University and Community Partnerships:

Building Successful and Mutually Beneficial Relationships

While Addressing University Readiness and the Unequal Balance of Power

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Abstract

While recent trends suggest a strong desire between universities and the local surrounding communities to build mutually beneficial partnerships, these partnerships often struggle and are not successful. Therefore, the question must be asked why university and community partnerships are so difficult to form and what can be done to increase the chances of forming a mutually beneficial union. The following article will introduce a community and university partnership, provide a brief history of university and community relations, detail issues that make partnership building difficult (including university readiness and the unequal balance of power), and highlight three distinct models aimed at helping universities build mutually beneficial partnerships with their local communities.
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Introduction

University and community partnerships: this sounds like a utopia, a university and the local community coming together to provide services that neither could do alone to benefit people who are in need. While these partnerships certainly sound grand, they seldom start off that way. My experience with university and community partnership building is that both sides meet in a large, cold conference room (usually at the university) with the university staff sitting on one side of the table and the community sitting on the other side. They chat briefly; the university staff seems to listen intently to what the community agency is saying they need, and the university tells the community agency what they can do for them. They often agree on shared services and the community agency (which is often cash strapped and struggling to meet the needs of their constituents) gladly accepts any offers of help or assistance. The university officials leave the meeting feeling validated and affirmed that they are once again able to help people in the surrounding community while the community agency leaves the meeting feeling grateful that helpful services will be provided to their constituents. But, a frequent side effect of such meetings is that the community agency leaves the meeting again being reminded of the massive power the university holds and asking “is the university really ready to help?”

University-Community partnership defined

According to Curwood, Farrar and Mackeigan (2011), a university community partnership can be defined as “collaborations between community organizations and institutions of higher education for the purpose of achieving an identified social change goal through community engaged scholarship that ensures mutual benefit for the community organization and the university” (p. 16). This definition adequately explains the overarching concept a university and community partnership is trying to capture which is mutual benefit
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from the partnership for the university and the community. Another definition according to Lessons from the Community Outreach Partnership Center Program (2002) is “in a partnership where two or more parties make a commitment to invest resources in joint pursuit of a mutually beneficial end” (p. iv). With this definition, it must be noted that in a true university and community partnership, both have something at stake (personal, facilities, money, time, data, reputation) for which they expect something in return. Understanding this concept that both the university and community agency both have something at stake in the partnership is a critical factor for the chances of success. These two separate definitions outline adequately the crucial point of a true university and community partnerships, that both parties have something to gain and both parties to have something at risk in the partnership.

A university strives to form these community partnerships because such connections can help the administrators, faculty and students promote their missions, provide student engagement opportunities and increase the chances of faculty engaged research with the community. The community and the people who live around universities can benefit from these efforts of outreach from the universities in ways such as community improvement, better health opportunities, better educational opportunities and enhanced employment opportunities. Community and university partnerships should be viewed as a critical tool for addressing pressing social problems with important transformative potential to advance social change by focusing university resources on real world issues in the local community (Curwood, Farrar & Mackeigan, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

While recent trends suggest a strong desire between universities and their local surrounding communities to build mutually beneficial partnerships, they are often not successful in doing so. These potential partnerships are critical to the overall success of the university because community outreach efforts often support the university’s mission. The communities, in turn, can benefit tremendously from the services rendered by the university. Therefore the question must be asked; if both the university and the community can benefit from these partnerships why are they so hard to form and what can be done to increase the
chances of forming a mutually beneficial union? This article will examine the history of university and community partnerships, barriers to building partnerships, and strategies for universities as they attempt to reach out and form meaningful partnerships with their communities.

