks leading to higher education as well as expose them to fundamental learning skills, competencies, and knowledge that enable them to also participate in Latino community life as future leaders (NHI Summer Youth Experiences).

**Identification** of potential candidates takes place through public and private high schools and the application of particular academic criteria.

**Mobilization** primarily takes place through traditional classroom presentations, evening community meetings, and the use of media and social networking that also includes a selective review process and adherence to particular payment schedules.

**Engagement** occurs during the summer months through leadership programs conducted on college campuses and designed for particular age groups.

Mobilization in years past primarily focused on classroom presentations and extensive visits to particular regions of the nation. It was not uncommon for recruitment in the Rio Grande Valley to cover a period three to four weeks cultivating relationships with counselors, teachers, and community supporters. Recruitment in New Mexico often required at least a week with two people making 4 high school visits a day with the assistance of nearby college admissions staff who accompanied NHI staff. The same process was used in California, Midwest, and places like Nevada, and Arizona. The goal behind these extended visits was threefold: (1) establish personal friendships with counselors and high school administrators; (2) work in concert with undergraduate admissions staff of NHI College Register institutions; and (3) work towards setting up evening meetings with parents ("the close").

Almost always, the recruitment goal was to mobilize three times the eligible prospects than the required yield ("let the water meet its mark"). To achieve this end, counselors were sent information well in advance of the recruitment visits and also given general instructions on NHI applicant preferences and participation goals. In other words, the intent was to engage the counselors as the 'chief yield managers' for NHI. Through this approach a student was asked to submit a 'counselor certified application'. Once applications started to arrive at NHI, counselors were advised either by direct telephone call or mail of the number of students who had applied and

which students were absent. Almost always, counselors went out of their way to ensure NHI of multiple applicants.

What goes on today is clearly different. We have moved more towards a transactional relationship with the community we wish to serve rather than a developmental one. School staff priorities as well as NHI's audiences have also changed. When at one time the LDZ was the main center of our efforts, today that momentum has shifted towards the Great Debate. And while we formerly enjoyed wide access to large contingencies of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade youth in the past highly interested in becoming junior counselors, the rewards of continued affiliation with NHI has now changed to the Great Debate. Other factors that have contributed greatly to our methods of conducting business includes: (1) the expansion of NHI to other regions of the nation [Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York City, Puerto Rico]; (2) the rise of an international market [Mexico, Panama, Dominican Republic]; (3) a weakening relationship with the NHI College Register; (4) the staff 'turn over' and retirement of former key school district supporters; (5) the employment of staff with insufficient training, particularly in community mobilization, outreach, and Latino community trends and dynamics; and (6) problems of supervision and focus often associated with remote management [New York, Pennsylvania, El Paso, and Monterrey].

Left unattended, the current situation that faces NHI from an outreach point of view could eventually become highly burdensome to the organization's growth and, in particular, financial stability. Improvements, however, are already in place and include the following:

- Expansion of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade program to other regions of the nation through outsourcing (partnerships with OCI, Qobe, and others) will significantly widen the applicant pool for older NHI programs that once depended on independently recruited students.
- The development of Celebración as the official fundraising engine of NHI will shortly start to yield larger amounts of potential scholarship support, thereby shrinking the practice of discounting (HYF).
- The focus on 'crossovers' (alumni who *cross over* from one program [GD] to the next [LDZ]) as NHI's continuing education programs for students will lessen costs associated with travel, car rental, food, and overnight accommodations.
- The expansion of school district participation in partially funding NHI youth will make student registration fees more family affordable and also allow for modest increases with harming family incomes.
- The growth of international programs among full tuition (no financial assistance) students will lessen the costs associated with collections.
- The introduction of a strong community/family relations program as part of recruitment will decrease the loss of students who sometimes discontinue their interest due to poor communications with NHI offices in Maxwell.
- The planned transfer of student collections under the business/finance office will create greater consistency and businesslike attitudes among parents who want their children to attend NHI programs.
- Early start initiatives (March 2012 for Summer 2013) in student outreach that begins six months before the academic year will increase student/parent interest earlier than the current schedule, which often conflicts with the holiday season when it comes to payment, and follow through.
- The introduction of community organization training will significantly improve field staff understanding of their roles and capacities to meet and surpass outreach goals.

