

Active Living as an Institutional Challenge: Lessons from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's "Celebrate Fitness" Program

Lawrence D. Brown
M. Katherine Kraft
Columbia University

Abstract Native American youth suffer disproportionately from a range of adverse health conditions. Empowering youth leaders to work on community-based solutions has proved effective in reducing tobacco use and gun violence and is now emerging as a promising approach to improving fitness and health. This article, based on direct observation and interviews with key informants, examines the implementation of a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation–funded project that gave tribal youth councils minigrants to design and run diverse projects that encourage physical activity in their communities. The article highlights the institutional challenges that confront health-promotion strategies for disadvantaged populations. Unless they take proper account of organizational, political, environmental, and cultural forces, funders' interventions have limited chances for success and sustainability.

The public health community has long insisted that health promotion, prevention, and education are key (arguably *the* key) to improved health-status outcomes. Frequently, public health professionals invoke images of persuasive communication campaigns that change the hearts and minds of the public and thereby induce beneficial behavioral changes. This image is useful so far as it goes, but—this article argues—it does not go far enough. Sandwiched between the monitoring, assessing, informing, and educating with which the disease-prevention and health-promotion processes begin and the planning, regulating, and evaluating with which they end, one typically finds community partnerships and cooperation with

Warm thanks to Stephanie St. Pierre for insightful comments on an earlier draft.

Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law, Vol. 33, No. 3, June 2008
DOI 10.1215/03616878-2008-006 © 2008 by Duke University Press

local groups, but this organizational (and intrinsically political) link in the action chain often gets short shrift.

Effective public health promotion presupposes effective cultivation, communication, and coordination among networks of organizations (some complex and formal, some so elemental and informal as hardly to constitute organizations at all) that work to institutionalize public health messages and measures in the daily lives of individuals and communities. The more needy the targeted population and the more seemingly intractable the challenges of engaging health promotion for its benefit, the more salient such institutional networks become, but given the high costs of action and the low prospect of benefits in such hard cases, the more fragile these networks are likely to be.

Here we develop this argument by exploring an unusually hard case (Native Americans, whose health indicators are often the worst in the nation) and an innovative program (Celebrate Fitness, in which the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [RWJF] made small grants to tribal youth councils to develop projects that enhanced fitness-promoting activities in Native American communities) in order to illuminate an insufficiently studied process (implementation, i.e., how plans get put into—or out of—action) and illustrate an unorthodox perspective, namely, that the promotion of health and active living in disadvantaged communities is (among other things) an institutional challenge, more prominently a matter of forming, maintaining, and coordinating organizations than health-promotion strategies tend to acknowledge.

The Celebrate Fitness Program

Many health experts maintain that various worrisome conditions—among them heart disease, hypertension, obesity, and diabetes—often respond favorably to increased physical activity and improvements in personal fitness. These problems arise from diverse sources and respond to various correctives, of course. No one holds that fitness is the key to averting or managing these conditions, merely that it is one possibly beneficial intervention in some cases.

In 2001, RWJF launched, under the thematic umbrella of its program for Active Living by Design (a portfolio of programs designed to increase opportunities for physical activity in the routine course of daily life), Celebrate Fitness, which made small grants to the tribal youth councils of nine Native American communities to promote physical activity among their members. The program sought to test the proposition that youth-led

planning and advocacy could effectively promote wellness in the funded communities.

The program had a three-pronged rationale. First, the need was unmistakable. The average life expectancy of Native Americans (70.6 years) is approximately six years below that of the general population (76.5 years) (National Indian Health Board n.d.: 3). Native Americans served by the Indian Health Service (IHS) lose ninety-five years of potential life (a measure of premature death) per one thousand versus fifty-five years per thousand in the general U.S. population (Henson and Taylor 2004: 128). Despite major improvements on almost all indicators since the 1970s, large health disparities persist between Native Americans and other groups (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2004: 15). Native Americans are 770 percent more likely than the larger population to die from alcoholism, 650 percent more likely to die from tuberculosis, 280 percent more likely to die from accidents, 52 percent more likely to die from pneumonia or influenza, and Native American infants die at rates 150 percent higher than white infants (*ibid.*: 8, 18; for figures showing somewhat smaller disparities, see Grim 2005: 3 and National Indian Health Board n.d.: 3). Obesity afflicts Native Americans at rates estimated to run two to ten times higher than those found in the general U.S. population (Support Services International 1997: 23), and rates of cardiovascular disease in Native America are twice those of that population (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2004: 15). Indians show the highest prevalence of type 2 diabetes in the world (Grim 2005: 4) are 420 percent more likely to die of the disease than are other citizens, and have seen a 54 percent increase in the prevalence of diagnosed diabetes in youth aged fifteen to nineteen since 1996 (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2004: 8, 10). Some powerful threats to the health of Native America—high rates of accidents and homicides, for example—may be little amenable, if at all, to active-living interventions, but many of the menacing conditions cited here may respond positively to fitness-promoting measures.

Second, mainstream foundations have been slow to assist Indian communities, partly because the federal government's IHS and Bureau of Indian Affairs are already on the case and partly because foundations do not readily identify within tribal governments and nontribal Native American communities' administrative structures with which they may confidently do business. Third, however, the tribal youth councils offered a plausible point of entry, a more or less serviceable home for the grants, and a link to a national organization, United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY), that had created the councils, could give technical assistance

to the grantees, and hosted national meetings at which these future Native American leaders could share experiences and exchange ideas.

The program adopted a dual funding stream that aimed simultaneously to give local youth the fiscal wherewithal and leeway to innovate and to enfold these youth initiatives within a supportive frame of central mentoring (the UNITY organization) whose assistance and oversight would help assure that the funds were wisely used. Small sums (\$20,000 per tribal youth council in each of two years) were awarded to UNITY and thence to the youth councils, which studied their community assets, needs, and preferences; contemplated goals and priorities; settled on strategic options for promoting fitness; and implemented their plans. A highly unusual grant, Celebrate Fitness, put funds in the hands of Native American teens to concoct grassroots initiatives under the supervision of Native American adults.

