

*A Story of Evolution:
The Resource Center of the Americas' Merger Decision*

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Abstract: Founded in the early 1980s, the Resource Center of the Americas was a well-respected and important Minneapolis institution. Yet when the Resource Center was quite abruptly forced to suspend operations due to financial shortfalls in the mid-2000s, the Center's board of directors hired executive director Jason Stone to help determine the future of the organization. This case explores the history of the Resource Center of the Americas and the process the organization used to chart its future. The case requires participants to evaluate the available options for the Resource Center of the Americas, specifically evaluating a merger with the nonprofit organization La Conexión. Is merging with La Conexión the best option for the Resource Center of the Americas? Is the organization's survival worth giving up a vibrant, politically active history and shifting to a more direct service approach? Or is it time to close the Resource Center permanently, preserving the rich history of the organization without altering its mission?

A Story of Evolution: The Resource Center of the Americas' Merger Decision

In July of 2008, in the midst of an unprecedented organizational crisis, the board of directors of the Resource Center of the Americas hired a new leader, Jason Stone, to help guide them through the challenging times ahead. Originally the Central American Resource Center, the Resource Center of the Americas was a Minneapolis-based nonprofit dedicated to educating Americans about the effects of globalization and US policy in Latin America. The organization had evolved from a collection of organizations in solidarity with Central America during the wars of the 1980s to a respected and beloved community institution with a bookstore, café, and a vast collection of resources. Unfortunately, the organization ran into financial difficulties and suspended operations in August of 2007 due to financial instability. In 2008, the Resource Center of the Americas reopened on a much smaller scale and hired Jason Stone to help lead the organization in determining its best course of action. Stone and the board would have to develop a viable vision for the organization or close the organization permanently.

An Organization in Crisis¹

In 1983, activists near the University of Minnesota campus founded the Central American Resource Center in response to the array of "dirty" wars taking place in

¹ This account is taken from a telephone interview with Pam Costain, former Executive Director, on December 1, 2011.

Central America. The organization was an egalitarian collective, with all staff receiving the same salary regardless of education, experience, or level of responsibility. The main purpose of the organization was to raise awareness of US policies in Central America, calling for an end to US aid for perpetrators of genocide and torture. The focus of the organization was heavily political with campaigning, organizing, and demonstrating as key activities. In 1988, the organization hired Pam Costain as Executive Director. During her 14-year tenure, Costain would oversee a number of significant changes in the structure of the organization.

As the wars in Central America drew to a close, the organization began to shift its focus to reflect the changed political situation. For the 1992 Quincentennial of Columbus' arrival in the Americas, the organization spent a year focusing on this "teachable moment," creating the curriculum entitled "Rethinking Columbus." In hindsight, this endeavor marked a turning point in the history of the organization as it moved towards pragmatic educational activities rather than a purely activist agenda. The organization also began to focus on issues that affected the Americas as a whole, including trade relations, globalization, and immigration, rather than maintaining exclusive attention on Central American issues such as abuse of military power. Labor solidarity and opposition to free trade agreements became key components of the organization's activities. Said Costain of the organization's evolving focus, "We are all in this hemisphere together, and Latin America had a dependent relationship with the United States." Central American Resource Center changed its name to the Resource Center of the Americas to mark this shift in ideology.

During this time, the organization expanded rapidly. The budget grew from approximately \$80,000 in 1988 to \$1,000,000 by the late 1990s. The organization moved into a newly renovated building in Minneapolis and, in 2001, unveiled a striking two-story mural. The organization's offerings included curricula for schools and teachers, guest speakers, Spanish and English classes, and workshops for students and educators (Turck 2007). Programs expanded to include the Bookstore of the Americas, the Worker's Rights Center, and the Penny Lernoux Library (Moore 2007). Said Costain, "It went from being a really wonderful organization of the left and the progressives to a true community institution" (Furst 2007).

Unfortunately, problems were looming for the Resource Center. Because of the Center's dramatic growth, Costain began talks with the board of directors about a more sustainable structure for the organization. Costain believed that a collective style of organization was no longer best for the Resource Center. Subsequently, the board made the decision to differentiate salaries in order to increase sustainability and attract the type of talent needed to run such a large organization. The decision was very controversial: staff began to unionize with the support of some members and the atmosphere at the Resource Center of the Americas became tense. Resource Center staff began to express a great deal of bitterness toward Costain and the board.

After 14 years as Executive Director, Costain left the Resource Center of the Americas in 2002 to take a position with Senator Paul Wellstone's reelection campaign. Costain states that it was simply her time to leave the organization. After taking what she had originally believed to be a one-year position, Costain had transformed the organization from a collective into an institution and had helped ensure its relevance in the 21st century. Costain also cites the tension related to the structural changes as one reason for her departure.

