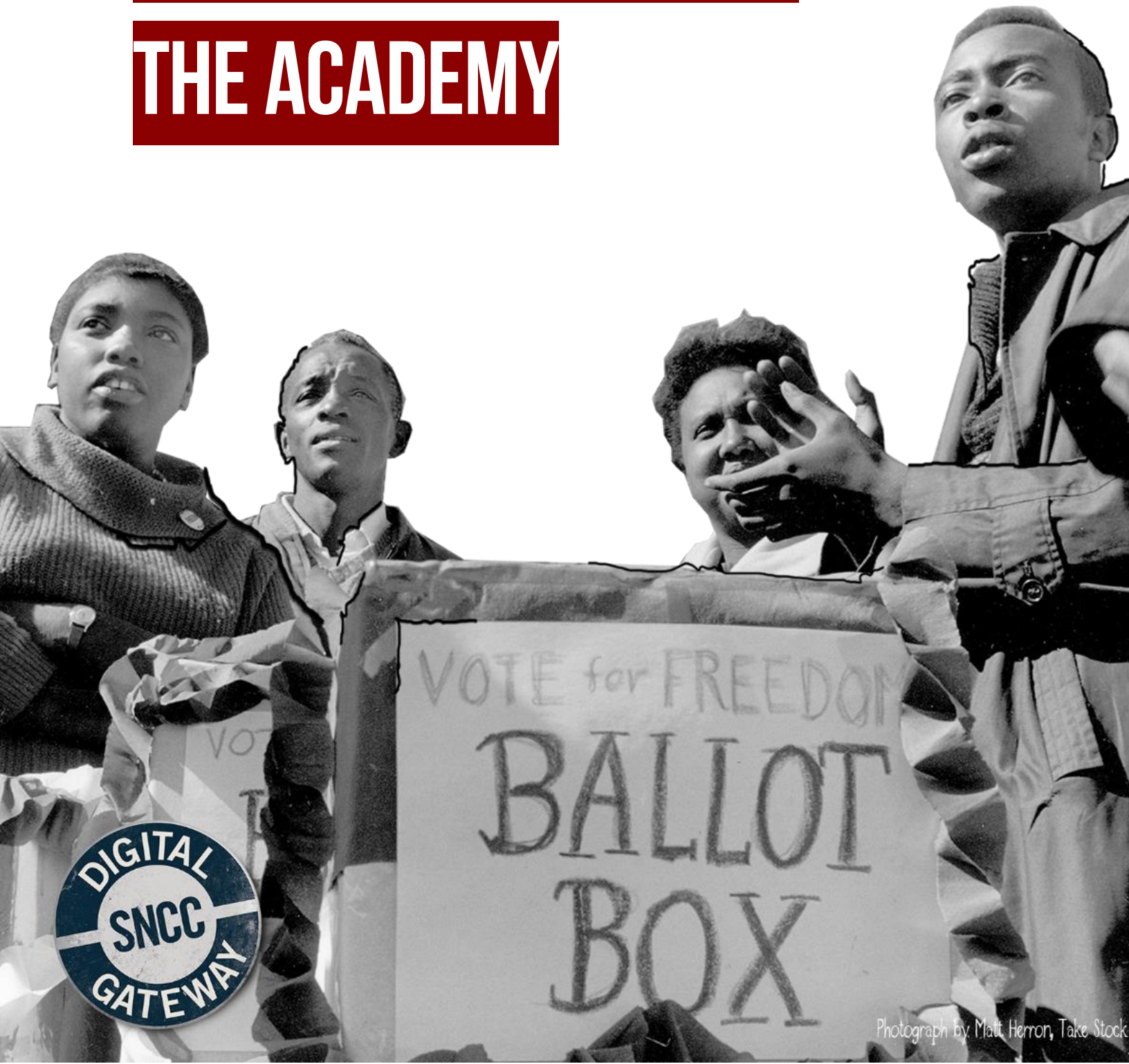


BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

BETWEEN ACTIVISTS &

THE ACADEMY



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PREFACE

In 2013, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Legacy Project, the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, and Duke University Libraries formed a partnership to chronicle SNCC's historic struggles for voting rights and to develop ongoing programs that contribute to a more civil and inclusive democracy in the 21st century. Collaborations between activists and universities have a long, fraught history. A pattern of exploitive relationships with elite white institutions and scholars had created deep distrust among SNCC veterans. So what made this collaboration between activists and the academy work? This paper lays out what we found to be the essential components for a successful partnership, one that's built on equitable relationships, mutual respect, trust, and a common vision.