The nine grantees were chosen in a competition that ended up funding all applicants. The Akimel O'odham/Pee Posh Youth Council of the Gila River Indian Community represents a tribe of about 15,000 members who occupy a 372,000-acre reservation headquartered in Sacaton, Arizona. The Yavapai-Apache Youth Council represents an Apache community, headquartered in Camp Verde, Arizona, in which 1,785 tribal members live in four different tribal communities spread over 652 acres. The Dine Unity Youth of Kaibeto represents Navajos in a small Arizona town near the Utah border. The Tule River Tribal Youth Council represents 1,600 people, mainly Yocuts, on a reservation of 75,000 acres in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, forty-five minutes from Porterville, California. The Rising Sun Youth Council is set in a nonreservation-based community of 2,000 people, mainly Choctaws and Apaches, in Zwolle, Louisiana, a town near the Texas border about one hour south of Shreveport. The Waaniniigaanzijig Tribal Youth Council represents the Sault Sainte Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians and is based in Saint Ignace, a town on the southern tip of Michigan's Upper Peninsula in which Native Americans constitute about 2,000 people in a population of 3,338. The Creating a Personal Vision Youth Council is a body established by the Indian Center of Lincoln, Nebraska, the program's sole urban site, in which members of a dozen or so tribes of Native American and Alaskan natives accounted for 1,537 of the city's 225,581 residents. The To'hajiilee Warrior Spear Staff Youth Council represents the Canoncito band of Navajos, 2,000 people on a 66-acre reservation, about forty miles west of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Finally, the Chickasaw Nation District Youth Council is a group within the Chickasaw Nation of 12,516 people stretched across eight thou-

sand square miles and thirteen Oklahoma counties and is headquartered in Ada, about an hour south of Oklahoma City.

Methods

This account of the program's challenges and achievements rests mainly on information acquired in 2002–2004 from in-person interviews with participants (both youth and adult) in the design and implementation of the funded projects and with J. R. Cook (the director of UNITY) and UNITY staff in the organization's office in Oklahoma City. Interviews were conducted on site in seven of the nine funded communities and off site and by telephone for the other two. Documents supplied by UNITY and by the sites on the nature of their communities and their plans for Celebrate Fitness were also very useful.

Social Capital, Organizational Capacity

Within Native America, as elsewhere in the United States, no viewer of television, reader of newspapers and magazines, attender of school, or other participant in the give-and-take of public opinion can fail to recognize that improved fitness by means of increased physical activity promotes better health. Thus enlightened, some citizens will hop up and get active, but many require the guidance and encouragement of some type of group. The trick is to institutionalize insights about the links between fitness and wellness high on the agenda of organized entities that value health promotion as a matter of mission and worry over the means to advance it.

The Celebrate Fitness program took this critical first step by successfully implanting fitness on the agendas of the tribal youth councils it funded. “We wouldn't have taken the initiative on fitness without CF,” said a leader in Oklahoma. “Without this, it wouldn't be on our agenda.” An interviewee in Tule River remarked that Celebrate Fitness “jump started us” on fitness. Apparently word traveled far and wide: a survey conducted by UNITY found that, among responding sites (including but not limited to ones Celebrate Fitness funded), fitness had risen on youth priority lists from tenth to fourth overall—a datum that, in turn, raised the prominence of fitness on UNITY's own agenda.

Celebrate Fitness not only put the benefits of exercise squarely on the councils' agendas (the money alone, after all, doubtless sufficed to inspire formal pledges of allegiance to the mission) but also stimulated a small

but impressive cadre of youth leaders to ponder how to translate talk into action. The awarding of RWJF money directly to the councils was, as many participants remarked, a source of pride to the youths who, moved by this unaccustomed vote of confidence, transcended rhetoric and started investing their real money in real projects. The advent of the program also coincided with rising youth participation in the councils' proceedings. Protagonists in Zwolle estimated that their core of four youths and two adults had, after Celebrate Fitness arrived, expanded to fifteen youths and four to five adults who attended meetings regularly. In Camp Verde, planning and promoting a walking trail (the council's top priority) helped to induce about fifteen of that body's twenty-seven members to meet at least once per month. In Kaibeto, fifteen to twenty youths met once each week mainly around plans for Celebrate Fitness because, as a plainspoken adult leader explained, "CF is the only thing that gives us money."

By stimulating this focused organizational engagement, the Celebrate Fitness grant gave youth leaders "encouragement"—a term that popped up repeatedly in interviews as shorthand for the social capital that, as one adult leader observed, "youth growing up here don't get a lot of." Encouragement, contended a respondent, helps to combat isolation, which is pervasive within the tribes. A source in Tule River characterized the sports leagues in his community as, in effect, an antidote to bowling alone (Putnam 2000): "It means let's get 'em out of the house, get 'em together, and be active." The grant helped both to nourish and solidify capacity and confidence within the youth council organizations and to connect them to networks that included adult advisers, tribal leaders, other community organizations, and not least important, UNITY, an organization created to combat isolation. J. R. Cook, the head of UNITY, created the tribal youth councils as an institution intended to combat isolation by encouraging youth to picture and plan in concert for better communities.

The grant, moreover, invested the human and social capital that comes with encouragement and confidence in that crucial form of organizational capital called leadership. In Saint Ignace, Celebrate Fitness "put us in the real world, with our own money and responsibilities" and attracted the notice of the local chamber of commerce, which wanted to hear more of the teens' ideas about fitness. In Tule River, the youth leaders "attend their own meetings, and the tribal council meetings, and the health board meetings. They tell what they're doing and they're welcomed as doers not just talkers." Sometimes what they say converges with the priorities of tribal leaders—as in Gila River, where the governor and lieutenant governor, both diabetics, proclaimed a passion for fitness and let tribal employees

take an hour off each work day for exercise. In Camp Verde, youth leaders presented their proposed walking trail at a meeting of tribal leaders; adult advisers sat admiringly and “didn’t say a word” of objection, one recalled. In Zwolle, youth leaders discoursed on fitness before a packed room of respectful elders at a community dinner. As a leader in Lincoln succinctly noted, “People listen when I speak”—no small victory given the static often emitted by sharp tribal infighting for turf and resources in social and other programmatic arenas.

The Celebrate Fitness program not only advanced such leadership skills as public speaking and PowerPoint presentations but also helped to build a larger portfolio of capacities in which leadership shades subtly into management—handling grants, assessing community needs, assembling strategic options, steering negotiations toward agreement, communicating and learning via the Web site that UNITY staff in Oklahoma City designed and maintained for the program, writing reports, charting implementation plans, and—of course—learning how to return to the drawing board when best-laid plans crash and burn. Noting that tribal youth leaders often have parents who work in youth services programs, an adult adviser in Tule River contended that Celebrate Fitness helps youth to move into larger leadership roles (including, perhaps, membership on the tribal council itself) in their communities. Celebrate Fitness was, therefore, “a good long term investment in health promotion.” Moreover, the current and future benefits of Celebrate Fitness’s capacity building accrue not only to youth council members but also to their adult advisers, some of whom were youth council members in their day and are, in most of the Celebrate Fitness sites, still youthful themselves. Because these advisers often appear to be upwardly mobile within the (admittedly swirling and inscrutable) currents of tribal politics, the extra immersion that Celebrate Fitness gives them in health promotion is no small collateral contribution to the community’s social capital.

