The *Help Me Grow* Blog

Sep 22, 2014

**The Power of Town & Gown**

*A New Avenue for Collaboration in Early Childhood System Building*

This past year, the [College of Education of Niagara University in Western New York](http://example.com) became the first higher education institution to serve as a *Help Me Grow* organizing entity. Though universities and their medical schools have served as key partners and collaborators in *Help Me Grow* replication across the *Help Me Grow* National Network, none had taken on this primary structural requirement for replication.

An organizing entity is a *Help Me Grow* structural requirement. It emphasizes the importance of strong leadership in early childhood system building. In keeping with the doctrine that all politics are local, we in the National Center do not identify the specific organization to lead an affiliate’s system building, but encourage affiliates’ discretion in selecting the entity best suited for this critical task. We are thrilled that a university has taken now up the mantle.

Informed by the Catholic and Vincentian traditions, Niagara University “seeks to inspire its students to serve all members of society, especially the poor and oppressed, in local communities and in the larger world.” Its mission and commitment to its motto, *Education that makes a difference*, led its administration to lead a “re-launch” of *Help Me Grow Western New York* into order to bring it to scale and impact, first in the region and then statewide.

In May 2014, the University demonstrated its firm commitment to the organizing entity role by hosting a *Help Me Grow* Partner Meeting on campus. The agenda alone illustrated Niagara’s extraordinary capacity and commitment.

Debra Colley, Ph.D., Dean of the College of Education, served as moderator for the day-long event and welcomed the large group of attendees. Amber Slichta, Vice President of the Health Foundation for Western New York, and a steadfast, generous, and important supporter of New York State *Help Me Grow* replication since 2008, then paid strong tribute to Niagara as a partner, stating “everything that we do with them is just easy” and refuting the typical challenges of town-gown relationships.

Remarks by President of the University, Rev. James J. Maher, C.M., Min., were especially informing and inspirational. President Maher spoke of the role of universities in service and the “critical interdependence” between universities and their community. He explained that “action is our only strategy” and such actions are important in “building a
foundation to have an impact." Father Maher’s comments validated and reinforced our own commitment to and understanding of the collective impact model.

During the meeting, Lynnette Haley O’Stewart, director for Help Me Grow Western New York, described the efforts of the University to convene a consortium of 21 educational institutions to collaborate in screening and early detection efforts. At the day’s conclusion, Niagara’s Provost and Chief Academic Officer, Timothy M. Downs, Ph.D., thanked the speakers and partnering organizations and reiterated the University’s commitment to working in the community to advance a lifespan model that promoted health and wellness.

Across the Help Me Grow National Network, organizing entities vary from state agencies to local and statewide foundations, community-based organizations, not-for-profit groups, and service providers such as children’s hospitals. Each brings vital and unique strengths to Help Me Grow's system replication efforts. We have seen time and time again that the capacity to serve as an organizing entity exemplifies the highest level of commitment to the community.

As Niagara University has shown, institutions of higher education can offer extraordinary resources for the community-building, collaborative work of Help Me Grow, including leadership, content expertise, evaluation capacity, and student/volunteer support. We anticipate that other affiliates will find Niagara an inspiring example of strengthening town-gown ties in support of childhood system building.

<<Back to Blog Home