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# Racial Diversity on ACORN's Organizing Staff, 1970-2003

Fred Brooks, PhD

**ABSTRACT.** Using historical and case study methods, this paper analyzes how the organizing staff of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) went from 10% organizers of color in 1970s and 1980s to 64% organizers of color in 2003. Keys to this transformation included experimenting with different organizing models, job descriptions, and recruitment methods; aging and lifestyle changes of senior management; developing a "critical mass" of organizers of color; and an internally organized Caucus of Color. Many of the steps ACORN took to diversify support findings from the business literature on diversity management. With the racial composition of staff now congruent with its membership, ACORN has more than doubled in size, and its organizing seems stronger today than ever before. doi:10.1300/J147v31n01_03 *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** ACORN, racial diversity, diversity management, community organizing, cultural diversity

This paper examines the history of racial diversity on the organizing staff of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN).

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ACORN's organizing staff was 90% white in the 1970s and 1980s, but over the past 15 years ACORN has made considerable progress hiring and retaining organizers of color. In 2003, as much as 64% of ACORN's organizing staff were people of color. Although this transformation was self-evident based on observation it has yet to be documented in the literature.

Drawing on historical and case study methodologies this study addresses three research questions: (1) What are the differences between the racial composition of ACORN's organizing staff today compared with those 20-30 years ago? (2) What prevented ACORN from hiring more organizers of color in the 1970s and 1980s? (3) What factors contributed to ACORN's success in hiring and retaining organizers of color over the past dozen years? The final section of the paper considers the implications of this transformation for ACORN's organizing and the literature on racial diversity in the workplace.

## *LITERATURE REVIEW*

### *ACORN, Community Organizing, and Diversity Issues*

Founded in 1970, ACORN has grown significantly since its inception. ACORN's model of organizing is unique and well documented in the literature (see Adamson & Borgos, 1984; Delgado, 1986; Fisher, 1994; Kest & Rathke, 1979; Staples, 2004; Stein, 1986; also see www.ACORN.org for current activities). ACORN organizes low and moderate income people into democratically run neighborhood organizations that engage in direct action to challenge the power structure and win concrete victories on a variety of issues such as city services, utility rates, tenants' rights, affordable housing, living wages, access to bank loans, predatory lending, and public education. Although parts of ACORN's organizing model are similar to other community organizations (such as direct action tactics) two parts of ACORN's model stand out. The first, ACORN organizes the unorganized. In addition, ACORN's federated national structure, allows the organization to simultaneously organize on neighborhood, citywide, statewide, and national issues (Atlas & Dreier, 2003). Departing from the Alinsky tradition of organizing people through institutional networks (typically churches), ACORN goes door to door and directly signs up individual members regardless of their institutional connections. ACORN codified this doorknocking model into what is called a "Neighborhood Drive," and though after 35 years ACORN's organizing has grown more complex, the Neighborhood Drive remains the bedrock of the organization. Probably the most creative aspect of ACORN's organizing model, and what sets it apart from other community organizations, is the comprehensive blend of factors: multi-issue orga-

nizing; the ability to work on issues ranging from neighborhood to national; direct involvement in electoral politics; organizing the unorganized; a multi-racial membership; combining service with direct action (Brooks, 2005); ownership of two radio stations; and consistent growth.[1]

Historically a major criticism of social action or "Alinsky Style" community organizing (CO) was the lack of diversity among the organizing staff (Adamson, 1979; Delgado, 1986, 1995; Rivera & Erlich, 1998; Stein, 1986). Writing in the early 1980s, Delgado estimated less than 10% of the organizing staff in the major national organizing networks–the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), Citizen Action, National Peoples Action (NPA), and ACORN–were people of color. Delgado's work focused primarily on ACORN and he argued the organization operated on three assumptions that prevented the organization from attracting significant numbers of organizers of color: "(1) economic issues subsume issues of race and gender, (2) organizers must be trained in the dominant culture even to work in their own community, and (3) the structure of the organization need not change in order to successfully bring in people of color" (pp. 196-197). Delgado argued that unless the organization was willing to question these assumptions, it would never attract a significant number of organizers of color. Delgado predicted that over time these internal contradictions would stunt the growth of the organization and would create credibility problems for an organization whose membership was predominantly people of color.

Delgado's arguments were not without empirical precedent. The National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), a precursor to ACORN, was never able to reconcile the internal race, class, and gender contradictions between a mostly white, middle-class, male organizing staff and a membership made up of African American, female welfare recipients. According to West (1981) NWRO's inability to reconcile this tension was a primary reason for the organization's decline in the early 1970s and eventual bankruptcy in 1975. West claims for many years NWRO resisted hiring members to organize, and when they finally succeeded, most of the white male organizers quit, taking funding contacts and other resources with them. Although Delgado (1986) did not predict such a stark future for ACORN he did predict increasing irrelevancy unless ACORN was able to resolve its own internal contradictions and discrepancies between a low-income constituency of color and a predominantly white, college-educated organizing staff.

