

## **AS WISR BEGINS ITS 35<sup>TH</sup> YEAR OF COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION, WE ARE PLANTING SEEDS TO GROW COMMUNITY ACTION THINK TANKS**

**By John Bilorusky, PhD, WISR Co-Founder and President**

Tradition of Participatory Knowledge-Building. In our more than 34 years of operation, WISR [*Western Institute for Social Research*] faculty have worked with community-based professionals, social activists, and progressive educators to nurture collaborative inquiry among people from varied walks of life. The students in our personalized BA, MA and PhD degree programs are people who are, for the most part, both well-connected with grassroots communities and also highly educated professionals. WISR's degree programs have aided our learners' efforts to combine academic studies and community-based inquiry with their community and/or professional involvements. Also, WISR has frequently been involved in innovative, community-action projects in collaborations with various community groups. These projects have typically used WISR's expertise in participatory action-research as a way to promote wide community involvement and critical inquiry into such varied community problems as health disparities, youth violence prevention, unmet needs of elders, the need to create sustainable urban villages, and education of various types of at-risk populations, among others.

Quite significantly, WISR students learn how to appreciate, respect and further their own capabilities as builders of practical knowledge that can be used for constructive social change. And, they often have become further engaged with and supportive of "laypeople" in the larger community, so that these laypeople, too, could become aware of, articulate and act on the knowledge that has grown out of their "everyday" experiences. This is a striking contrast to the assumptions underlying more conventional think tanks which look at the "bigger picture" mostly from the perspective of the expert researchers and professional leaders who are hired by or appointed to those think tanks.

New Agenda to Promote Community Action Think Tanks. WISR is engaged in an effort to nurture and develop Community Action Think Tanks that will promote engaged collaboration and ongoing dialogue from people from all walks of life. The recommendations and actions growing out of these think tanks will be informed by the rich, varied knowledge and experiences of people in the participating communities. One of our MA students, Mark Snaer, has already initiated a small experiment in Sacramento by organizing a think tank examining the conditions that aid and impede broad and significant community engagement in support of nonprofits and community services.

Skills to be Promoted in Community Action Think Tanks. This agenda grows out of our years' of efforts to aid people in seeing knowledge building, inquiry, action-oriented change, and collaboration in ways that are both sophisticated and still understandable in everyday terms. For example, we have helped our students and others to:

- *become more conscious of the processes by which they build knowledge;*
- *wrestle with complexities of judging the evidence* (learning that so-called “data analysis” is a rich, textured, necessary and also uncertain process of judging and weighing evidence that comes from many sources and often points in many, sometimes competing, directions);
- *discover ways of broadening their experiences* (so they aren’t limited to their previous, although still quite important, experiences);
- *learn how to benefit from collaboration with others* (whether through informal conversations, formal interviews, or reading what others have had to say, for example);
- *communicate what they know to others* (this usually includes articulating broad ideas that may have general applicability, while also sharing tangible examples and telling stories that can make abstract ideas “as big as life”);
- engage in thinking and dialogue that aim to *probe beneath the surface, look at the immediate task as well as the long-term and “bigger picture,”* and continually *ask new questions* and imagine new alternatives.

In the Coming Months. WISR’s Community Action Think Tanks will build on the ongoing efforts of our students and alumni in such diverse areas as: the problems of youth violence prevention, health disparities that weigh heavily on disenfranchised groups, the predicament of foster youth when they turn 18 and age out of the system, the growing epidemic of workplace bullying, the need to preserve the history and culture of Native American cultures, public school failures, and the challenges involved in deepening the level of citizen engagement in our communities, among others. Many of these issues are on the agenda for a two-day conference, sponsored by WISR on September 24-25, 2009. We plan to make the proceedings of that conference available on our website [[www.wisr.edu](http://www.wisr.edu)] sometime in Fall 2009.

Our next steps in developing Community Action Think Tanks are the efforts of established community groups with whom we currently work, but we invite others to collaborate with us, and we plan to convene occasional community forums on topics of current interest to solicit and develop interest and cooperation with others.