By underwriting commingling, communication, and commiseration among members of different councils at periodic regional and national conferences sponsored by UNITY, the grant also helped to amass inter-organizational capital. An adult adviser in Tule River explained that “with the grant we can present stuff at national conferences, which opens the youths’ eyes to other groups. They see ‘we’re not alone’!” An adviser in Lincoln added that, without Celebrate Fitness, “kids wouldn’t know that other kids out there are facing the same things. That’s the big difference [the grant makes]: it gives them a broader idea of what youth elsewhere are doing about fitness.”

Challenges and Responses

Tribal Youth Councils

Elevating fitness on the agenda of tribal youth councils and helping council members to develop the leadership and management skills to advance that agenda were necessary for the promotion of active living but were far from sufficient. Attainment of the program's goal—relatively sustained participation in fitness-enhancing activities by a nontrivial fraction of the funded communities—faces formidable motivational and logistical challenges.

The obstacle that tops the list of barriers to broader, deeper engagement is plain and simple: people are busy, so fitness must make a compelling case for a claim on their time. Tribal youth—especially the young leaders who ran Celebrate Fitness and other programs—are occupied with school, families, friends, jobs, grants for other funded youth programs, and sometimes sports. Many juggle visits, sometimes protracted, to divorced parents in other reservations or communities. Most interviewees agreed that getting youth to focus on fitness is a struggle and getting them to stick with fitness programs is no less so.

In all the sites, transportation issues combine with motivation to complicate participation. Most youths lack driver's licenses or cars, so parents, buses, or vans must convey them to and from activities beyond a walkable distance, which means that paid or volunteer drivers must be continually recruited. Tribal geography can raise the bar higher: in some sites, homes, schools, and sports facilities cluster together, but in many, they are widely separated. For instance, Gila River's youth council spans seven districts across 372,000 acres. Lincoln's urban setting—the residential norm for roughly 70 percent of Native Americans—encompasses members of several tribes housed all over town. Tule River's two thousand residents live compactly in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, but their children ride buses for forty-five minutes to and from schools in Porterville. Zwolle has a fine but un-air-conditioned gym; one with air-conditioning sits several miles away in Ebart. Most youth in Kaibeto attend schools thirty-six miles away in Page, which means a 6:30 a.m. departure and—if sports commence after school—a 7 p.m. return home.

Uneven distribution of facilities across communities further challenges buying into fitness. The Celebrate Fitness site in Oklahoma has such abundant resources—tennis courts, swimming pools, walking trails, tracks, and wellness centers—that “we haven't even tapped into it all.” But these riches stretch over a huge terrain and are not easily accessible to all tribal

members. Youth who live in the outlying districts in Gila River may travel an hour to use the tribe's excellent gyms and other resources. Other communities enjoy a few central venues for exercise, and youth who want something more or different must continually negotiate rides.

The sheer omnipresent difficulty of getting youth from point A to point B carries the motivational challenge to participation in fitness beyond the immediate beneficiaries, youth themselves, to elders, especially parents, whose assistance was everywhere characterized as crucial but spotty. A leader in one site saw “hardly any” engagement of parents and elders in Celebrate Fitness, a pattern that appeared pretty much across the board. (Ironically, the site from which the quoted leader comes rotates adult supervision of Celebrate Fitness among five volunteers and appears to enjoy more adult commitment than most other sites.) This paucity of parental involvement constricts the transportation that extensive youth participation presupposes and thus brings matters back to square one. People are busy (with work, household management, competing activities, relaxation), time and energy are finite, the intrinsic persuasive merits of fitness as a means to promote health mean little in the face of these obstacles, and engaged organizations must be on hand and equipped to sell Celebrate Fitness's health-promotion agenda skillfully if it is to ascend the list of personal and family priorities.

All the Celebrate Fitness sites converged on a set of strategies that helped to build support for their plans. Job one was that traditional public health chestnut, communication—tell the whole community about the case for fitness and about the fitness-promoting options on hand and, having told them, tell them again. Hence, media campaigns used public-service announcements and ads that announced events on the walls and sides of buses, in community newspapers, in television and radio spots, and in posters and flyers. Some concretized and personalized their appeals by identifying role models (e.g., the mother of an adult leader in Zwolle who, having recovered from a heart attack, began using light dumbbells while riding an exercise bike in front of the television) and, by telling the world about them, showed that exercise can indeed be inserted into everyday life.

Such mass appeals have their limits, however, one being that advertisers can sink considerable time and money into them without ever knowing which appeals moved whom to do what. The sites therefore adopted a second approach, one more narrowly targeted at community elites. Each tribe contains its “community power structure”—families of exceptional prestige and influence whose views carry special weight with tribal coun-

cils, chairs, and chiefs. Celebrate Fitness leaders sought the blessing of these notables and the legitimation that flows from it. A program leader remarked that, within his tribe, “if you can get the families with big influence interested, they’ll spread the word, but if they shake their heads at it,” plans may stall. Citing (and better still, importing for visits) Native American athletes as role models also helped Celebrate Fitness broadcast its message.

Communication and legitimation are important prods to participation, but they do not suffice. Youth and adult leaders in the sites concurred that a third strategy—plying participants with tangible rewards—is vital to a well-designed package of incentives. Everybody likes a free meal—for example, the community dinners for which the Oklahoma Celebrate Fitness youth furnished placemats imprinted with information about diabetes and the one in Zwolle at which youth leaders explained the benefits of fitness to a sizable cadre of elders enjoying homemade, potluck Indian cuisine. Projects that endow a community with new facilities evoke general gratitude and pride that may prompt people to check them out. Cases in point are new walking trails in Camp Verde and Saint Ignace and an outdoor exercise course and remodeled baseball field in Tule River. Tribes found such expanded facilities all the more welcome because school-based occasions for fitness were said to be inadequate and declining in the face of budget cuts. When fun runs and dances reward participants with banners, T-shirts, uniforms, regalia, pedometers, or otherwise unaffordable exercise gear and outfits, turnout rises. Trips are a highly prized incentive (“You tribal youth council guys get to have fun, you get to go places”) and by expanding the ranks of youth who could travel to Spokane, Palm Springs, Washington, DC, San Diego, and other venues at which UNITY held meetings, Celebrate Fitness drew admiring attention to its aims and activities. Social gatherings and face-to-face exchange are key vehicles of transmission of ideas in Native American culture, and spreading the news among tribes (and urban populations) encourages the diffusion of innovation (or at any rate the spirit of innovation).

Fourth, the sites stressed the instrumental value of fitness, especially in the management of diabetes. Closing this sale is surprisingly hard. Many Native Americans do not recognize that they are at risk for or in the early stages of diabetes. Some diagnosed diabetics view the condition fatalistically, as a hereditary condition about which nothing much can be done, dismissing “diabetes management” as an oxymoron. Even less-resigned diabetics may not understand how exercise can help to control the condi-

tion. A leader in Zwolle explained how “the media help — they tell people you don’t have to get diabetes if you watch your diet and exercise. But we don’t have many educated people here. People don’t know how diabetes slowly, silently kills you. They think it’s something old people get. You can talk all you want, but it boils down to show me. Why, if you live right you can live to 50, maybe more!” Making the connections means supplementing promotional talk with organizational action grounded in cultural norms. In Michigan, for instance, “we had talking circles and asked ‘who are you related to that’s ill?’” and explored measures (including fitness) that might help.

