Elusive Community in South Park

Teaching Note

Introduction

"Elusive Community in South Park" focuses on concepts that public officials and non-governmental professionals need to understand in order to represent their organizations and offer services effectively in complex community settings. In particular, the case explores important nuances in the "inclusion" skills that enable public managers to cultivate public participation in fractious communities (Feldman and Khademian 2007), where traditional methods of citizen involvement such as public notices and hearings may be ineffective. Representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations who work in divided communities like South Park need to be able to recognize the different component groups that make up the "community" and build rapport with each of them. In multi-ethnic communities, "community engagers" may also need a developed understanding of cross-cultural communication, the immigrant experience in America, and how the processes of government can either perpetuate or undo institutionalized racism. When government fails to recognize the differing needs that diversity creates in a community and remains focused only on its own priorities and timelines, then unorganized sub-communities —often immigrant

communities and communities of color — can find themselves more marginalized and isolated from government and other community factions. Conversely, public actors with an awareness of issues such as those raised by this case can work more inclusively with diverse communities, building productive relationships with various community groups and incorporating new immigrants and other underserved groups into the process. These issues are important for students of public affairs because many will work in state or local governments or in NGOs, which bear responsibility for fairly representing or serving community residents. As communities around the world continue to become more diverse, the lessons from South Park can help other cities learn to adapt to the changing needs of communities.

Case Summary

The case offers a narrative of the efforts of the City of Seattle to engage the multi-ethnic, fractious community of South Park, a low-income neighborhood of the City. In responding to dramatic violence among South Park's Latino youth, the City discovered how neglected the neighborhood had been, particularly the neighborhood's growing Latino community. The City had overlooked the increase in Latinos and other immigrants in the neighborhood because community engagement efforts had relied upon a traditional approach of public hearings, limited public comment periods, and working with organized neighborhood groups, all of which attracted mostly Anglo residents who were familiar with and accomplished at such traditional forms of government-community interaction. Claudia Arana, the Mayor's appointed liaison to South Park, was sent to engage the larger South Park community and the Latino community in particular, to identify and prioritize community needs so that the City could respond and allocate resources appropriately.

The community reaction was not what she expected. The initial public meetings were attended mostly by older, white residents of South Park who had considerable experience representing the neighborhood in interactions with local government. Few members of the Latino community attended. In trying to establish connections within local Latinos, Claudia discovered that some Latinos thought she was a "sell-out" and the older, white community thought she was there to give lip service to change while doing nothing. In this hostile environment, Claudia set about the hard work of gaining the trust of the various community factions and establishing an engagement process inclusive of South Park's various communities while under significant time pressure created by City budget deadlines. After several public meetings failed to get much response and a modest

City budget allocation proved disappointing to community residents, the "A" case ends with Claudia wondering why traditional community-engagement tactics had failed her. In class, students can assume Claudia's role and think strategically about barriers that Latinos and immigrants face to participating in government-community interactions, and begin to devise ways to overcome those barriers.

As the "B" case describes, in response to this dilemma, Claudia proposed an intensive, "City-staffed, community-led" committee process to produce the South Park Action Agenda (SPAA). While this approach achieved more representation for the Latino community than it had in previous rounds of public processes, participation by Latinos was still mostly limited to "community spokespersons" with little participation from the grassroots level. In order to get some feedback from the grassroots Latino community, Latino committee members proposed that the group create a survey and distribute it in the community. The proposal met with surprising backlash from some of the Anglo residents on the committee, revealing deep-seated tensions between the ethnic communities in South Park that threatened to derail the entire process. At the close of the case, problems with cross-cultural communication and perceptions of racism caused members of the Latino community to withdraw from the process. At the case's end, Claudia is faced with an impending budget deadline, an absence of Latinos on the committee, and a clear mandate from the Mayor that the Action Agenda must include the Latino community's voice.