### **Community Organization**

Community organization is widely practiced in most sectors of U.S. community life, dating as far back as the Boston Tea Party that eventually led to our independence as a nation. Saul Alinsky, in other words, did not invent

community organization, although he is considered the founder of American community organizing ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saul\\_Alinsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saul_Alinsky)).

Traditionally, community organizing is defined a process that involves people coming together into an organization that acts to address their self-interest. A community organizer is a person who works towards the development of local leaders, creating coalitions of people with like interests, and assisting in the attainment of a group goal. Organized community groups often attempt to influence government, corporations and institutions. They also seek to increase direct representation within decision-making bodies, and foster social reform more generally. Where their efforts to negotiate fail, they generally seek to gain support for the issues being addressed by exposing or pressuring the decision-makers through a variety of means, including picketing, boycotting, 'sit-ins', petitioning, and electoral politics. Organizing efforts often seek out "community gut issues" they know will generate controversy and conflict in the community. This tactic allows them to draw in and educate participants, build commitment, and establish a reputation for winning. Community organizing is usually focused on more than just resolving specific issues. In fact, specific issues are often vehicles for other organizational goals as much as they are ends in themselves. The three most basic or common types of community organizing are (1) grassroots organizing, (2) faith-based community organizing (<http://new.gbgm-umc.org/plan/hispanic/>), and (3) coalition building. Political campaigns often claim that their door-to-door operations are in fact an effort to organize the community, though often these operations are focused exclusively on voter identification and turnout for candidates who are generally more to the left than right.

### **Community Organizing from an NHI Perspective**

NHI's approach is through a different set of social lenses. Rather than using controversy and conflict as the means of stirring involvement, the organizer shares a vision of community betterment and asset development as the chief means of gaining community support. Also different from traditional approaches to organizing is the emphasis on power and change. In Saul Alinsky community organization, organizers invariably penetrate communities where the residents often feel disconnected and unrepresented in the decision-making structures of the communities where they reside. The organizing fervor that brings people is the conscious realization of feeling powerless and, therefore, forced to confront people in power positions to make change possible.

NHI community organizing is built on a different theory and approach. Under this philosophy the organizer makes a convincing and compelling arguments that allow people to realize and appreciate the power they already have to not only change conditions they wish altered, but, more importantly, play key roles in making their desired changes attainable (see Community Equity Building). Although some will argue to the contrary, the NHI theory of community of organization is built around a philosophy that leads people to become self-sustaining, while the Alinsky approach to community, once a problem is addressed, is faced with the reality of constantly having to agitate involvement all over again.

Basic principles of NHI organizing theory is driven by several beliefs that include the following:

- Commitment to Community  
The organizer must have a deep appreciation and value for the community through a view that is driven by the admiration of its capacities and asset potential rather than its problems and conditions.
- Membership  
The organizer must see him/herself as a full-fledged member of the community through his/her constant presence and his/her participation in its institutions, organizations, economy, cultural events and celebrations.

- Familiarity  
The organizer must be familiar and active in the various interests that comprise community life that include civic, religious, political, education, intellectual, and business leaders without creating division and/or taking sides with his/her personal beliefs and vested interests.
- Clarity of Mission  
The organizer must have the capacity to clearly articulate his/her mission in the community with conviction and in a manner that generates support and involvement by others.
- Organizational Skills  
The organizer must be equipped with the organizational skills to create structures, systems, and pathways through which the community may participate in the attainment of key community goals and priorities.
- Energy Capacities  
The organizer must possess the energy capacities for extended involvement that lead to the accomplishment of important community goals.
- Initiator  
The organizer must be able to develop community constituency groups and interests who are willing to be active supporters the overall efforts of NHI.
- Resourcefulness  
The organizer must be adept in creating contacts, partnerships, and coalitions in the community that are willing to participate in NHI's vision.
- Recognition  
The organizer must be able to establish the means at the community level that draw recognition to the efforts of adults and youth who support NHI efforts.
- Authentication  
The organizer must be able to authenticate the involvement of the community through the accomplishments of the youth served through their efforts.