### *Business Literature on Diversity*

Very little peer-reviewed scholarship exists documenting progress made toward increasing racial diversity in community organizations. The vast majority of the social work literature on diversity is focused on questions about

how to deal with clients from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Helton & Jackson, 1997; Wiley & Ebata, 2004).

Compared with the scant literature on workplace diversity in the CO literature, a substantial body of literature exists on diversity in the corporate sector. This literature is primarily a response to several historical trends. First, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, in 1965 President Lyndon Johnson signed executive order 11246 stating any company doing business with the federal government had to "develop affirmative action plans to assure equal opportunities in their employment practices" (Mor Barak, 2000, p. 340). Johnson's endorsement of affirmative action sent shock waves through the workforce that are still being felt 40 years later. Although affirmative action programs have been in decline since the Reagan administration (1980-1988), they have been replaced by a robust "diversity management" movement that has been embraced by much of the corporate sector (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). Diversity management differs from affirmative action in two major ways. First, rather than being forced to diversify because of law, corporations adopt diversity management programs by choice. Second, diversity management programs are promoted as being good for business (Thomas, 1990) and congruent with demographic trends highlighting an increasingly diverse workforce (Johnston & Packer, 1987).

In a comprehensive review of the diversity management literature, Kellough and Naff (2004, pp. 66-67) summarize the following steps businesses have taken to diverse their workforces:

1. "*Ensure management accountability*." Managers who are responsible for hiring and training staff need to be held accountable for their success or failure at creating a diverse staff. In the corporate world promotions and pay raises should depend on a manager's proven success at managing a diverse staff (Chicago Area Partnerships [CAPS], 1996; Cox, 1994; Dobbs, 1996; Fernandez, 1999; Morrison, 1992; Wilson, 1997).
2. "*Re-examine the organization's structure, culture, and management systems*." Organization's need to self-reflect and examine their systems regarding recruitment, performance appraisal criteria, promotion, and career development programs for bias (CAPS, 1996; Cox, 1993; Fernandez, 1999; Fine, 1995; Mathews, 1998; Morrison, 1992; Norton & Fox, 1997; Riccucci, 2002; Thomas, 1996; Wilson, 1997).
3. "*Pay attention to the numbers*." Those responsible for recruiting and managing staff need to constantly monitor the diversity statistics of their staffs, and also be managed around those statistics by CEOs (CAPS, 1996; Cox, 1993; Morrison, 1992; Norton & Fox, 1997; Thomas, 1996).
4. "*Provide training*." Training is essential for staff to understand the importance of diversity goals and to learn how to successfully manage and

work with a diverse staff (CAPS, 1996; Chambers & Riccucci,1997; Cox, 1993; Fernandez, 1999; Gardenswartz & Rowe, 1993; Hudson & Hines-Hudson, 1999; Mathews, 1998; Riccucci, 2002; Thomas, 1996; Wilson, 1997).

5. "*Develop mentoring programs*." Mentoring relationships are crucial to retaining a diverse staff and communicating organizational expectations concerning promotions and advancement (CAPS, 1996; Cox, 1993; Fernandez, 1999; Fine, 1995; Morrison, 1992; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999; Wilson, 1997).
6. "*Promote internal identity or advocacy groups*." Internal caucuses of women, people of color, gays and lesbians, or people with disabilities can provide an important forum for support, camaraderie, mentoring, resolving conflict, and influencing organization policy and procedures (Cox, 1994; Digh, 1997; Dobbs, 1996; Morrison, 1992; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999).

The discussion section of this paper will compare these variables with the steps ACORN took to diversify its organizing staff.

## *METHOD*

### *Design, Sample, and Data Collection*

This study draws upon historical and case study methodologies (Yin, 2003). ACORN serves as the case, and the racial composition of the organizing staff is the dependent variable of interest. The independent variables emerged from analysis of the qualitative data. Individual and focus group interviews were the method of data collection. Since this was an historical case study purposive sampling was required to make sure key informants were interviewed from ACORN's past to the present. Purposive sampling targeted the most senior staff who would have first hand knowledge of ACORN's hiring practices in the 1970s and 1980s. Among this group of people I interviewed the directors of three offices responsible for breakthroughs in hiring organizers of color. Purposive sampling also targeted the most senior organizers of color involved in the caucus of color.

In 2003, I conducted 4 focus groups and 5 individual interviews with a total of 25 ACORN organizers. Open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted with nine senior white organizers (five in a focus group and four individual) who had been on ACORN's staff from 14 to 33 years. Five of these organizers were women and four were men. They were asked their opinions about what prevented ACORN from hiring more organizers of color in the 1970s and

1980s, and what changes made ACORN more successful at recruiting/retaining organizers of color in the 1990s. Individual interviews typically lasted for 45 minutes; focus group interviews lasted approximately one hour.

