

Building Bridges, Building Power: Developments in Institution-based Community Organizing

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Community organizing in America is alive and well and being vigorously practiced in the version we call “institution-based community organizing.” This national study shows that in the last decade institution-based community organizing has significantly increased its power base as it continues to bridge divides that deeply bedevil American politics—divides of racial and ethnic identity, religion, socio-economic status, geography, and immigrant-native background. This executive summary details the dynamic expansion of the field over the last decade, outlines the impressive “bridging social capital” it generates, discusses ways it has overcome the strategic limitations that previously undermined the field, and identifies some of the ongoing challenges that remain. We argue throughout that institution-based community organizing is poised to be an important strategic partner in the democratic renewal of America.

Building a Bigger and Wider Bridge: Dynamic Expansion in Scope, Scale, and Collaboration

The dynamic expansion of institution-based community organizing (IBCO) over the last decade has taken place in three ways. First, the field has made impressive gains in sheer geographic reach: The number of local IBCO organizations has grown by 42% since 1999, today reaching into 40 states. Second, many IBCO organizations have expanded beyond core urban areas and now organize entire metropolitan and regional areas. Third, many IBCOs are partnering with other organizations (either within their own

network or via collaborations) to directly influence state and national policy-making. Taken together, these three forms of expansion create a new power within the field that, at its best, links vigorous local community organizing to a strong presence in higher-level political arenas in ways that strengthen both.

Reaching More People: The Impact of Critical Organizational Capacity

Two results of this dynamic expansion are especially powerful.



“Democracy is not something that happens to us, like the weather. It’s something that we create. We create the opportunity for democracy to happen.”

- Doran Schrantz, ISAIAH



First, the institutions that form the base of the IBCO field (approximately 3,500 congregations and 1,000 public schools, labor unions, neighborhood associations, faith-based organizations, and others) collectively represent over 5 million Americans. Rarely in American history have voluntary associations incorporated such a high proportion of citizens; those that have done so have profoundly shaped American society in challenging times. Second, historically the most successful associations have been built on a “federated structure” of local organizations nested within state and national organizations. The IBCO field today has begun to build such a federated structure—only partially and unevenly, but nonetheless substantially. As a result, institution-based community organizing has the organizational capacity to make a powerful impact on democratic life, especially if best practices spread across the field.

Bridging the Divides of American Society: Race, Class and Religion

For America to undertake the joint action required to confront our challenges, we must bridge the social fissures that divide us as a nation. Among these are the divides of race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, and immigration status that

separate people and undermine efforts to confront our challenges.

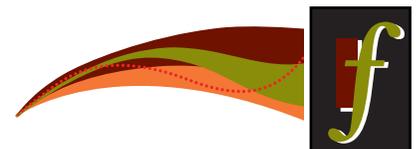
Institution-based community organizing has historically brought people of different races together to pursue their shared interest in building better communities. But questions by critics regarding how consistently the field has cultivated cross-racial social capital deserve to be tested rigorously, and the State of the Field project has done this both nationally and at the local level. Our results show that the IBCO field is actively engaging a broad representation of America. Predominantly Hispanic institutions (13%) are represented at about Hispanics’ percentage of the total U.S. population,¹ and predominantly African American institutions (30%) are represented at more than twice their percentage of the U.S. population. In addition, “other” non-white or mixed institutions make up over 10% of IBCO members. At the individual level, more than 50% of IBCO organizing

1. Hispanic participation may in fact be higher. It is difficult to reliably measure the racial/ethnic identities of individuals participating in IBCO, and the State of the Field study did not attempt to do so. However, such a measure would likely show larger Hispanic involvement than the figure cited above: in many IBCOs, large Hispanic congregations produce a disproportionate share of turnout at public actions. But a ten-year relative decrease in the proportion of Hispanic-led member institutions deserves attention; it might reflect immigrant insecurity regarding public engagement as a result of recent anti-immigrant discourse and legislation.

staff and board members (together the crucial decision-makers in these organizations) are non-white.