The SNCC (pronounced "snick") Legacy Project was formed by movement veterans to preserve the history of SNCC's grassroots organizing work and to assist today's scholars, activists, and organizers. During the 1960s, SNCC became the cutting edge of the direct-action Civil Rights Movement, focusing on both political freedom and equal economic opportunity. SNCC was the only national, southern-based civil rights organization begun and led primarily by young people. Its full-time student workers, "field secretaries," worked with local Black communities to help them organize and take control of their own lives. Together, they organized a grassroots movement for change that empowered these communities and transformed the nation.

The partnership between the SNCC Legacy Project (SLP) and Duke University brought together SNCC veterans, noted civil rights scholars, library professionals, and students in a multi-faceted, multi-year project that sought to change the normative story of the Civil Rights Movement. The goal was to tell the story of SNCC's organizing from the bottom up and inside out, exploring SNCC's thinking and how their work at the grassroots affected how people organized to change history, while also making SNCC materials more widely accessible to students, teachers, activists, and citizens. SLP and Duke also sought to create a replicable model for partnerships between activists and scholars in which the former could have the primary voice in assembling archival materials and shaping the historical narrative.

The collaboration's pilot website, *One Person, One Vote: The Legacy of SNCC and the Fight for Voting Rights*, launched in March 2015. Thanks to a generous three-year grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, project partners were able to expand that work into the *SNCC Digital Gateway* website (snccdigital.org). During all phases of the project, SNCC partners have been central in shaping the telling of SNCC's story. They have worked collaboratively with historians of the Movement, archivists, and students to weave together grassroots stories and primary source material and create new multimedia productions that illuminate this history for new generations.

PROJECT PARTNERS

“It’s possible, with the right people and the right place, to make things happen that otherwise cannot happen.” –Bill Chafe, founder of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

ACTIVIST PARTNERS

Are organized.

The SNCC Legacy Project was established in 2010, following the 50th anniversary conference celebrating SNCC’s founding. Within six months, the organization had a governing board, its own 501(c)(3) status, and the support of a significant number of SNCC veterans. Its mission was to preserve the history of SNCC’s work and to assist today’s scholars, activists, and organizers in continuing the struggle for human and civil rights. The SLP’s 501(c)(3) status gave it an institutional equivalency in the partnership with Duke University Libraries and the Center for Documentary Studies. SLP had established ways to solicit feedback from SNCC veterans and could make decisions as an organization. As a legal entity, SLP could enter into agreements with the university, own copyright, etc.

Have a clear purpose but are flexible on the means.

It was essential that the SNCC Legacy Project was clear and united regarding the purpose of and vision for the project. One of SLP’s major objectives was to create new works to interpret and provide fresh perspectives on SNCC ideas and experiences for a 21st century audience. Before entering into a partnership with Duke, the SLP Board had developed proposals for different ways to tell SNCC’s history from the perspective of the activists themselves and how

to pass their “informational wealth” on to subsequent generations. They brought this prior work into partnership with Duke. While SLP was clear on vision, they were also flexible about the means of carrying it out and embraced new opportunities that presented themselves throughout the course of the project.

Have strong relationships around which to marshal support.

Many movement veterans distrusted scholars. Too many, they felt, had failed to include the perspectives of the activists and gotten the story of the Movement wrong. Elite universities also had a long history of exploitive relationships with activists. “There was a lot of suspicion among members of our [SLP] Board about Duke and this relationship and questions of ownership and all of this,” SNCC veteran Charlie Cobb explained. The SLP partners who were working with Duke needed to demonstrate to their board members, as well as the broader community of SNCC veterans, how the collaboration would be equitable and would get a more authentic telling of SNCC’s story to a wider audience. SLP partners drew on the strong relationships that had developed within SNCC to marshal support as well as to diligently represent the interests of SNCC veterans throughout the collaboration. These efforts became easier as the project produced tangible work that won the approval of SNCC veterans.

UNIVERSITY PARTNERS

Have a history of valuing the stories of everyday people.