I conducted two focus groups made up exclusively of organizers of color. One focus group consisted of seven leaders in ACORN's Caucus of Color. This group included four men and three women. All were African American except for one Latino organizer. These organizers had been on ACORN's staff for 5-12 years, three were originally ACORN members who later moved onto staff. Another focus group consisted of six organizers (three Latino, three African American) of color from a large ACORN office where the majority of organizers were people of color. Another focus group consisted of three white ACORN organizers who had been on ACORN staff 5-7 years and are now regional directors who have the responsibilities for promoting and managing staff in a number of ACORN offices.

### *Instruments and Measures*

Because I interviewed staff from two distinct ACORN periods and I also conducted two focus groups with exclusively organizers of color, I had different interview guides. The senior staff interview guide asked the following questions: What prevented ACORN from hiring and retaining more organizers of color in the 1970s and 1980s? What were the breakthroughs, and when did they occur, that led to ACORN's success hiring/retaining organizers of color? Probes for these questions included inquiring about job descriptions, pay increases, and experimenting with new organizing models. Senior staff and middle-management staff were asked, "What impact has the increasingly diverse staff had on [ACORN's] organizing and the organization?" In addition, middle-management staff were asked to describe the racial diversity on staff when they were hired, and how the diversity changed over the years. The interview guide for organizers of color asked them to describe the racial diversity present on staff when they were hired, how that changed over the years, and what factors they felt contributed to changes in the racial composition of ACORN's organizing staff. They were also asked how the Caucus of Color functioned and what role it played in sustaining racial diversity within ACORN.

Estimates of the number of organizers of color on ACORN's staff in the 1970s and 1980s are based on staff memories and the literature. Figures for the racial composition of organizing staff in 2003 were taken from surveys filled out by the Head Organizers at the annual year-end staff meeting in December. The question asked organizers to list the numbers of organizers for each racial group represented on staff.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the most basic form of open coding and the constant comparative method (Berg, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Analysis of the focus group data was driven by the research questions. Table 1 shows the analytical categories and themes that emerged from each category.

The categories in Table 1 correspond to the research questions. For example, the category "obstacles" includes themes that emerged from senior staff interviews responding to the question about the obstacles to hiring organizers of color in the 1970s and 1980s. The themes under "Caucus of Color" are the responses that emerged from organizers of color about the function of the Caucus of Color within ACORN.

Validity of content analysis was supported by member checks conducted by five focus group participants. Several corrections/clarifications were made per their suggestions. Focus group respondents were paid a $25 honorarium for their participation. All of the above described research procedures were approved by the Georgia State University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

### *Limitations*

An historical case study methodology is unable to assert 100% causality between independent and dependent variables. Unknown external threats to validity cannot be ruled out. Another weakness of the methodology is relying on senior staff memories to account for breakthroughs that occurred some 15-20 years ago. The results in regards to breakthroughs are probably most accurately described as how current senior staff remember ACORN's transformation.

TABLE 1. Analytical Categories and Themes

| *Obstacles* | *Breakthroughs* | *Other Factors* | *Caucus of Color* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Job description | New organizing models | National statistics | Peer support |
| Dominant staff culture | New job descriptions | Board directive | Mentoring |
| No critical mass | Hiring from the membership | Age and experience of senior staff | Organizational changes |
| | | Pay increases | Dominant culture as a challenge |
| | | New recruitment model | Competition |
| | | Having a critical mass | |
| | | Longevity and success of organization | |

## RESULTS

### Diversity Statistics 2003

In 2003, the statistical evidence suggests ACORN was able to rise to the challenge of racially diversifying its organizing staff. In December 2003, the racial composition of ACORN's staff was 38% African American, 36% white, 24% Latina/Latino, and 2% Asian or other. The significant increase of organizers of color is not just newly hired staff; ACORN has a significant core of organizers of color who have from 5 to 13 years of tenure with the organization. For the past 7 years a Caucus of Color has been meeting to provide support, mentoring, and a stronger voice for organizers of color in the organization.

### Early Obstacles

#### *Organizing in the South and Expansion*

One of ACORN's founding objectives is to organize a "majority constituency" of low to moderate income people (Kest & Rathke, 1979). In order to wield significant political power the organization had to organize low and moderate income people of all races. During the 1970s, in the South particularly, ACORN organized white and African American neighborhoods. For most of the 1970s ACORN expanded primarily in the South and Midwest (e.g., Memphis, New Orleans, Dallas, St. Louis, Atlanta) and they always organized first in white neighborhoods and then in black neighborhoods.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s ACORN began organizing in major northern cities such as Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Brooklyn NY. Because of white flight, the vast majority of inner city, low-income neighborhoods in many of these cities were black or Latino/Latina. Based on these demographics ACORN organized almost exclusively people of color in cities like Philadelphia, Brooklyn, and Chicago. Although a majority white staff was incongruent with a majority black membership base in the South, it became increasingly incongruent with the racial demographics in many of the big northern cities ACORN expanded to in the 1980s.