Action logic, even in matters of life and death, goes only so far, however. Program leaders across the sites agreed that the best-laid strategies to promote fitness fall short unless linked to a fifth incentive, namely, making fitness fun. This three-letter word rarely finds its way into the learned volumes of program design and health promotion, but it is, for better and for worse, fundamental to behavioral change of the type Celebrate Fitness encourages. On one hand, because Celebrate Fitness can fill a salient gap—one hears everywhere and often that “kids are longing for things to do,” that “there’s not much for them to do after school”—with, as one interviewee put it, “examples of having good times with fitness.” On the other hand, because the fun of fitness is inextricable from hard work and self-sacrifice, at least if activity is to be sustained and improved performance is a personal goal. “The hardest thing is to keep them interested,” a martial-arts coach in Oklahoma reflected ruefully. “The attitude toward Celebrate Fitness is ‘I like what it has to say but you mean I gotta work out?’! Between ages 7–14 it’s OK but after that they’ve got a boy- or girlfriend and you don’t see them again till they’re in their 20s.” In the hedonic calculi of consumers, fitness faces stiff competition from alternative (and sometimes unsavory and unhealthy) sources of fun. The mix of incentives crafted by one or another Celebrate Fitness site may not produce new legions of Olympians among Native American or other youths, but if sustained, expanded, and refined over time, these inducements may reach a critical mass of sufficient size and dedication to generate ripple effects within and across communities. The fundamental points for fitness promoters are that incentives are key, they are multiple, and their effective mixing and deployment demands committed, capable organizations with local knowledge and know-how.

Tribal Youth Agencies

The impressive youth leadership that Celebrate Fitness encouraged in the tribal youth councils depended importantly on the guidance of adults in formal roles in tribal youth, health, and/or social services departments and of others serving informally as volunteer youth advisers. Firm support by leaders in capable units of this sort is an invaluable resource, without which tribal youth councils are hard to maintain, let alone engage in productive projects. Enlisting support among tribal officials and volunteers was a salient challenge to Celebrate Fitness's health-promotion goals, however, and on this count, the glass stands half full, half empty. All nine sites enjoyed copious commitments of quality time from supportive adults, but all nine struggled constantly to secure and maintain staff leadership adequate to the task.

One set of staff frustrations turns on the management of space. Most Celebrate Fitness supervisors complained that their offices were too small, too often shared, and poorly equipped (e.g., inadequate or no computers). Some could count on access to excellent youth centers on site, but others found few (or no) basketball or volleyball courts, equipped weight rooms, running and walking tracks and trails, or other fitness basics within easy reach. Leaders were often obliged to use their own cars or trucks or to borrow vehicles from others, catch as catch can, to transport youth to facilities and events. Some tribes make available one or two fifteen-passenger vans (usually without air-conditioning), but signing up drivers can be difficult. Everywhere the supply of vans, cars, and drivers falls far short of youths' current demand for transportation to fitness opportunities, not to mention falling below the much-increased demand that Celebrate Fitness planners hope to trigger.

Time management was an equally pressing and pervasive challenge. Every supervisor in every Celebrate Fitness site had far too much to do in the time available, and notwithstanding the cliché, asking busy people is not the best tactic if one wants to get something as labor intensive as Celebrate Fitness on track. Tribal youth leaders and social-service workers are dedicated by vocation to Celebrate Fitness–like initiatives, but they are often preoccupied with running (or seeking) grants for other, bigger programs. For instance, Camp Verde's adult leader managed the tribe's Johnson-O'Malley program, in which federal funds support tracking attendance and grades of 350 students—the type of tall order likely to drive smallish projects like Celebrate Fitness down the practical priority list. Gila River's youth services department won both a Native American

Education College Service grant and a National Youth Wellness award. (“Mini-grants are not a big incentive if you’ve got lots of big grants,” an observer noted sheepishly.) These and other fruits of its sophisticated quest for outside funds are implemented by a complex tribal youth council structure that allocates two dozen teenagers (two elected in each of seven districts, plus nine chosen at large) across several committees that are expected to address fairly the needs of a huge reservation. Management of this sizable programmatic portfolio falls squarely on the coordinator of youth programs, who laments that tribal leaders have not answered his repeated pleas for more staff.

Volunteer leaders (usually parents of current or former tribal youth council members) who insert the program’s duties into their daily domestic whirl show the other side of the coin. Their lack of formal connection to the tribal bureaucracy may oblige them to plead with authorities for office space and access to copy machines, phones, computers, vehicles, and other vital resources. Celebrate Fitness is less likely to get lost in the programmatic shuffle that bedevils tribal officials, but volunteer leaders may lack the wherewithal to publicize it effectively and to mobilize sustained participation. Sadly, the nine sites seem to contain no happy medium between (1) overloaded administrative operations with impressive management capacity but too little time to use it effectively for Celebrate Fitness (Camp Verde, Gila River, Lincoln, Oklahoma, and Saint Ignace) and (2) underdeveloped operations that focus, in their fashion, on Celebrate Fitness but have too few management resources to move it forward very far (Tule River, Zwole, New Mexico, Kaibeto). Prospective funders can easily sketch the requisites of more adequate staffing, however: dedicated (at least one full-time) staff coupled with a plan for aggressive outreach to and by parent volunteers as a condition for receiving (or retaining) grants.

Even if paid and volunteer supervisors were more numerous and less thinly stretched, time management would remain a challenge because socializing and steering youth participants never settle down. Leaders of tribal youth councils tend to be older teens, who graduate from high school and move on to college and/or jobs, leaving a learning curve that their successors try to master under adult tutelage. The succession problem is recurrent and predicable, of course, and forewarned is forearmed. All the same, grooming new leaders for Celebrate Fitness and similar programs is an inherently tricky business: each new leadership cadre brings distinctive aptitudes for and commitments to the different projects and priorities youth councils tackle. That adult supervisors may themselves be moving

up or out for any number of reasons—a better job offer within or beyond the tribe, family relocation, battles with bosses or other tribal power holders, plans to earn a higher degree—means that novices may be initiating neophytes into the mysteries of program planning and management.

