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“IT WILL TAKE PERSISTENCE”: THE DYNAMICS OF A UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP TO SUSTAIN THE NEW ENGLAND WORKER HEALTH AND SAFETY MOVEMENT*

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Abstract

The New England Consortium (TNEC) is a university-community partnership that since 1987 has delivered health and safety training for hazardous waste operations and emergency response (HAZWOPER) workers. Through two decades of the relative loss of power by the labor and environmental movements and subsequent reductions in state support for worker health and safety, this selective history of TNEC demonstrates its ability to sustain a worker health and safety movement in New England. The evolution of TNEC’s partnership process and the principles and policies by which it operates have helped to resolve several critical conflicts and strengthen its working relationships. Partnership dynamics are explored within their political and economic contexts and the need of member organizations to balance fiscal solvency with political objectives.

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the United States took a big step in its movement to the right. Shortly after taking office, the Reagan Administration broke a national strike of air traffic controllers, sending a message to labor and liberals that opposition from the federal government would be more intense. The environmental movement maintained its strength through the Reagan years, its roots in communities concerned about hazardous waste were deep enough to gain re-authorization of the Superfund law. It is important to remember, however, that 1986–1988 were probably the peak years of environmental movement strength. Trade unions, on the other hand, had begun their long slide—only public employee unions maintained anything like their previous membership and political clout. The federal system for regulation of work environments—established only 10 years before the Reagan election—was set for decline unbroken by the brief Democratic resurgence under Clinton. The neo-liberal anti-government pro-market orientation begun in the Thatcher-Reagan period continued to set the political, social, and economic context for worker health and safety through the Bush-Cheney administration.

Within that context, The New England Consortium (TNEC) was established in 1987 to submit a proposal to the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) to develop and deliver health and safety training for hazardous waste operations and emergency response (HAZWOPER) workers. This partnership is particularly interesting because it has sustained itself for more than 20 years with primarily a single source of external funding. It is also interesting because it is neither a research partnership nor a coalition addressing the needs of a community in a specific municipality or county, making it different from what are generally discussed in the area of partnerships for public health. TNEC’s purpose includes engagement

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in a specific project and movement strengthening to further workers' rights, health, and power. This article will discuss TNEC's partnership process, the principles and policies by which it operates, and how adherence to them has helped to resolve several critical conflicts and strengthen the organizational relationships. A brief review of the literature discussing university-community partnerships precedes our discussion of TNEC.

UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS FOR HEALTH

A body of public health literature addresses the dynamics, processes, and principles of university-community partnerships for health. Much of this literature is in the context of community-based research [1–18]. A substantial body of literature also addresses public health practice and the process of building and sustaining partnerships [19–28]. Most describe partnerships as Green, Daniel, and Novick [5] have, noting that they involve the sharing of resources, expand the reach and credibility of each member organization to address public health problems, enhance creativity within organizations, allow organizations to assume projects that otherwise would be too difficult, and "... act as a strategic vehicle to mobilize and leverage resources." Seifer and others have noted though that partnerships for health often are formed to meet a funding organization's requirements or to collectively obtain fiscal resources that otherwise would not be available [20,29]. Green, Daniel, and Novick [5], however, warn that obtaining external resources is usually an insufficient basis for sustaining the partnership.

STRUCTURES AND PRINCIPLES OF PARTNERSHIPS

University-community partnerships are relationships between social actors with differing needs, goals, resources, and responsibilities. It would be naïve and unrealistic to assume that the partnerships would not become at times arenas for conflict and struggle over control, resources, and goals. The likelihood for conflict is well documented in the literature already cited, with examples and guidelines for developing the capacity to resolve conflicts, hopefully without having to end the partnership prior to successfully accomplishing its goals. Butterfoss, Goodman, and Wandersman [20] note Mizrahi and Rosenthal's [30] notion "... that conflict is an inherent characteristic of coalitions" [20].

General structural and organizational components found necessary for managing conflicts and for successful partnership activity most commonly cited in the public health partnership literature include:

- formal rules, roles, and procedures;
- strong and committed central leadership, as well as sharing of leadership across the partners [31] and the contributions of "champions" [32];
- the pooling of member-organizations' resources;
- clearly stated and mutually agreed upon goals and objectives; and
- ongoing evaluation to provide the feedback necessary to identify successes as well as potential areas of future conflict.