During this period some offices always had one or two African American organizers on staff; and some stayed on staff for a number of years. Two African American women were Head Organizers for several years. With the exception of a few small offices (e.g., Lake Charles, LA), during the 1970s and 1980s people of color did not make up a majority of the organizing staff in any major ACORN office for an extended period of time.

*Job Description*

Organizing has always been a challenging and difficult job, and some say ACORN's organizing job description was one of the toughest in the business (Delgado, 1986). The typical ACORN organizer in the 1970s worked from 10am to 10pm Monday thru Friday; and would work a 6-8 hour day on Saturdays and often Sundays. In the 1970s organizer pay was $4,000 a year. This moved up over the years, in the 1980s organizers made $12,000 a year (2003 starting pay was $22,500). Tasks included four hours of doorknocking every evening and staffing weekly organizing committee meetings during a neighborhood drive. During the day organizers would research issues, make up flyers and agendas, and work on fundraising. The average person found the job difficult if not overwhelming.

Based on the long hours, low pay, and challenging job responsibilities it wasn't easy to hire people of any race to do the job, and it seemed especially difficult to hire people of color. Here is the way one senior white organizer described it:

> I think we had a very rigid and hardcore way of looking at the work. I think there was almost pride about it being the few, almost insane people willing to work almost endless hours way beyond the hours of a regular job. So, it didn't seem like a doable job for a lot of people of any color or background . . . It made it extremely hard for people with kids to do the job.

An African American organizer who initially joined ACORN as a member described how the organizing job appeared to her: "I came on staff briefly in 1987, decided these people was crazy, they worked too damn hard for too little money, I wasn't having it! So I stayed with the membership." Several years later, when the office was in transition she came on with a more limited fundraising job description, and then later became an organizer.

Since the majority of organizers were white, and all but one Head Organizer was white, the dominant staff culture in most ACORN offices was white. An African American organizer described his first impression of the office: "The office was full of white people [when I was hired], I was the only African American in the office at that time. I felt like a fish in the desert. I could not identify with that head organizer at all, on any level."

Since the organizing job did not offer the material benefits commonly associated with employment, the reasons someone would take and keep the job of organizer were the intrinsic, or non-material benefits associated with the job–personal growth, challenging responsibilities, and meaningful political

work. In an environment offering few material benefits typically associated with employment, the non-material benefits are magnified in importance. These non-material benefits are closely intertwined with the culture of the job. In this context, the culture of the job would be a powerful factor in whether or not a potential recruit wanted, accepted, or kept the job. Since the dominant culture was white, the organizer trainees that took and kept the job in the 1970s and 1980s tended to be white. One senior organizer described it this way: "It is almost in its own weird way like an exclusive club of people who look alike and think alike and would define their politics and their background in a similar way."

The job description and responsibilities that came with promotions to management also made it difficult to employ older folks who had families. In the 1970s and 1980s the majority of organizers were college educated, single people, with no children. Obviously a 24-year-old single person was more able to live off the modest organizer salary.

### *Breakthroughs*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s senior ACORN management did several things differently that enabled them to hire and retain a core of organizers of color: (1) they experimented with new organizing models, (2) they created two new organizing positions–Housing Organizer and Intake Organizer–which were primarily office jobs with more traditional 9 to 6 work schedules. These new job descriptions made organizing more attractive to a wider variety of people, (3) they made a more concerted effort to hire from ACORN's membership and low-income constituency, and (4) beginning in 1992 (and continuing to the present) ACORN's National Field Director began keeping statistics on the race of all employees and directly managing Head Organizers around the issue of staff diversity.

Beth Butler[2] in New Orleans, Jon Kest in Brooklyn, and Madeline Talbott in Chicago were the staff primarily responsible for these breakthroughs. Each had been with ACORN since the mid-1970s and had over a dozen years of organizing experience at the time of these breakthroughs. One thing became perfectly clear to all three (among other) organizers: If ACORN was going to continue to grow and become the type of organization they always dreamed it could become, it had no choice but to figure out how to diversify the organizing staff to reflect the racial composition of the membership. Although all three were equally committed to the goal, they took different paths toward staff diversity. Kest experimented with the organizing model; Talbott was the first to successfully hire and retain a critical mass of ACORN members, and although Butler was unwilling to experiment with ACORN's organizing model she was

sensitive to her organizers' family and child raising needs in a way that allowed them to successfully organize and have a family at the same time.

These factors were not mutually exclusive and several other developments facilitated these breakthroughs. First, ACORN's governing body, the Association Board (made up of member delegates from across the nation), became increasingly dissatisfied with the racial divergence between ACORN's membership and staff. The Association Board instructed Chief Organizer Wade Rathke to increase the numbers of organizers of color on ACORN's organizing staff. Second, senior staff were becoming middle-aged, marrying, and having children, forcing them to juggle their own demanding job descriptions with the obligations of family and children. With 12-15 years of experience senior staff also had more refined management skills enabling them to hire, train, and retain people coming from diverse race and socioeconomic backgrounds. This maturity and new-found flexibility of senior staff enabled them to hire and retain a core group of organizers of color. Additional pay increases in the 1990s also made the job more attractive to a broader pool of potential recruits.