The Strategic Challenge

The situation in the case is dynamic. New challenges develop for Claudia as events unfold. In the beginning of the case, Claudia's primary challenge is to balance the need to produce results before the City's budget deadlines with the need to take the time to identify and reduce the barriers that prevent an unorganized Latino community from engaging in any government-sponsored outreach process. In attempting to engage the Latino community, she confronts many challenges, among them Latino and Vietnamese communities that are largely unorganized and fearful of engaging with government because of immigration concerns or mistrust of governments based on experiences in their home country. In order to be successful in her task, she must find solutions to these barriers while maintaining a close eye on the City's timelines for planning and budgeting. In the "B" case, it appears that Claudia has discovered a way to ensure Latino participation in identifying community priorities. However, she is then confronted by the fact that the multiple sub-communities do not trust each other or agree on priorities for engaging with the City. As such, her strategic challenge moves from

one focused on the barriers to communication between the City and the community to one centered on the barriers to communication between the various factions of the community itself. The dynamic nature of the case and Claudia's evolving strategic challenges present students with a realistic picture of what real public management and community organizing work is like.

Teaching Objectives

- ❖ Explore the rationale and limits of government-community partnerships
- ❖ Identify factors that enable and hinder partnerships between governments and divided, multi-ethnic communities —in particular, immigrant communities
- ❖ Identify community factions
- ❖ Communicate across factional differences
- ❖ Explore strategies and tactics for building trust within divided communities and between communities and government
- ❖ Consider how power imbalances across sub-communities influence outcomes of government processes
- ❖ Understand how government engagement processes can play a role in either perpetuating or undoing institutional racism
- ❖ Managing conflict and communicating in conflict

The case asks students to assume the role of Claudia Arana. The "A" case focuses on the relationship between the community and the City. Students can think through the factors that enable and inhibit minority, immigrant, and low-income community members from participating in public processes sponsored by local governments. Enabling factors might include experienced liaisons on both the community and government sides, committed staff from public agencies, the creation of "boundary objects" or common experiences (Feldman and Khademian 2007), and institutionalized commitments to dialogue, learning, and joint planning (Innes and Booher 1999; Leighninger 2002). Barriers are created when the City's approach lacks sufficient expertise or resources, or fails to account for qualities of the community that make its needs different from those of other civic groups, such as limited literacy, lack of previous association with government, or issues of immigration documentation. The instructor can ask students to devise strategies to establish the enabling factors and to address the barriers in order to create inclusive community engagement processes and productive working relationships between City officials and community members.

The "B" case highlights divisions and tensions within South Park that hinder the ability of the various sub-communities that Claudia establishes to engage effectively with each other in a cooperative process. The dynamic between the Anglos and the Latinos on the South Park Action Agenda committee complicates Claudia's ability to move forward on a short timeline. When the tensions come to a head, perceptions of racism cause Latino committee members to withdraw, threatening the integrity of what is intended to be an inclusive process. Students can consider how they would manage these tensions if they were leading a community engagement process as a representative of local government.

The "B" case also offers an opportunity to unpack the identity of the community. The Latino community in South Park, while unified in name, subdivides along axes of country of origin, citizenship, and documentation. There are also differences between the grassroots community and the service providers and activists who tend to have more education and English language skills. This diversity is disguised by the outsider's perspective and the City's assumption that there is one Latino community. The "B" case gives students information that allows them to parse the differences between "the community" and "the neighborhood." A more nuanced understanding of the community helps students to become more effective community engagers.

The epilogue offers some lessons for students as well. Claudia was never able to convince the Latinos to rejoin the committee's meetings. However, with the City's support, the Latinos did move forward with the proposed survey and it was very successful in collecting input from grassroots Latinos. Implementation of the South Park Action Agenda is hindered by the lack of organization and cohesion in the community. The epilogue demonstrates to students that even intensive government efforts to engage disempowered and unorganized communities require sustained energy. The situation in South Park remains as dynamic as ever going forward, and requires continued attention and effort from stakeholders in the future.

