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Educating the Adult Minority Professional: a Case Study of the National Rural Fellows Program

John Mullin

Satya Gabriel, *Mount Holyoke College*

Meir Gross

Michael Waltuch

Training Program Report

Educating the Adult Minority Professional: A Case Study of the National Rural Fellows Program

Satya Gabriel, Meir Gross, John R. Mullin and Michael Waltuch

Abstract – The authors describe the critical issues that emerged during the first years of the National Rural Fellows Program at its academic base, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, and how these issues were subsequently addressed.

The Program is designed to provide intensive training leading to a Master's degree for adult minority professionals from rural backgrounds throughout the United States. As a case study, the paper has implications for other departments considering innovations of this sort. It particularly describes the pedagogical and socio-cultural issues regarding the education of adult minority professionals, the potential for new faculty perspectives to be gained from such interaction, and the challenge to traditional regional planning curricula for rural planning across the United States.

Introduction

In 1979, the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, was selected as academic base for the newly-instituted National Rural Fellows Program. Designed to provide intensive training leading to a Master's degree for adult professionals of minority, rural background from throughout the U.S., the program by its very nature was a significant departure: it brought fresh perspectives to not only a faculty hitherto accustomed to traditional curriculum and approaches, but it also influenced the Department's relatively homogeneous young student population, who were primarily from the New England area. For the Fellows, the commitment was equally challenging. Over the course of the program's six-year life to date, many problems have been explored and remedied, and clearly the experience has been provocative in highly positive ways. Thanks to lively, ongoing critique and receptivity to change, modifications instituted over the several years have strengthened the program and clarified issues to the benefit of those concerned.

This paper describes the critical issues that emerged during the program's first years and how these were subsequently addressed. As a case study, it has implications for other departments considering innovations of this sort, particularly regarding the education of adult professionals. It also provides the planning profession with a set of fresh perspectives to consider and address as provided by the program participants' diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

Background

The University of Massachusetts' Master of Regional Planning (MRP)

The regular MRP program at the University is fairly typical of 'mainstream' graduate programs. A forty-six credit course of instruction, it includes a strong core of planning theory, planning law, quantitative methods, studio courses and a thesis or terminal

project. There are normally forty-five graduate students in residence who come mostly from white, middle-class communities throughout New England and the North-east. Most of these students enter the program directly upon completion of undergraduate degree work.

The faculty of eight professors (all white, one woman) might be considered, at least superficially, representative of the 'Eastern Establishment'. They have extensive experience in urban planning, landscape planning, economic planning and rural development, with particular focus on regional problems as well as international development. By and large, orientation of the program tends to be towards the specific problems of New England and the North-east.

The National Rural Fellows Program (NRFP)

Funded by such organizations as the Ford Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture and modeled after the National Urban Fellows Program, the NRFP enables eleven planning and community development professionals from rural areas across the country to obtain a Master of Regional Planning (MRP) degree each year. The sixteen-month program is rigorous, combining two eight-week summer sessions at the University with an interim nine-month practicum in the home area, and culminating in a written thesis. The Fellows are mostly minorities at mid-career level who have achieved outstanding professional results.

Each class of Fellows is an intentional mix of men and women representing a wide diversity in geographic, ethnic and professional background. To date, they have come from such places as south-west Texas, the Passamaquoddy region of Maine, Harlan County (Kentucky), Saipan, the Sioux Nation of North Dakota, Puerto Rico, the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta and rural upstate New York. Selection, through national competition, is based on excellence in the workplace rather than prior academic achievement. Academically, some come without a bachelor's degree, while others have completed higher degrees in various fields. Their professional experience has included elected political office (two are mayors – of Soledad, California, and Mayersville, Mississippi), community organizing, cooperative management, job and housing development, agricultural extensions service and others – all in positions of leadership.

While at the University, the Fellows find themselves living closely together (most of them live in the same student dormitory during their first year), taking five hours of classes a day, five days a week. Most have left families behind; most have not seen a classroom in years; few have visited or lived in the North-east. They embark on an intensive course of study under unusual personal conditions in a totally new environment.