Other components discussed in the literature include participatory/democratic decision-making and regular, clear, and open communications. The importance of a steering committee was not as regularly noted, but highly valued by those who had observed the importance of this component [32,33]. The principles for effective partnerships for community-based public health research and/or practice most generally discussed in the literature include reciprocity among partners [5,7,26,34], trust that develops through extended involvement [7,26,31,34], and planning for potential difficulties in the future [7,27,31].

Partnerships, as any human relationship, evolve and change, establishing points for conflict and growth. As Sarena Seifer [31] stated so simply, “Developing a partnership is inevitably a non-linear process involving many ‘starts’ and ‘restarts.’” Our presentation of TNEC highlights its origins and then three start/restart periods which illuminate conflicts and their resolution.

THE FORMATION OF THE NEW ENGLAND CONSORTIUM

TNEC began from an effort to obtain funding for a set of university occupational health and safety programs and worker health and safety advocacy organizations. A federal funding opportunity had arisen as a result of an extended effort by the AFL-CIO and several of its affiliated unions to secure in the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986 (SARA) a mandate for worker protection regulations and a training grant program [35]. The Superfund Worker Training Program was established in the U.S. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS)¹ to fund model health and safety training and education programs that would develop and deliver training for workers engaged in hazardous waste operations and hazardous materials incident emergency response.

In New England, representatives from five universities and four coalitions for occupational safety and health (COSH groups) met to discuss the organization and development of a proposal for the funding. Only one of the academics was willing to lead the effort and assume responsibility for running the project if awarded. That individual, a professor at the University of Lowell² and a COSH member and activist who later became the Principal Investigator of the awarded grant, suggested that one of the COSH groups take the lead, rather than setting the resources and control at a university. The COSH director believed that this was too large a project for the COSH to take on and that doing so would weaken the proposal in the eyes of the funding agency as well as make it difficult for the COSH group to stay focused on its primary goals and objectives. Nonetheless, from the outset, an explicit project goal was to sustain the capacity to organize and expand a vibrant New England worker health and safety movement.

NIEHS training grant program representatives met with the key occupational health and safety researchers and activists in New England to explain the program and encourage the development of a consortium for a New England training program. It was presented as a strategy to create a model program and reestablish federal health and safety funding, previously provided by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) New Directions Program, but which was steadily being withdrawn by the Reagan administration. Neither the NIEHS representatives nor those considering participation in the consortium expected that the project's demands would detract from what each believed was the critical core work of these actors in the regional health and safety movement. Once operational, however, the NIEHS program demanded a much greater commitment than anticipated, which, as will be discussed, has been a primary source of ongoing TNEC conflicts.

The successful proposal, submitted through the university's Department of Work Environment (DWE), created TNEC, one of eleven awardees in the original NIEHS program. The DWE was made up of academic researchers who worked closely with the labor, environmental, and other progressive social movements, and who wanted to provide academic resources, including strong science, to these movements. The NIEHS funding was seen as a way to advance these goals as well as to build the department's infrastructure, providing staff, equipment, and a formal vehicle for regional networking. Key DWE faculty believed that leading the consortium

The NIEHS Superfund Worker Training Program changed its name to the Worker Education and Training Program to reflect the ways in which it had expanded over time. The program's web site is <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/> and it supports a clearinghouse which can be found at <http://www.wetp.org/wetp/>

²It became the University of Massachusetts Lowell (UML) following a 1991 merger into the University of Massachusetts.

project appropriately matched the mission of a public university. The other academic institutions that participated in the project's start-up were less interested in using this funding for those purposes. They provided critical initial technical support and withdrew from the consortium by the end of the third funding year. Therefore, they are not included in this partnership discussion.

COSH groups are labor-based non-profit organizations that build broad community coalitions that conduct advocacy and mobilization campaigns to improve workplace health and safety and workers' health through worker empowerment in workplaces, unions, and society. They organize for labor contract provisions and state and federal laws to protect workers, support injured workers' groups, provide a wide range of health and safety training, and link with communities to advance the rights and health of working people. More recently, COSH groups have increasingly shifted their focus to non-organized workers: immigrants, youth, and low-wage and contingent work forces. Rooted in labor and community, they provide an interface between professionals (occupational, environmental, public health, and legal), unions, and workers and their communities.

TNEC's original COSH group members included the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH), the Rhode Island Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (RICOSH), the Connecticut Council for Occupational Safety and Health (ConnectiCOSH), and the Maine Labor Group for Health (MLGH). Each has an all-volunteer executive board as the decision-making body of authority and an executive director who reports to the board and runs the organization.

