TOOLS AND CHALLENGES TO COMMUNITY UNIVERSITY RESEARCH
FRIDAY, MAY 9, 2003

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. As Karen Chad indicated, I agreed to speak at this plenary on very short notice – just yesterday as a matter of fact. I have been told that when one finds oneself in this situation one has two options – tell jokes or try to say something relevant about the topic. As no one ever laughs at my jokes, I will try the second approach. However, I would caution you not to expect a scholarly presentation. My comments will be based very much on our experience with our CURA grant in Winnipeg and my own work with communities throughout my career.

We were given three questions to address in this presentation and I will take them in turn.

1) What are some of the causes and, more importantly, some of the methods or strategies to resolve conflict between community and university groups?

I would suggest that we cannot always resolve conflict. Assuming we can will leave us disappointed and feeling as though we have failed. Perhaps a better question is how can we work to avoid or manage conflict? I am reminded here of an experience from earlier in my career when I worked as a planner in Canberra Australia. The Commissioner of Planning, a very British gentleman named Sir John Overall, had a solution for resolving conflict. Build more pubs – particularly neighbourhood pubs. Like many planners, Sir John had an indicator or threshold of so many households per pub – something like one pub for every 500 households. It may have been higher, but given the copious amounts Australians drink, perhaps not. How was this related to resolving conflicts? Sir John was very keen on citizen engagement. He felt that people needed a place to come together not as representatives of their professions but as residents of the neighbourhood, the City, etc. The pub, he felt, was such a place. It was visited by academics, planners, lawyers, plumbers, electricians, labourers, professionals, etc. Standing at the bar throwing back the booze, they took off their professional/occupational./social roles and baggage. They related as equals, discussed issues of community and generally became engaged as residents. They discuss and air local issues and concerns, problems get addressed and engagement leads to resolution. They come together and discuss as equals. Having, in recent years, become reasonably familiar with the pub culture in London England, I realise that many aspects of his scenario are spot on. I am not suggesting we go out and build more pubs but thinking back one can draw lessons from his idea.

If we hope to resolve, or avoid, conflict we have to take off our "academic hats" or set aside our academic role. We have to get out of the ivory tower, meet people on common ground (a community centre, church, maybe even a pub). We have to relate to people as equals, as residents of neighbourhoods with common goals and objectives. We have to build that comfort zone, that degree of familiarity, if we hope to move forward on community based research agendas and at the same time avoid or resolve conflicts.

Drawing on our Community University Research Alliance (CURA) experience in Winnipeg, we also find that to avoid conflict where possible, and manage it when it occurs, it is important to establish clear objectives up front and to have a clearly defined mandate. Community based

research under CURA cannot resolve the large systemic problems such as poverty, racism and unemployment. The time frame of CURA is too short, the funding too little. CURA can make a difference in community, but it is not a cure for all problems, it cannot be "all things to all people." Don't bill it as such. When working with community partners define reasonable objectives within research themes communities identify as important. You should not promise what you cannot deliver. The suit has to be cut to suit the cloth (funding). Doing this up front helps avoid both thwarted expectations and conflict.

Another key component of resolving, avoiding and managing conflict is consultation. Although time consuming, you have to take time to listen. Consultation, however, is more than listening, it is involvement in all stages of the research process. It is not enough to consult, identify the research themes important to the community then go away and structure research projects focussing on these themes. Consultation has to continue through design, delivery and completion of a project. It has to be consultation within a partnership arrangement.

Given our experience in Winnipeg, we also feel that organizational structure and the role of third parties within this structure is important in managing conflict. In our CURA, an Executive Steering Committee (ESC) establishes the overall direction and handles project adjudication. The ESC is a fifteen member body with twelve community members, two academics and an academic chair. Under the ESC we have a Community Liaison Director (Anita Friesen) and a Research Liaison Director (myself). We both work as a resource to the ESC, we don't make decisions but do make recommendations and advise. We also work with community and academic partners respectively. We help structure and encourage research partnerships, we facilitate discussion, we arbitrate, mediate, where there are difficulties we try to keep the partners at the table and talking. We don't always resolve conflicts but we certainly help manage and reduce conflict. We are not directly involved in the decision making process, we are arms length from that process and we can meet with partners without that baggage. Therefore, in our opinion, structure is important in avoiding and resolving conflict. Having said this, skills in conflict resolution, which neither of us have, would certainly be useful.

My final point on this question is the simple observation that one "should never close the door." Once you do this the battle is lost. Naturally, there are situations where resolution is not possible and closure is required. However, avoiding closure as long as possible often results in eventual resolution.

2) How do we develop skills or capacity within the research groups and/or within the community in general? (Capacity or skills may include group facilitation, cultural competency, making presentations, interdisciplinary collaboration, community assessment, fundraising, grant writing, developing qualitative or quantitative research skills, disseminating results, applying results to policy or program change).

Again I will draw on our CURA experience in Winnipeg. We contend that participatory research develops skills and capacity for both community and academic partners. When our ESC

adjudicates projects, it allocates points for the participatory nature of the research, asking such questions as:

- Ş   are there community partners and co-sponsors?
- Ş   are the objects (homeless youth, for example) of the research involved in a participatory way?
- Ş   are community residents involved in an active manner in the research?
- Ş   are students involved?
- Ş   is there an advisory group/committee involving all interested stakeholders?

It is our opinion that the higher the level of participation, the more knowledge and understanding it builds and the better the capacity building exercise.

Second, if you want to build skills and develop capacity you do not collect and control knowledge, you disseminate it. You disseminate it in a simple, understandable form. Make it meaningful and easy to understand. Do not be too concerned about including abstracts and bibliographies. Short, concise papers or research highlights are often more meaningful to the community.