Through all parts of the case, students encounter issues of cultural competency and institutional racism. By working through this case, students will develop a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges of ensuring equitable access to local government processes. As future public officials or non-profit managers, students may be asked to lead outreach efforts such as the South Park Action Agenda. Even students whose work will not lie in community engagement specifically can benefit from developing a nuanced understanding of the challenges of public service and community development in diverse communities.

How to Use This Case

This case can be a useful part of a public affairs curriculum in courses on community engagement, community organizing, community development, urban affairs, diversity, social justice and racism. It can also be used in more general classes on public or nonprofit management to highlight the challenges of organizing and engaging citizens to ensure robust public participation in diverse communities and to illustrate the competing priorities that public agents must navigate.

The "A" and "B" cases can be assigned sequentially or together, depending on the instructor's teaching objectives as well as the nature of the course or curriculum in which it is used. In an introductory class on public management, for example, the cases might be assigned sequentially with an opportunity for classroom discussion after each part. One class session can be spent discussing case "A" to identify stakeholder groups, their interests, and the challenges of fostering public participation in government initiatives among the residents of diverse, disadvantaged communities. After students read case "B", a second class session can explore the City's strategy for bridging ethnic divisions to help the community identify common priorities. In courses on community engagement, social justice, or urban affairs, the "A" and "B" cases might be assigned and discussed together.

Both the "A" and "B" cases lend themselves well to small group work. Many exercises can be done with students working in small groups, discussing the questions amongst themselves and then presenting their insights to the class. Asking students to take on the role of the various stakeholders helps them to understand the differing, possibly oppositional, interests of each group involved in community development efforts in South Park. It also gives students the opportunity to bring their own experiences to bear on the dilemma, enhancing their own understanding of the case and adding to the learning of other students.

Suggested In-class Exercises

The exercises have been grouped according to the section of the case that they support. Exercises that are listed under both cases are explained thoroughly in the "A" case section.

"A" Case Exercises

❖ *Evaluate the City's Strategy and Claudia's Approach*

The instructor can ask students to explain and assess the City's decision to appoint Claudia as the Mayor's liaison to South Park. Questions might include:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of reaching out directly to the residents of South Park from the Mayor's office?
- Are their alternative approaches the City might pursue besides creating a special liaison in the Mayor's Office?
- How would you assess the decision to hire Claudia to serve as the City's liaison to South Park?

Students can also assess Claudia's performance as a community liaison for the City. This evaluation will likely generate illuminating discussion of what "good" community engagement entails, and whether City officials fully grasped the challenges and the stakes facing the residents of South Park. The instructor should highlight the distinction between traditional community engagement, such as public hearings and other formalized interaction, and community engagement with diverse and less empowered communities. Especially important in this regard is for public officials to engage citizens as "problem solvers and co-creators of public goods" — not just as voters, clients, and consumers (Boyte 2005; see also Chrislip and Larson 1994). This approach to citizen involvement turns out to be crucial because Claudia begins her work in South Park with the expectation that the traditional public engagement methods will suffice (e.g. City officials set an agenda, post public notices and hold limited meetings, and invite only recognized neighborhood "leaders" to participate). While the shortcomings of those methods may be due to City officials' incomplete grasp of the fragmentation of the South Park community or to Claudia's inexperience and tactical miscues, students need to identify methodological limits in South Park. Asking students why traditional community engagement was problematic in South Park can generate a list of barriers to public participation for immigrants and other residents of disadvantaged communities (e.g., see Gecan 1998; Briggs 1999). Having an initial discussion about effective engagement strategies and tactics in divided communities (see

Smock 2003; Murphy and Cunningham 2005) will help students understand why Claudia's partial successes in the "B" case rest largely on her ability to adapt her textbook approach to community engagement to the needs on the ground. Later discussion can proceed to identify factors that can enable successful partnerships between governments and fragmented, less empowered communities.