Points of conflict

At the onset of the first year of the program, with little precedent and only several weeks' notice, the faculty devised a curriculum that was essentially the same as the year-round Master's program albeit far more intensive and without the studio component. The topics

addressed included knowledge of the theories, functions, approaches, and political considerations that guide regional planning practice. It was assumed that these principles were sufficiently general as to apply to any group of students in the field of regional planning, regardless of experience or geographic focus.

Faculty expectations and assumptions were met head-on by those of the Fellows, whose very different experience and outlook resulted in much controversy and debate. In part, the conflict was ideological; in part, it was based on differences in experience and knowledge about different regional problems: and in part on the gulf between those working out of an academic milieu and those coming fresh from the workplace in leadership roles. Socio-cultural differences had implicit bearing on faculty – student as well as student – student interchange – none of which had been anticipated. During the first years of the Rural Fellows Program a variety of issues arose that resulted in lively discussion and considerable change in its structure. These are discussed in detail below.

Education issues

Two major educational issues altered the structure of the Rural Fellows Program. First, it was determined that there was an inherent difficulty in transmitting the educational precepts of two of the Program's major courses, Quantitative Methods and Planning Theory. Second, it was found that there was a gap between theoretical planning issues raised in the educational context and the extension of those issues to actual planning practice.

Educational precepts

The quantitative approach

The quantitative methods course met with great resistance. Required for all students in planning, it provides skills in such analytically rigorous techniques as survey research, statistical data analysis and population forecasting. It is typically a difficult course for instructors and students alike, but the difficulties were exacerbated in the new program by a number of special barriers. The Fellows had been out of school for a long time, and almost all of them had to overcome many years of 'math phobia'. Their academic background had been in the 'soft' social sciences, and they brought both an unfamiliarity with and a psychological resistance to quantitative methods, however applied. They were convinced in any case that quantitative methods were not relevant to everyday practice, and might be manipulative in detrimental ways.

The teaching process was accordingly made more difficult because program participants had to first be convinced that quantitative methods were necessary tools to aid in certain vital steps in the planning process. Once that hurdle had been overcome, the information transfer aspect of the teaching had to be handled with great patience.

Theory

The faculty approached their work with a thorough knowledge of theory that was a new area for most of the students. The planning theory course focused upon such critical issues as the planning process, social justice, goal development, policy analysis, and equity and efficiency. The syllabus included extensive readings of the key theorists that are part of virtually all regional planning theory courses. The difficulty of dealing with theoretical abstractions and the quantity of reading to be absorbed and discussed in a short period of time were serious obstacles for students unaccustomed to this kind of work. This raised the question of how much material should be covered, as well as how theory could best be presented to people coming fresh from active work in the field.

Extension to practice

The central problem confronting the program was the difference in experience and perceptions of faculty and Fellows which in turn governed the ways that the question of planning – as theory and in practice – was addressed. The poverty of planning education in dealing with the problems of rural America is understandable, given the preoccupation with the requirements of growth based upon private enterprise and urban centers. This problem seems to be universal. Even in those nations which describe themselves as socialist, a similar pattern to development strategies appears to govern planning practice, and again it is the rural citizen who seems to be harmed most by the biases of those who plan and implement economic development schemes.

It became clear that none of the traditional planning tools were appropriate for the problems that emerged in the course of the early phase of the program. The need to find new approaches became the central preoccupation of the program. The key issues raised in this context were as shown below.

Relevance

Faculty experience was primarily with international agriculture and New England rural development. Relevance was thus a key question: could analyses and prescriptions for planning as offered by faculty with their specific experience be generally applied? It was also a hot point of debate whether planning for the New England area, with its strongly megalopolitan characteristics, could have bearing on the problems of more clearly rural, agriculturally based communities elsewhere in the country.