An important part of this dissemination process includes presentations to the community, making sure you give back what you receive. We have found on several studies that presentations to residents, press releases, neighbourhood flyers, presentations to the various levels of government, forums for politicians, workshops for neighbourhood organizations and distribution through web sites and newsletters, as well as being effective dissemination tools, also help build capacity in the community. Knowledge and awareness are key components of capacity building.

In dissemination of material it is also important to apply your results to their (the community) problems, the policies they wish to change, and the programs they hope to evaluate. This does not mean that research results have to always support community positions, but to be relevant there has to be this connection or there is little capacity building involved.

We find our application process itself can be a capacity building and skills development exercise. We require a partnership approach even at this stage. The partnership (community and academic) is involved from the beginning in establishing project objectives, designing projects then moving on to the actual research work itself. Preparation of applications for research funding is a skill development in itself and community involvement leaves this capacity in the community on a long term basis.

In combination with the above involvement, we encourage research ideas to percolate up from the community. We do this through broad community consultations, meetings with specific sectoral groups such as housing organizations and face-to-face meetings with individual organizations to discuss their research needs. If research ideas percolate up from the community there is a greater buy-in by community groups and you get greater involvement. When you have this involvement you have learning and capacity building.

It is also important to stress inter-disciplinary partnerships on both the academic and community sides. Encouraging inter-disciplinary and inter-agency partnerships builds knowledge, adds expertise, helps develop networks and enhances understanding of other disciplines' and agencies' positions. In a project we are currently developing that will be examining single room occupancy units in Winnipeg's old hotels, twelve to fifteen community agencies and government departments and four academic disciplines have already come together at a series of meetings to structure the project objectives and develop an application. Networking has already occurred and leaning is underway.

Finally, encouraging student internships and working relationships with community agencies is a capacity building situation for both sides. With modest cost, and often on a volunteer basis, community agencies are able to undertake research and organizational work that would not otherwise get done. Students develop expertise, experience that counts when they apply for full time jobs, and gain a better understanding of community issues. Capacity building and development of expertise are outcomes for both students and communities.

3) What are some examples of effective approaches, skills or tools that would aid in creating and sustaining community-university partnerships?

Creating effective partnerships is not easy and sustaining them is even more difficult. There seems to be no magic solution, no failsafe model. Although it seems redundant to mention money, few partnerships are effective without it. The Winnipeg Inner City Research Alliance existed as a partnership before it had funds, but one could hardly say it was an effective research based partnership until it received funding. This is not meant to suggest that a partnership cannot be constructive without funds. Networking and pooling expertise and time mean partnerships can make a difference. However, it would be hard to argue that money does not make a difference. A concern shared by all in the Winnipeg Inner City Research Alliance is the knowledge that funding from SSHRC and CMHC will not always be available. In an attempt to improve sustainability, we are working to broaden the funding base – provincial funds, funds from other federal departments, funds from the municipality and in-kind contributions from all stakeholders involved. Broadening the range and number of stakeholders is an important part of broadening the funding base. If the partnership can prove its relevance to a broad enough range of stakeholders it can certainly strengthen its potential for long term sustainability.

I am also convinced that to ensure long term sustainability attitudes have to change at universities. There has to be less separation of Town and Gown. The University of Winnipeg is more community based than many. It is an inner city university and many disciplines have a strong community focus. Having said this, it is still true that the academics get less credit for involvement in community based research and reports with a practical, policy, community focus than they do for articles published in well known and recognized academic journals. Until community based research competes on a more level playing field it will be difficult to sustain academic/community partnerships on a long term basis. On the flip-side, however, there has to be greater recognition by the community that academics can play an effective role in addressing community needs. Academics can, and do, come out of their ivory tower and work effectively in the community.

However, until University attitudes towards community based research change and community/university partnerships are institutionalized within universities, long term sustainability of these partnerships will be difficult. Some universities have institutionalized such partnerships already – the University of Toronto with the Centre for Urban and Community Studies, Saskatoon with its Community-University Institute for Social Research, the University of Winnipeg with the Institute of Urban Studies, to name a few. The movement towards institutionalizing such partnerships is growing and the trend will improve the sustainability of community/academic partnerships.

Perhaps the most effective way of sustaining partnerships is to undertake credible research and educational initiatives. Credible from both the community and academic perspectives. If research is credible to the point of effecting positive change at the community level as well as providing academics with profile and credit toward academic award (promotion and tenure) then there will be a strong reason on both sides to support such partnerships as well as a strong rationale for both sides to partner in funding applications. Education and capacity building also have to be effective for both sides. The Summer Institute, sponsored by the Winnipeg Inner City Research Alliance, may be an example of a sustainable educational initiative. With a focus on community development, the Institute is a week long intensive course for university students and community based workers. The practical as well as the academic relevance of this course and its capacity building strength probably ensure the sustainability of this initiative even after SSHRC and CMHC funding disappear. Support from the province has already been obtained.

Finally, another method of strengthening these partnerships is by opening up the university to community initiatives and building them in to the university academic programs through such initiatives as incorporation of community based research into student assignments, student internships with community based organizations, workshops on community issues, academics serving on the boards of community based agencies, academics incorporating more local community issues and examples in their teaching programs and universities working in general to serve the needs of the communities they are part of. Universities have to look beyond the bounds of academia to embrace communities and likewise communities have to view universities as a legitimate part of the community and a resource like any other agency in the neighbourhood. Only then can effective and sustainable partnerships be structured and sustained.

I hope you have found my comments useful. As I indicated at the outset, they are based very much on our experience with our CURA grant in Winnipeg and my own work with communities throughout my career, as opposed to a scholarly presentation on the subject. I hope you have found them useful. Thank you.

Tom Carter
Canada Research Chair in Urban Change and Adaptation
Institute of Urban Studies
University of Winnipeg