Beginning in the 1970s, the Duke Oral History Program had trained a generation of scholars that valued the voices of ordinary people and pushed the boundaries of what kinds of stories could be told. Over four decades, it produced forty-five Ph.D.'s. Nearly thirty of their dissertations on grassroots activism were published, and eighteen of these won national book prizes, helping to change, significantly, the way historians write about the Civil Rights Movement. The program's commitment to everyday people in many ways paralleled SNCC's approach to grassroots organizing. Over time, its success created leverage and support in the university, which eventually led to the founding of the Center for Documentary Studies in 1989. By the time the SNCC Legacy Project approached scholars and librarians at Duke about a partnership, there was a strong base of people and institutions committed to local movement studies, as well as a favorable environment within the university for a project of this kind.

Have institutional will.

The SNCC Legacy Project found institutional will within Duke University in the form of people who were willing to commit to the project. Support from Naomi Nelson, the director of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library; Wesley Hogan, the director of the Center for Documentary Studies; and William Chafe, founder of the Duke Oral History Program and the Center for

Documentary Studies, and a former dean of Duke's Trinity College of Arts & Sciences, was essential in getting the project off the ground. They believed in the vision of the project, but more importantly, were willing to put in the time and energy to bringing that vision to fruition. Working together, they secured funds for the initial project and mobilized resources within their respective institutions, which was possible because the project aligned with the university's mission and programmatic goals.

Are flexible.

By entering into the collaboration with activists, university partners demonstrated an openness to nontraditional ways of working and creating knowledge. Two concepts common to the library and academic world—objectivity and efficiency—had to take a back seat in the partnership. Content produced for the website met rigorous citation standards, but it told history from the point of view of those who created it. The premise was that the input and insights of the activists were absolutely essential to getting the story right. University partners needed to accept that working in an equitable relationship with activists sometimes required more work and lengthy, ongoing, small “d” democratic conversations. University partners at Duke were also flexible in the day-to-day work and committed to finding a way when potential roadblocks emerged. They were willing to restructure the project as they learned from doing, to bring in new collaborators as opportunities arose, and to undertake simultaneous but distinct projects to further the broader vision of the collaboration.

SHARED MISSION, SHARED VALUES

“There is a common set of values that the activists and the academics shared in this project that helped make it work.” – Hasan Kwame Jeffries, historian at The Ohio State University

Part of the reason that the SNCC Digital Gateway was able to succeed was because project partners were committed to a common mission and held shared values. The veteran activists, archivists, scholars, and project staff were uniformly committed to telling SNCC’s and the Movement’s history from the bottom up and what they came to call “inside out”—that is scholarship directed and created by those who lived it. Although there were disagreements about how to best implement this, there was never a question about what the primary purpose of the collaboration was and how the history needed to be framed.

Scholars, whose work had earned the respect of the activists, brought project partners together around a shared vision.

The civil rights scholars on the project were essential in forging the collaboration. Historians Emilye Crosby, Wesley Hogan, and Hasan Kwame Jeffries had a demonstrable track record of academic- and activist-approved scholarship. They had built trusting relationships with activists over the years. Throughout the collaboration, they mobilized this earned respect to bring the activist and university partners together around a shared vision.

SNCC’s history of organizing—taking ideas, putting them into action, and finding solutions—infused the day-to-day work of the SNCC Digital Gateway project. A shared belief

in the importance of the project pushed project partners to engage, problem solve, persist, and make things happen. In many ways, this approach paralleled how SNCC approached its work in the 1960s. SNCC veteran Courtland Cox explained:

*“When you think about SNCC at its essence, it was always trying to develop new ways and new methodologies of solving problems, and that's what it was. Whether you're talking about the Freedom Schools or whether you're talking about the MFDP, or things that didn't exist, we created it. And as I keep telling people, the basis of genius is what? Making sh*t up. So that's what we did.”*

Beyond holding a shared vision, project partners could take ideas and put them into action, and project staff could follow through and get the work done.

As a group, project partners were willing to problem solve and figure out ways to make things happen. People were “prepared to think about whether there are ways to get around the problems, even if they’re outside of common practice,” as historian Emilye Crosby explained. This openness to thinking about things in new ways and trying new approaches was essential to the project’s success. The project regularly encountered new challenges and opportunities that weren’t anticipated, but

project partners and staff were able to adapt the project based on experience and need, solving problems and responding with flexibility. The project adapted and evolved organically over its four years. The final SNCC Digital Gateway website holds true to the vision laid out in the original proposal, but nearly all the specifics have been reimaged and refashioned to fit the shifting circumstances and new ideas the project encountered along the way.