### *New Organizing Models, Job Descriptions and Hiring from the Membership*

A fundamental principle of ACORN's model is "organize the unorganized." ACORN organizers door knock 3-4 hours every evening in neighborhoods targeted for organizing. The doorknocking might be with a member, but is often done solo by the organizer him/herself. The objective of doorknocking is to sign-up members and collect dues. For most of ACORN's first 20 years (1970-1990) if an organizer trainee was unwilling or unable to successfully door knock they could not organize for ACORN. In the late 1980s some of ACORN's senior management began to wonder if experimenting with the model of signing up members might help ACORN recruit more organizers of color. Experimenting with alternative ways of signing up members began with two events.

Brooklyn's Head Organizer Jon Kest hired a middle-aged, Panamanian woman, who said she wanted to work for ACORN but did not want to door knock. She claimed she could organize house meetings in key neighborhoods building off of personal networks and that she could sign-up members, collect dues, and build a neighborhood organization with this new methodology. Kest was willing to let her try, and in terms of dues production, the results were highly successful. She began signing up members at house meetings at a record setting pace.

She was also recruited in a nontraditional way. In 1991 New York ACORN won a housing development and advertised for families to apply to live in the

housing complex. ACORN's phone rang off the hook, and Kest hired five people of color to work part-time taking the onslaught of housing calls. The organizers invited people to come into the office and asked them to join ACORN. Several of these organizers were quickly signing up more members and collecting more dues than the best doorknocking organizers were. After two months of signing up members from the housing calls several of these part-time organizers moved into full-time field organizing positions.

ACORN management quickly codified this success into two new job descriptions–Housing Organizer and Intake Organizer. Intake organizers took phone calls, signed up members and collected dues. Housing Organizers took calls, collected dues, organized meetings, worked turn-out for housing meetings, and did internal fundraising. Intake organizers did not door knock or work most nights. This made the job attractive to a wider range of people including people with families and children. Housing Organizers often worked nights but did not door knock either. Both of these job descriptions were more focused compared to the traditional field organizing position.

ACORN was developing housing in several cities and the Intake and Housing Organizer job descriptions were used successfully in several cities to hire people of color from the membership and constituency. In Chicago, Madeline Talbott hired several members into these new organizing positions. These members stayed on staff and several became record setting organizers in terms of signing-up members and collecting dues (two quantifiable statistics organizers are managed around). Another senior organizer believed that hiring members was the critical breakthrough because, compared to hiring young, college educated people of color–members were less likely to perceive a staff of young white organizers as an unusual situation. Through their experience as members they were used to dealing with young white organizers. Also, members already had a commitment to ACORN and a level of comfort with the organizing staff.

ACORN did not create the new positions of Housing Organizer and Intake Organizer primarily to increase recruitment of organizers of color. They created these positions to capitalize on organizing opportunities. When Head Organizers noticed a latent function of the new positions was to increase the number of organizers of color it gave them an extra incentive to codify and replicate these positions in other offices.

*National Statistics and Managing Staff*

In 1992 Madeline Talbott took over the position of National Field Director with the responsibility of supervising all Head Organizers in ACORN. In each city the Head Organizer is the person responsible for the organizing operation

and has the final say in hiring, administration, and management of local ACORN offices. Talbott had Head Organizers track and report statistics on the racial composition of their organizing staffs. She also managed Head Organizers on this issue. At tri-annual national management meetings Head Organizers had to account for and set quantitative goals for hiring and retaining organizers of color. This practice made hiring and retaining organizers of color a priority in the organization and has continued under Field Director Helene O'Brien to this day.

*Critical Mass*

"We had no critical mass" was the most common response of senior ACORN staff to the question: In the 1970s and 1980s what prevented you from hiring more organizers of color? Webster's dictionary (1977, p. 270) defines critical mass as "of sufficient size to sustain a chain reaction." A critical mass of organizers of color is 2-3 organizers with experience who assume leadership roles that create a supportive atmosphere for trainees. An office with a critical mass of organizers of color finds it easy to hire and retain organizers of color. Conversely an office without a critical mass finds it difficult to retain organizers of color. An African American organizer stated, "At the time [I was hired] we had black lead organizers and the other main organizer was also a woman of color. Both of them were stars at signing up members. And I think that's one of the things that allowed me to stay." All senior staff interviewed stated that retaining organizers of color has been much easier since the mid-1990s because many offices have a critical mass of organizers of color. Compared with 15 years ago, when a new person applies for an organizing job at ACORN today s/he is much more likely to be interviewed, trained, and supervised by a person of color. Organizer trainees will have co-workers they can identify with, socialize with, and who share their culture. During the 1970s and 1980s senior ACORN staff experimented with the job description and organizing model to develop the first critical mass of organizers of color. Organizers report now that they have a critical mass of organizers of color, it is not a problem hiring and retaining people of color in the traditional job description involving door-knocking and working nights.