The COSH groups had two primary motivations for agreeing to form TNEC and submit a proposal to NIEHS. They believed that the grant would provide them substantial funding to enhance their organizing and advocacy for health and safety and sustain them after the loss of all or part of their financial support from the OSHA New Directions Program. The Reagan Administration had steadily reduced the COSH group funding from this program, putting them at risk of either becoming smaller and less effective or even having to discontinue operations.

By the end of the fifth year of TNEC's existence (September 1992), the University of Massachusetts Lowell (UML) was the only academic group remaining in the consortium. The MLGH left to join a different NIEHS-funded consortium, and two newly established COSH groups joined. TNEC provided organizing support and a limited budget to The New Hampshire Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (NHCOSH) to get established and to conduct outreach and marketing of courses in New Hampshire. The Western Massachusetts COSH, originally associated with MassCOSH, established itself as an independent organization, hired an executive director, and requested a limited budget from TNEC to promote the marketing and delivery of TNEC courses in Western Massachusetts. TNEC membership has remained the same since that point.

UML is the recipient of the NIEHS funding. A principal investigator (PI) directs the consortium and is accountable to the university, NIEHS, and the consortium member organizations. A project staff group at the university, including a project director, manages the consortium. The PI, project director, and university staff coordinate grant proposal development for continuing and additional funding. Each member organization employs one or more trainers who participate in the development and delivery of TNEC's training courses.

Currently, all TNEC member organizations participate in a Coordinating Committee (CC) which meets monthly and sets consortium policy. COSH directors participate in quarterly CC general business meetings. UML project staff attend all meetings. COSH trainers attend at least eight consortium meetings about training issues, and may attend the general business meetings. A quorum is required for decision-making, which is set by majority vote, though the committee

strives for consensus. Formal operating rules and procedures have been established and are amended as needed. Decisions about major changes in orientation, functioning, shifts in the balance of funding, and general consortium goals cannot be made without approval by each member's authoritative body. We will discuss below the process through which TNEC came to be organized in this way.

TNEC research is limited to evaluation of its training. It is not a coalition addressing the health concerns of a geographic community. Rather, it is a partnership between a university program and labor/community-based organizations that are themselves coalitions. Partnership members are part of and support a broad community of interest, which is no less a community than those found in a locality. The partnership represents the concept of community presented by Green, Daniel, and Novick [5] that includes "... groups that have a common interest or cause even if they do not share a common location."

TNEC has two primary related but competing goals. One is to establish and run a model HAZWOPER health and safety training program in New England, and thereby sustain long-term funding for all TNEC member organizations. The other is to build and strengthen a regional worker health and safety movement. It is unlikely that the member organizations would have formed a consortium to achieve the second goal. It already was being done in a less formal and unstructured manner, united as an emerging movement. When the initial proposal was submitted in 1987, none understood the extent of demands that would be made on each to fulfill the grant requirements and create a model training program. As an example, in 1989 NIEHS responded to Congressional oversight concerns and required increased course delivery levels from its awardees. Each TNEC member had to contribute unanticipated work and resources to the effort.

GETTING THE PROJECT STARTED

The first 3 years required an intensive effort of program development and meeting the NIEHS mandates, including curriculum development and participating in the national effort. The consortium had to market its hazardous waste remediation and ER training courses. These were activities that neither the UML group nor the COSHes had done previously. It required that TNEC member organizations and staff participate on state and local committees established to meet the emergency planning requirements of SARA. An advisory board was established with representatives from pertinent federal and state agencies, businesses, and other NIEHS awardee programs in the New England region. TNEC had to work hard and quickly to become known as a provider of the training newly required by OSHA. It developed curricula to address hazardous waste site remediation, industrial facility hazardous waste management, and hazardous materials incident emergency response.

TNEC was committed to worker-oriented training. That is, not only training that would help workers learn about health and safety, but would facilitate a process through which they could explore how to "develop strategies to protect their health and safety and improve the conditions of their work" [36]. NIEHS directed its awardees to establish participatory training that included substantial hands-on activities and curriculum that addressed the learning styles and needs of adult workers. The NIEHS program administrators acknowledged that development and delivery of this kind of training would require a strong federal subsidy, but they required the awardees, particularly those that were university-based, to strive for self-sufficiency. Grant funds have been insufficient to meet project expenses and course revenues have been needed to meet the full university staff payroll expenses. (The COSH groups have been allocated a budget that does not require generation of course revenues to meet expenses.)

