

**DISCOVER YOUR COMMUNITY:
A LEARNING ADVENTURE FOR ALL AGES**

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DISCOVER YOUR COMMUNITY is a program of learning by study, discussion and practice for all ages. It is offered by New Directions Community-Based Research Institute for communities defined by school district boundaries. It is conducted in cooperation with the public schools, local leadership and local government, businesses, nonprofit agencies and civic groups. And it draws upon the research and educational resources of universities, community colleges, Cooperative Extension and other educational organizations.

The purpose of this outline is to identify the various components of a complete Discover Your Community program, briefly describe each part and suggest how each relates to the other components and to the program as a whole. The structure of the program is meant to be flexible and adaptable to a wide variety of communities.

- I. INTRODUCTION. [This section is “under construction.” It will look at the weakness of civic organization in typical suburban communities and discuss how this program is designed to lay the foundation for a more vigorous civic culture.]
- II. HISTORY. The program outlined here is a very substantial advance in breadth and complexity when compared to its predecessor, developed with the Lowell Avenue Civic Association of Central Islip in 1998-2000. It also moves well beyond the Learn by Doing project in North Bellport, 2001-02. In this abbreviated history, we review the structure of these two projects and note difficulties and obstacles encountered in each of them. Reflecting on these experiences, we have come to a new understanding of the nature of our involvement with local communities.
 - A. The Lowell Avenue model: In this project, the Lowell Avenue Civic Association was the client, and New Directions’s role was to provide assistance as the civic went through the Circles of Hope process, found common ground, formed a shared vision and began work on grassroots implementation. It was in the implementation phase that the shortcomings of the model began to appear. An innovative approach to recovery and rehabilitation of vacant houses, called “Neighborhood Realty Services,” was designed as a partnership of the Lowell Avenue Civic Association, a commercial realtor and the local community-based development organization, Central Islip Civic Council, which was eligible to receive public subsidies. The CICC director, however, opposed the idea on grounds that New Directions was a competitor for scarce funds in a zero-sum game. Thus ended the involvement of New Directions in the Lowell Avenue neighborhood. (See “Claiming a Seat at the Table.” in /Library/Bookstore at www.newdirectionscbr.org.)
 - B. North Bellport “Learn by Doing.” In North Bellport, we made a special effort to explain our work to the director of Bellport Hagerman, East Patchogue Alliance and it was only after she and her board had endorsed our program that we came in and announced it to the neighborhood. We did not, however, take the Alliance as

our client, for we believed that our mission was to reach the “grass roots” people of the neighborhood, not to work with the staff of a nonprofit agency. It would have been much easier for us to assume that the Alliance was the community, as many “community-based” programs do. As a step toward the grass roots, we contacted the Bellport Foundation, an energetic group of volunteer activists. We also visited the staff of Victory Housing, which is a project of Victory Church of God, and called on the outreach workers of St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church. On grounds of our ability to bring these groups to the table along with a representative of the Alliance, we were able to obtain a grant from Catholic Campaign for Human Development to be used for community organizing.

Since there was no civic association in the area, we set up a committee called the Oversight and Stewardship Committee, which we hoped would form the nucleus of a future civic association. The one member who came from the Alliance came only once. As it turned out, the majority of members did not want to broaden the membership and make the group open to all residents. For this and other reasons, several members dropped out and the committee was disbanded. Some said they would try to start a civic association.

In the process of trying to broaden community participation, we had fallen out of favor with our original host. The Alliance director told us that we had “abandoned” her by meeting with other groups, with people who were critical of her and her organization. Once again we found ourselves at odds with the officially designated “gatekeeper” agency and wondering what we had said or done to bring this on ourselves. (See more details in /Library /Bookstore at www.newdirectionscbr.org .)