In most ACORN offices people of color constitute not only a critical mass, but the dominant culture of an office (e.g., Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and New Orleans) and there are several offices that are staffed 100% by people of color (e.g., St. Louis, Miami, and Atlanta). Madeline Talbott (in Chicago) stated she could either hire people of color or young white college graduates; but her preference was to hire people of color. She was frank that the dominant culture on her staff was a culture of color, and if she hired a young college educated white organizer, he/she might have trouble identifying with the domi-

nant culture in the office. In Chicago over the last 15 years the dominant culture on the organizing staff has completely turned over, and today it is probably easier to hire and retain organizers of color compared to white organizers.

Having a critical mass of organizers of color has also allowed the organization to recruit people of color directly into the field organizing job (door-knocking) rather than into the intake or housing organizer job descriptions. This suggests that the problem of recruiting organizers of color was not really the job description but the culture associated with the job description. In the 1970s and 1980s when the culture associated with the job was white, people of color did not find the job attractive. When there was a critical mass of field organizers of color, ACORN had no problem hiring organizers of color into what was traditionally the most difficult job in the organization.

*Longevity and Success of Organization*

Besides having a critical mass, another issue that has made it easier to hire and retain organizers of color is the longevity, credibility, success, and media attention the organization has attracted over the past dozen years. As previously mentioned, ACORN's organizing model is well documented in the literature; ACORN has a highly developed web site that is frequently updated with press, research, and campaign news. One African American organizer applied to New York ACORN at the time of a national convention ACORN held in the city. She was invited to attend the convention and was initially put off by the demonstrative action she attended, but after researching ACORN she decided it was where she wanted to work. This is how she described it:

> I read up on it and did some research, and I was like damn, this here is the largest organization of low income folks, and they organize. I saw members in the office, making calls, they were doing direct action and I said this is it. This is what our people need to be doing.

Over the past few years ACORN recruiters are finding increasing numbers of applicants who have researched ACORN, know about the Living Wage or Predatory Lending campaigns, and have decided organizing is what they want to do. Twenty years ago this type of prior knowledge of the organization was rare, but it is more common today.

*New Recruitment Model*

In the 1970s ACORN often sent a national recruiter to college campuses (both white and black) to interview prospects for the organizing job. If someone

wanted the job, ACORN would negotiate with them on the best place to train and work, which were typically driven by ACORN's organizing priorities. If they succeeded and became good enough to be a lead or Head organizer they had to make a commitment to "go where the work was," meaning they had to be willing to go organize based on strategic decisions of senior ACORN management. Young, single, unattached people looking forward to moving around the country were clearly favored by such a recruitment model.

Since taking over the job of National Field Director in 1998 Helene O'Brien created a different recruitment model that has been more successful than the 1970s model at recruiting organizers of color. The new model involves a recruiter going to the city targeted for expansion, hiring organizer trainees, training them in another city, and finally relocating them back to the city of origin to organize one's home turf. Requiring people to relocate is no longer a part of the model. Everyone interviewed credited this new recruitment model for making it easier to hire and retain organizers of color. O'Brien's model of recruitment and her leadership was also responsible for a dramatic increase in the number of Head Organizers of color since 1998.

### *Caucus of Color*

Since 1996 a caucus of color has been meeting at the annual Year End/Year Beginning staff meeting. The caucus of color was initiated by Bertha Lewis, New York ACORN's Executive Director, who was hired in 1991. The Caucus of Color was initiated to create a space where any staff person of color could come and share their experience of being a person of color working for ACORN. The caucus provides a forum for younger organizers of color to bring up issues, discuss them with senior organizers of color, and provides support and mentoring for younger staff of color. The Caucus of Color also works to give people of color a stronger voice in the organization. One change the caucus takes credit for is the date of the year end/year begin annual meeting. It used to be held the very last weekend of each year, which sometimes fell on the New Year holiday. Lewis and other members of the Caucus of Color decided they did not enjoy spending their holiday weekend traveling for work, and got the support of other organizers to change the date of the year-end meeting to mid December. Lewis described this as a "tiny little thing that changed the culture of [ACORN] seismically . . . I remember that was the first flexing [of the Caucus of Color]."