The 3-year start-up effort was successful, and 1,600 workers were trained in the 3rd year in more than 70 courses. The success overworked all the project staff and organizations. The

COSH groups resented the strain on their organizational resources. The UML trainers, who were obligated to deliver more training than the individual COSH staff trainers, were exhausted and resentful of the COSH groups' demands that they do even more of the work. Nearly all of the consortium staff and the COSH directors and boards resented that project management had pushed so hard to establish a successful training organization at the expense of working to strengthen the regional health and safety movement. It triggered TNEC's first crisis.

To address it, the PI hired a consultant to conduct a program evaluation that would guide TNEC in a process to overcome the crisis and strengthen its partnership. The evaluator was a seasoned social movement activist and researcher. Following discussions with the staff and directors of each TNEC member organization, she submitted a report detailing a reorganization plan that would facilitate a partnership that could then establish objectives and a process for integrating TNEC's two primary goals. She presented the PI with the following recommendations for establishing and sustaining a strong partnership:

- hire a new manager and include COSH representatives on the search committee;
- strengthen the existing project Coordinating Committee with mechanisms for decision-making established through consensus agreement;
- develop a comprehensive set of operational policies for project management.

The successful implementation of these measures firmly established TNEC as a university-community partnership. The nearly 2-year process to negotiate these structures, policies, and practices, as well as test the mutual commitment of member organizations to apply them, cemented TNEC's capacity to take stock of its successes and negotiate its way through future disagreements.

COORDINATING COMMITTEE

A new project manager was hired at the university, following a search conducted by a committee that included university and COSH training staff. The manager was a health and safety professional and had been an active COSH group member for nearly a decade. The project manager and the PI worked together to implement the evaluator's recommendations. The existing project Coordinating Committee (CC) lacked clear lines of authority and power. Neither voting nor operating policies had been established. Although there were meetings, they were not regular and little time was allocated for collective communication and sharing about current member organization activities and issues. The process was neither conducive for collective management nor movement strengthening. The first task of the new project manager was to coordinate a process that established a CC that could achieve partnership goals and be a venue for discussing and resolving differences of opinion.

Rules were established regarding meeting regularity and scheduling, including making the location and time convenient for members from across the multiple state area. A governance structure and operating procedures for meeting were established. The PI was ultimately accountable to the university and NIEHS and therefore was given veto power over CC votes that would violate the terms of both NIEHS and the university. The COSH representatives (and even some university training staff) were suspicious that the veto would be used to nullify democratic process. The only real leverage that the PI had to ensure COSH cooperation was the threat of discontinuing funding and consortium membership. To take such action against one or more COSH groups, however, would jeopardize consortium cohesion and even eligibility for NIEHS funding. Therefore, it was agreed that the COSH member organizations could effectively counter an unacceptable PI veto by collectively agreeing not to accept it. This established an understanding of how the university and the COSH groups shared relatively equal power for consortium decision-making.

The CC established a sub-committee for curriculum development and modification and another for marketing and outreach. They allowed for clearer distribution of work and enhanced a sense of collective responsibility and partnership. It advanced collective decision-making about key project activities as well as regular discussions of how best to integrate movement strengthening with the business of worker training. The immediacy and economic imperative of supporting the training program provided the impetus to meet and work without having to tread through different perspectives about strengthening a movement.

Consequently, the CC meeting agendas minimized discussion of movement strengthening which could invite resource allocation conflicts that could weaken the primary project and therefore the long-term funding. Such discussions often were reduced to statements about the intense resource and time demands that the project made on COSH groups, interfering with their primary advocacy activities. University project staff were similarly frustrated by the lack of time and resources available for addressing movement strengthening strategies.

Interestingly, conflicts about the balance of effort between the two primary goals have arisen both between and within member organizations. COSH directors and boards generally have wanted to use the project resources to advance their individual organization's movement strengthening work. COSH trainers, whose primary work is to build a model training program that can become a vehicle for strengthening a regional movement, generally have wanted to use the project resources to advance the training project. At the university, the PI and manager, who are responsible for the fiscal solvency of the project, have emphasized enhancing the training project, especially since course revenues are used to meet payroll obligations. The university training staff, however, often have tended more toward wanting to engage in movement strengthening activity because they have felt stifled by the heavy training burden in an institution that does not have movement strengthening as part of its mission.