❖ *Problem Identification – Claudia's challenge*

Students will recognize that Claudia's strategic challenge is to develop an inclusive process and priorities for action that all factions of the community perceive as legitimate and desirable within the timeframe imposed by City processes. Discussion should include considerations of the constraints placed on her by her authorizing environment, such as the timing of the budget cycle and the Mayor's need for a quick response. Students can also consider how the lack of organization in South Park's Latino community renders traditional community engagement ineffective and challenges Claudia's ability to move her agenda forward on the City's timeline.

❖ *Defining community*

This exercise pushes students to consider the flexibility of the term "community" and how various conceptualizations of community operate in the South Park case. Public actors frequently use the term "community," but its ambiguity can lead to considerable confusion over exactly to whom the term refers. Additionally, communities themselves may have different concepts of who is and is not a part of their community. In this case, for example, the City assumes service providers who provide services to Latinos to be part of "the Latino community," but come to find out that "South Park Latinos" do not consider those service providers to be part of their community. The difference between the City's conceptualization of the community and the community's conceptualization has implications for almost every aspect of engaging the community. Who the City decides to work with may not reflect the identity of the community itself or of factions within it, potentially increasing mistrust in and marginalization of the community or particular factions. This in turn perpetuates structures of institutional racism by strengthening the resource advantages, both political and economic, of more empowered community factions.

Potential Discussion Questions:

1) What do we mean by "community"? What are the risks and opportunities for a community (or sub-communities) of establishing a partnership with local

government? What are the risks and opportunities for a local government of engaging in a partnership with a divided, less empowered community?

2) What kinds of "communities" are there in this case?
   Responses might include:
   - Issue-based (e.g. the business community, the environmental community)
   - Geographically based (South Park residents)
   - Demographic communities (immigrant, Latino, and youth communities)

3) Which of these communities is/are active in the South Park case?

4) How does the City determine who speaks for the community?

5) How does the community determine who speaks for them?

Mapping the community

Students can be prompted to talk specifically about the communities involved in the case. As students name the communities, the instructor can draw Venn diagrams on the board in order to visually represent how the communities in South Park overlap (or not) with each other and with other communities outside South Park.

Community stakeholder groups should include:

o All residents of South Park

o South Park Neighborhood Association
o South Park Area Redevelopment Committee/SPARC (keepers of previous neighborhood plans)
o Long time residents of South Park
o Business community

o Latino Advisory Council
o South Park Latino community leaders (who may have interests separately from community, such as obtaining funding for their programs)
o Grassroots Latino residents of South Park
o Latino youth (should be listed separately as important focus in process and as motivator in the Latino community)

o Immigrant community in South Park (includes some, but not all Latinos, Vietnamese, Cambodian)
o Vietnamese community
o Cambodian community

Other possible groups to consider:

o City-wide Latino community
o City-wide immigrant community
o City-wide Vietnamese community
o City-wide Cambodian community
o Environmental groups

Strategize Action Steps

Students can work in small groups from Claudia's perspective and the perspectives of various community stakeholder groups (which will be diverse) to think strategically about how Claudia or a motivated stakeholder group might work to overcome the divisions in the community to move the City's outreach and planning agenda forward. The instructor can divide students into multiple groups, each group assigned to one of the following questions. Community stakeholder groups can include SPNA, Latino service providers, grassroots Latinos and any of the other groups listed in the previous exercise.

1) Community stakeholders: If you live in South Park, what are some different things you might want the City to do at the end of the "A" case?
2) Claudia: What are some things you might try to do in light of the difficulties that your initial approach encountered in practice?
3) Full class: How do you think the ideas from the Claudia group would be received by the various groups in the community? What are the pros and cons of the suggested actions?