Review of the Literature

The history university and community partnerships

If there is such a potential for positive gain from partnering with local universities, why aren’t communities always eager to welcome the recent advances by universities? In order to answer this, the history of universities and their surrounding communities must be examined. A review of the literature begins with a discussion of “town and gown”. Anyone who has spent time in a university community has probably heard the term “town and gown” (as “town” refers to the non-academic population and “gown” being the university community). The struggle to balance the differing cultures of these two distinct groups of individuals has been going on for centuries as universities have operated in isolation from their surrounding communities. The university and its staff were different from the people in the surrounding communities and universities took actions to make sure they remained separate and distinct, such as faculty wearing their gap and gowns around town in an effort to signify their status. As Martin, Phillips and Smith (2005) wrote, “Universities promoted themselves as elite bastions of information and knowledge” (p. 3). Throughout much of the twentieth century, universities directed the majority of their efforts toward research and publication. The primary function of higher education was to produce an educated class of leaders (Wilson, 2004). The institutions of higher education largely ignored the needs of the surrounding communities and even often competed for the same funds as local cities and towns to further their research and publication efforts. According to Harkavy (1998),

In the decades after World War I and II, American higher education increasingly competed, ferociously, egocentrically, narcissistically, for institutional prestige and material resources. Almost single-mindedly, pursing their self-centered goals, they increasingly concentrated on essentially scholastic, inside the academy problems and
conflicts rather than on the very hard, very complex problems involved in helping American society (p. 20).

Universities were often viewed as walled off cities with narrow interests and little concern for the communities around them (University and Community, 2012). Time and again, universities and their surrounding communities have failed to work together to address common problems (Martin, Phillips & Smith, 2005).

As the 1980’s and 90’s progressed, communities became dissatisfied with the large budgets and the tremendous power being wielded by the universities. As Kysiak (1986) noted “citizens perceive them [universities] solely as large, powerful, non-taxpaying entities that soak up city services and provide little in return” (p. 50). In addition to this widely held belief, many people viewed institutions of higher education as socially detached from the local community (Strier, 2010). With their use of public monies, universities have an obligation to connect and to make meaningful contributions to the social welfare of their communities. Because of these increasing pressures from communities for universities to justify their existence, universities began to realize the value in not isolating themselves from or competing with local communities but instead partnering with the surrounding community. After all, universities are a part of the local community.

**Barriers to partnership building**

Now, as much as any time in history, universities can see that engagement with their communities is vital to effective achievement of their missions (Wilson, 2004). This realization by universities has led to a real push for universities and communities to come together and form meaningful partnerships that will benefit both. The past several decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number of university and community partnerships. Community and university partnerships are now gaining momentum across the country as a powerful force in revitalizing communities, fostering civic engagement and strengthening the core missions of higher education (Carrierre & Seifer, 2003).
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Even with this new movement by universities to reach out and connect with their local communities, it must be noted that the building of significant and successful partnerships between universities and communities is a very complex task which generates multiple tensions (Strier, 2010). These potential collaborations tend to bring together people with differing personal styles as well as diverse cultural and social locations, which often results in conflict. This conflict leads to barriers in partnership building. Quite simply, successful partnerships are hard work and often messy (Curwood, et al., 2011). Some potential problems that will likely be faced in attempting to begin the process of partnership building could include: institutional tensions, conflicts of interest, bureaucratic constraints, poor planning, implementation issues, lack of on-going evaluation processes, competition over resources, value clashes, mistrust among partners, different knowledge and expectations of stakeholders, and tensions over ownership, control, funding and lack of sustainability of the partnership (Strier, 2010).

Is a university ready to begin partnership building?

Even though universities are now seeking to reach out and build partnerships with the local communities, the question must be asked are they really ready? Are universities ready and able to engage in meaningful partnerships with community organizations? According to Curwood, Farrar and Mackeigan (2011), the university culture has not yet fully shifted to realistically accommodate involved and sustained community partnerships. The administration of many universities has not developed and supported the strategies needed to support prolonged community engagement. Because of this, assessing and improving the readiness of a university to engage in community partnerships is essential. Universities need to make a strong statement when they are ready to reach out into the community, and this needs to occur from both the faculty and administrators.