AN EQUAL PARTNERSHIP

The early and unwavering commitment by partners at Duke University to having movement veterans participate in an equitable manner in all aspects of the project was essential to the collaboration’s success. At the project’s first meeting, the SNCC Legacy Project (SLP), Duke University Libraries (DUL), and the Center for Documentary Studies (CDS) agreed that movement veterans were to be equitable partners in terms of ownership, decision-making, and content. This commitment was made real in a number of ways:

Governance

SLP, DUL, CDS, and scholars had equal representation and an equal say on the Advisory Board that oversaw governance for the project and the Editorial Board that was in charge of content decisions.

Decision-Making

No decision was made without consulting the appropriate project partners, and most

importantly, the movement veterans. The process could be slow and time consuming, but it was critical to the project’s success. As Naomi Nelson of Duke Libraries explained, “We’ve all been able to hold this idea in our head that everybody owns this project.” At its core, it reflected SNCC’s own commitment to small “d” democracy and building consensus.

Ownership

Ownership was a primary concern for SNCC partners, as they were the creators of the history to be told on the SNCC Digital Gateway. In the first meeting, Duke Libraries and the SNCC Legacy Project agreed that their common goal was to create access to SNCC materials and get them out in the world. They moved forward with an agreement to make the material as open as possible via Creative Commons licenses and contract language prohibiting future paywalls or similar requirements. Copyrights for attributed new works created for the SNCC Digital Gateway would belong to the authors, while copyrights

for unattributed new content would be owned by the SNCC Legacy Project. The authors and SLP then granted Duke non-exclusive, perpetual licenses to publish and provide access to the content using Creative Commons licenses. This creator-centric approach reflected SNCC values regarding the value of work and respecting the rights of the creators who do the work.

Memorandum of Understanding

In the first six months of the partnership, Duke University and the SNCC Legacy Project wrote a Memorandum of Understanding to document their commitment to equitable ownership and participation in decision-making, as well as to open access. This was an important step in building trust early in the collaboration. It was important that SLP came into drafting the MoU with clear terms of what it wanted, as well as experience working with

large bureaucracies. On the other side, Naomi Nelson of Duke Libraries, who was responsible for shepherding the agreement through the university's legal department, saw SLP's terms as reasonable and in alignment with Duke's aims and values. Despite university pushback, she was able to preserve the statements of joint copyright between SLP and Duke. Meanwhile, SLP was understanding of the need for Duke to include complicated legal language. This agreement helped create a basis of trust early in the collaboration.

The commitment to equitable participation helped build strong relationships among project partners and fostered a respectful way of working together. Scholars, archivists, and project staff were dedicated to carrying out the SNCC partners' vision. As John Gartrell of Duke Libraries explained to the SNCC partners, "We're always accountable to you all."

TOLD FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE ACTIVISTS

"We were trying to make a very difficult conceptual switch and say that the people who made the history have vital insights, and we will not understand all of this other data that we have unless they're able to narrate and explain." – Wesley Hogan, director of the Center for Documentary Studies

From the project's earliest conceptions, the SNCC Digital Gateway had two primary purposes: to tell the history of SNCC from the perspective of the activist themselves and to pass their "informational wealth" on to subsequent generations. As the SNCC veterans saw it, the essential "how-to's" of the freedom movement had often been lost after each

generation. The tactics and strategies of grassroots organizing have had to be found, discovered, and put together by each activist generation. The SNCC Digital Gateway would be a way to remedy this.

SNCC veterans' knowledge and experiences were crucial to the work. Traditionally, scholars have been the primary tellers of activists'

stories. The name recognition of a handful of activists has given them the opportunity to tell their story in their own voices, but more often, scholars have been those who uncover the lesser known stories and interpret them for the present day. While the makers of history appear as subjects, they rarely get to shape and interpret the story in a way that accurately reflects their experiences and understandings.

In the SNCC Digital Gateway Project, SNCC veterans took the lead in framing the story and shaping the content, both on the Editorial Board and as Visiting Activist Scholars (see below). The scholars on the

Editorial Board were critical in determining content, but they played a supporting role in finding documentation, clarifying, and bringing to life the visions put forward by the SNCC veterans. The process for creating content ultimately drew on project partners' three different realms of expertise: new content was led by the activists and informed by the scholars, and its presentation was structured by the librarians. Together, the partners saw themselves as true partners in the production of knowledge, with SNCC veterans leading the way.