- C. Lessons learned. Luckily, in January 2003, there came in the mail a little report by James B. Hyman for the Annie E. Casey Foundation about community organizing in the Denver area, entitled “Not Quite Chaos.” Appendix III of that report says, in part,

“Perhaps the greatest challenge to resident-driven communities in working with nonprofit organizations is the need to renew relationships of trust between those organizations and their would-be community constituents. In Denver, as in many communities, community-based and nonprofit organizations are appreciated for the services they provide; yet they are sometimes viewed with suspicion because they are not owned or directed by the communities themselves. Some of the distrust stems from community perceptions of the ways nonprofits are constituted and do business.”

Judging from our experience as well as the experience of organizers in Denver, anyone coming in from outside the community to promote grassroots organizing has to avoid getting into a position of dependence on the community-based nonprofit that funding agencies have designated as the neighborhood gatekeeper.

Given the built-in conflict of interest between the nonprofit, which of necessity must work for the funding agencies, and the citizen groups that see themselves as representing the neighborhood, the outside organizer has virtually no chance of staying on good terms with both sides.

- D. Clarifying our role as educators. Besides being regarded as intruders in another organization's geographic territory, we were plagued by a prevalent belief that we would wastefully duplicate the efforts of other organizations in the housing and development field. It is our hope that the presentation of the Discover Your Community program will put an end to any notions that we are in the housing business.
- E. Staking out a new position. For years we have held the view that the school district is the most reasonable and recognizable geographic unit to treat as the local community on Long Island. By the summer of 2002 we had begun to look for a way to establish ourselves on a broader base at the school district level. Standing on that higher and wider platform, we would be less vulnerable to being "run out of town" by a local development organization defending its turf. We felt that it was truly a stroke of good fortune when, in the fall of 2002, the new superintendent of South Country Central School District, Dr. Michael C. LaFever, agreed to begin working with us on a list of projects.

III. GOALS. In general terms, the goal of Discover Your Community is to increase community resourcefulness, by which we mean the ability to meet challenges, take advantage of opportunities, and establish a supportive environment for the achievement of individual and collective goals. As educators, we do not take direct action for community improvements, but we will coach citizen teams as they learn by doing.

A. *Direct objectives.*

(Basic research and learning.)

1. *Developing community insight* through a community self-study with the help of the academics. Building an information base, a library of knowledge about the community.
2. *Grassroots action planning.* After reviewing the past, present and future as revealed in the self-study, citizen groups arrive at a shared vision for the community and set priorities for goals to be achieved.

(Applied knowledge—learn by doing.)

3. *Participatory program planning.* In consultation with academics and appropriate professionals, and in cooperation with local government, business firms and nonprofit service agencies, the citizen groups develop concrete proposals for improvements that can be made with the use of existing resources.
4. *Grassroots implementation.* Civic groups create new local institutions to meet the needs that have been identified but are not met by existing agencies.

- B. *Indirect objectives.* While the direct objectives apply to community learning, this not the end in itself. The ultimate aim is to build a better community, as measured in terms of seven sets of characteristics.
1. Population traits and geographic distribution.
 2. Environmental quality.
 3. Technology. Physical plant, infrastructure. This includes streets free of potholes or flooding; garbage, yard wastes, trash, and bulky items carted away promptly; frequent, reliable and well-routed bus service; adequate parking downtown and at train stations, and so on.
 4. Economy. The simplest way to state the aim is to say that a positive net cash flow between the community and the surrounding world is desirable, and that there should be a net positive rate of investment in the community's durable assets.
 5. Polity. The desirable trend is a gradual shift from being a community where all political decisions are made by outsiders, to a community where local citizens have a strong voice in decisions that affect them.
 6. Values. The desired outcome in terms of values is for a shift from extreme individualism to more of a balance between individualistic and communitarian values—a little less concern with “me” or “my group” and more with “us,” the community.
 7. Expression and symbolism. If the community develops a greater sense of identity and integrity, it can be expected that there will be visible symbols of its unity and local pride. Examples would be welcome signs with attractive landscaping at main entrances, or more businesses operating under the community name.

