THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF NEIGHBORHOOD WOMEN

COLLEGE MODEL

by

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During the 70's, the women's movement, the economic pressures, and the rapid changes regarding traditions and values forced most women in the United States to re-examine themselves and the institutions they were a part of. The National Congress of Neighborhood Women emerged because a group of women - largely poor and working-class - whose roots were based in the family and the neighborhood, needed a forum to express their issues.

Out of this need grew many new ideas that led to the development of institutions shaped by and for low and moderate income women. These institutions were different from those shaped by the more popularly known women's organizations in that they did not pull women "up" and out of the family and neighborhood. In fact they not only assisted in recycling the women's role, but they improved the women's functioning in both.

One of the earliest programs developed by NCNW was a neighborhood-based college program, which was co-sponsored in 1975 by NCNW and LaGuardia Community College. Perhaps
education was first because it is perceived by disenfranchised people as the one institution that allows them access to the "greater society". Because NCNW believes that the only way to reach poor and working-class women is by offering clear, concrete solutions to their problems and personal support systems, the college takes on a new meaning.

It was apparent from the beginning that a new model of education was needed. The university system as it now exists has done little to reach poor and working-class women. This is true programatically, financially and in terms of accessibility. The story of the development of the neighborhood college and the sharing of the process is being developed so that other women can start neighborhood colleges and have a chance to write their own stories. This article lays out the beginnings and rationale for the college. Anyone wanting to begin a program can call NCNW for help.
THE BEGINNINGS

In the spring of 1974, an important meeting took place in the Williamsburg-Greenpoint neighborhood located in Brooklyn, New York. For the first time, the women of the neighborhood attended a "women only" meeting precisely for the purpose of discussing their own needs. They were active women, used to taking care of the community like they took care of their homes and families. However, of late they felt that their needs were all too often last. As was usual, this evening was no different. They talked of starting youth programs, beautifying parks, etc, but finally with the help of an organizer, they also talked about feeling that with the growing complexity of today's problems, they weren't as effective at solving them as they used to be. They began to speak - at first hesitantly, then later quite vociferously - about how they would like the opportunity to learn more. They felt cut off from the world of formal education - it was something
for others, not themselves. In the beginning, they talked of sewing and cooking classes, dress design and driver's education (of course, only a few drove a car). Later on they spoke of public speaking, more effective ways to organize and how to write proposals. Finally, someone mentioned college credits. No one thought it a possibility. Colleges with their credits were too far away, both physically and psychologically. The women felt that they were too old or that they wouldn't fit in. They felt that their husbands wouldn't like it. Their kids would laugh and they couldn't pass after so many years out of school. And besides, they thought that they weren't smart enough - after all, they were just "housewives". Yet if they were allowed to dream, they would have their own college right in their neighborhood, not in some remote place, far away from their community. They could walk to class and they wouldn't be made to feel dumb, out of place or old. Well, three years later, 38 out of the original 50 students
graduated from their neighborhood college with an A.A. degree. What an impact this has made on themselves, their families and their communities. The college functioned not only as a place for learning, but also as a support mechanism so they could examine themselves, their families and their community in an environment free of fear.

PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

Every college has its own philosophy and its own particular clientele. Much of NCNW's college philosophy comes out of its original planning meetings but it also evolved over the 2 1/2 years of its first program and continues to evolve. It is our belief that each neighborhood college must evolve in its own way, based on the needs of the neighborhood and the women involved.

For us, the most important purpose of the NCNW college was to establish an educational model that would bring the university's resources to the neighborhood where they could
be used for social improvement and basically, to empower neighborhood women. NCNW was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation to establish a neighborhood-oriented college that would serve as a national model for those community groups and universities attempting to develop neighborhood-based programs. NCNW was commissioned to develop an improved system of learning. The program would work to develop community leaders who could more effectively solve urban problems such as the rising drug abuse, crime, pollution, red-lining and deteriorating housing conditions. Finally, it was to help universities reach new populations of people in new ways.

It is obvious to most people struggling to improve neighborhood conditions that the university system was failing our neighborhood by not only not providing resources and brain-power but also by not reaching the poor and working-class people who live there. With this awareness, we turned to other
community leaders, authors, social scientists and educators

for further assistance in conceptualizing what was wrong.