BUILDING TRUST

"The trust factor is gonna happen over time. It's not gonna happen from jump. And it's through the work." –Judy Richardson, SNCC veteran

"You're gonna have to show me through actions." –Courtland Cox, SNCC veteran

Activist partners are involved in and guide the day-to-day work of the project.

One of the ways the project prioritized the knowledge and experiences of SNCC veterans was by creating the Visiting Activist Scholar position. In this capacity, SNCC veterans came to Duke's campus to guide the project staff and student project team in creating content, work for which they were compensated. The SNCC veterans provided on-the-ground oversight in the work of writing history and were people that SNCC Legacy Project members trusted to get the story right. They also created new content for the website—including audio, video, and written narratives—that told the history from SNCC's perspective.

The Visiting Activist Scholar position helped build trust between the activist and university partners. The first two Visiting Activist Scholars—journalist Charlie Cobb, and filmmaker Judy Richardson—were SNCC veterans and members of the SLP Board and the project's Editorial Board. This was a strategic decision. Both Charlie and Judy were involved in the earliest conceptualization of the project and already invested in its success. Their physical presence on campus and direct interactions with the project staff and team shaped the project work and helped assuage the concerns of the SNCC Legacy Project. "Their being on the project was a big, important issue because I knew there were going to be ups and downs, and everything

wasn't going to be smooth," Courtland Cox, the chairman of SLP remembered. "But if they were involved, I could feel that things were going fine."

Project staff are able to transform ideas into tangible outputs.

The project staff needed to have a range of skills to carry out such an expansive project. These included knowing the content, listening to project partners' wishes and ideas and incorporating them into the work, implementing tasks efficiently and effectively, problem-solving, and adapting to the shifting project needs. It was essential that the project manager and coordinator had the buy-in of the activist partners. They needed to prove that they could carry out project partners' vision and create an atmosphere of accountability. This was central to earning the trust of the activist partners and Editorial Board.

Over time—and through the work—the project staff demonstrated that they could transform ideas into tangible outputs that accurately reflected project partners' desires. They developed a process of asking targeted questions, listening closely, and creating concrete options for moving forward for the Editorial Board to choose from. Editorial Board members came to trust the project staff as good problem solvers and synthesizers. They could feel confident that they could leave something unfinished or unsettled until the next time they got together and that the project staff would successfully pull together an option that everyone could agree on. The reliability and follow-through on the part of the project staff was important in building strong working relationships and trust. They approached the work with sensitivity and accountability,

making sure that project partners were heard and that their concerns were addressed.

Project partners use a variety of strategies to deal with conflict.

Regular communication was central to keeping project partners on the same page and addressing conflicts before they arose. "We follow up. We touch base. We follow up. And something gets done," John Gartrell of Duke Libraries explained. Project partners were also adept at reading people and the nuances of situations. Many potential problems were averted because of ongoing side conversations between different project partners. Sometimes this involved one SLP member talking to another SLP member about a particular issue; or the project manager talking with a scholar and SLP member about how to best approach a pending decision; or the directors of Rubenstein Library and CDS consulting on how to manage conflicting expectations of activist partners and the broader university. These ongoing formal and informal conversations were instrumental in holding the project together.

Inevitably, conflicts arose in the work, and project partners discovered that sometimes the best way to move forward was to not deal with an issue head-on. It was a strategy of conflict avoidance as opposed to conflict resolution. Instead of insisting on complete agreement on vision or structure, project partners forged through impasses by focusing on the specifics of the work. "We started the work, and we came back to those sticking points in a piece-by-piece manner," project manager Karlyn Forner explained. Avoiding direct confrontations by moving forward on what project partners could agree on kept the project on track, and leaving disagreements to be

settled at a future date actually helped mitigate the conflicts themselves.

A foundation of respect and trust, as well as steady progress, also helped project partners overcome moments of disagreement. The tenants of equitable partnership and shared vision were always bigger than the current point of contention. One-on-one side conversations smoothed the waters. Tangible

options that reflected project partners' desires kept the work moving forward. Project partners also did not get caught up in the drama of hurt feelings. Despite differing opinions, everyone around the table agreed that the most important thing was telling SNCC's history. That shared vision of the project always took precedence.