Even if youth council members and adult leaders stuck steadily with Celebrate Fitness, time management would remain frustrating for the simple reason that promoting fitness, once its inviting surface has been scratched, is a nuanced and complex concept. Fitness-promoting activities are many. Those pursued by one or another Celebrate Fitness site include hunting, fishing, hiking, swimming, volleyball, Frisbee, dancing, softball, mushball, running, football, Tae Bo, boxing, basketball (“the thing” among male youth), hiking or walking, weight lifting, water aerobics, handball, horseshoes, stickball, martial arts, hockey, cross-country skiing, skating, snowboarding (these last four in Saint Ignace), skateboarding, golf, bowling, and wrestling. The population groups that might benefit from one or more of these options are manifold as well: children, younger teens, older teens, males, females, well adults, adults with chronic conditions, and elders get differing degrees of “objective” good from different items on the list and, of course, approach the list with varying subjective tastes. Done well, matching activities with participants requires thoughtful and time-consuming customization.

Some tribal members have little idea where to go to exercise, how to get started, how to use equipment, how much of what type of activity to do how often, how to set realistic goals, and how to monitor progress (e.g., distance covered, calories burned, heart rate achieved, time elapsed, weight lifted, weight lost). Some like to work out in groups or in gyms, others prefer the privacy of home. Creating options for ad hoc exercise episodes is one thing, recruiting people to and enlisting them in regular exercise regimens is another. Some activities make simple demands of administrators (e.g., pointing out the walking trail, finding out when the pool is open); others entail organizing leagues, acquiring equipment, transporting teams, and imparting skills. Busy adult staff in Celebrate Fitness cannot begin to tackle such tasks.

Medical providers (e.g., physicians, nurses, dieticians) could and should help customize fitness routines for their patients and clients, but a wide-ranging community commitment would require new staff, presumably housed wherever Celebrate Fitness or kindred programs reside administratively. The words of a leader in Tule River apply pretty much all over: “We need an exercise physiologist at our gym, someone who’s well versed in all kinds of illness and can work with people, devise exercise programs

for them. A lot of people don't go to the gym because they don't know what to do." His back-of-the-envelope cost estimate was \$75,000 per year— not a princely sum, but nearly quadruple the sites' annual Celebrate Fitness grants. Of course, if a new supply of such services induced considerable new demand (precisely what one wants in principle), the new staff could be quickly overwhelmed. Saint Ignace, a participant recalled, "had exercise coaches, got eighty people involved, and fifteen people were e-mailing the coaches each day! And you need personal contact, not just e-mails. It's a big commitment to go community wide." Big commitments will require big sums from tribal coffers, external sources, or both. The message to fitness promoters is that financial support for projects is necessary but entirely insufficient without clear concomitant commitment to build the staff and organizational capacities that anchor and advance them.

Political Leaders

If Celebrate Fitness, or some future variant of it, is to be institutionalized—that is, carried beyond a time-limited, externally funded program into activities built durably into the substance of tribal policy—the support of a third institutional layer, tribal leaders (e.g., chiefs, chairs, council members) is essential. (The use of "tribes" here reflects the tribal or reservation-based nature of eight of the nine funded sites, but the same basic political dynamics apply to urban areas.) These leaders have many priorities, however, and must juggle diverse claims on tribal resources. The Celebrate Fitness program changed the balance of power, at least marginally: as one teenager remarked, "Money talks, and it's given youth a voice as a result." Still, winning leaders' general endorsement of better health achieved by means of enhanced physical activity is much easier than developing in them a sense of mission sufficient to send major resources in this direction.

At the top of the list of official priorities in the tribes Celebrate Fitness funded generally stand "economic development" and "elders and youth." Improved health status is integral to both these broad objectives, but forging links in leaders' minds between means, such as Celebrate Fitness, and these larger ends is never easy.

The biggest recent news in the political economy of Native America—the growth of wealth from casinos as a supplement to such familiar sources of income as mining, real estate, and sales of cigarettes—is a double-edged sword because it multiplies not only the resources available to tribal policy makers but also the numbers of claims and claimants seek-

ing their favor. Responses vary widely. Leaders in Saint Ignace have long made human resources a high priority and now channel sizable earnings from casinos and other assets into health and human services components of a carefully tended tribal long-term plan. (Even so, protecting youth budgets from cuts is not always easy.) In Gila River, a community with an extraordinarily high incidence of diabetes, the diabetologist governor pledged to combat that disease, but getting leaders to connect it with Celebrate Fitness was a stretch. An observer explained that among the seventeen members of the tribal council “at least five—the standing committee that approved the resolution [to pursue the Celebrate Fitness grant] know about CF. The council is interested but too overwhelmed with policy to deal with it much. The tribe is doing real well—three casinos, golf courses, housing. But their main preoccupation right now is water rights.”

Getting on the leaders’ radar screens entails intensive selling that begins (and may persist endlessly) with patient conversation and consultation. In Native America, the simple cut to the chase is poor form. J. R. Cook, head of UNITY, explained this fundamental element of political culture: “Asking people for input, for help, is a compliment. The idea is, if you go over my head, I’ll run it down. Ask me in and I might say no, but I won’t obstruct it.” This etiquette is easier sketched than practiced because several people may hold pieces of power, and tribal governments may have complex hierarchies and distant headquarters. (In Zwolle, the authorities are right down the street. In Kaibeto, they are an hour’s drive away.)

Once tribal leaders have smiled on the work of program builders, the latter must carefully share credit if and when they make progress. In one site, for example, “the chief wasn’t thrilled with CF because we did it without him, and he wouldn’t help us much. He likes grants that make him the cock of the walk.” Gender differences—in this typical case, male chief, female grant seekers—may aggravate tensions over credit claiming.

Native American culture prizes the sharing of credit, but tribal life often also encompasses deep-seated, long-lived feuds among individuals and families that inhibit simple interpersonal cooperation let alone collective action. One leader noted sadly that “a small number of people and families have lived on this reservation for *years*. Feuds get started, and they persist. It’s personal, not ideological.” This observer spoke from experience: having antagonized a tribal council member (a physically imposing type who intimidated his council mates), he lost his job as youth coordinator—an exile that ended only after the council member in question declined to seek reelection, the rest of the council relented, and the observer’s job was restored. Such conflicts may also be intertribal. Celebrate Fitness’s

New Mexico site was bogged down in battling over resources by two distinct governments fighting for recognition and control of the Canoncito community.

Advancing programs like Celebrate Fitness in Native America is a subtle but intense political game with rules of its own. If such programs are to stand much chance of success, proponents should begin by carefully canvassing the structures of community power to identify personal and familial factions and seek allies accordingly. Within this supportive sphere, they should then diligently explain to leaders not only why their initiative is good policy on the merits but also why it meets their credit-claiming needs (in Native American politics, as elsewhere, money tends to address this concern pretty clearly) and then generously spread credit around. As projects roll out, implementers should understand that the hard work has only begun, and they should labor to keep conversation and consultation going with a wide range of tribal leaders—even, indeed, especially when the pressing demands of program management make small talk look like an expensive, perhaps wasteful, luxury. None of this has much to do with public health lore or policy analysis as explicated in the texts, but within the institutional and personal politics of Native America, such skillful base-touching is crucial to getting (not to mention staying) in the game at all.