But tensions within the organization continued to plague her successors. Over the course of the next five years, two executive directors and three interim directors tried and failed to stabilize the Resource Center. Part of this instability was expected after the departure

of a leader who had played such a pivotal role in the development of an organization, but ongoing tension and rapid turnover also contributed to the instability. According to Costain, her successors failed to understand the political moment. She believes that the Research Center of the Americas should have seized upon a new wave of civic engagement efforts within the Latino community and among bilingual and bicultural youth in order to reinvigorate the organization. The first director following Costain suffered a personal crisis and left his position. Due to a budget deficit, layoffs and budget cuts began in 2004 that would continue for several years (Furst 2007). Costain claims that a second director lacked the skills to manage the budget and, in 2007, the organization found itself unable to meet its lender and creditor obligations. Interim director Kathleen Mcown asserted that there had been no improprieties, simply a poor accounting system and, following years of deficits, foundations were reluctant to donate (Furst 2007). A slow summer fundraising cycle and a downturn in income from the bookstore worsened the situation and, on August 16, 2007, the Resource Center of the Americas closed its doors due to “continuing and insurmountable financial challenges” (Moore 2007; Turck 2007). Operations of the organization were suspended indefinitely and the staff was let go with full severance packages.

Board members, participants, and staff expressed great dismay at the closing of the organization. “It’s a really sad day to see an important community institution not make it financially,” said Costain in an interview. Online comments mirrored her sadness: “Minneapolis won’t be the same without the Resource Center,” wrote one reader. Another stated, “These are truly dark times,” (Turck 2007). Still, some expressed continued faith that the Resource Center would live to see another day. Barb Kucera, board spokesperson for the Resource Center, stated that the closing “might be the opportunity to start something else that would carry on the Resource Center mission” (Moore 2007). Perhaps prophetically, Jason Stone, a participant in some of the Resource Center’s programs, wrote on an online forum, “I’m holding out hope that someone can revive a great institution” (Stone 2007). Less than a year later, the board of the Resource Center of the Americas hired him to do just that.

“Just an Evolution”

Though the organization suspended operations, the nonprofit structure behind the Resource Center of the Americas remained. The board, composed at this time of eight women and ten men, had to settle daunting issues of finances and identity (Resource Center of the Americas 2008). Early in 2008, the organization began reoffering a small number of programs such as Spanish classes, coffee hours, and *Intercambios* language exchanges (S. Humpage, personal communication, December 1, 2011). The organization planned to operate at a loss for the time being, but believed that offering programs was essential to reestablishing its reputation and attracting funding support. In April of 2008, the board sold the Resource Center of the Americas building at 3019 Minnehaha Avenue for \$1,000,000, allowing the organization to pay off all lender, creditor, employee, and donor obligations (Resource Center of the Americas 2008). The board then began holding strategic planning sessions and, in July 2008, hired Jason Stone as Organization Administrator. Stone had spent years in the private sector, more recently managing software development at US Bank (Stone 2011b). He also had extensive civic experience, making an unsuccessful bid for the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board in 2005 and serving on city advisory committees and nonprofit boards (Stone 2008b; Resource Center of the Americas 2011b). The job allowed Stone to combine his years of experience with a longtime passion for Latin America. Shortly after his hiring, Stone sent an email to all

members and friends of the organization entitled “The Resource Center is Back!” and described the strategic planning process that would continue in the coming years (Stone 2008a). Stone’s first responsibility was to reengage the public as quickly as possible in order to regain trust and avoid losing supporters forever. By January of 2009, the Resource Center of the Americas was reoffering several programs and organizing new ones such as Latino Voices (J. Stone, telephone interview, October 26, 2011). According to Stone, these educational programs were “just the beginning. We’re working hard to develop a much broader vision for the organization” (J. Stone, telephone interview, October 26, 2011).

In the 2009 Annual Report, Stone reported a great deal of progress. A group of software developers donated their time and launched a new website for the organization through the Sierra Bravo Overnight Website Challenge, which connects teams of professional software developers with nonprofits in need (Stone 2009). The Resource Center of the Americas saw 250 class and event participants per week, diversified the board of directors, offered a wide variety of programming, and doubled donation income (Resource Center of the Americas 2009). However, the organization had been largely unsuccessful in attracting foundation support. The Resource Center received none of the eight grants it applied for in 2009 (Resource Center of the Americas 2009). Stone cites continuing hesitance due to the financial crisis and an inability to coherently define a new vision as reasons for the lack of grant support (J. Stone, personal communication, November 17, 2011). Though the increased support of members was a positive sign, it was, according to board member Sarah Humpage, “not something that could be counted on as a longer term solution” (S. Humpage, personal communication, December 1, 2011). In order to overcome these continuing financial challenges and develop a new vision for the organization, the Resource Center hired an outside consultant to advise Stone and the board on strategic planning. This process determined that the “Resource Center of the Americas required some fundamental change in order to carry its work forward” (Stone and Benavidez 2010). Stone and the members of the board faced the difficult task of determining what form this “fundamental change” should take.

