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Action Research Dialogue and Praxis: How a Participatory Evaluation Design as a Case Study Unfolded to Restructure an American Indian Program (AIP) and Reconstruct a Thirty Year Relationship With an Ivy League, Land-Grant University

Abstract

The AIP at Cornell University underwent a major internal restructuring process that engaged multiple stakeholders between 1998 and 2000. The methodological, philosophical, political, and pragmatic value of this process will be detailed along with implications for other ethnic programs needing to reassess their relationship with a given institution. Key Terms: Action research, participatory evaluation, search conference

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In fall 1998, according to Cornell University (CU) records, 105 Indian students were enrolled as undergraduates, graduates, and professional students representing more than 28 Indigenous nations. The American

Indian Program (AIP) on campus provided student support services, academic courses, community extension, and housed a publication component.

Administratively, the Program was at a critical juncture with gaps in services due to personnel issues, budgetary constraints, and declining political support. Larger issues of determining the Program's future and leadership were on the horizon.

All social inquiry is both political and value-driven. Thus, a remarkable, and sometimes conflictual process of social change employing a participatory evaluation (PE) research process ensued with the AIP at CU between 1997 and 2000. Both PE and action research (AR) are social change vehicles, explicitly designed to promote inclusion, dialog, and deliberation as a means of democratizing research on behalf of and with a given community. PE designs integrate AR principles and practices to improve a system's operations that is driven by a series of social goals. First, a few comments on PE, then why the CU AIP decided to employ a mixed methods approach to understanding its quality and effectiveness as well as constructing future directions.

PE utilizes a constructivist/interpretivist framework (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) throughout the social inquiry process. Interpretivism is a qualitative approach to program evaluation that engages stakeholder participation, utilizes a hermeneutic and dialectical process to

arrive at interpretations, and promotes utilization of findings. Deliberate planning and decisions to employ mixed methods are essential on the "political, philosophical, and technical levels" (Greene & Caracelli, 1997) in the PE process. The value of employing an integrated mixed methods approach to this context was that different methods were needed to gather different data while simultaneously triangulating emergent themes of the Program's history, presence, and future. Given the unique AIP context, which is a politicized entity with multiple constituents and experiences, value-based questions and concerns required an on-going dialectical process that would engage the participants in meaningful ways.

This PE design required mixed methods in the design, implementation, and analysis phases to ensure that collective stakeholder voices were clearly represented. A Search Conference, an action research method, served as the anchoring method for this PE process and will be discussed below. PE actually facilitates the use of AR which clearly aims to produce democratic social change and to enhance the control relevant stakeholders have over their own situations. Professional researchers and stakeholders from the community or organizations under consideration collaborate, learn social research methods together, set the research agenda, execute the research collaboratively, and implement the results as a team. AR principles run counter to traditional forms of social research because AR processes engage local stakeholders as co-researchers in the construction of knowledge (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). And, AR views "local knowledge" as vital as "expert knowledge" in the design of social change programs. AR seeks to mobilize that knowledge, help local people articulate it so that it can be understood, and incorporate it into the evaluation and planning of new efforts. All stakeholders are responsible for managing the content and outcomes in a systematic effort to generate collective knowledge that supports the values, ideals, and realities of the total organization.

A common way to begin an AR process is with a Search Conference (SC) event that enables a large group of people to collectively create a systematic plan to address their problems and concerns that its stakeholders will implement (Cabana & F. E. Emery, 1995; M. Emery & Purser, 1996). By scanning those cultural, social, and political environmental factors interfacing a system, the actual SC event facilitates an in-depth analysis of the system's past, present, and future plans. Implementing specific SC strategies for organizational change is a deliberate and lengthy process requiring a considerable amount of time and resources. An additional consideration is its applicability with Indian groups or organizations. This was a central beginning point for the AIP to utilize a PE design with an AR focus.

Finally, any case study requires a collective Program effort and institutional commitment of time, resources, and personnel. The benefits gained from engaging in a PE process can outweigh the initial investments. If Indian higher education programs are serious about understanding the quality and effectiveness of their operations and directions, they should begin by trying to change them (Lewin, 1948). Certainly, the AIP did administratively restructure, did gain additional staff and faculty lines, and did redefine their relationship

with the CU administration - with a price. The lessons learned from this journey could very well be applicable to other higher education institutions with ethnic programs.

Presenter

Rebecca Maldonado Moore is an enrolled member of the Northern Arapaho Nation of Wind River Indian Agency in Wyoming. She graduated from the University of Utah with a Bachelors of Science degree (1977) and a Masters in Social Work degree (1979). Her extensive professional experiences in Indian education support programs in both rural and urban communities with K-12 students and adult learners progressed toward higher education as an adjunct faculty member of the College of Santa Fe Education Department. Later, she served as a health education coordinator at Western Kentucky University. Rebecca attended Cornell University in 1995, was a recipient of the David L. Call Achievement Award, Cornell University, in April 2000 and completed her Ph.D. in Policy, Analysis, and Management in August 2002.

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