C. Evaluation.

1. Direct objectives can be measured by statistics on program activities.
2. Longer range benefits can be traced by beginning with a set of baseline measurements and then taking repeated measurements to establish a time series. Of course the analysis of the results should include comparisons with trends in the larger region and society. If unemployment in the community increases, for example, is it the fault of the community (e.g. a plant closing), or an effect of the national business cycle?

IV. ORGANIZATION. Having clarified what it is that we want to do, and where we hope to do it, the next step is to designate the major players and tell how they will be related to one another.

- A. New Directions Institute. Provides program design and oversight, and in collaboration with local partners, raises funds to support local program staff.
- B. Local program staff (New Directions). Under general policy guidance and funding from New Directions, local staff work with local partners as appropriate to carry out the agreed-upon program.

- C. Local partners. Once the decision had been made to enter into a partnership with the public school system, there was a question of how to structure the arrangement. The South Country school superintendent had the answer in the concept of a Family Support Center, which he had developed in the Buffalo area. Before the end of his first year here, he had established the first school-sponsored Family Support Center on Long Island. It aims to coordinate health and human services for the betterment of families and thereby to help develop a better learning environment for the young people of the community. In April, 2003, the Family Support Center entered into a partnership with New Directions to design and implement a customized version of its *Discover Your Community* program for SCCSD.

This step constituted a major extension of the Family Support Center's mandate. In the Buffalo area centers the focus has been entirely on direct services to families. In South Country we also serve families indirectly through efforts to build better neighborhoods and a community that overall supports the educational agenda—a learning community.

- D. Civic associations. We remain mindful of our original intent to keep in touch with the “grass roots,” that is with the citizens and families in the neighborhoods. In our thinking, “community-based” means what Hyman called “resident-driven.” If we are to work with a community as large as a school district, how can we remain responsive to and accountable to the citizens? An idea we have in mind is that every neighborhood should have a civic association and that there should be a community civic council or federation composed of representatives of these neighborhood associations. One function of this council would be to channel grassroots input to Discover Your Community.
- E. Regional and national partners. The intent of this program is to call upon the resources and expertise of a variety of educational institutions and service providers for the benefit of the local community.

V. SUSTAINABILITY AND CONTINUITY. Discover Your Community is conceived as an ongoing activity without a completion date. Particular care and thought must be given to means of maintaining support over the coming years. The first step is to try to ensure that the key players in the program will find the activity rewarding personally and that they will gain the satisfaction of knowing that their efforts have produced benefits for the community. Beyond that, some way should be found to make the program a permanent fixture among the community's institutions.

- A. Rewards and incentives for the key players.
 - 1. New Directions needs recognition of its expertise, professionalism, uniqueness and value of its services. Letters of appreciation from community

members will help in future grant applications. In addition, New Directions senior staff and board members want to know that the learning that occurs in the program actually does lead to community improvements, and that research done in connection with the program contributes to the growth of general and transferable knowledge (that is, knowledge that can be applied in many other places).

2. Local partners. Many different partners will be needed to fill in the resources that will be necessary to carry out the program. Staff should always seek to understand what each partner needs to gain from the program as a condition for continued support.
3. Citizens. The people who participate in DYC all have their own needs, and if the program is to survive, citizens must see that they have gained personal rewards and that they have contributed to the betterment of the larger community.
4. Academic researchers. If academic researchers are to come to the aid of local communities, and return again and again for additional research, they must be able to obtain results that are publishable in peer-reviewed journals. This means that they cannot be asked only to answer citizens's questions but must be allowed to cast their work in a larger context in order to support generalized conclusions, test theoretical propositions and report findings that are of interest to other communities as well as the one in which a study began.

B. Making Discover Your Community a permanent function of schools and other organizations. Given the tightness of budgets of school districts, all levels of government and the charitable foundations, it can never be easy to introduce substantial new permanent budget lines. It is one thing to try out or demonstrate a new idea, but quite another to allow the idea to become a continuing obligation as far as the eye can see into the future. From the beginning, New Directions will have to work on demonstrating tangible and "bankable" benefits that will justify ongoing support.

