

**ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT
LEADERSHIP
TRAINING PROJECT**

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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1. Definition of the Problem

According to the 1990 census, the city of Lowell has a population of approximately 103,000. While the immigrant population is estimated to represent anywhere from 30-40% of this population, it has a very limited role in the political and economic arena. Although the immigrant community emanates from many different regions of the world, Latinos and Southeast Asians represent the vast majority of this group.

The groups identified for this project are the Southeast Asian and Latino communities of the Merrimack Valley with the major focus in Lowell. Both communities have grown considerably since 1980, with the greatest growth taking place within the Southeast Asian community. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, between 1980 and 1990 the Asian population in Lowell grew from 604 to 11,493. During the same period the Latino population in Lowell grew from 4,585 to 10,499. Since 1990 both communities have continued to grow according to the MISER State Data Center which in 1995 estimated the Asian population at 14,695 persons and the Latino population at 13,080.

These population estimates are a source of contention within the Lowell community. Many local agencies and activists within the Southeast Asian community believe that the real population figures are closer to 25,000 with the Cambodian population representing approximately 20,000, the Laotian 3,000 and Vietnamese 2,000 residents. The population estimates within the Latino community are believed to be lower than actual figures, but not as far off as the estimated number of Asian. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census of 1990 the Puerto Rican community represents 74% of the Latino population in Lowell. The second largest group is Colombian, with the rest divided among other Latin American countries.

Lowell has a Plan E (strong city manager) form of government which elects 9 at-large city councilors. Because there are no district representatives, the city council is normally dominated by the two most affluent and highest turnout areas of the city. Consequently, city government does not come close to reflecting a cross-section of the city.

The ability of the community to influence city government is weakened further by having a city manager who is appointed by a majority of city councilors and does not have to run for election. The city manager is the true political power in government, runs the day-to-day operations of the city, controls hiring and firing of employees and makes appointments to key city boards. Consequently, minorities represent less than 5% of the workforce and have little representation on key municipal boards and commissions. More importantly, the immigrant community has no representation on the key economic development institutions such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Lowell Plan.

There are a number of common problems that exist within each community, including language barriers, problems with youth violence, lack of education and unity. In addition, the immigrant community plays an insignificant role in the political and economic arena, and suffers from a lack of economic opportunities. Moreover, within the Hispanic, Laotian and Vietnamese communities there are a serious lack of institutional resources, as neither group has a community based organization.

There are many root causes to this problem. The first has to do with the reasons why immigrants came to the U.S. in the first place. The Latino community began to arrive in the late 1960s and 1970s. They came looking for better economic opportunities and jobs. Most members of the Puerto Rican community came from an economically depressed and rural region.

Most arrived with little formal education, marketable skills and serious language barriers. While most Latino immigrants from other countries came from urban areas, they still lacked formal education, marketable skill and necessary language proficiencies.

On the other hand, the Southeast Asian community came here as political refugees, victims of failed U.S. foreign policy, years of war and in the case of the Cambodian community, Khmer Rouge genocide. Again, many arrived here with little formal education, a lack of job skills and language deficiencies. However, unlike the Latino community, a portion of the community came from a professional and well educated background, but lacked necessary documentation and professional certification.

Various divisions in the community have also contributed to this problem. The most important problem is the fact that immigrants come from many different countries, cultures and speak different languages. Even within the Latino community you have many nationalities and historical differences, despite having a common language. These issues are even more noticeable within the Southeast Asian community because of language differences and historical tensions and mistrust between the Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese populations.

In addition, there are many political issues that contribute to this problem. Within the Southeast Asian and Puerto Rican community, many are more concerned with the politics of their native country than local affairs. For example, various allegiances to native Cambodian political parties have made unity difficult. Furthermore, within the Laotian community there is disagreement among three factions over which national flag should be recognized as legitimate (the current flag, the previous flag of the republican government, or the old flag of the monarchy). Moreover, the political structure in Lowell of at-large representation makes it

difficult for any minority group to influence local elections. Some form of district representation would certainly make it easier and more democratic.

Finally, it is only natural that the immigrant community would need time to adjust to a new environment and culture. The community is still learning how to function effectively within the current political and economic system. This is a similar transition that all new immigrants groups have experienced since the 1800s.

2. Project Goals

To develop an Economic Development Leadership Training Program that will create the leadership and network necessary to strengthen existing institutional capacity, to develop projects that will lead to the creation of new community institutions, to give the immigrant community a greater role in the political and economic arena and to enhance their economic well being. This project will develop a leadership group within the immigrant community of Lowell that would help empower their respective communities both economically and politically.