Through that process it became clear that the university

for the most part, is unreal to neighborhood people because

it isn't neighborhood-based. It sets up its own structure -

apart from the real social systems of the people that many of its

graduates are being educated to serve. (This is true in spite

of field placements, internships, etc.) This helps give it that

"ivory tower" effect. Perhaps it is because of the artificial

nature if the educational milieu that teachers, social workers,

scientists, planners, economists, etc. are having such a difficult

time dealing with present day problems. They often seem to

enhance the problems instead of solving them. Not only

is the university removed from the neighborhood, but in order

to build this ever-enlarging "ivory tower", entire blocks

and in fact some healthy neighborhood are destroyed in the

process. (Think of the battles surrounding Columbia and New
York Universities) NCNW's philosophy is that the classroom learning experience must be integrated with real community and family life. Our program is in the neighborhood - classes are held in many settings, in day care centers, living rooms, and on street corners.

As we talked to each other and read further, we could see that the university often denigrates the culture of poor and working-class students and leaves them alienated from their own roots through insensitivity and a lack of awareness of cultural pluralism. It often forces a person to leave his/her community and to adopt the values of this artificial world--most often middle and upper-class WASP, rootless, alienated and agnostic in order to "make it". If you don't, you fail to fit in. This phenomena is particularly sad because each group attempting to bring itself into the "main-stream of American life" or to "make it" see the educational system as their main hope. Given the fact that we are a pluralistic society, universities still insist that we have melted.
It often teaches working-class and poor ethnics, Blacks, Hispanics and women to deny their heritage or at least to see it as second-rate. The rich contributions of the different ethnic groups are most often not taught. Because learning does not start with what is familiar, it is perceived by the student as foreign. It teaches students, however inadvertently, to look down on their families and communities by stressing abstracts such as "correct English" and "proper values".

In the process the student becomes different and unable to go back. Ironically, these students become alienated from the very community that requires their skills. The NCGNW model starts with the student and branches out, reinforcing the positive values of the family, the neighborhood and working-class culture. It does this through it's selection of materials, curriculum development, teacher selection, etc.

Furthermore, besides being class, sex and culturally sensitive, the university pulls the most talented up and out
of these neighborhoods. This process acts as a brain-drain to poor and working-class communities, breaks up families and perpetuates rootlessness and super-mobility. It deprives communities of the very information they must have to solve their complex social and economic problems. Vance Packard, in his "Nation of Strangers" states that, "All the movement about the landscape of students and faculty while frequently salutary for the younger individuals involved, is denuding many communities of leadership talent". His book documents the fact that students never go back and how this rootlessness is destroying our nation's communities. Toffler, in "Future Shock", adds to this eloquently in his criticism of our present educational system. The NCNW model serves to educate leaders in their community, actually enhancing their community involvement.

NCNW purposely selected as students the least mobile people - those in their 30's, 40's and 50's - people who are
intimately involved in their communities.

The general format of learning in the present college system adds to these problems. The university tends to be teacher-oriented, not student centered, thus the students are not expected to lead or to become powerful. These skills are needed in the students real world. Since students are often not involved in the decision-making process of the university, they are not prepared to make decisions. The material is generally not related to his/her real world, thus, learning becomes a passive process. Perhaps this may account for the fact that so many educated people seem unable to make decisions.

Furthermore, sitting in a classroom is one of the most artificial and least effective ways of learning; yet most universities have used the vast resources of the world in only the most limited ways. Demanding that students learn for grades instead of usefulness, following instructions instead of experiencing for oneself, denotes a lack of understanding for the true concept of learning.
To NCNW, it is essential that students be involved in the decision-making process and that they, as women, learn to explore possibilities and take charge of their own lives.

The students at NCNW develop curriculum, participate in faculty selection and plan the overall format of the program.

Beyond the need for a new system of learning, it is NCNW's belief that women are the key to neighborhood stabilization.

Since many women have a low self-image, it was perceived that it would improve the situation. Therefore, the college was to assist them in exploring their own experiences. Role models would be established to assist them. It is apparent that women have done most of the volunteer and helping work in the communities. They keep the political process going by raising funds, stuffing letters and the other nuts and bolts work. They take care of their neighbors, their relatives and the shut-ins. They helped make the old neighborhood a place where people mattered.

In spite of this they received very little recognition. They also had little power. They raised money for the church, but
how it was spent was decided by the priest. The results of their work in the ladies auxiliaries was handed over to the "real organizations" (male). Besides this, their roles were rigidly and narrowly defined. As social pressures increased, they found themselves in positions of only being able to react to situations instead of creating them. No wonder their self-images were low and their energies misused.

