Abstract for Paper in Response to the UML CITA Request for Paper Submissions

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The Environmental Literacy Project: Opportunities and Barriers Found in a University-Community Partnership for Regional Occupational and Environmental Health

The University of Massachusetts Lowell has been, for 16 years, the base for a regional hazardous waste and hazardous materials incident emergency response worker health and safety training program. This program, The New England Consortium (TNEC), currently includes five occupational health and safety advocacy organizations from throughout New England: The Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH); The Western Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (Western MassCOSH); The Rhode Island Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (RICOSH); the Connecticut Council for Occupational Safety and Health (ConnectiCOSH); and, the New Hampshire Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (NHCOSH). TNEC is funded through the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences’ (NIEHS) Worker Education and Training Program, as one of twenty national programs funded for this effort.

This training program addresses an intersection between occupational and environmental health issues and strategies. In 1999, TNEC began discussing ways to increase COSH group funding to address the problems of limited technical literacy that hamper communities, regions, and states from being able to more effectively address environmental health issues, particularly environmental justice issues. A request for applications from NIEHS provided an opportunity to write a proposal to fund these two objectives. Unfortunately, as often happens in university-community partnerships, organizational constraints and communication barriers prevented consortium members from being able to collectively develop proposal language that fully addressed the concerns and interests of member organizations. Nonetheless, the proposal included a request to support an Environmental Literacy Project (ELP) which would provide each COSH group an opportunity to address these issues in unique ways suited for their part of New England. The ELP proposal was strongly supported by the NIEHS reviewers whose only recommendation was that an evaluation component be included in the project. TNEC managers proposed to base ELP evaluation upon the methods and principles established in an early NIEHS-supported worker health education evaluation project called the Self-Sufficiency Research and Evaluation Project (SREP). This model was selected because it provided demonstrated approaches that support the full involvement of worker-trainers in the development, implementation, and analysis of worker health education evaluation programs. The ELP is now completing its second year, and although quite successful, has been hampered by conflicts that have evolved from the limitations of the proposal development process.

This paper will discuss the TNEC Environmental Literacy Project. We will begin with the discussions that led us to develop the project, as well as the structural consortium constraints that resulted in the development of a proposal that would not satisfy the needs and interests of member organizations. We will also address the first two years of program development and implementation, which include implementation of a SREP-based evaluation effort. These conflicts will be further discussed in the context of university-community partnerships that are formed to addressed regional health issues.

This paper addresses the following topic areas listed on the CITA Request for Papers: Health and Its Many Links to Sustainability; Universities Supporting Public Health and a Healthy Economy; The Implications of Diversity for Supporting Public Health and a Healthy Society; and, New Ideas and New Organizations.