"B" Case

❖ *Revisiting Claudia's challenge*

While Claudia's goal remains largely unchanged, she has encountered an additional layer of complication. Specifically, her attempt to unify the factions through a single inclusive process has surfaced some racial tensions between South Park's Anglo and Latino residents that make it difficult for the groups to work together. The discomfort of the Latinos on the committee is a strong incentive to withdraw from the process, which would result in a non-inclusive Action Agenda

and discourage the Latino community from future efforts to engage them in interactions with the City. At the same time, the significant time pressure of City budget deadlines creates an incentive to continue the South Park Action Agenda process without the Latinos. Claudia must manage the racial tension to ensure that the process is both timely and inclusive.

Possible discussion questions:

- How has Claudia's strategic challenge changed since we discussed the "A" case? What are the root causes of those changes?
- Given the substantial difficulties that come to light in South Park and the City's short budget timeframe, how would you assess the Mayor's office's strategy in this case? Are more services and resources from the City budget an appropriate governmental response to the situation in South Park? What other policies or strategic approaches might the City have considered? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each compared to the strategy the City chose to pursue?

❖ *Community Interests*

Building on the community mapping exercise from the "A" case, students can identify the positions and interests of the various community factions. With a larger class, the instructor can divide students into small groups representing the major communities. Each group can discuss the positions and interests of the community it represents and outline two to three key interests to present to the rest of the class. Classroom discussion can focus on finding interests that the groups have in common and discussing why the sub-communities themselves may not see any overlap. (On the value of identifying common interests in complex, multi-stake holder settings, see Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991.)

Potential discussion questions:

- What are the shared interests that could be used to create common ground and a broad coalition in South Park?
- What prevents the sub-communities from perceiving the overlaps of their interests?

Barriers to Participation

Students can be asked to think about barriers to participation that exist for the various sub-communities in South Park, especially immigrant communities

(Gecan 1998; Briggs 1999). Some barriers are less obvious than others and students will need to draw from their personal experiences and previous exposure to issues of social and racial justice. While students are likely to recognize how language barriers may prevent participation, they might need to be prompted to delve deeper into the many possible ways that language barriers manifest (jargon, literacy, etc). Different norms of public participation and interaction can further complicate language barriers (Briggs 1999). This conversation can help students identify ways in which racism is institutionalized. For example, the City's preference to work with established groups or tendency to work with community leaders with which it is already familiar tends to exclude the voice of unorganized or newer residents. The existing resource and power disparities between community factions also tend to privilege more advantaged factions in interactions between the community and government. Such a conversation can also prompt students to understand that, even when not intentional, such dynamics can marginalize groups in a way that resembles and feels like racism.

Potential discussion questions:

- What are some things about the way the City does business that make it hard for some community members to participate in the community meetings and the Action Agenda planning process?
- What are some characteristics of the community members that might make it hard for them to participate?

Discussion can include the following:[1]
1) Language barriers:
- Many adults in the Latino and Vietnamese community in South Park do not speak English well or at all, affecting not only their ability to participate in public meetings, but also their ability to receive notification of meetings.
- Even those community members that speak some English may not understand the jargon of City employees. Words like "capacity," "infrastructure," or "engagement" can be foreign to the average person and convey an unintended message that those individuals do not belong in the conversation.

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[1] Substantial detail is provided here because few of these issues are inherent in the case; students will need to bring ideas and information from outside readings (e.g., Gecan 1998; Briggs 1999; Murphy and Cunningham 2005), prior experience, or previous class discussions in order to recognize these issues.

2) Time
- People in low-income communities may not have time to invest in intensive community processes.
- People in low-income communities are more likely to work evening or night shifts or multiple jobs, and be unable to attend meetings at the times scheduled.
- People from different cultures have disparate concepts of time as a priority. Government actors are often constrained by the need for condensed processes and quick results, while immigrant or indigenous communities may consider a rushed process a sign of disrespect. The time investment is necessary to establish the relationships that are the building block of progress and trust for these communities.