It is significant to note that at this time, the board of directors of the Resource Center was a diverse group. The board was both 46% Latino and 62% female (Resource Center of the Americas 2010). In addition, professional backgrounds were widely varied and board members ranged from Ph.D. students to attorneys, nonprofit executives to statisticians. The divergent backgrounds of the board members, as well as Stone’s pragmatic leadership, would play a crucial role in the important decisions they needed to make.

Difficult Decisions²

While Stone and the Resource Center board contemplated changes in the organization, other nonprofits across the globe were facing similar dilemmas. Accompanying the global economic crisis was a “philanthropic recession” in which companies and foundations gave far less to charitable organizations than they had historically (Protest and Roose 2011). The very public bankruptcies of certain large companies and banks, fear of a double dip recession, and the restructuring of charitable giving at some foundations meant significant decreases in grants given to many nonprofits. In this increasingly competitive environment, the Resource Center of the Americas was unable to secure the kinds of grants that would ensure its long-term survival.

² This account is taken from personal communication with Jason Stone on October 26, 2011.

After acknowledging that the needed foundation support was not coming anytime soon and that the organization could not survive long-term on capital from the sale of the building and individual donations alone, Stone and the members of the board had to consider alternatives. One possible option was a radical reinvention of the organization, perhaps reorganizing as a fair trade organization. The board also deliberated taking on a large business venture, such as the purchase of a Spanish school and using income to fund the organization's other programs (S. Humpage, personal communication, December 1, 2011). Still, the Resource Center rejected these ideas, viewing them as being far removed from the original mission and goals of the organization. As Nolan and Kelleher (2010) write in their consulting manual "Steering your Non-profit Organisation through the Storm: Actions a Board and CEO Can Take to Deliver the Promise in Tougher Times," organizations attempting to weather difficult economic periods should attempt to increase volunteering, develop a long-term strategic funding plan, and share functions and services with other organizations. The Resource Center of the Americas tried each of these strategies and, in 2009, partnered with the Upper Midwest Regional Office of Witness for Peace. The two similar organizations shared office space and staff for a time, helping to reduce overhead costs for each.

Witness for Peace, much like the Resource Center of the Americas, began in 1983 in response to the Contra War in Nicaragua. This organization sought to educate Americans about the harsh realities of this war through grassroots mobilization and media outreach (Witness for Peace 2011). Today, Witness for Peace has continued to act as an advocate for those harmed by US policies in the Americas and is committed to nonviolence as a method for achieving change. The shared political ideologies of Witness for Peace and the Resource Center of the Americas prompted Stone and the board to consider a merger as a potential solution to the struggles of both organizations.

However, the Upper Midwest Regional Office of Witness for Peace was a semi-autonomous organization which had a complex relationship with the national Witness for Peace organization. Consequently, Stone worried that this unclear identity would be difficult to resolve. In addition, Witness for Peace often struggled to meet its own budget: In 2007, net assets for the organization totaled only \$9,405 and in 2008 decreased still further, with reported net assets at -\$50,1332 (Witness for Peace 2009). Despite similar ideologies, organizational cultures, and memberships, Stone and the board determined that a merger with Witness for Peace would not help the Resource Center achieve the desired financial stability and clear vision for the future.

Resource Center board member Joy Nelson identified a second potential merger partner. Founded in 2001 by a group of six Lutheran congregations in South Minneapolis, the organization that became La Conexión was originally designed to research and serve the needs of the community with the belief that "together we can do more" (D. Olson, telephone interview, November 10, 2011). In the fall of 2005, the group officially formed a 501(c)(3) nonprofit by the name of City South Cluster Ministries and, under the guidance of Executive Director Andrea Qually, began to focus exclusively on serving the needs of the Latino community by 2008.

Under the marketing name La Conexión, the organization engaged in collaborative social outreach and created a public space where Latino immigrants could find resources and build a supportive network within the South Minneapolis community (La Conexión de las Américas 2011a). La Conexión operated a referral center, providing Latino immigrants with access to educational, economic, and community resources, and opportunities in the Twin Cities. In

addition, the organization ran a Financial Achievement Program, the “Kitchen Connection,” and “Community Circles” (Stone 2011a). La Conexión served over 2,000 clients a year and had received significant foundation support thanks to the hard work of board members like Don Olson and the attractiveness of La Conexión’s direct service approach (La Conexión de las Américas 2011a; Benavidez, Lougee, and Stone 2010).