These organizations also incorporate significant numbers of predominantly white institutions. This matters for political efficacy because substantial economic resources, political power, and cultural influence reside in this sector, which still constitutes two-thirds of the American population. To be viable, any national political movement needs alliances with such institutions. Their involvement has actually risen in the last decade, apparently a result of the strategic choice to expand into suburban areas nationwide and into secondary cities of the upper Midwest and Northeast.

Expanding into these predominantly white settings reduces the field’s overall racial/ethnic diversity, but also likely increases its strategic capacity: By creating more fully multiracial/multiethnic organizations that bridge urban and suburban boundaries and represent new geographic areas, the field expands its own base and external alliances in useful ways. Simultaneously, much of the field has gained a more reflect-





“We want to change the political terrain of the country in a way that creates opportunity and advances racial and economic justice. What do we need to do to do that?”

- George Goehl, National People's Action

tive and critical understanding of the role of race in American society. As a result, the IBCO field is better positioned to play a central strategic role in the public arena of our multi-racial nation. Finally, we note that, on average, IBCO boards of directors are dramatically more diverse than boards in the corporate and non-profit sectors.

The IBCO field not only incorporates impressive racial/ethnic diversity on a national level, but more importantly at the local level as well: IBCOs are actually getting people to collaborate across racial and ethnic lines. To estimate cross-racial interaction within IBCOs, we used a diversity index to measure the probability that two members of the same IBCO would be of a different race/ethnicity. This analysis shows that the average “diversity score” for IBCOs (0.49) is substantially higher than the average diversity score for congregations (0.12), counties (0.28), and even public schools (0.33).

The census study and our interviews with strategic leaders show that most local IBCOs actively engage in discussions about racial and ethnic identity, racial inequity in America, and the impact of race on organizing itself. This was not part of

the organizing ethos a decade ago and thus represents an important shift in the culture of organizing. By cultivating strong cross-racial ties and by explicitly discussing racial/ethnic differences, institution-based organizing is now able to address questions of inequality in American life more authentically and effectively than in the past.

These organizations generate social capital by bridging other social divides in America as well. For example, instead of allowing faith to be a divisive factor, IBCOs draw on the unifying components of faith to span a diverse array of religious congregations. While mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Black Protestant churches continue to make up the core of the field, Jewish, Unitarian-Universalist, and Evangelical/Pentecostal congregations have each doubled their representation from a decade ago, and 20% of IBCOs have at least one Muslim congregation. In addition, secular institutions (mostly public schools, unions, and neighborhood associations) represent approximately one-fifth of all member institutions. IBCO boards and staff organizers also reflect these high levels of religious diversity. Finally, spiritual practices remain salient in

the IBCO world: IBCO directors tend to be more religious than the overall American population (i.e., they pray, read sacred texts, and attend religious services more often than the average U.S. adult) and a large majority of IBCOs report that they often incorporate prayer, religious teachings, and discussions about faith into their organizing activities.

Institution-based community organizing also bridges the divide between socio-economic groups, incorporating a significant proportion of low-income people within its top leadership structures. Nearly one quarter of IBCO board members have a household income of less than \$25,000 per year, and 58% have a household income of less than \$50,000 per year (about the same as the U.S. population as a whole—but rare for a board of directors). About 37% have household incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000 per year, and less than 5% have household incomes over \$100,000 per year (compared to the U.S. figure of over ten percent). Thus, the IBCO field also bridges economic class structures to a significant degree.



Designing the State of the Field Study

Finally, the IBCO field reaches across the chasm that too often lies between immigrants and the native-born, while building power to change immigration policy at the national level. Fourteen percent of all IBCO member institutions are predominantly made up of immigrants. Over two-thirds of those institutions (mostly congregations, but also secular organizations) are predominantly Hispanic, while smaller proportions of immigrant member institutions are Black, Asian, or other/multiracial. Furthermore, more than half of IBCOs are addressing immigration issues, and, among those, two-thirds are addressing them at the national level.