Interviews with the senior caucus of color organizers revealed another side of why they stayed on staff. Four of the caucus organizers I interviewed stated that the dominant culture in the ACORN office at the time they were hired was white. Even though they did not identify with the white culture of the office

they had a strong desire to organize people of color in their communities. ACORN impressed them as a viable model of organizing. Rather than be turned off by the white culture in the office, they looked at it as a challenge for them to prove their own organizing skills. As caucus member John Jackson (of Los Angeles ACORN) stated: "I don't suffer from an inferiority complex, I suffer from a superiority complex." The caucus of color organizers I interviewed believed they could organize as well or better than any white organizer and they would prove it. Since ACORN quantifies numerous organizing stats and produces a weekly report on membership/dues totals per organizer, this was easy to do. Caucus member Joyce Campbell of Boston ACORN won an award five years in a row for most new members and dues collected. Caucus members stated the dominant white culture on the organizing staff was a challenge to rise to and eventually to change, rather than an elite club they did not want to belong to. In the interview several staff made it clear that they thought learning to organize was so important to them they were not going to let a dominant white office culture prevent them from doing it. Peter Santiago, a Latino organizer from Brooklyn put it quite bluntly: "If they [senior management] wanted to get rid of me they were going to have to fire me." These organizers did not look to the ACORN staff in their office as a social outlet, or a place to make friends. They looked at it as a place they could learn to organize people of color.

Several organizers of color stated that ACORN-sponsored national management training had helped them enormously. Joyce Campbell stated she had been on the fence about organizing for quite a while, but then attended a national management training conference where she "lost it and loved it" and has been organizing ever since. She argued there should be more of these and more emphasis on training and support at the management level.

## *DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS*

### *Implications for ACORN*

It would be hard to exaggerate the positive implications of ACORN's transition from a majority white to a majority people of color organizing staff. As Wade Rathke, the Chief Organizer of ACORN, stated "It has been positive in every way." This transition has impacted ACORN in at least four ways: (1) fueled the greatest expansion in ACORN's history, (2) helped ACORN attract more foundation grants for organizing, (3) shifted the old Alinsky boundary

between organizer and member, (4) strengthened ACORN's credibility in coalitions of color.

During the 1980s ACORN typically had 80-100 white organizers and 10-15 organizers of color on payroll. Since then the white organizing staff has remained at around 100 while the number of organizers of color has grown by 1,100 percent. Clearly organizers of color have been the primary engine of expansion for ACORN since 1990. As earlier sections of this paper have demonstrated this change is much more than a simple quantitative expansion. Significant financial, cultural, social, and political ramifications are associated with this transition.

Racial diversity has become an important criteria for awarding foundation grants. A common question on foundation Requests For Proposals is to describe the racial diversity of an organization's membership and staff. It is probably not coincidence that, commensurate with the increasing numbers of organizers of color on ACORN's staff, ACORN also experienced an increase in foundation support. Increasing support from foundations made ACORN's ambitious expansion program more feasible.

Having more organizers of color has broken down the traditional strict boundary between organizer and member/leader. In the 1970s and 1980s when most staff were white and college educated, organizers never spoke to the press or were featured speakers at events; members always assumed these roles. This clear-cut division of labor was a hold-over from Alinsky's model and also the staff/membership dichotomy used by the National Welfare Rights Organization. While acknowledging the need for this distinction when there are pronounced differences between staff and membership in terms of race and class, Delgado (1986) argued the sharp boundary between organizer and member did not make sense to organizers of color, and further served to reinforce race and class cleavages between staff and membership. With more people of color on staff, and many being from the constituency, it is common for staff of color to be featured spokespersons for ACORN both with the press and at political events. For example, Bertha Lewis–New York ACORN's Executive Director, is often a featured spokesperson representing ACORN at a political event or at a citywide coalition meeting. In Chicago, it is not unusual for housing organizer Mary Hollis to speak at an ACORN event.

Having a diverse staff has increased ACORN's presence and credibility in city, state, and national coalitions. In the 1970s and 1980s ACORN had a reputation of not joining many coalitions (Stein, 1986). Over the past 15 years ACORN has increased its membership and leadership roles in coalitions. ACORN's involvement in Living Wage coalitions in over 20 cities (ACORN, 2004) is probably the most notable example of ACORN's increased willingness to work with other organizations.

### *Implications for Diversity Management Literature*

This paper extends the social work literature on diversity in community organizations by documenting the transformation of ACORN to a majority people of color organizing staff. The findings from this case study suggest the path to diversity for community organizations is very similar to the path taken by major corporations. Table 2 compares key variables leading to diversity from the business literature with findings from the present study. All of the critical steps ACORN took to diversify have precedents in the business literature. Previous literature suggests management accountability (Cox, 1994; Dobbs, 1996; Fernandez, 1999) and keeping track of numbers (Cox, 1994; Morrison, 1992; Norton & Fox, 1997; Thomas, 1996) are critical to creating diverse workplaces. Since 1992 ACORN Field Directors have tracked racial diversity statistics in hiring and retention of organizers. Although ACORN did not provide head organizers financial incentives for successful diversity initiatives, ACORN's Field Directors managed Head Organizers around the statistics and held them accountable for their success or failure in individual management sessions and at national staff meetings.