One of the factors that made a merger with La Conexión desirable was the fact that the organization had been operating without an executive director for months. As Giffords and Dina (2003) explain in *Changing Organizational Cultures*, power struggles between leaders of merging organizations can often determine the outcome of the merger. In this case, there would be no power struggle, as Stone could simply become the leader of the merged entity. Another advantage of a merger between the two organizations was the complementarity of their services. Says Resource Center board member Sarah Humpage, “We thought that having these complementary programs and complementary funding sources would promote stability and longevity” (S. Humpage, personal communication, December 1, 2011).

Despite the potential benefits of a merger with La Conexión, board members soon brought forth concerns. What would happen to the boards of the two organizations? How would a merger affect the organization’s financial sustainability? How would staff, participants, and members feel about the merger decision? What roles would staff and board members play in the new organization? What would happen to the name “Resource Center of the Americas” and the unique history it carried with it? How would the merger alter the organization’s mission, goals, and programs? None of these questions had easy answers. Furthermore, there was the potential for employees to lose their jobs, the challenges of merging different technological systems, and the difficulties of integrating distinct organizational cultures (Strom 2007). The board considered program fit, financial security, and the ways in which a merger would affect the fundraising capacity of the organization. It would take months of careful thought, planning, and discussions to determine the best course of action.

In order to fully explore the advantages and disadvantages of this merger, the board formed a merge team, composed of board members and staff from both organizations (S. Humpage, personal communication, December 1, 2011). The merge team was led by Stone who, with his pragmatism and forward-thinking, had become the sort of visionary leader Pietroburgo and Wernet (2010) describe as crucial to a successful merger. After the suggestion from Joy Nelson, whose husband Randy was on the board of La Conexión, Stone followed up with La Conexión and quickly initiated a discussion with its staff and board members. The merge team met to discuss mission, vision, values, and objectives, as well as the more tangible aspects of the proposed merger.

In addition to the merger between La Conexión and Resource Center of the Americas, the merge team contemplated a three-way merger with a larger organization, Intercultural Student Experiences and Global Citizens Network (ISE-GCN). ISE was founded in 1972 and provides experiential travel learning, while GCN, founded in 1992, has a social justice focus, providing opportunities for participants to volunteer with indigenous peoples around the world. The two organizations began an alliance in September of 2009. While merging with this larger organization would absorb the Resource Center of the Americas and La Conexión, it would allow the Resource Center to operate semi-autonomously. In addition, the merger would provide an opportunity for the two smaller nonprofits to significantly reduce their overhead costs and to create synergies between the three allied organizations without losing the mission and programs of the smaller organizations. However, ISE-GCN expressed

hesitance at pursuing a merger so soon after their 2009 alliance. It began to seem that a three-way merger would not be possible, at least not in time for the Resource Center of the Americas. La Conexión remained the Resource Center's best hope of forming a merger.

To Merge or Not to Merge?³

The board of La Conexión was very willing to pursue the merger with Resource Center of the Americas. According to Don Olson, cofounder and board member of La Conexión, the board, composed of seven women and five men, "saw the writing on the wall" (D. Olson, telephone interview, November 10, 2011). With the poor state of the economy and decreased individual and congregational support, it appeared likely that the organization would not survive past November of 2011 if it did not merge. Furthermore, the La Conexión board was impressed by Stone, especially in light of their own lack of leadership. The Resource Center's ability to raise money through services like their Spanish language classes, outreach to the Caucasian community, and social justice programs was attractive to the board members of La Conexión. The organizational cultures of the two nonprofits were compatible, and the similar sizes of the organizations would make a merger more equitable. The La Conexión board felt that the two organizations complemented each other well and almost unanimously supported the decision to move ahead with the merger.

While the complementarity of programming was a major draw for the Resource Center of the Americas as well, the Resource Center board was not unanimous in its support of the merger. Although differences in programs, membership, and funding sources could add much needed diversity, they might also cause tension or alter the original mission of the Resource Center. Board members and others also worried that the important political history of the Resource Center could be lost in the merger. A merger with La Conexión would almost certainly mean less of an emphasis on political activism due to La Conexión's concerns about alienating funders and undocumented program participants who might be nervous participating in a controversial organization. On the Resource Center side, many were anxious about losing a valuable political and educational legacy to the direct service programs that La Conexión favored. Costain remarked that, before her departure from her post as Executive Director, "I was pretty clear about keeping us out of direct service" (P. Costain, telephone interview, December 1, 2011). Humpage said, "I get nervous that the Resource Center of the Americas' legacy will fade because it is easier to fund social service programs." Tension amongst board members stalled the discussion for months.