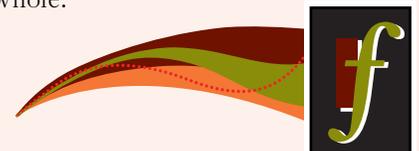
Overall, institution-based community organizations are today generating valuable social capital by bridging some of the major divides in American communities. This bridging social capital offers a vital resource in the ongoing struggle to deepen democracy in America and confront our shared challenges—a resource for both the IBCO field and its partners, and for American society as a whole.

The State of the Field study provides an up-to-date picture of the field of institution-based community organizing and draws on data from Interfaith Funders' 1999 study to show how the field has changed over the last decade. Interfaith Funders coordinated and funded the study, which was conducted primarily by lead researcher Brad Fulton (Duke University) and overseen by research director Richard L. Wood (University of New Mexico) and Interfaith Funders members and director Kathy Partridge. The study drew on insight from local organizers, national organizing staff, foundation program officers, denominational funders, and scholars of the field.

The core of the study is a national census of every local organization practicing institution-based community organizing (IBCO), supplemented by a dozen in-depth interviews with key strategic thought leaders in the national networks, independent IBCOs, and foundations that fund this work. For the census, a total universe of 189 active local IBCOs was identified. During the second half of 2011, a two-part survey was distributed electronically to the director of each. Part one was an online survey that gathered extensive data on each IBCO's history, constituents, collaborators, activities, finances, and issue work. Part two consisted of

customized spreadsheets that collected demographic information about each organization's member institutions, board members, and paid staff. The survey achieved a response rate of 94%, gathering data on 178 IBCOs and demographic information on approximately 4,100 member institutions, plus 2,900 board members and 600 paid staff involved in the IBCO field.

Strengths of the State of the Field project: The study's extraordinarily high response rate allows us to characterize the field of institution-based community organizing with great confidence. The structure of the study enables the data to be analyzed at two levels—the field level, to demonstrate patterns in the field as a whole, and the organization level, to assess similarities and differences among individual IBCOs. In addition, because we replicated items from the 1999 study and included the IBCOs surveyed in 1999, we can assess changes in the field (and in individual IBCOs) over the last decade. This offers a more dynamic view than is possible with only a one-time snapshot. Together, these strengths make the State of the Field project the most comprehensive and rigorous assessment of the field as a whole.



Moving Beyond Limitations, Finding New Strengths: Strategic Capacity for Democratic Renewal

Over the last decade, several institution-based community organizations, and, to a large extent, the field as a whole have made significant progress in overcoming critical challenges that had previously limited the field's democratic impact.

First, the organizing field now incorporates women and people of color in top leadership positions. Whereas professional staff organizers (especially at the higher levels) once tended to be white and male, today they are substantially more diverse than the U.S. population. In one decade, the gender composition has shifted, with 55% of organizers now being women. The percentage of African American and Hispanic organizers is each 50% higher than their representation in the general U.S. population.²

Second, many IBCOs now widely and routinely collaborate, rather than work in the relative isolation of the past. Two-thirds of IBCOs now engage in a variety of new forms of collaboration at the local, regional, state, or national levels, and among these IBCOs, 95% coordinate their efforts with organizations outside their formal organizing networks.

Third, IBCOs are projecting power into higher-level political arenas while staying rooted in local organizing. Today, half of all IBCOs engage

2. In 2011, 21% of professional IBCO organizers were African American (vs. 13% of the U.S. population in 2010), and 24% of organizers were Hispanic (vs. 16% of U.S. population). The percentage of African American organizers had fallen somewhat (from 29% in 1999), yet fewer than half of professional organizers were white (vs. 64% of the U.S. population). Forty-three percent of organizers were women in 1999.

in state-level collaborations, whereas a decade ago only a fifth did so. Ten years ago, virtually no IBCO work focused on the national political arena, where many decisions are made that shape the quality of life of all Americans. Today, a quarter of all IBCOs are engaged in national-level work. The issues most commonly addressed at the state or national level are immigration, health care, banking/foreclosures, public finances, employment/wages, poverty, racism, and public transportation.

