

Environmental Justice Roundtable: A College/Community Interaction

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On two Saturdays in February 2001, The Evergreen State College sponsored an Environmental Justice Roundtable in Tacoma, Washington. The event, "Environmental Justice: Making Connections in Washington Communities," provided coverage of a broad range of perspectives and activities. The first day's topic was "The Public Sector and Environmental Justice." Taking a focus on agency and government viewpoints, this day's panel featured five speakers, one each from the US Environmental Protection Agency's (USEPA's) Region 10 office, the Washington State Board of Health, the Washington State Department of Ecology, a state senator from Tacoma, and a member of the Puyallup Tribe, whose ancestral territory includes the Tacoma area. The event's second day, "Community Advocacy," featured representatives from two non-governmental organizations active in environmental justice issues in the state: United Farm Workers, and the Seattle-based Community Coalition for Environmental Justice.

The Roundtables provided a direct view into both general policy-level activities and "on-the-ground" action around particular concerns. On the federal level, a recent milestone was President Clinton's 1994 Executive Order extending Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to apply to the activities of federal agencies. Beginning two years ago, USEPA Region 10 has maintained an Office of Civil Rights and Environmental Justice to handle both internal and external issues. Nationally, USEPA operates a program that provides small grants for local organizations to use for community education efforts around environmental justice issues. An example of such an effort might be a video or pamphlet produced in the language of a non-English speaking, at-risk population.

In 1994, spurred by a bill introduced by Senator Rosa Franklin (one of the Round-

table panelists), the Washington State Legislature allocated funds to conduct an environmental equity study investigating the proportional distribution of polluting facilities and contaminated sites around the state. The study found that, "on a state-wide basis, there is a disproportionately greater number of facilities located in low-income and minority block groups" (Washington State Department of Ecology, 1995). As a result of this report, the state dedicated a full-time position to environmental justice concerns. John Ridgway, another Roundtable panelist and the report's author, holds this Department of Ecology position. Also on the state level, the Washington State Board of Health has prioritized environmental justice as central to the protection of public health.

Jeffrey Thomas, Forest Resource Manager for the Puyallup Tribe, introduced a broader understanding of environmental justice issues to the Roundtable event. Thomas offered a perspective that also considers the importance of places and activities that perpetuate social meaning, and the effects of environmental hazards on cultural and psychological aspects of tribal life. He also emphasized the importance of ecosystems and non-human species, elements often overlooked in environmental justice debates and policy decisions.

Specific, on-the-ground environmental justice issues discussed at the Roundtable events included the siting of polluting industrial facilities and hazardous waste dumps, urban pesticide application, the preservation of Native American culture and heritage, and the use of community-right-to-know legislation. Yolanda Sinde, from Seattle's Community Coalition for Environmental Justice discussed strategies for effective community organizing, and recounted her organization's successful campaign to close a medical waste incinerator in a Seattle neighborhood. Lupe Gamboa, of the United Farm Workers, presented the environmental conditions of farm worker populations in Washington State, emphasizing pesticide exposure issues, lack of adequate housing, and access to clean water. Against the backdrop of the federal exclusion of farm workers from col-

lective bargaining laws, the environmental justice concerns of farm worker populations are particularly severe.

After each panelist had presented his or her organization's role in environmental justice activities in the state, the floor was opened for questions from the audience. Students, faculty, and other community members had the opportunity to interact directly with the panelists. The panelists also took the opportunity to discuss issues among themselves. Both the audience and the panelists learned and benefited from the dialogue.

This reciprocal aspect of the Roundtables raises the question about the role of colleges and universities in providing such forums for community interaction around environmental justice (and other) issues. In practical terms, such events provide a benefit for the sponsoring institution by providing faculty and students with a learning opportunity, and by exposing students to research, internship, and employment possibilities. Lin Nelson, Evergreen faculty and co-coordinator of the event, elaborated: "The educational benefits can be invaluable in that the faculty become more informed and regionally sensitized, the curriculum is enriched and more interdisciplinary in exploring science/community/cultural/legal aspects of EJ [environmental justice] and the diversity of communities reflected in EJ efforts supports diverse students finding their voice" (Nelson, 2001). Similarly, such forums offer panelists the opportunity for direct contact with each other, as well as with potential researchers and student interns. In a broader sense, though, what else can colleges and universities offer through events like these?

In their book *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, John Kretzmann and John McKnight lament that, "as schools have become more professionalized and centralized, they have tended to distance themselves from their local communities." They write, "we need to create a new kind of partnership in which both schools and communities contribute directly to the strengthening and development of each other" (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

All too often it seems that, while colleges and universities are busy educating students about global environmental problems, they are often unaware of environmental issues in their own communities.

Commenting on the intent behind coordinating the Environmental Justice Roundtables, Nelson remarked, "As faculty, students and college staff, we have a lot we can learn from our neighbors and regional colleagues—those working in the public sector, tribal governments, unions and community-based organizations. We realized that there have been many significant developments that we needed to understand and be more connected to. We knew there is a lot at stake in these public sector efforts. We also knew that the tribes, unions and community-based organizations that have mobilized around EJ have rich experiences and insights. So, our intent was to gather these various representatives as our guests and teachers, in hopes that the roundtables would also serve as catalysts for us all becoming more effective collaborators."

This element of collaboration is especially crucial to positive research interactions between colleges or universities and communities or community-based organizations. Frequently, university-based research pro-

jects are professionalized, one-shot deals, in which there is little communication or follow-through with the community in question. On the subject of environmental justice research involvement with communities, Nelson says, "A central tenet of the EJ movement, especially from the communities that are the source of the ideas and the work, is 'in our own voice.' Colleges/universities should focus on the collaborative possibilities and be attentive to how community groups want the opportunity to 'study with' instead of simply 'being studied.'" The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences has addressed this concern by requiring solid evidence of community participation in requests for proposals.

Finally, there are the human-scale considerations of input, courtesy, and respect involved in sponsoring a forum which includes community advocates as guests. "College hosts should be attentive to the complex (and often unequal and volatile) relations between government-based and community-based EJ projects" says Nelson. "When community advocates are invited to campus, it's important that they have a strong role in shaping the forum and the connections between community, college, and public sector." Also, colleges and uni-

versities function on institutional time, which moves far more slowly than do the daily demands of organizing and sustaining community work. Important small things that college or university hosts can attend to include a sensitivity to scheduling constraints, distance and travel considerations, and the timely provision of just financial compensation to community advocates. Thoughtful attention to these details on the part of the sponsoring institution will contribute to positive ongoing relationships with community advocates, and help to strengthen reciprocal college-community ties around environmental justice issues.

References

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