Organizational Environment

A large cast of organizational characters outside Celebrate Fitness embraces missions that overlap at least partially with Celebrate Fitness's and command resources that could do much to augment fitness-promoting activities. Celebrate Fitness, however, suffers from a strategic introversion common among applicants who seek and win external grants. Money at last in hand, the lucky local planners want to hit the ground running, make their presence felt, and cement the allegiance of key supporters. This laudable urge to get on with the job narrowed the focus of Celebrate Fitness (as of so many other programs) toward short-term manipulation of funds in hand at the expense of longer-range thoughts on leveraging larger resources in the hands of organizations in the core coalition's environment.

Opportunities for institutional coordination begin at home, within tribal structures themselves. In some tribes (e.g., Camp Verde and Tule River), school buses drop kids off near recreation centers and gyms, so closer cooperation between Celebrate Fitness leaders and the managers of recre-

ation departments might help expand both the range of available activities and participation in them. The same logic extends to social services and education departments, with which Celebrate Fitness might work to (as a leader in Camp Verde put it) “make healthy living flow through it all, from kids to adults.” In the course of an interview, a tribal leader remarked that “come to think of it,” such tribal units might cooperate to “incorporate healthy snacks” into a play then being produced and that counselors in a federally funded school program could start emphasizing healthy eating and exercise.

On one hand, Gila River’s Celebrate Fitness leaders hoped to introduce a fitness project into their alcohol- and drug-abuse program’s “sober challenge week” and envisioned a youth council that would incorporate education about diabetes into its Turning Point Partnership. On the other hand, youth leaders in this rich but bureaucratically complex tribe lamented disconnects among Celebrate Fitness, the Department of Health, and the hospitals and clinics of their Health Care Corporation. “Everyone wants a share of the money,” so organizational rivalry may stymie collaboration. And alongside disconnects stand latent occasions for cooperation that go unrecognized for want of time or attention. Camp Verde’s leaders, for instance, were not sure whether the health center was promoting the walking trail.

There is no magic formula for successful cooperation, but opportunities abound. A youth council member in Gila River urged Celebrate Fitness to begin working with the tribe’s diabetes department, and leaders in Saint Ignace pondered closer connections between its nutrition department and Celebrate Fitness. Economic development councils and offices, prominent in most tribes, could help fund youth centers, gyms, and trails—a strategy that only the New Mexico site seems to have pressed aggressively. Schools are a plain target of opportunity: some sites bus their children to schools in which Native American youths are a minority (and therefore tend not to be an influential policy voice), but in other cases, Native Americans are a majority in community schools or get at least part of their education in reservation-based schools. These latter circumstances presumably enhance chances of engaging schools in both teaching the importance of fitness and enhancing physical education and after-school activities that promote it.

To be sure, coordination seldom offers painless gains. Schools, for example, are not *tabulae rasae* on which innovators are welcome to inscribe their preferred agendas (antiobesity or pro-fitness campaigns and so on), but rather, they are complex formal organizations with structures

and processes that limit the outcomes they agree to pursue. The Canoncito schools derailed Celebrate Fitness plans to buy exercise equipment for the school gym by refusing to keep the gym open after school hours and added insult to injury by holding Celebrate Fitness funds in a school budget frozen while the Federal Bureau of Investigation looked into embezzlement charges. Rolling with the punches, youth leaders gamely commenced discussions with the tribe's behavioral health department about housing the equipment in its new building. Notwithstanding such roadblocks and U-turns, one can safely say that the Celebrate Fitness sites have barely scratched the (admittedly hard) surface of cooperation with promising tribal partners.

The same problem—rich possibilities for interorganizational cooperation that remain too little activated—arises outside tribes in the local communities around them. Local newspapers and television and radio stations, valuable sources of (possibly free) publicity for Celebrate Fitness's doings, are sometimes engaged, sometimes not. Community health centers might try harder to impress their patients that fitness can contribute to better health if Celebrate Fitness and its allies lobbied them harder to do so. In Lincoln, the YWCA made discounted memberships available to lower-income residents. Other Ys (often the best available venue for swimming and water aerobics) might be persuaded to get into the act in this or other ways. In Gila River, turf fights between the tribe and the Boys and Girls Clubs froze cooperation; other sites might have better luck. Police Athletic Leagues may lend a helping hand. Zwolle's Celebrate Fitness leaders were grateful to the local Veterans of Foreign Wars, who gave T-shirts to youth and let them use their hall for meetings, and contemplated asking Boise South, a large local employer said to be a good citizen, to grant hikers access to its large landholdings. Lincoln has a Ponca (tribal) center, a medical center, and an Urban Indian Center, which serve many Native Americans and could help publicize and perhaps organize fitness activities. But, said a Celebrate Fitness leader, "coordination is weak, the leaders are too busy, and competition for money and turf gets in the way." Some sites—notably Lincoln, New Mexico, Gila River, and Zwolle—have universities nearby and hence have access to experts in public health, medicine, social work, planning, and other pertinent bodies of knowledge. In virtually all sites, churches are a potent potential (and underused) source of information and advocacy for the Celebrate Fitness agenda.

Beyond communities and their voluntary organizations lies the public sector—agencies of county, state, and federal governments, including,

of course, the IHS. In Lincoln, the county health department conducts diabetes screenings that presumably could be coupled more closely with promoting exercise as a disease-management strategy. The Oklahoma and Lincoln Celebrate Fitness sites have approached local juvenile justice and corrections officials about including youth who are in legal trouble in Celebrate Fitness events. In Michigan, the tribal youth council persuaded the Mackinaw County Commission to reserve land for a walking path along the shoreline of Lake Huron and then worked with a Hiawatha National Forest ranger, who provided tools and (as one teen participant recalled) taught the youth “how to break a trail with a firefighting method.”

About eight miles from Zwolle sits Toledo State Park, an inviting site for outdoor activities. Nebraska’s Office of Minority Affairs has a Native American liaison eager for ideas about health promotion and the role of fitness therein. Many federal programs invite, or might be receptive to, collaboration with Celebrate Fitness. These include IHS clinics, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grants, Youth Opportunity and Indian Education programs, Johnson-O’Malley programs, and more.