CRITICAL CONFLICT DEMONSTRATES THE SUCCESS OF ESTABLISHING A PARTNERSHIP

At TNEC's outset, one COSH member organization had been allocated more project funding than the others because it had taken a larger role in developing the proposal and had a closer relationship with the university PI than the other groups had. In 1992, when TNEC membership settled to UML and the five COSH groups, four of the groups had equal funding and the one maintained about double the funding of the others because it supported more staff and assumed more responsibilities. Changes at that COSH group, combined with changes in the political and market context for the training program, as well as the project's staffing needs brought forth CC discussions about reducing that COSH group's funding level to match that of the other COSH groups while increasing the university's share of the funding.

The nature of a high-demand, single-subject training program led to trainer burnout and turnover. It was attenuated by the difficulty of the COSH groups to provide the staff with employment opportunities for advancement to meet the staffs' financial and interest needs as they matured in age and experience. These stresses along with increased financial strains led most of the COSH directors to want to shift more of TNEC's training project workload to the UML staff. Unfortunately, course sales had dropped precipitously for a multitude of reasons unrelated to the effort and quality of TNEC's project³. The one COSH group (from here on called "XCOSH") receiving funding in excess of the others also was experiencing internal difficulties and was not able to maintain staffing levels to match TNEC's needs. At a 1994

³Reasons included weakened enforcement by regulatory agencies, a decreased government emphasis on hazardous waste site clean-up, saturation of training for some businesses, and the establishment of training divisions among waste management firms who would then provide training as a loss leader to secure service contracts.

planning retreat, the CC agreed that after one year XCOSH's funding would be reduced to the level of the others and that the funding would be transferred to the UML group so that it could hire an additional trainer and assume a larger proportion of the responsibility for the training project. It was agreed that this decision was made on sound information, would be binding, and that a vote by the COSH executive boards was not required.

The decision reflected the strong sense of collaboration and support between TNEC member organizations. Although supporting XCOSH in this way put a strain on the consortium, all members, including the university group, acted in solidarity with XCOSH because it was experiencing internal difficulties and asked for additional support. At this point in TNEC's development, the COSH groups usually voted on critical matters as a block, especially when the university management posed a strategy that was perceived to potentially threaten the resources that the COSH groups believed the project should provide for them. This vote was no different and the decision to reduce XCOSH's funding was made only after a COSH group caucus which resulted in a united position for a consortium vote. Although such caucuses often posed difficulties for the project management, they were supported as an important part of TNEC's decision-making process.

The year passed and XCOSH had not only inadequately prepared for the funding reduction, but it had hired a new staff trainer less than a half year before the pending point of reduction. NIEHS had warned TNEC that an award reduction was likely in 1996 due to anticipated federal budget restrictions. At a September 1995 planning meeting, the CC had to vote on a request from XCOSH to extend its existing funding level for another year. XCOSH made clear that the newly hired trainer would need substantial time and preparation to meet TNEC's training demands and standards. Therefore, the CC had to decide not only to extend the funding for XCOSH, but to continue to burden the other members with the ongoing short staffing problem. The CC also had to develop a process for assigning budget reductions should NIEHS reduce the award the following year. It was a day of contentious debate. Partnership solidarity prevailed and XCOSH kept its funding level. The discussion about future award reductions was particularly difficult because TNEC's weakened capacity to sustain the quality of training was adding to the aforementioned decline in course sales. At this point, helping an individual member organization was jeopardizing achieving the goal of sustaining a strong training program that could support all members.

NIEHS did reduce the next year's funding. Course revenues continued to decline, and the strain of keeping the training program strong with insufficient staff was forcing all member organizations to commit more resources to the training program than had been expected. Consequently, the COSH groups could not engage in more mission-oriented efforts and the university group's training and administrative staff were experiencing job burn-out. Nonetheless, XCOSH had failed to prepare for a consortium shift of funding to the university group to reduce the strain all of the groups were experiencing and shore up the training program.

XCOSH tried to maneuver the other COSH groups into a united front against UML management. At this point, representatives from three of the four other COSH groups assumed leadership to negotiate a transition that would best secure continued success. They organized two meetings of the COSH directors and trainers without the UML management. They negotiated a plan which the PI and project manager opposed. Nonetheless, the COSH leaders urged them to accept it. The four other COSH groups each agreed to an 8% reduction in funding so that XCOSH could make an easier transition to the lower funding level. The UML management did not want the other groups to lose funding, but had to agree to accept the settlement in order to move forward. The UML group itself delayed the hiring of a new trainer and put the unspent payroll funds into XCOSH's award for the year.