The effects of planning

Most graduate programs look at planning as a positive, socially beneficial function of government. Most rural community developers, due to their experience with government planners, are more than skeptical of this assumption. The traditional planner believes that somehow, through a balance of idealism and pragmatism, equity and efficiency, planning can effect positive change for all communities. The Fellows, on the other hand, vehemently challenged what they perceived as the implicit bias of this view. For them,

more often than not, the planner, whatever his/her model, came as a mercenary carrying cultural baggage from a different world, often at the expense of the goals and desires of the community. The planner was hardly an advocate of positive social change.

Examples they gave were specific: it was the planner who blocked sewer system expansion, who promoted annexation when it was profitable to the dominant white community, or who used all of the federal housing grants for elderly housing rather than for low and moderate income families. Even regional planning was often perceived as being negative, in that it could reduce the political strength of minority groups.

Nowhere did this negativism toward planning become more evident than in discussions concerning the role of A-95 Review powers. Office of Management and Budget Circular A-95 called for an extensive review process of all major Federal grants. It involved local, regional, and state review. Regional interests generally took precedence over local concerns. In the North-east it is rare to see these powers abused. The faculty thought of the A-95 Review as a forward-looking and necessary tool for promoting regional interests. The Fellows took the opposite stance: in virtually every community with which they were familiar A-95 was used by the white majority to block change. Thus, once again, the perspectives of the faculty and the Fellows were very different.

Community size

Is there a size or type of community for which planning cannot function? Few planners or educators would answer no. Yet, based on the present state of planning approaches, it is very difficult to develop plans for the types of rural communities represented by the Fellows. These communities tend to be sparsely populated and spread over a relatively vast geographic area. The sense of community held by the people of such areas is based less upon place than upon spiritual bonding and mutual support. Production and distribution tend to be centered around small independent production units. Large private enterprises are a relatively new phenomenon in such communities.

Traditional economic development approaches vs. community alternatives

Presentation by faculty of economic development approaches utilized by the typical New England regional, town or city planner which largely focus on the conditions necessary to stimulate the growth of private enterprise, contradicted the experience of the Fellows. They had seen, in their communities, how the growth of private enterprise had often led to an erosion of traditional culture and negatively affected community self-reliance. Other processes of production and distribution, such as the family farm or the cooperative society, were integral to the culture. Their experience had shown that local development corporations, community development corporations, independent producer associations, organizations and cooperatives were most effective in reaching their goals.

Educational issues for adult minority professionals

The initial approach toward the education of adult minority professionals in the National Rural Fellows Program was fraught with problems, both from the faculty's and the students' perspective. These difficulties, both pedagogic and social in nature, are sketched out below.

Teaching methods

Faculty were accustomed to traditional teaching methods. They had been lecturing to large groups of younger students who took notes in preparation for follow-up exams and final grades with a minimum of questions. There was always leeway, over the course of a semester, to fully expand on difficult material. During the first summer of the Rural Fellows Program, the temptation to lecture was especially strong: how else to concentrate a full semester's worth of material into the intense and brief eight-week session? But the lecture method necessarily leaves little room for student expression, and the Fellows were eager to give voice to their experience and to compare it with that of the others. Many of them were strongly committed – in practice and ideologically – to communal, participatory methods of communication and decision-making, which are contradicted in traditional teaching methods. Furthermore, what they had to offer was largely unfamiliar to the faculty; their concrete and diverse experience, information, and perceptions were lacking in the regular, regionally-focused curriculum. More flexibility in classroom procedures and program offerings was quickly demanded and clearly called for. While Fellows were very aware of what quality education meant and resented any suggestion that their program differed from the regular requirements, they also were sensitive to evaluation methods that relegated their work to open comparison.

Academic fears

Any adult returning to academic life brings his or her doubts and memories of adolescent anxieties ingrained long ago in school. While all the Fellows had had some college experience, few had taken courses in the recent past. For many of them, college work had either been incomplete or unsuccessful, with the result that they brought with them a lingering expectation of failure and much anxiety. These fears were revealed especially in test situations and when confronted by quantitative or writing assignments. This suggested the need for explicit provision of skills training, which would be non-coercive but readily available and individually designed.