Celebrate Fitness leaders, overtaxed and understaffed, can only skim this list of targets of opportunity. Even if their resources were more abundant, however, how far they might effectively be devoted to interorganizational affairs is an open question. Agencies within and outside tribes are constrained by laws, regulations, budgets, missions, and preferences, and local applicants can exhaust themselves in frustrating, futile quests to win funds and influence people. Potentially supportive agencies, themselves often underfunded and thinly staffed, may not welcome further claims on their time and resources. (Tule River, for example, has a fine health center in the heart of the reservation, but its overworked registered nurse so far lacks time to work closely with Celebrate Fitness.) At each institutional level sketched here, rivalries among agencies for funds and turf are rife, and the principled case for cooperation repeatedly collapses into tense and barely veiled competition. Public and nonprofit service agencies sometimes clash with a ferocity that would make a hardened corporate CEO blush, and no recipe exists for cutting through such conflicts. The introversion of local grantees, then, is not only an ingrained instinct but also often a rational adaptation to rebuffs.

The point here is not that more coordination is necessarily better but simply that if Celebrate Fitness or comparable projects are to be institutionalized successfully, their leaders should—preferably sooner than later, but better late than never—map carefully the universe of potential

organizational supporters; ponder the goodness of fit between fitness-enhancing activities and the missions, budgets, and plans of the agencies in question; guesstimate prospects for payoff; and then encourage bonding with promising institutional allies.

Community and Culture

If Celebrate Fitness is effectively institutionalized, it will, over time, generate ripple effects within its communities from tribal youth council leaders to youth peers to their families to adults and elders and, by example, to Indian communities at large. These effects may be small now (and for the foreseeable future), but through patient tenacity, the program might achieve changes in behavior. Buy in by a spectrum of public and private organizations is crucial to such cultural learning (for cultures look and learn as well as constrain and teach), but those manning these institutional superstructures face brute facts of social structure, which, in much of Native America, means addressing a culture less *of* than *in* poverty, a condition that is not, by and large, a high road to healthy living.

Even more than other groups heavily skewed toward lower socioeconomic status, Native America wrestles with a long list of social problems. In 1997, the poverty rate among Native Americans was twice that of the general population (Henson and Taylor 2004: 146). Unemployment is estimated at 49 percent (35 percent, if those who have stopped looking for work are excluded from the count). Native American youth drop out of high school twice as frequently as whites (Support Services International 1997: 37, 2, 31). Incarceration rates run high. Mental illness takes a heavy toll that available mental health services are far too limited to assuage. (The reservation, said one Celebrate Fitness leader plaintively, is “a narrow, enclosed world. These lovely foothills are prison walls for many. Enclose their world, and they go at each other.”) Suicide rates among Native Americans aged fifteen to twenty-four are 2.5 times higher than those found in the larger population (two times higher for those aged twenty-five to forty-four). A survey of students at Bureau of Indian Affairs schools found that 29 percent—including 36 percent of females—had seriously considered suicide within the previous twelve months (IHS 2001: 166–168; Support Services International 1997: 25). Alcohol and drugs are widely abused—drug-related deaths among Native Americans in the mid-1990s stood 65 percent above those in the general population (IHS 2001: 233). Alcohol-related deaths claim Native Americans at rates seven times those of all races—and seventeen times more

often within the fifteen-to-twenty-four age category (*ibid.*: 108; Support Services International 1997: 20). Treatment options are (again) few and poor. Homicides exceed those in the larger society by 63 percent, and sexual assaults and abuse are estimated to be five times more common on reservations than in nearby rural counties (IHS 2001: 96, 2). Indeed, Native American women become victims of crime at a rate 50 percent above that for black males (Henson and Taylor 2004: 134). A Celebrate Fitness participant who worked on the tribe's child protective team called it "scary to see what your neighbors do. We'd try to place kids with drug- and alcohol-free families, but it's hard to find them!" Domestic violence, including physical and verbal abuse of children, "leave[s] marks on self-esteem," said another understatedly.

Healthy living gets compressed within the unfriendly confines of difficult daily lives. People are tired, television beckons. "If you have a limited income a Big Mac is cheap and could be that day's only meal." "Here it's all fried food and soda—even in baby bottles—from the early morning." "The basic diet here on the reservation is meat and grease." Processed, salty government food commodities are accessible; fresh fruit, vegetables, and other produce can be a long drive away, take time to prepare, and may not be viewed as a "lasting, filling meal." These nutritional patterns push fitness farther out of reach and are not readily reversible. "We give the kids information on this and that, but then they go home and the lifestyle is so different," mused an adult leader in Lincoln. "It's fried this and that. We gotta educate parents who cook big heavy meals and expect the kids to eat it."

Designing and building exercise into such lifestyles is a tall order. "Families just don't think that such activity is normal," an interviewee observed. "You suggest they start taking walks, and they say 'why?'" And with an insidious subtlety, cultural norms put layers of barriers before change agents like Celebrate Fitness. For example, Native Americans are said often to discount media images of "people who don't look like us," and to "get offended when told they're overweight, even when it has to do with diabetes." Native Americans have "strong norms about not telling people what to do." Other norms discourage "prospering, looking self-important and above the group." "Doing well" (e.g., excelling in school, buying a new car, or pursuing unusually diligent exercise routines), a respondent explained, may trigger envy in the community and a sense of guilt in the doer.

These troubling sociocultural characteristics may respond favorably to broader and better economic development, school systems, social services,

and income redistribution—reforms that are highly desirable but hardly imminent. Meanwhile, small interventions like Celebrate Fitness can make a modest salutary mark by affirming the positive within this complex cultural quilt. Within Native America, fitness is not (only) a vision driven down and out by the daily grind, but it is also a legacy, a spiritual inheritance that can exert sizable contemporary lift and thrust. A chief eloquently recaptured what had been lost.

We lived in the country, no air conditioning. You heard sounds through the window—owls and such. The TV was black and white and got three channels. We had to entertain ourselves—we'd fish, climb trees, run up and down the road. We pumped water from a well and gardened. There are no challenges now. And you fear to walk in the woods 'cause you don't know who's out there. You work all day, then you sit, mostly. You don't want to come home and start running—you're tired, you crash, you watch TV. If the family doesn't support the kid or get involved, it's hard. It goes back to momma (often there's no papa there). And there's video games and all that stuff on TV. For some of our four year olds it's Scooby Doo and peanut butter sandwiches all day long.

The bad news is that the active living of yore is largely gone. The better news is that its spirit may be regained and, suitably fortified, might advance to confront present-day pathologies. Walking trails, hiking clubs, fun runs (sometimes named for departed ancestors), traditional dances, powwows, and games such as mushball connect a healthier future with an honorable past. And some nontraditional activities may come to bear a Native American imprint. (In Lincoln, for instance, an adult adviser aimed to become a certified aerobics instructor and then “make tapes with Indian music and powwow dances, the idea being that aerobics should be a source of motivation and pride.”) Fitness is not simply a desired resultant of sociocultural change but is also, and equally, an engine of change—or, better put, of changes, the value of which does not decline (still less disappear) because they cannot directly transform local economies, reallocate incomes, fix schools, or endow Native America with effective social services. Native America is not about to be comprehensively reformed by the public or any other sector, and the putative choice between systemic and incremental reforms is spurious. The practical challenge is how to mix and match programs most productively for the benefit of particular communities resolved to chip away at an infinite to-do list.