The strong set of decision-making, voting, and procedural policies set as a foundation 5 years earlier supported the development of a true partnership, as demonstrated by its ability to negotiate a conflict so intense that it threatened to end the consortium. Member organizations recognized that achieving the movement strengthening goal required being able to maintain the capacity to sustain all member organizations. An attempt to manipulate the principle of solidarity was countered with an assertion that consortium project cohesion was essential for maintaining the existence and strength of the member organizations.

The UML group assumed more responsibility for overall project management and coordination and the COSH groups were relieved of some of the duties which were more burdensome due to their organizational capacities, such as marketing and outreach and training coordination. Reestablishing fluid working relationships and training program strength after the conflict took several years. A period of high personnel turnover within all member organizations further complicated these efforts. Unplanned leadership changes in most member organizations helped to reunite the partnership, as those with grudges or bad memories of the conflict left. As new leaders and staff came to own the consortium project, they looked to the future rather than being hounded by the past. The UML project manager had become the PI and the former PI assumed the role of advisory board chair. The university group hired a new TNEC project director who was a former COSH group director committed to maintaining a strong partnership. New administrative and communication procedures facilitated greater opportunities for creative involvement in project decision-making by all trainers and the COSH directors, and thereby strengthened consortium cohesion.

New relationships evolve, and trust and commitment are tested, creating conflicts that challenge partners' capacity for resolution. Organizational partnerships are social relationships. Sharing that may be sufficient in one phase of the relationship may become insufficient as the individuals' and organizations' needs change and their capacity for engagement increases. The next critical juncture for TNEC came in its seventeenth year as it approached preparation for a new 5-year grant cycle. In planning to develop a new proposal, the UML management committed to increasing the COSH funding. The COSH directors asked that the CC establish a finance sub-committee that would conduct a budgeting assessment to determine the maximum feasible funding increase for the COSH organizations. Instead of dividing as COSH groups versus university, the CC worked collectively, not always easily, to develop a funding plan. It was a challenging effort that required attention and communication and confronting mistrust between individuals. All member organizations, however, committed sufficient time and personnel resources to meet the challenges.

Demonstrating mutual trust and willingness to negotiate over a 9-month period, the committee engaged in a process that yielded a plan for addressing multiple funding scenarios. Receiving the full amount requested, the best scenario, would provide maximum funding to all consortium members. The worst scenario would result in a significant funding cut to all. The award outcome represented a slight increase of funding over the prior period, but an amount that would not support the desired increases for the COSH groups. The COSH directors anticipated that the UML managers would recommend a funding increase for the COSH groups of no more than 50% of what had been agreed upon if the full amount of requested funding was awarded. Instead, the COSH groups were offered nearly the fully agreed upon increase. The subcommittee's work provided the basis for determining that this increase could be provided without straining the project. One COSH director summed up the process as follows:

In the past five years, we've had struggles over dividing up the pie. When COSH directors began to dig and ask questions, things got better. (UML managers) took it seriously, addressed the concerns and we were listened to. The pie got divided better. Sometimes as a COSH director, you feel like a welfare bum. Never get heard, but I'm pleased and kind of surprised that they heard us.

HOW THE PROJECT HAS BUILT AND STRENGTHENED THE REGIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY MOVEMENT

As discussed, TNEC has a goal of strengthening the New England regional health and safety movement. Often, the demanding work of running a training business makes the political work of movement strengthening difficult to keep in focus or even accomplish. Some individual TNEC members with a sole focus on movement strengthening ignore that maintaining staff and infrastructure are important to supporting political work—organizers need to eat and benefit from having an office. One COSH trainer explained this dynamic in his COSH and within TNEC.

The COSH Boards think of this as funding, pure and simple. The way one of the members of my Board treated the PI and Project Director (when they visited) back in 1999 insulted me as a trainer. TNEC started as a way to get funding for the COSHes. But as the years have gone by, the grant has gotten more and more demanding, which leaves less time to do COSH work. For me, the training is most important. The political is important, but not my strong suit. That's why the others (with a political focus in TNEC) are important.