Socio-cultural conflicts

The built-in hierarchies of academic life (e.g. faculty vs. student) are not easily accepted by adults accustomed to leadership roles in their communities (some Fellows had responsibility for millions of dollars and hundreds of people). Resistance to hierarchical approaches is heightened when faculty – in the eyes of politically active minorities – represent what they see as the culturally dominant group. Because the University of Massachusetts faculty were nearly all white, middle-class males, their credibility was

suspect at best. This inherent problem aroused antagonism and conflict and the development of a 'we-they' dichotomy that needed redress.

A further problem was the potential intra-cultural animosity between Fellows. Despite a general tendency toward mutual support, there were also occasional schisms triggered by cultural differences. Within the broad categories, 'minority' or 'rural', there are discrete differences and in some cases inherited rivalries. The intensity of the educational program, the constant interaction among Fellows, and expectations of commonality that were not always fulfilled, contributed to an environment in which schisms occurred. This undercurrent worked against efforts to promote the programmatic cohesiveness and mutual learning environment.

Changes

The complexity of the problems that emerged points to both the difficulties involved in bringing a non-traditional academic program into a traditional department and the enormous potential for learning by faculty, students and administrators alike, about the diversity which constitutes the United States. The problems are interrelated and almost inevitably have some cultural underpinning. It was realized early on that conventional approaches would not be conducive to the NRF setting. Discussion and proposals by students and faculty led in the course of time to a number of changes.

The task of dealing with these problems is hobbled by the difficulties faced by any administrator of an academic program within a large research university with college and departmental requirements to fulfill. The central problem of the administrator is to be able to identify the critical problems involved in bringing non-traditional students smoothly through the maze of sometimes inflexible university requirements which were designed with traditional students in mind, and doing this in a way which leaves the administrator free to deal with the other problems mentioned above. If these bureaucratic problems can be solved simply, then the program will be all the better for it.

It was clear by the end of the first year of the Program that there was much to learn. Faculty had not been prepared for these new students, nor for what the Rural Fellows Program in fact demanded, nor what they could offer, nor how best to go about it. Above all, the special nature of adult education and the cultural differences between rural minority adults and the kinds of students with which faculty were most familiar required thorough reassessment. The focal point of regional rural development and a fuller appreciation of rural minority experience in contrast to their own was the starting point for many of the changes that were implemented.

To begin with, a coordinator was hired. This person was a minority person with extensive experience both in rural development and in academic life. It was critical that this person understand the cultural differences between faculty and Fellows so as to help bridge some of the barriers that prevented communication and learning. In general, the coordinator was to work towards two complementary objectives: to identify problems related to cultural dissimilarities between the Fellows and the academic community, and

thus to facilitate transition; second, to serve as an instrument through which Fellows could recommend changes in the academic program.

Several minority faculty were hired. In part because of an insufficient representation of minority people among the faculty, Fellows questioned the ostensibly objective and culturally unbiased nature of the teaching. To address this problem, as well as to broaden the perspective of the academic program, a nationwide search was carried out to attract minority faculty with specialties required for the program.

Workshops and tutorials were arranged. They were designed to improve writing, quantitative and computer skills for those Fellows with clear need of them and to do so through personal guidance. It was felt that the degree to which some of the Fellows became anxious and confused over the course of the academics session was partly due to the 'culture shock' of conventional academic demands coupled with their sense of their own skill deficiencies. When the workshops and tutorial sessions were introduced, the acculturation process seemed to be greatly facilitated and anxieties related to academic work abated.

A series of seminars was developed. The goal of these seminars was to enable the students to independently share their experiences, accumulated through years of community work in rural America, and to create a more cooperative, participatory learning experience outside of the classroom.

Finally, the faculty retooled. Over the fall and spring semester of the first year, the core members educated themselves, obtaining information concerning rural development from across the country. This information was to become the basis for the lectures and seminars scheduled for the following year. In addition, faculty sought means to alter classroom procedures to allow for greater interchange and student participation.