Two board members in particular, both Latino and graduate educated, felt that Stone was pushing the merger too hard and focusing mainly on the question of how to financially support the organization's vision and objectives. They believed that the vision and objectives should be the board's primary concern with the question of funding coming into play only after the board had defined its goals. Stone suggests that the fact that these two board members were native Spanish speakers contributed to misunderstandings, and, despite a lengthy discussion process, the two ultimately decided to leave the organization. These challenging interpersonal dynamics hinted at the merger's potential to create deep divisions within the organization.

With tension surrounding the discussion of a merger and concerns about losing the identity of the organization, some advocated closing the Resource Center of the Americas permanently. The organization began in response to wars that had long since

³ This account was taken from personal communications between the author and Jason Stone and Sarah Humpage between October-December 2011.

ended and had educated and advocated on issues such as labor rights, globalization, and immigration. Much had been accomplished, but perhaps the Resource Center's time had come to an end. Costain, though saddened, supported the idea of closing the Resource Center. "Organizations have a life just like everything else," she stated (P. Costain, telephone interview, December 1, 2011). Whether due to missed opportunities, a harsh economic environment, mismanagement, or simply the natural life cycle of an organization, perhaps it was time to bid adieu to the Resource Center.

Stone, on the other hand, believed strongly in the possibilities presented by a merger with La Conexión. Although some wanted to preserve the political side of the organization, Stone argued that there was no longer the vision or the engagement to continue this work, nor the ability to fund it. "Some see a merger as defeat," he stated, "I think it's just an evolution." An evolution was bound to happen, merger or not. In making this decision, the board would have to consider not only financial sustainability, but also a redefinition of the mission, vision, and objectives of the Resource Center of the Americas. How important was the human rights advocacy and organizing component of the organization? Was it worth reducing this aspect of the organization and offering more direct services in order to fund the organization's continued existence? Or was it time to close the Resource Center of the Americas, saying goodbye before the organization was changed beyond recognition?

Epilogue⁴

On November 30, 2010, Eva Benavidez, Board Chair for the Resource Center of the Americas, Jean Lougee, Board Chair for La Conexión, and Jason Stone, Executive Director of the Resource Center of the Americas, wrote a letter to members and participants announcing the merger of the two organizations. The letter cited both financial and mission-based reasons for the merger, excitedly describing the merger as a blending of "social change and social service" (Benavidez, Lougee, and Stone 2010). Wrote Benavidez, Lougee and Stone, "We are developing the framework for a powerful, multicultural organization that will educate, empower, connect, research, organize and advocate" (Benavidez, Lougee, and Stone 2010). The Resource Center of the Americas had not abandoned the idea of the three-way merger entirely, but had decided to move ahead with the La Conexión-Resource Center of the Americas merger in the meantime. However, this three-way merger never materialized; the new organization forming around the Resource Center of the Americas and La Conexión would have to make it on its own.

At the annual members meeting in January 2011, members voted on and approved the merger between La Conexión and the Resource Center. The merger became effective on February 1, 2011. For legal purposes, it was an acquisition, not a merger—the Resource Center of the Americas absorbed La Conexión and the Resource Center of the Americas would remain the legal name of the organization (Resource Center of the Americas 2011a). However, Stone and the members of both boards decided to rename the organization La Conexión de las Américas, a name that preserved aspects of both organizations and expressed their desire to form a "merger of equals" rather than the subsuming of one organization into another.

The merger brought together complementary sets of services. As a merged entity, La Conexión de las Américas would continue and expand the programs of both organizations and attempt to change the underlying systemic inequalities (La Conexión de las Américas

⁴ This account was taken from personal communications between the author and Jason Stone between October-December 2011.

2011a). La Conexión offered a complementary merger that would bring firsthand knowledge gained from working with immigrant Latino families to the Resource Center's experience of policy analysis and education about the US relationship with Latin America. The merger also allowed for the diversification of staff, increasing the number of staff members and variety of skills, and allowing staff to support each other during peak times. In addition, the merger provided needed leadership for the staff of La Conexión. All in all, Stone said, "I think it was completely ideal." When asked if he feels the merger was the best decision, La Conexión co-founder Don Olson replied, "Unequivocally" (D. Olson, telephone interview, November 10, 2011).