Nancy Seifer says in one of her proposals, "these women find themselves in an increasingly confusing position--trapped in a kind of suspended animation. They are compelled to divorce themselves from the old while they still lack the education to cope with the new. The are the unrecognized advocates of change, being forced, while still ill prepared to respond to it. Realizing the need to reply increasingly on themselves, many were fearful of the challenge."

Part of changing their self-image would be to change their position in the family. Until now, working-class men often used their status in the family to mitigate their lack of self-esteem on the job. Even though ethnic women have a real cultural
stake in the family, which is quite different from middle-class women, it does not mean that they are content to just clean house and cook pasta. They can balance their husbands economic and physical superiority. They can obtain positions of leadership in the community and a newly recognized status through college credit. Furthermore, family life is rapidly changing, thus the school will help recycle them and put them in a less vulnerable position.

In the end, working-class and poor women of Williamsburg-Greenpoint started their own college. They developed their own programs and theories because even as they looked at the movements closest to them—the progressive, ethnic, neighborhood and women's movement—they couldn't find a place for themselves. The "women's movement" was perceived as being in opposition to the values of the family and the culture that neighborhood women hold as important. They don't see men as the enemy. They suffer class discrimination with them even though they are struggling to redefine their own roles in realtionship to them.
The college, by offering credits and other forms of recognition, helped offset the imbalance of power women had in the family and community.

The "ethnic movement" still romanticized them as poster-making earthmothers (or the ethnic equivalent). Either way they were second-class. The "neighborhood movement" persisted in relating power and decision-making to men. Most importantly, it didn't know how to look at neighborhoods in terms of how it's different institutions impacted on women.

The initial ingredients needed in this recipe for a neighborhood-based college are: a strong community group, a college with a desire to work equally with a community group and students who desire to be part of the program.

It is an inherent part of NCNW that a new form of education must be developed. The present methods of learning help prepare women for a world that no longer exists, a world where people worked in factories and just had to listen to bells and act like robots. In the world of today, professions become
obsolete in ten years and everything is constantly changing.

People need to learn how to learn so they can keep grasping
new knowledge. They must know how to communicate and deal with
ever-changing people. They need to be able to see things in their
entirety. A piecemeal, fragmented, computerized non-skill
approach to learning offers little. It helps to perpetuate
the linear thinking and incompetence that has caused our institutions
to be so destructive to our community. It creates the kind
of thinking that can build a highway but in the process kill
a major business street; tear down fifty homes and not know the
cost to the neighborhood. NCNW's model stresses wholistic
thinking—it sets up interdisciplinary and sequential courses—
and homework has meaning and is most often useful.

Hazel Henderson, Co-Director of the Princeton Center
for Alternative Futures, sums up the need for a new, decentralized
system of education when she says, in a speech before the
Association of American Colleges that:
"Naturally, most of this new learning is occurring outside existing structures although much is now occurring within old institutions as individuals try to stretch their contraints. Not surprisingly, during such a period of cultural experimentation academic institutions, the custodians of the old culture, are particularly suspect. In a rich, media saturated society, education is bound to move away from old forms and become an individual and small group enterprise, where the whole society and all its dimensions of experience are used as one vast, metaphysical university. Meanwhile, the ferment within academia is beginning to produce fragile flowers in the form of interdisciplinary programs and other experiments, nurtured from within by courageous individuals with new visions.

The pressures are also coming from without, due to the changing perceptions of our citizens, and are part of the necessary questioning of all authority figures intoning old platitudes and the vital ridiculing of the inadequate formulations of our fragmented disciplines. However painfully, academic
hypocracies, territorial jealousies, intellectual and financial vested interests, as well as the commitment to the "value-free objectivity" of the sciences and other myths must continue to be exposed. Only in this way can our citizens continue to learn the big lessons:

1) How the consent of the governed is too often engineered by impounding and distorting information.

2) How intellectuals have too often become the servants of the powerful and help control the allocation of resources by mystification.

3) How professional corner the market on specific knowledge in order to maximize their income and influence.

4) How business leaders manipulate preferences and cultural norms through advertising and endowments.

5) How political leaders too often govern by capitalizing on ignorance."
Nancy Seifer says that working women, armed with an educational program to suit their needs, will represent a patent force for change within ethnic-worker neighborhoods. Their influences on their children, their husbands and their community will enable them to break the hopeless chain of life that has become theirs and their neighborhood's. The added stability for family and community that these women can bring to our cities through a comprehensive education and research program cannot be described. It is safe to say however, that a well executed program has tremendous positive potential and could be expounded by the thousands through programs in continuing education for women all over the country--junior colleges, community colleges and universities.