Awareness of the cultural differences between Fellows and faculty and efforts to overcome resulting problems helped to illuminate the extent to which the critical educational process is governed, not only by the competence and pedagogical skills of the instructors, but also by the ability of students and faculty to relate to each other and to penetrate barriers of communication.

The Fellows are, by and large, successful community leaders and tend to be aggressively committed to progress and change. The weaknesses identified in the NRF academic program acted as a stumbling block to both the aspirations of the Fellows and the faculty who taught them. With recognition of cultural and experiential differences and of the demands made upon a teaching/learning situation where adults work together, the program changes had the net result of bringing about a dramatic improvement in the relationship between students and faculty as well as major improvements in the quality of work.

Conclusions

What can be extracted from the National Rural Fellows Program in Amherst that might benefit other schools of regional planning involved in adult outreach? Of course, every program is unique, defined by the perspectives and expertise of faculty and students alike, as well as by geographic location and institutional practices. However, from our experiences thus far, the following points can be offered.

Education for adults

Standard teaching approaches – lectures, exams, conventional testing and grading procedures – are not always appropriate for highly skilled professionals returning to academic work after many years. Older students, for one, will challenge more and expect more from the educational process, particularly those accustomed to leadership roles. At the same time, they will tend to have less tolerance for the abstract, more theoretical aspects of learning – both due to their relative unfamiliarity with this kind of work and because of their current immersion in responsibilities in the field. The relevance of academic material to their own experience must be allowed to be fully explored. This experience is a rich resource of material otherwise unavailable to faculty and often lacking in a traditional, regionally-focused curriculum. Furthermore, adult professionals expect the academic program to provide the opportunity both to give intellectual form to their own experience and to learn from the experience of others. All this requires flexibility in classroom procedures and variety in the structures of the curriculum.

For students with difficulties in skills such as writing or mathematics, individual tutorials and group work sessions are critical and must be presented sensitively and positively. The remedial character of such work should be deemphasized and skill-enhancement stressed. These sessions should be external to the regular curriculum, easily available, and individually designed.

Socio-cultural dimensions

Especially among minorities who are politically active, aware and committed to social change, the built-in hierarchies of academic life (faculty vs student) are exacerbated when faculty represent what can be classified as the ‘culturally dominant’ group in our society. To counteract this, faculty must be sensitive to cultural differences, ideological perspectives, and must become personally involved and find ways to encourage mutual learning. In addition, if not already in place, faculty and staff from similar cultural backgrounds to those of the students should be recruited. Aside from their contribution of new perspectives, and their ability to serve as role models, they can add credibility to the academic program as well as provide a more evident source of communication for students.

Despite presenting a seemingly ‘common front’ to the faculty – especially where the academic program seems not to meet their collective needs – minority students from different cultural backgrounds have distinct often historical differences. These

differences are potentially a source for much mutual learning, of course; on the other hand, they also can serve to divide the group. Different motivations, goals and styles of expression need to be reconciled to allow for basic understanding to emerge. Channels of communication to allow for open discussion of cultural friction cannot be left to chance but should be built into the structure of the program.

Planning education for rural development

Traditional assumptions concerning regional planning as offered in academic programs are put into question by the experience of people working out of rural communities with a variety of regional differences. Planning approaches with a variety of regional differences. Planning approaches may be used for dramatically different purposes in different areas across the United States. Indeed, the same approaches used to improve the quality of life of an entire community in one section of the nation may be used to further the narrow interest of one sub-group of a community in a different area. Thus, the view of planning as always a socially beneficial function of government is contradicted by the experience of minorities in rural areas where planners often threaten the political strength of minority groups. Finally, in light of the historical realities, including racial discrimination as well as priorities that govern distribution of available funds, the applicability of traditional economic development approaches to many impoverished rural communities is seriously questionable.

If small scale communal indigenous enterprise is not the answer, traditional approaches are not either. There are even certain types of rural communities that may not be amenable to the planning function at all.

Planning education for rural development must look for new solutions within the context of social and economic realities. Programs such as the NRFP provide a means to do so.