After the initial tension regarding the merger and the departure of the two disgruntled Latino board members, most board members, program participants, and staff were enthusiastic about the merger. Says Stone, "Everyone really embraced everything. It all went pretty smoothly. We didn't really have any pushback from constituents" (Personal communication, November 17 2011). In order to proceed more rapidly with the merger and avoid complicating matters and slowing the process, board subcommittees from each organization met, researched, and developed a set of high level principles, rather than extremely specific goals, that would guide the new organization:

- "Create a two-way learning experience to develop reciprocal understanding, respect, and adaptation between established residents and Latino immigrants;
- Create educational programming on Latin America, the Caribbean, and the US relationship with the region;
- Empower the Latino community throughout the Twin Cities by providing and connecting participants with resources and educational, economic, and community engagement opportunities;
- Utilize our knowledge and experience as educators and service providers to transform underlying system problems that result in inequalities of power and resources" (La Conexión de las Americas 2011a).

Once the full boards of the organizations approved these principles, La Conexión was dissolved and absorbed by the Resource Center of the Americas through the amending of the Articles of Incorporation of the Resource Center of the Americas (Resource Center of the Americas 2011a). In the board elections, a number of La Conexión board members were voted in to ensure that both former organizations retained decision-making power for the new organization.

Support of the merger has not come without some continuing concerns. Humpage, though supportive of the merger, voices ongoing anxiety about the fate of the Resource Center's political legacy. Costain, longtime former executive director, expresses unhappiness at the organization's decision to merge. Though she did not play a role in the merger decision, Costain believed that the organization should have chosen to close. "It is no longer the organization that I was trying to build. It has been very painful to watch," she says. However, she also says that she appreciates the tenacity of both organizations and believes that Stone has done a "tremendous job with what he inherited" (P. Costain, telephone interview,

December 1, 2011).

In reviewing the decision to merge that occurred nearly a year ago, Stone says that he believes the choice of merging with La Conexión was the right one for the Resource Center of the Americas. The benefits have been numerous and staff has worked hard to integrate programs and strengthen the organization. La Conexión de las Américas now offers programs including Spanish-language classes, topical social justice classes, coffee hours, movie nights, *Intercambios* language exchanges, “Latino Voices” panel discussions, a referral center, the Financial Achievement Process, the “Kitchen Connection,” “Community Circles,” curricula for educators and study groups, and a weekly event newsletter (La Conexión de las Américas 2011b). Stone says that the only major challenge that continues to plague the organization is difficulty acquiring support from foundations. Don Olson echoes this sentiment, but believes that much of the struggle is due to the economic environment. In the face of these challenging circumstances, Olson says, “We feel that we’ve done ok” (Don Olson, telephone interview, November 10, 2011).

Still, the rebirth of the Resource Center of the Americas and its transformation into La Conexión de las Américas has demonstrated that an organization can, with careful planning and a strong leader, survive, even in the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression. Stone says that the lesson he has learned from the experience is that, “Sometimes you just have to be open to the universe and willing to evaluate things that land in your lap.” His entrepreneurial attitude and responsiveness to the opportunity presented by La Conexión, as well as the strategic planning and preparation conducted by both Stone and the board, allowed the Resource Center of the Americas to take full advantage of a strategic merger opportunity.

At the end of 2011, Stone will leave La Conexión de las Américas to return to a career in the information technology sector. According to Stone, this transition is best for both his own career goals and the organization. Stone was the right person to lead the organization through the challenging merger process; his departure will allow someone with a different set of skills to carry the organization into the future. Right now, the future of La Conexión de las Américas looks bright. Only time will tell what evolutions the future holds for this adaptable organization.

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Appendix A: Cast of Characters

Unless otherwise stated, all descriptions reflect the backgrounds of major actors at the time of the merger decision.

Jason Stone: Stone joined the Resource Center of the Americas, initially as Organization Administrator, in July of 2008 and went on to serve as Executive Director. Prior to working with the Resource Center, Stone worked as a development group manager for fund services and trust technology at US Bank and as a consultant for various IT companies. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1994 with a B.A. in Latin American and Iberian Studies and spent time abroad in Ecuador, Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Colombia (Stone 2011). Stone's civic experience included making an unsuccessful bid for the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board in 2005 and serving on city advisory committees and nonprofit boards (Stone 2008; Resource Center of the Americas 2011b). In his campaigns for public office, Stone received endorsements from such wide-ranging sources as former Vice President Walter Mondale, Mayor R.T. Rybak, the Sierra Club, the Star Tribune, and labor organizations. Stone is married to wife Shireen.