INTENDED OUTCOMES:

- A. Conduct interviews and focus groups with community leaders to determine interest, needs and resources.
- B. Formulate advisory committee to help guide program development
- C. Recruit facilitators and quest lecturers
- D. Evaluate existing economic development leadership training curriculum
- E. Develop training curriculum based on needs and objectives
- F. Formulate outreach and marketing strategies
- G. Develop recruitment and selection process
- H. Recruit training program participants
- J. Assist program participants to formulate community projects, strengthen existing institutions and create greater unity.
- K. Link up program participants with existing projects, programs and institutions.
- L. Help program participants formulate strategies and networks to achieve project goals.
- M. Initiate strategy to generate and obtain funding for project technical assistance, start-up and operating capital.
- M. Develop program follow-up, technical assistance and project implementation phase.

3. Methods

The first step of the project was to identify what information, tools and assistance the immigrant community would need in order to achieve greater political and economic power. The University of Massachusetts Lowell began a program called the Center for Immigrant and Refugee Community Leadership Empowerment (CIRCLE) in 1994. The CIRCLE Program provided leadership training in three areas: political leadership; economic development leadership; educational leadership. However, this training was very academic and theoretical. It lacked a practical component that could have a direct impact on the well being of the community. Based on interviews with CIRCLE program participants and other immigrant community leaders, the need for a practical training that was community/project focused became evident. In addition, leaders felt that this training would require an on-going technical assistance and project implementation component, as well as practical classroom instruction.

Another shortcoming of the CIRCLE Program that had to be overcome through this project was the lack of participation of key segments of the immigrant community. According to the definition of “immigrant” used by the funder of CIRCLE, members of the Puerto Rican community were excluded from participation because they were born as American citizens. In addition, the third largest immigrant group, the Portuguese speaking communities from the Azores and Brazil had never participated in any of CIRCLE ‘s programs. Consequently, an important strategy of the project was to ensure that all of the largest segments of the immigrant community would actively participate. Without the involvement of all sectors to create a network of leaders, it would be very difficult for this project to succeed in helping to improve economic and political opportunities within the immigrant community.

After the above assessment, I outlined a proposal for an economic development leadership training program that would be both practical and project based and presented it to Dr. Linda Silka, director of the center where the CIRCLE program was based. The director liked the concept and agreed with my assessment of some of the shortcomings of CIRCLE. She told me that she had some available funds and would like me to design and facilitate this program on a part-time basis.

In addition, Dr. Silka suggested that I meet with a former CIRCLE student who is a trained economist from Liberia to see if he would have any interest in co-facilitating the classroom training component with me. Consequently, I arranged a meeting with him and he agreed to work with me on this project. Our initial efforts focused on developing a curriculum outline for the classroom training component. Once this was completed, we began to formulate an outreach and recruitment campaign. During this process of working together my colleague began a new position as an economist. Unfortunately, he quickly realized that he would be unable to continue his involvement in this project and still fulfill the demands of a new job. As a result, I continued to work on the project without his involvement.

After finalizing the outreach plan I began the process of recruitment. The first aspect of the outreach plan was to send a mailing to individuals who had attended past CIRCLE training. We send out an informational packet that included a letter from the director of the center, an application and a program description. In addition, I contacted leaders that I knew in the various immigrant communities, including participants from a course that I co-facilitated in the CIRCLE Program on "How to Run for Political Office and Win". Furthermore, I disseminated information on the training program through community-based organizations in the immigrant community as well as other organizations that interacted with this population. Moreover,

because of my Spanish speaking ability, I attended two talk radio programs in Lawrence and one at UMass Lowell to discuss this training program. To our delight, we recruited 21 participants from 10 different countries.

The classroom training involved twelve weekly sessions, one night a week. It included instruction on the following topics:

- Leadership Development
- Community Organizing
- Grant Writing and Fund Raising
- Community Economic Development Strategies
- Project Planning
- Strategic Planning

The goal of this classroom training component was to give participants the tools necessary to become more effective leaders and consequently help empower their respective communities. In particular, we wanted to give immigrant leaders the type of training that would help them analyze the political and economic environment and allow them to develop strategies that would increase both involvement and opportunities in these areas.