ACORN's creation of the new job descriptions of Intake and Housing organizers, along with experimenting with new organizing models, are classic examples of flex-management (Mathews, 1998) and re-examining the organization's structure and culture (Cox, 1994; Fernandez, 1999; Fine, 1995; Morrison, 1992; Norton & Fox, 1997; Riccucci, 2002; Thomas, 1996). Flex-management is a management philosophy and practice that views people as a valuable commodity and works hard to balance individual needs and desires with organizational

TABLE 2. Findings Compared with Key Variables from Diversity Management Literature

| Key Variables from the Diversity Management Literature | ACORN Implementation |
|---|---|
| Management accountability | Since 1992 National Field Directors have managed Head Organizers specifically on the racial diversity of their staffs |
| Re-examine organization's structure, culture, and management systems | Experimented with a new organizing model–House Meetings; Created new job descriptions–Intake Organizer and Housing Organizer |
| Pay attention to numbers | Since 1992 Field Directors have tracked racial diversity statistics by office |
| Provide training | Mid-year management meetings |
| Mentoring programs | Mostly informal through Caucus of Color |
| Promote internal identity or advocacy groups | Caucus of Color founded 1996 |

Note. Variables are from the literature review in Kellough and Naff (2004).

objectives (Jamieson & O'Mara, 1992; Mathews, 1998). In ACORN's case, the objective of signing up members and collecting dues was maintained, and in some cases even enhanced, by experimenting with alternative approaches to membership recruitment. These new job descriptions allowed the organization goals of membership recruitment to be met, but in a more flexible way, rather than having to door knock every evening. These new job descriptions made the job more attractive to older people, and people who might have children to care for.

Training is associated with increased diversity (Chambers & Riccucci, 1997; Cox, 1994; Fernandez, 1999; Gardenswartz & Rowe, 1993; Hudson & Hines-Hudson, 1999; Mathews, 1998; Riccucci, 2002; Thomas, 1996). Since the mid-1990s ACORN has held annual management training meetings. Several Caucus of Color members stated these meetings were crucial in their retention and desire to move up and take on more responsibility in the organization. ACORN's experience offers further support to Roosevelt Thomas' (1991) assertion that diversity management is simply good management.

Prior research links mentoring programs and internal identity groups with diverse workplaces (Cox, 1994; Digh, 1997; Dobbs, 1996; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999). ACORN's Caucus of Color continues to play a crucial role offering support and mentorship while giving organizers of color a greater voice in influencing organizational policy. The strong role the Caucus of Color plays at ACORN has precedent in the corporate sector at Xerox and Corning Glass Works (Dobbs, 1996).

Since the present study followed the qualitative protocol of not extensively reviewing the literature prior to data collection (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998), the author approached the interviews with no *a priori* theoretical assumptions (derived form the literature) of how ACORN diversified its organizing staff. The remarkably good fit between the business literature variables and the ACORN findings supports the internal validity of the present study. Since ACORN is a different type of organization compared to the typical corporation studied in prior literature, the present findings provide external validity for the diversity variables identified in the business literature.

## *SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH*

Future research should compare the findings in this study with other community organizations' experiences with staff diversity over the past 20 years. In 1986 Delgado argued that none of the major community organizing networks had more than 10% people of color on staff. Have other organizations been as successful as ACORN at diversifying? If so, what are the similarities and

differences between the paths taken toward diversity. According to Warren (2001), The Southwest IAF affiliate was successful at diversifying its staff. Like ACORN it learned how to hire people of color from its membership base. Future research should compare the present findings with IAF Southwest and other IAF affiliates.

An important question for future research would be to assess similarities and differences in organizing process and outcomes between African American, Latina/Latino, and White organizers all implementing the same generic ACORN organizing model. Although the model is the same there may be subtle or dramatic differences in process or outcome based on the race of the organizer. Also, some major ACORN operations are managed 100% by people of color (from the Head Organizer to the Field Organizers). What difference does it make when the entire culture of an ACORN office is a culture of color? Is the model interpreted and implemented in the same way as when the staff is mixed or predominantly white? Outcome variables worth examining in such studies include the types of people who join ACORN, selection of local and citywide issues, combining services and organizing, relationships between organizers and the membership, and relationships with allies.

## *CONCLUSION*

Recent literature has suggested that the best days of direct action community organizing may be in the past (Eichler, 1995). In the conclusion to his book Delgado (1986, p. 213) does not answer, but poses the question: "Did community organizing peak in the early 1980s?" The evidence presented in this study suggests that far from peaking in the early 1980s, ACORN's organizing is stronger today than anytime in its history. The transformation from a majority white to a majority people of color organizing staff is primarily responsible for the organization's significant growth over the last 15 years. Indeed, if the trajectory of ACORN's growth is a harbinger for community organizing, the best days of community organizing are sometime in the future.

## NOTES

1. This description of ACORN appears in slightly different form in Brooks, 2005.
2. Names were used because of the historical nature of this analysis and organizers requested their names be in the paper. Anonymity was respected for anyone who did not want her/his name in the paper.

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