The COSH groups are the backbone of the New England grassroots worker health and safety movement. They work with labor organizations, immigrant advocacy organizations, environmental groups, and public health organizations. They make sure that the media pay attention to the ways that workers are left unprotected at work as well as the measures being taken to improve working conditions and environmental health. They work closely with activist academics and researchers at universities and in government. So, TNEC's training project, which provides a substantial proportion of each COSH group's budget, makes a strong contribution to sustaining the regional capacity for strengthening a health and safety movement. In addition to funding which supports staffing, it increases the capacity of the COSH groups to be technically accurate in their advocacy and communications. This is particularly important when countering false employer or industry association claims of safe practices or ignorance about the health risks to workers in various settings.

UML has established itself as an important regional resource for conducting education and research that promotes workplace, community, and environmental health as foundations for sustainable regional development. In order to be relevant, the university's work must be grounded through active engagement with the regions' communities, governments, social movement organizations, industries, and labor. A project such as TNEC provides that grounding to the regional health and safety movement. In addition, the partnership with the COSH groups helps keep the university community connected to other organizations and movements.

TNEC provides a vehicle for bringing together individuals and organizations who are either actively or potentially part of the regional health and safety movement. Its semi-annual advisory board meetings are used as a forum for discussion of relevant current topics in occupational and/or environmental health related to hazardous wastes and hazardous materials. For example, TNEC hosted a forum at the university featuring Lois Gibbs, an environmental movement leader whose activism began with the struggle of community residents at the Love Canal hazardous waste site in Niagara Falls, New York, in the late 1970s and who has been the Executive Director of the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice, a national grassroots environmental organization. Other events have featured regional researchers and emergency response leaders speaking about the threats of pandemic flu and other disaster scenarios.

TNEC's CC provides a way for the directors and some staff of the COSH groups to engage in regular face-to-face meetings. Regional COSH meetings are not easily organized since the

groups have strong independent priorities and limited resources. Having a vehicle for regular meetings has proven useful for communication and planning across the region. COSH directors have used the meetings as an opportunity to set aside time for additional meetings to plan and develop funding proposals, coordinate efforts in support of immigrant workers, and share ideas about current campaigns. The monthly trainers' meetings are used to share stories of local hazardous waste sites and industrial accidents and to consider successful ways of helping affected workers and communities.

TNEC's training project has expanded into different areas over the years, securing funding for related projects supported by NIEHS. They have included supplemental funding for a Minority Worker Training Program and a similar effort for communities with substantial brownfield areas. These initiatives have allowed TNEC to work more closely with several building trades unions and several small employment training organizations that focus on the needs of underserved populations. Sometimes these relationships have been limited, but some have resulted in developing bridges between the health and safety movement and community organizing efforts. One longer effort TNEC members conducted was an Environmental Literacy Project in which the COSH groups engaged in collaborative training with local environmental and government organizations in an effort to increase environmental health awareness.

TNEC has helped its member organizations to more easily participate in the national health and safety movement. NIEHS sponsors semi-annual combined business meetings and technical workshops. TNEC members attend them, as well as a tri-annual national trainers exchange conference that NIEHS holds to promote sharing and diffusion of ideas and practices. These meetings help TNEC member organizations stay in touch with health and safety activists from around the country, helping to connect the regional and national movements. TNEC resources help members to attend national meetings, such as the annual American Public Health Association meeting and the AFL-CIO's national health and safety meeting. The National COSH network⁴ holds its annual meeting a few days prior to either of these meetings, alternating between the two annually.

DISCUSSION

In developing this article, we have asked ourselves what would happen to the partnership if the NIEHS funding were discontinued. It's difficult to answer questions like that until the circumstances occur, but since course revenues cover no more than 8% of consortium expenses, chances are that the training project and its related activities would cease. It would be difficult to retain most of the project staff unless other funding was secured. These individuals would lose their employment, at the university and at the COSH groups. Still, should that occur, it certainly would not nullify 22 years of successful partnership efforts. TNEC's Coordinating Committee regularly questions its reliance upon a single funding stream, the loss of which could seriously jeopardize the viability of several member groups—including the university group. So far though, we have chosen to limit consortium funding to that single source. We do not believe though that loss of the NIEHS funds would mean that we would have failed to achieve the goal of strengthening the regional health and safety movement. We have sustained two decades of this work by six organizations which would not have been able to do it otherwise.

⁴The National COSH Network has a web site at: <http://www.coshnetwork.org/>. Links to all participating COSH groups are available at the site.