3) Fear
- In the Latino community in particular, there is fear related to immigration status. Latinos are afraid that, if they participate, they or their family members may be detained and deported either out of retaliation or simply by becoming more visible.
- Many immigrants come from places where governments are feared. Some aspects of community engagement processes can be misinterpreted and inhibit participation. For example, the requirement that those who wish to testify at a public hearing sign up and give their contact information can be a significant source of intimidation for non-citizen residents.

4) Trust
- Many immigrants have an inherent mistrust of government that stems from their experiences with corrupt government agents and processes in their home country. For these people, government agents are to be avoided.
- Even for the more established, Anglo community, mistrust based on prior interaction with the City was a major issue in South Park.
- A solution: Communities often rely on "trusted spokespersons" to convey their needs to government officials or other agents of the state such as school administrators. A potential downside to relying on trusted spokespersons is that the community does not develop new leaders.

5) Culture
- There may be barriers around cultural norms in a given community structure. For example, in Muslim communities, women are unlikely to

attend public meetings. Solution? In some cultures, one person speaks for the whole group. This is particularly true with tribal communities. In other communities, it may be necessary to make contact and gain approval from certain community leaders before participation at the grassroots is permitted. This may be true for African or religious communities.

- Members of low-income, immigrant, or minority communities may feel that there is a certain way to act or talk when engaging with the government and that they can't participate because they don't know these things.

6) Power imbalance
- City employees have the education, the access to the system, and experience with the system. For the Latinos in South Park, it can be very intimidating to attend a public meeting or try to engage government on its terms, using its formal terminology.
- The power differential between the Anglo community structures and the Latino communities can complicate the issue of power between the City and the Latinos.
- Feedback from the Vietnamese community indicated the prevailing sentiment that "we don't tell government what to do, government tells us what to do." This may be founded on their experiences with the Vietnamese government.
- Even the physical arrangements of the traditional public hearing can emphasize power differentials. Often the room is arranged with the city representatives in front with a table between them and the "audience." They may even be on a raised platform. This physically replicates a hierarchical power structure and implies that the flow of information should be from the City to the community and not the other way around.

7) Knowledge
- Many new immigrants do not know the history of on-going issues in the community and feel as if they cannot participate effectively in community discussions as a result. They describe the experience as trying to jump on a moving train.

Strategize Options

Students can strategize ways to bridge the barriers they have just identified so that the City and community can work together effectively. Some questions to generate discussion could include:

- What are some key strategies that Claudia can use to overcome or circumvent the barriers to community engagement in South Park? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy?
- What role can the City play in removing the barriers that prevent cohesion within the community itself?
- In light of the many barriers to community engagement, is the task that the Mayor's office gives Claudia — knitting the priorities of the different communities in South Park into a unified action agenda — even appropriate for the situation in South Park? What alternative approaches might Claudia propose to the Mayor that might ameliorate the situation in South Park?
- How might the City institutionalize its commitment to work with the residents of South Park?

Written Assignments

❖ *Memo 1: Community Interests*

The "Community Interests" exercise listed as an in-class exercise can be used as a written assignment. In a memo to Claudia, students would identify the various community groups active in the case, their interests, and their positions toward the City and the Action Agenda process in particular; to identify areas of possible coalition building.

❖ *Memo 2: Advice for the New Community Organizer*

After distributing the case Epilogue, the instructor can ask students to write a memo offering advice from Claudia to Lora Suggs, the new Community Organizer that SPARC hires with City funds to work with the residents in South Park. Depending on the objectives of the course, the instructor could ask students to focus on specific dimensions of the Organizer's relationship with the City or on her role in the community, or on both.

❖ *Memo 3: Assessing and Institutionalizing City Assistance to South Park*

Students can assume the role of Neighborhood Affairs Advisor to the Mayor. They can write a memo to him assessing the strategy of having a liaison from the Mayor's Office work directly with divided communities, and then outline and weigh options the City might use to institutionalize its commitment to work with the residents of South Park and similar neighborhoods.

References and Related Resources

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