In addition to the above, we wanted to help participants take this knowledge from the classroom directly to the community in order to make positive change. Our plan was to help them implement their strategies and project ideas by providing on-going technical assistance. In addition, we intended to assist participants obtain funding and seed money which would be essential to turn their ideas into concrete realities.

Unfortunately, I slowly began to realize that it was going to be difficult to help participants design and implement community projects, because of the time necessary to make

this happen. While I was working on this project I was self-employed on more than a full-time basis, a graduate student and a member of the board of directors of a CDC. In addition, I was teaching the majority of the classroom training session. As a result, it became quite apparent that it would require a full-time commitment and staff to make this project work .

Consequently, I arranged a meeting with a local elected official, State Senator Steven Panagiotakos to discuss my idea for a state funded project that would provide economic development leadership training. After hearing my presentation, the senator said that it sounded great and asked me to write a formal proposal with a budget. Subsequently, I wrote a draft proposal and presented it to Dr. Silka who worked with me to help make some revisions. I submitted the final proposal draft with a budget to Senator Panagiotakos in March 1998. The Senator was impressed by the proposal and he committed to meeting with the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee to lobby for its inclusion in the FY 1999 Budget.

Approximately, three week later I received a call from an aide to the Senator because the Ways and Means Committee staff had requested more information on the proposal. The committee wanted more background on the need, as well as information regarding the CIRCLE Program and its accomplishments. I conducted a few interviews and did some additional research and forwarded the results to the Ways and Means Committee.

4. Results

The expected outcomes that were listed in my project contract, as well as the project goals that are listed earlier in this final report have all been achieved. The first significant accomplishment was the development of the part-time economic development leadership training and the successful recruitment of 21 participants. Based on the evaluations and the direct feedback that I received from people personally, the classroom training component of the program was a success. Participants felt that they received practical knowledge that made them more effective leaders in their communities. In addition, individuals believed that a mutually beneficial network of immigrant leaders from the Southeast Asian, Portuguese and Spanish speaking communities have been forged as a result of this training.

More importantly, a number of projects that have increased the economic and political clout of the immigrant community were created by participants from this project. Within the Hispanic community, an organization called “Latinos En Accion” was created to increase political participation through voter education and voter registration campaigns. In addition, within the Laotian community a new community-based organization was formed after many years of lacking a CBO. This organization will focus on increasing educational and economic development opportunities within the Lao community. Lastly, two members of the training program were appointed to serve on the City of Lowell’s newly formed Immigrant and Refugee Commission. The Lowell City Council created this commission after a united lobbying campaign from most sectors of the immigrant community. The hope is that this commission will give immigrants an official body that can advocate for and give the community a greater voice in city affairs.

The most important accomplishment of this project was obtaining full-time state funding for the Refugee and Immigrant Self-Sufficiency Project and the hiring of myself to manage this effort. Since becoming project manager, we have recruited 29 participant and have conducted a series of training sessions around the following:

- Understanding the Local Economy and the Factors that Influence It
- CED Strategies and Principle
- Effective Leadership

In addition, we had a special presentation by fellow CED students (Donald Hill, Sandy Abrams and Juanita Joyner) that helped participants develop strategies that could realize their true economic and political potential.

We are also working on some interesting community initiatives within this project. We are assisting Southeast Asian business owners establish an Asian American Business Association to advocate for the unique needs of this community. Many business owners or potential business owners lack a clear understanding of what it takes to run a business successfully in this area. Furthermore, the Asian business community is not represented by any of the traditional business association, while having more problems and disadvantages when it comes to conducting business than their counterparts. Moreover, this association will provide an important networking forum for business owners.

Another interesting initiative we are working on is a Latino media project. As mentioned earlier, the Latino immigrant community is the second largest immigrant community in Lowell, but lacks any newspapers and has very little programming on radio and cable TV. We are planning to start a Spanish/English newspaper, as well to create more radio and cable programming targeting the Latino community. This expansion of media outlets is crucial in

order to increase their role in the political and economic arena for a number of reasons. First of all, the community cannot organize itself politically without an effective way to communicate and disseminate information. Expanded Latino media will make it easier to politically educate and mobilize the community. Furthermore, the lack of Latino media outlets have certainly retarded business development. There is currently no effective way for a Latino small business owner or person interested in starting a venture to reach their potential market. This inability to reach a target market make the chances of success as a Latino business owner even less likely.

In addition to the above, we are working on developing a youth after-school project that will provide educational tutoring and part-time employment placement assistance to high school students. Moreover, we are providing on-going technical assistance to the Lao Family Mutual Assistance and the Latinos En Accion to assist their organizational development and fund raising efforts.