TNEC, at the time of this writing, represents a university-community partnership that has endured and evolved for more than 20 years. Its history and process reflect much of what the public health literature explains as necessary components for success. They include:

- a working partnership;
- acting on a specific set of goals;
- acquiring resources—fiscal and non-financial;
- strong central leadership;
- formal rules, roles, and procedures (in this case, for both the training business and consortium functioning); and
- member decision-making control.

Wandersman, Goodman, and Butterfoss define a consortium as a “type of organization ... (that) ... needs resources, structure, activities, and accomplishments in order to survive” [26, p. 261]. TNEC’s policies and practices provide two other important facilitating factors noted in the literature: the capacity to recognize warning signs for potential points of conflict [33] and a commitment to flexibility and acting collaboratively [32].

Partnerships require attention to the needs and interests of partner-members. The operating guidelines and principles presented in the literature are grounded in experience and help to sustain cohesion when applied. Partnerships will always present power dynamics between members, assuring periods of conflict that must be addressed. These conflicts over power and control are essential for determining the strength and need for the partnership. Conflicts and the process to their resolution (or failure to resolve) provide members with the opportunities to assess the value of membership and the degrees of trust between members.

TNEC’s major conflicts have helped members to determine the organizational needs that consortium membership fulfilled and each organization’s level of commitment to TNEC’s two primary goals. Without a challenge to power and control, how can members make periodic assessments necessary for ongoing commitment to the project and effort? Partnerships require substantial resources from each member organization, even as they provide resources. Staff time must be dedicated to both the specific projects as well as the process of sustaining the process and relationships.

Generally, one of the costs for members of partnerships is the difficult balance between using resources for their own activities or for those of the partnership [7,20,26,31,32]. The demands of partnerships regularly bring members to question the value of the partnership and to reconsider the extent of their commitment. Partnership vitality may rest on the process of asking and answering these questions.

CONCLUSION

TNEC has sustained a working project and partnership for 22 years at the time of this writing (1987–2009). As a result, its member organizations have received substantial funding (nearly \$16 million), sustained their technical competence, and remained politically engaged in issues that overlap workplace health and safety and environmental health. Six organizations committed to strengthening the New England area workers’ health and safety movement have used this project to advance their common political goals and develop and deliver model health and safety training. They provide strategic leadership in multiple New England efforts to build alliances between the health and safety movement and the broader public health and environmental movements as well as the immigrants’ rights movement. The post-September

11, 2001 national emphasis on homeland security and disaster preparedness is also bringing TNEC in closer collaboration with the broader public safety movement.

The political and economic circumstances of TNEC's history set external limits on what the partnership could accomplish. Throughout the period, union membership declined to historic post-New Deal era lows and the environmental movement went through agonizing debates over its decline in political power, even as the U.S. population continued to be concerned about environmental issues. Yet, in this context, TNEC helped the COSH groups in five states weather the difficult circumstances—that is, they have survived. Perhaps the goal of strengthening the health and safety movement had only limited success—but more important in this political context, a labor-based health and safety movement still exists.

For a university-community partnership for health to have survived in this way is an anomaly, based on the reported literature. Nonetheless, this relatively unique partnership has endured and matured, started and re-started (as Seifer has suggested). Having the good fortune of the support of an unusually successful federal worker health education program cannot be discounted, but that alone would not have been sufficient to keep a partnership vital. In fact, some other partnerships funded through the NIEHS program have disbanded, despite their access to the funding. TNEC's success is largely due to the mutual commitment of health and safety movement activists to sustaining a vehicle for movement strengthening despite often serious internal strains.

Formal operating rules and policies have supported the practice of shared governance based upon mutual respect and maintaining the dynamic balance between a set of collectively agreed upon goals. Trust has been built through collective participation in consortium decision-making about resource distribution and consortium direction. Collectively, the partnership finds itself capable of shaping its objectives within the historical context of the existing political economy of workers' health and safety. As one COSH director put it, "The overall collapse of the health and safety movement as well as the collapse of the labor movement has meant that we are digging holes in the back yard to keep the water from going into the basement." Another COSH director's succinct description of the process for partnership and movement strengthening seems like an apt ending to this article.

My advice is: be patient, it can take years to turn things around. When we started working with immigrant groups, they didn't all want to learn about health and safety. We had to go where they were, but we stayed with them. It took persistence. And it will take persistence with TNEC as well.

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