Pam Costain: Pam Costain served as the Executive Director of the Resource Center of the Americas for fourteen years between 1988 and 2002 and was responsible for several major transformations within the organization. She took the organization from a collective to a more traditional nonprofit structure and oversaw the transition from the Central American Resource Center, focused on the "dirty" wars of the 1980s, to the Resource Center of the Americas, which focused on issues such as globalization, trade relations, and immigration. During Costain's tenure as Executive Director, the organization began to take an educational focus and greatly expanded. After leaving the Resource Center, Pam worked for U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone's 2002 campaign and founded Wellstone Action as well as Parents United for Public Education. Costain served on the Minneapolis School Board for several years and, in 2010, became President and CEO of AchieveMpls, an organization that creates and manages scholarships and grants for the Minneapolis school system. She received her B.A. in Urban Studies from Carleton College and a Masters in Education from the University of Minnesota and taught adult literacy and English as a second language for more than ten years. She is married with two daughters.

Members of the Resource Center of the Americas board of directors: The board of directors of the Resource Center of the Americas was a relatively diverse group at the time of the merger decision. The board was 46% Latino and 62% female thanks to a conscious effort to diversify. Joy Nelson was, as mentioned in the case, the Resource Center Board member who identified La Conexión as a potential merge partner. Sarah Humpage kindly provided an interview for the writing of this case. Below are more detailed background descriptions. All of the following board member descriptions are taken directly from the Board of Directors fact sheet published by the Resource Center of the Americas in 2010. Accompanying the descriptions is the following statement:

Over the last year we have worked hard to make our Board of Directors reflect the community we serve in terms of race/ethnicity, gender and immigration experience. We strive for our organization to reflect the type of organization we want to help others build.

Eva Benavidez: Eva works for Casa de Esperanza and is responsible for marketing, communications and oversight of grant writing and individual fundraising. She also serves on the Hennepin County Latino Youth Development Committee, which promotes educational achievement among Hispanic youth. Race/ethnicity: Hispanic/Latina

Richard Bergeron: Rich recently served as VISTA Leader for Minneapolis Public Schools Volunteer Services and worked with AmeriCorps performing social project research, grant writing and web design for the MN Department of Human Rights. For nearly 30 years, he has participated in the design of curriculum, instructional courseware and teaching. He has a history of civic involvement including volunteer work with the Resource Center and Northside Neighborhood Services, and US Military service. Race/ethnicity: White/Native-American

Erika Busse: Erika is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota. She obtained her B.A. in Sociology and Gender Studies in Peru and her master's degree from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. She recently published, "Institutional Vulnerability and Opportunity: Immigration and America's 'War on Terror.'" She is active with Catholic Charities, serving Latin American Immigrants. Race/ethnicity: Hispanic/Latina

Christian Engen: Chris was a statistician with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture until retiring in 2007. He serves on the board of directors of the Interchange Institute, whose mission is to promote dialogue and create understanding between immigrants and their new communities. As a Peace Corps volunteer (1969-71) he worked on water development issues in Kenya. Race/ethnicity: White

David Gibson: David is an accountant and teacher. He taught for ten years in Minneapolis Public Schools and the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. David studied Anthropology and International Development and has lived and worked in Belfast, focusing on issues of peace and justice. Race/ethnicity: White

Sarah Humpage, Treasurer: Sarah is a PhD Student in Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota. In addition to the University of Minnesota, she is employed by the Inter American Development Bank. She volunteers with the Lake Area Group Organizing in Solidarity with The People of Guatemala (LAGOS) and Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA). Race/ethnicity: White

Felipe Illescas: Felipe is the Executive Director of Minnesota SOL (Strengthening Our Lives), a program of the Service Employees International Union Local 26, advancing civic engagement in the Latino Community. Race/ethnicity: Hispanic/Latino

Christina Jennings, Vice-Chair: Christina is a returning Board Member from several years ago, and is the Executive Director of the North country Cooperative Development Fund since August, 2008. As a small nonprofit Executive Director Christina brings significant industry insight to share with the Resource Center, including fundraising and operations management. Christina is

also building a company specializing in connecting micro-finance investors with Central-American communities. Race/ethnicity: White

Eduardo Jurado: Eduardo has been a translator with Allina Hospitals and Clinics since August, 2006. He is active with Jane Adams School for Democracy, Lake Area Group Organizing in Solidarity with The People of Guatemala (LAGOS), and the American Red Cross – Volunteer Disaster Action Team. Race/ethnicity: Hispanic/Latino

Joy Nelson: Joy retired as a social worker for Minneapolis public schools in 2007, is active in her church social outreach committee, volunteers with schools, and is a group facilitator in the Longfellow-Seward Restorative Justice Partnership. Race/ethnicity: White