VI. ACTIVITY COMPONENTS OF DISCOVER YOUR COMMUNITY. Each activity contributes in some degree to fulfillment of one or more or all of the four goals of building the knowledge base, community learning, planning and implementation.

A. Service learning for students.

1. Grade levels
 - a. Grades 1-3
 - b. Grades 4-5
 - c. Grades 6-8
 - d. Grades 9-12
 - e. College course work (term papers)
 - f. College independent study and internships.
 - g. Graduate school internships, theses and dissertations.
2. Administration. In simplified terms, a service learning opportunity is created,

subject to approval by school administration, by arrangements among New Directions local program staff (which at this writing is the same as central staff), the teacher and a host outside the school, to which the student will be sent. The last step is to place students into the positions that have been arranged.

- B. Adult learning courses and exercises. If the school district has a continuing education program, New Directions will endeavor to add a new curriculum in what might be called “citizenship arts.” In case there is no continuing education program we will have to begin at an earlier stage. The following are some suggestions for courses.
1. Studying your community—an ongoing, repeatable course. Students contribute to a growing file of information about the community, the larger region and neighborhoods within the community.
 2. Community circles. Rounds of dialogue in circles of 8-12 people on different topics, repeatable each semester.
 3. Community circle facilitation.
 4. How town government works.
 5. Building a successful civic association
 6. Community land trusts.
 7. How to conduct a business meeting.
 8. Nonprofit leadership and board duties
 9. Introduction to the school board and administration.
 10. Land use and zoning.
 11. Buying your first home.
 12. Build your house (uses a computer game by NAHB, already available).
- C. Grassroots planning. A series of informal neighborhood discussion circles could identify needed research, and when such research has been done the results could be used in a Circles of Hope sequence to find common ground, form a shared vision and draw a preliminary plan for the neighborhood. In order to make the plan a legitimate expression of the will of the neighborhood, it should be presented at a public meeting, discussed in small breakout circles which report back to the whole, and finally acted upon by the general meeting. If significant differences come up in this meeting, they will have to be resolved—in additional meetings if necessary--so that there will be no question that the final plan belongs to the neighborhood..
- D. Grassroots implementation, assessment and improvement of community services. An example might be a grassroots team assessment of existing human services and the participatory design of improvements to the local delivery system. This could be done with the help of Social Welfare faculty and graduate students.
- E. Academic research. Through the Academic Associates Network, university faculty will be called on for help with needed research.
- F. Annual conference. Hosted by the school district, the annual conference would bring citizens together for presentations of what has been learned over the year,

reports of “learn by doing” activities, and updating of community vision and plan priorities for the coming year.

VII. INFORMATION AND PUBLICATIONS—A FEW SUGGESTIONS.

- A. General purpose manuals, Discover Your Community series.
 - 1. Methods manual, Discover Your Community, for adults, in hard copy with workbook, and online in Acrobat format.
 - 2. Manual & workbook for each grade level, in hard copy and online.
 - 3. Online interactive guides, for different levels of age and education.

- B. Local files, exhibits and publications.
 - 1. Leaflets for publicity
 - 2. Neighborhood and community profiles, in hard copy and online
 - 3. Guide for study circles, with local data and issues.
 - 4. Library exhibits, collection.
 - 5. Regular column in local newspaper.
 - 6. Newsletter, hard copy (a few) and online.
 - 7. Website(s)
 - 8. Copies of assigned reading for continuing education courses.

- C. Symbolism. An easily recognizable logo on publications would help to fix the program in people’s minds. The first suggestion, being worked on, is a cartoon character in a baseball cap looking through a magnifying glass at a row of buildings. One building can be seen greatly enlarged through the magnifying glass. Some other symbols to think about are binoculars, microscope, hiker on a trail, sailing ship, space ship. Objects alone, such as magnifying glass without the human figure would not put the citizen in the picture. We want each reader to imagine herself or himself embarking on an adventure of discovery.