Conclusion

This article has traced the implementation of an innovative health-promotion program while making next to no mention of such usual suspects as public health agencies and very minor mention of such strategic staples as public health information, education, and communication. These strategies are important, but they are preliminary links in a complex institutional chain composed of highly informal assemblages such as tribal youth councils, small bureaucratic entities (e.g., youth, health, and social-services departments) within tribes, political governing bodies (e.g., tribal councils, chairs, and chiefs), and complex formal public and private organizations (e.g., government agencies, YMCAs, and so on) in tribal environments, all working within the constraints—and opportunities—of cultural forces that shape, but do not determine, the content and limits of workable interventions. In the case of Celebrate Fitness, health promotion is institutionally mediated across multiple levels, layers, and links. Promoting health entails working one's way up and down, back and forth, across this institutional terrain, cultivating and coordinating its elements into some coherent, purposive whole. Public health as doctors' orders will not do. The vigorous community partnerships that effective health promotion entails demand mastery of the tools and skills of organizational and political analysis: deciphering power structures, interpreting misions, building constituencies, crafting incentives, cementing legitimacy, reading cultural nuances, and, not least important, gauging and building institutional capacity.

How far the particulars of Celebrate Fitness, with its youth-leadership strategy, Native American target population, and fitness focus, may be generalized to other health-promotion programs is of course a good question that cannot be addressed here—although it may not be amiss to conjecture that the similarities among situations far outweigh the differences. Health promotion depends (as our young interviewees might put it) on “learning to deal” with the partly receptive, partly refractory institutional players that command the power and funds that determine, in turn, whether health promoting projects end up as public health pieties gone up in thin air or (like Celebrate Fitness) programs that help vulnerable citizens build better lives.

Implications

Various would-be change agents in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors have been disappointed by their dealings in Native America and fear

to tread farther there. The barriers to effective intervention are formidable to be sure: poverty and its sad concomitants (e.g., unemployment, educational failures, substance abuse) deep enough to leave the impression that only the surface may be scratched, fierce and opaque tribal politics, limited managerial capacities, and the geographical and institutional separation of many Native Americans from accustomed categories of grantees combine to persuade some funders that Native America is a black hole into which dollars simply sink. Celebrate Fitness should nourish cautious optimism that investments by change agents can pay off after all. The program is a small step in the right direction toward ameliorating some of the severest health conditions and the most dramatic health disparities in the United States. Potential funders and policy makers might derive several modest lessons from its record.

Think about Institutions

The question crucial to forecasting the prospects for effective health promotion in Native America is not who is on first, who sits at the table, but rather whether the principals in a community have and are willing to use the political capital to mobilize the power of organizations and institutions with which they have influence. Is the tribal youth council vital and well run? Do tribal health, youth, and social-services officials have a commitment to health promotion and the time, staff, and resources to advance it? Do tribal leaders (e.g., chiefs, chairs, councils) present a political setting positive (or at least neutral) enough to carry them beyond signing pro forma letters of support for grant applications? Are health-related organizations in the community's environment on board or likely to be brought on board? Have applicants contemplated the connections between their health-promotion designs and the challenges of culture and socioeconomics in their community? A granter's life would be pleasant indeed if the answer to these questions were "yes" often enough to inspire confidence. Often, however, the answer is "no" or "who knows?" The payoff from institutional thinking is not to assure funders of safer bets and surer returns on investment but rather to supply better understanding (and perhaps some narrowing) of the range of risks one inevitably runs and a heightened sense of the importance of realistic expectations and technical assistance.

Set Realistic Expectations

The changes on which health promotion depends require building local institutional capacity. Viewed in this light, excessive focus on return on investment and on “demonstrations” that put change in motion and then pull out just as communities are getting up to speed may be counter-productive. Institution building takes time; initial returns are subtle and often invisible to the casual eye. Between plans and outcomes, events matter mightily. Microaccomplishments such as fun runs, fitness fairs, and sports leagues empower youth, help develop human (and social) capital, and build champions for health promotion, who may soon rise to leadership within tribes and communities. Funders should not disdain such simple, doable victories, the incremental accumulation of which is a necessary prelude to bigger and more intricate achievements. Improvements in health-status outcomes lie well down a long road, and nothing is gained by impatient attempts to short-circuit the construction of human social capital and capacity.

Enlist Junior Partners

Celebrate Fitness shows that youth leadership and development can contribute importantly to health promotion. Fortified with funds for health promotion and the vote of confidence that such grants confer, tribal youth leaders breathe new life into governance and allocation patterns that have ossified, call attention to priorities that may otherwise get mere lip service, elevate fitness and health promotion on personal and institutional agendas both within and outside tribes, create new allies and advocates for health promotion, and raise the probability that future leaders will understand the value of health promotion for their constituents. Grant makers may derive unsuspected benefits from these unusual suspects.

Trust but Verify

Youth do not, however, simply hit the ground running and commence accumulating incremental victories for health promotion. Amid much disorganization and uncertainty, they require steady guidance and invitations to focus from adult leaders within their communities and from intermediary organizations such as UNITY, which supplied the young Celebrate Fitness protagonists not only with how-to material and other types of technical assistance but also with links to exciting developments

in the larger society, giving youth a sense of participation in something bigger than their quotidian realities. The success of an intervention such as Celebrate Fitness demands both leadership and followership by both youth and adults.

Accentuate the Positive

The deficiencies and disparities in Native American health statistics are well known—best known, alas, to Native Americans themselves. Health-promotion programs such as Celebrate Fitness are an invitation to affirm an asset-based approach that casts Native Americans not as stoic victims of disease or passive recipients of good public health counsel but rather as planful agents who derive from their culture and traditions fitness agendas with palpable rewards both smaller (e.g., T-shirts and trophies) and larger (e.g., better health for self, family, and community). And confidence is arguably a crucial first step toward building the institutional capacities that promote healthier communities.

References

- Grim, C. W. 2005. Testimony on the Status of Indian Health before the Committee on Indian Affairs, United States Senate. 109th Cong., 1st sess., April 13.
- Henson, E., and J. B. Taylor. 2004. *Native America at the New Millennium*. Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.
- Indian Health Service. 2001. *Trends in Indian Health, 1998–1999*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- National Indian Health Board. n.d. *Fiscal Year 2005 AI/AN National Budget Perspective*. Washington, DC: National Indian Health Board.
- Putnam, R. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Support Services International. 1997. *Profile of the State of Indian Children and Youth: Final Report*. Silver Spring, MD: Support Services International.
- U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. 2004. *Broken Promises: Evaluating the Native American Health Care System*. Washington, DC: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