5. Analysis/Conclusions

The most interesting thing I learned about myself during this project was that I am very effective at recruiting and bringing together a diverse group of immigrant leaders. Many people have told me that they don't understand how I could be so successful at recruiting such a large and diverse group of participants. I knew I could involve and work effectively with the Latino community, because I am fluent in Spanish and have a great deal of experience working with this group. However, I surprised myself on how successfully I could recruit and interact with the Southeast Asian community and other immigrant groups in which I had little experience.

The key to my success in this area is probably attributable to my sincere interest in learning more about these communities and helping them empower themselves. I did not approach people with the paternalistic attitude that I knew all the answer and that I would teach them how they could develop their community. I demonstrated my sincerity and caring by showing people that I was really interested in learning about their community by asking many questions. This approach allowed me to build relationships based on trust and mutual respect. I would ask people, what could I do to help them empower their communities both economically and politically? What kind of training and assistance would be useful to them and their communities? The key was to give people what they really thought they needed and wanted.

I also learned just how challenging it was for leaders to organize and involve members of their community with development initiatives because of the difficulties in overcoming various cultural, language, political and economic barriers. The fact that this is a new and intimidating environment, with a new language and culture, prevents many people from becoming involved. In addition, many members of these communities believe that there are here temporarily and are planning to return to their native countries. As a result, many immigrants are more concerned

with politics from their native land than engaging in local civic activities. Moreover, splits within the community along domestic political affiliations make it difficult to unify the population. Finally, most immigrants are stuck in low paying jobs, must work long hours to support their families and consequently lack time for community activism.

Once you become aware of these unique challenges it becomes somewhat easier to work with leaders to develop more effective strategies. As mentioned earlier, I am working with a group to organize an Asian American Business Association. The vast majority of Asian business owners are Cambodian and most are aligned with the major political parties in Cambodia. The key organizer of this project has some affiliation with domestic Cambodian politicians and I asked him if there would be a problem with him becoming president of the group. He told me that some people would probably question his motivation and this could impact the level of involvement of some businesses. I asked him if there was a neutral person who could be effective at uniting the business community. He suggested a respected attorney, one of only two Cambodian attorneys in Lowell, as an excellent candidate for president of the association, because he has never involved himself with homeland politics. This is an excellent example of why it is so important to really understand the community in which you are working.

Another important lesson I learned is that it is quite challenging as a trainer to organize a training with such a diverse group of individuals that have different levels of English. I had to be careful to make it interesting enough for people with a excellent grasp of English and not too difficult to comprehend for participant that lack a high level of language proficiency. In addition, I had to be aware of how a participants cultural background effected how they would respond to classroom discussions and group exercises. The Southeast Asian participants were much more reserved than the other immigrant members and were very reluctant to ask questions

and engage in discussions. I especially had to go out of my way to encourage active participation of Southeast Asian males. My original assumption was that Southeast Asian females would be extremely quiet in the training, but to my surprise they were much more expressive than their male counterparts.

I also learned that it was much easier to say that I was going to provide training that was practical enough to transform knowledge from the classroom into action in the community. It was difficult to provide information and to structure exercises that participants would find easy to apply to their work in the community. Its one thing to discuss ideas and theory in the classroom, its another to put those ideas to practice.

Understanding that this would be challenging, I tried to make this training more project based. However, working with participants to design and implement CED projects was no easy task. During the part-time economic development leadership training program it was very difficult because I didn't have enough time to work effectively with participants. In addition, most people were trying to design individual projects independent from others in the training. It was impossible for me to give enough time to each participant on a part-time basis. Fortunately, now that I am full -time, I am able to give projects more quality time as well as provide more on-going technical assistance. In addition, I am now trying to organize participants into 4 to 5 project groups so I can maximize my time and increase the success of each project in the process. I have learned to focus on a few projects that can succeed than to be spread out to thin. A few quality projects that can make an impact on the community are better than many projects that never have real success.

Based on what has been accomplished over the last year, the project has been a success. I moved the project from the idea stage, to the actual operational stage with full funding and

created a job for myself in the process. As mentioned, we are actually helping participants implement CED projects at this point. However, it is actually too early to determine just how successful this project will be. The long term success of the CED project that comes out of this training will determine how successful this effort has been. If these CED projects help give the immigrant community a greater role in the political and economic arena and further enhance the economic well being and quality of life, then this project would have been a great success.