Fourth, the active dialogues around race, ethnicity, and racial inequity create new strategic possibilities. Whereas an earlier generation of organizers built IBCOs that linked people across racial categories, they largely avoided discussing race due to a fear that this could prove divisive. These days, issues of race, ethnicity, and racial inequity—including racial tensions—are now “on the table.” Where those discussions are handled well, they generate new internal trust and give IBCOs greater strategic capacity and a new willingness to address the “new Jim Crow” era of structural racism.

Fifth, there has been a substantial shift in the culture of organizing toward innovation and strategic coordination. New thinking, opportunities, and leadership have driven parts of the field to pursue new collaborative ventures, experiment with different organizing practices, and leverage social media and other communications technologies.

Interviewees noted that much of this innovation has occurred because they came to realize that traditional practices and isolated efforts were not producing real democratic influence on big policy decisions. In response, they envisioned new coordinating structures and gradually developed both greater vertical integration within existing networks and greater strategic coordination across different kinds of associations.

Finally, the field's most adept practitioners have developed a wider array of tactics for IBCOs to exert influence. IBCOs continue to organize large public actions to exert organizational power via direct democratic pressure. Indeed, the field's capacity in this regard has grown, with directors reporting over 200,000 people attending at least one event in the last year. To complement this “hard power” approach, many IBCOs have begun to make sophisticated use of “soft power” tactics: negotiating with representatives of political and economic elites; shifting public opinion via the mass media; simultaneously educating local, state, and national representatives regarding the same issue; and intentionally cultivating strategic relationships with political officials, institutional leaders, and policy experts. Linking these hard and soft forms of power appears to have bolstered IBCOs' public influence as they now turn out people for more events, coordinate organizing efforts at several levels simultaneously, and cultivate strategic relationships with political officials and institutional leaders.



Facing the Future: Ongoing Challenges in the Field

American society needs new sources of democratic vigor to successfully confront the challenges it faces. There are no easy solutions to our economic, political, or cultural problems, and no political superhero will rescue us from them. A movement embodying the democratic will and political courage of the American people must come together with dedicated leaders from every institutional sector to craft the reforms and support the hard choices through which we will address our challenges. That is how real change has happened before in American history—and that is how it will happen again.

Institution-based community organizing plays a key role in reinvigorating democratic zeal. Decades of



investing talent, funding, and sheer hard organizing work have built a field with impressive strengths. The number of individuals represented by IBCO member institutions exceeds the historic threshold for wielding powerful democratic influence. The field's dynamic expansion in the last ten years has produced a solid organizational base and strengthened its multi-level federated structures. Furthermore, IBCOs bridge extraordinarily well many of the social divides that fracture American society, divides that constantly stymied previous efforts to address our challenges. The field's deep ties to America's diverse faith traditions, along with its active incorporation of spiritual practices into organizing efforts, allow IBCOs to offer the moral vision and prophetic voice to guide democratic reform efforts. The most effective IBCO practitioners combine strategic organizing practice with the political imagination required to build effective democratic capacity at the scale required for national reform.

But to take advantage of this moment and build a stronger sense of democratic renewal, institution-based community organizing faces ongoing challenges. At present, many of the innovative changes identified here are unevenly distributed, making some parts of the field far less

capable than others. To realize its full democratic potential, the savvy, discipline, and imagination of IBCO's most effective practitioners must be multiplied throughout the field. Funding and talent are needed to build strong local organizations, and these must be embedded in strong state- and national-level organizing structures. Traditional organizing practices must be linked to sophisticated use of social media and innovative organizing practices, and more IBCOs need to collaborate with other kinds of organizations.

Important progress has been made in the last decade, with significant new initiatives and the launching of experimental forays. Given the current state of the field, institution-based community organizing is poised to be a strategic partner in catalyzing democratic renewal. By mobilizing the shared aspirations and hopes of the American people in all their diversity, our economics and politics will be reshaped, and the American democratic promise can be extended to all.