Leticia Stabrino: Leticia Stabrino is a teacher from Uruguay and has been involved with the Resource Center for years as a volunteer and Spanish instructor. She works with the Latino population of North Saint Paul as the Spanish Liaison of the North Saint Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale Schools school district since January 2006. She lives in South Minneapolis. Race/ethnicity: Hispanic/Latina

Marcia Tapia: Marcia is a community organizer and founding member and President of the Green Cleaning Cooperative, a group of experienced commercial and residential cleaners. Race/ethnicity: Hispanic/Latina

Lauren Wood, Secretary: As an undergraduate, Lauren volunteered with the Resource Center and now returns to serve on the Board. Lauren is an intellectual property attorney for a prominent Minneapolis practice and graduating from the University of Minnesota Law School in 2008. She has studied at Augsburg College and in Spain and has interned with the Advocates for Human Rights. Lauren is an attorney with Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi LLP, and takes pro bono immigration cases in her personal time. Race/ethnicity: White”

Members of the La Conexión board of directors: Less information is available about the board of directors of La Conexión at the time of the merger. The board was, at the time of the merger, 58.3% female and included Latino representation as well as representation from area Lutheran churches.

Allison Anastos: “Allison is a private immigration attorney specializing in crime victim visas and removal defense. She has lived for extensive periods of time in Mexico City, Mexico and Seville, Spain. Her work with La Conexión has allowed her to provide free legal advice regarding a variety of immigration issues confronting the La Conexión community” (Resource Center of the Americas 2011c).

Barbara Benner: “Barbara is a psychologist at University of Minnesota Boynton Health Service. Since first learning Spanish several decades ago, much of her volunteer energies have been dedicated to Spanish-speaking communities...She is an explorer of cultures and enjoys traveling as much as she can afford. With our organization, her particular focus areas are program development and support of staff” (Resource Center of the Americas 2011c).

Ann Ellison: Ann has served on the Normandale Center for Healing and Wholeness Board of Directors and has worked as the Director of Community Health and Church Relations for Fairview Health Services. Her job at Fairview requires her to identify how the hospital's resources can best benefit the community and to bring the community's concerns to the hospital's attention (Fairview 2011).

Rob Englund: Rob has served for many years as a Lutheran Reverend in the Twin Cities.

Erika Flores: Erika is a personal injury and criminal defense attorney with Heuer & Associates in Minneapolis. "She received her B.A. from Hamline University, where she majored in Political Science, Legal Studies, and East Asian Studies. She graduated early from William Mitchell Law School, where she was an active member in both the Hispanic and African-American Law Student Associations. After law school, Erika attended the University of Phoenix to acquire a Masters in Business Administration. Erika has also worked for American Express Financial Advisors for several years in the security trade and employment law regulation departments. She has also volunteered with the Legal Rights Center and is a member of the Hispanic Bar Association" (Heuer & Associates 2011).

Alejandra Flores: No information about Ms. Flores is available.

Libby Krogh: Libby is an active member of Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Jean Lougee: Jean is a cofounder of La Conexión and served as Board Chair at the time of the merger. "As a long-time resident of South Minneapolis, Jean actively supports cultural diversity, embracing the gifts diversity brings to our community. She leads the Service Administration department of Yale Mechanical with 27 years as an employee. Jean is active in her church council, co-facilitator of women's retreats and bible study groups, and actively volunteers with Lutheran Social Services' Camp Noah" (Resource Center of the Americas, 2011c).

Rene Madrid: "Rene is an Assistant Vice President and Branch Manager with US Bank. He has been recognized by the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce for community and private sector leadership" (Resource Center of the Americas, 2011c).

Randy Nelson: Randy is the husband of Joy Nelson who serves on the Resource Center of the Americas board of directors. Randy retired in 2007 from his position as Director of Contextual Education and Melvin A. Hammarberg Professor of Contextual Education at Luther Seminary. He was the seminary's leading figure in "preparing students for ministry through practical experiences in the church and world" (Behrendt 2007). The Nelsons have three grown children. Don Olson: "Don is a retired business professional of 36 years, having held leadership positions with Deluxe Corporation, First Bank, and Pillsbury Company in the areas of product development, marketing, communications, and long-range planning. He holds BS and MS degrees in business administration from the University of Minnesota where he also taught quantitative methods. Don is a co-founder of La Conexión, focusing his expertise on grant-writing, strategy, and program development" (Resource Center of the Americas 2011c).

Larry Oppegaard: Larry is a financial executive with a broad array of experience. He currently works as the business administrator for Mount Calvary Lutheran Church. He has previously served as a financial consultant for Newgate Capital and as Executive Vice President for Old Home Foods, Inc. Larry graduated from Concordia College in 1961 with majors in Business and Psychology (Oppegaard 2011).