In most universities, community outreach begins with socially committed and motivated faculty (Manjarre, Nye, Romanik, Vidal, & Walker, 2002). This socially motivated faculty, while often driven by their conscience, understands the educational value in engaging their students with the local community. They design their curriculum around student engagement and partnerships with the local community. While these outreach efforts are often started by the
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faculty, these efforts cannot be sustained unless the faculty has strong support from the administration of the university. If faculty senses their efforts are not valued, there will not be a sustained effort given and these partnerships will languish (Wilson, 2004).

Strategies for support from administrators to help ensure universities are truly ready to commit to community outreach could include: the developing of promotion and tenure guidelines that reflect community outreach, the developing of a community outreach committee or council designed to be the clearinghouse for all community outreach for the university, the open support of administrators by being on the front lines encouraging and supporting community outreach, and with reduced teaching loads and financial incentives for community engaged faculty. These strategies have been proven to help move universities forward in their effort to engage in the local community as active involvement of senior administrators plays a critical role in promoting community involvement throughout the community (Manjarrez, et al., 2002). By engaging in these community partnership preparatory activities and ensuring the university readiness for community partnerships; the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of university-community partnerships will be enhanced (Curwood, Farrar & Mackeigan, 2011).

Unequal power

The second critical issue that can provide a barrier between universities and their community partners is the unequal power balance (more power being held by the university). Shamblin (2011) said, “University members hold all of the power and money, they are only willing to help the community if their rules are followed; they aren’t truly interested in helping the community” (p. 112). These unequal balances of power in university and community relationships generate tensions over control, ownership, funding and lack of sustainability (Strier, 2011); this power imbalance must be addressed. Institutions of higher education have much more to gain, more money and more power than communities which allows them to drive the agenda of the partnership.

Freire (1970) argued that there is never a neutral relationship in regards to power, as someone always has more power in every relationship; therefore, universities need to take
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steps to increase the buy-in and power held by the community organizations. The building of an effective university and community partnership demands the balancing of unequal power between the two partners. The university and community partnerships that can move beyond the rhetoric of collaboration requires universities to shift the university culture to value community knowledge and truly share power with community stakeholders (Curwood, Farrar & Mackeigan, 2011). Universities can do this by making the partnership building phase as participatory as possible, building trust and promoting community ownership. These specific tactics will be addressed in detail in the following section.

Ways to build successful partnerships

When attempting to begin the process of potentially building partnerships, it must be noted, that people often approach the possible relationships from different places with different goals, priorities, capacities and needs. Partnerships can be difficult to form and they take time, knowledge, interpersonal skills and resources to sustain (Bailis & Melchoir, 2004). It is not a process to be attempted by the faint of heart. Given how difficult partnerships are to form, how do universities and communities suddenly jump into a relationship that works for both? How does a university or a community that wishes to bridge the gap or tear down the long established walls which have separated them for decades begin to proceed? While there are many different examples to guide a partnership building attempt, I will provide and review three distinctly different models or framework for building community partnerships.

The three models of partnership building are ones that a university seeking to reach out and build bridges into the community can use to begin the process. All three take into account the two biggest issues when it comes to partnership building; the universities readiness, and the unequal balance of power held by the university. The three different perspectives vary greatly as the first was designed to work in an urban area, the second was designed to work in a high school setting (but would be very applicable to universities), and the third is geared towards partnerships in rural areas. These three models are excellent examples for a university to use to access if their university is ready to begin partnership building with their local community and to allow the local community to have some measure of control in the process.
The CAM partnership building model

The first model is based on the research of Burbank and Hunter (2008). The authors in this example established what they called the Community Advocate Model (CAM). The model was developed at The University of Utah and was designed to help establish a university-community partnership in Salt Lake City which would give the families, students and communities the tools they would need to be successful throughout their education careers. In the Salt Lake City area, according to census data, there was a very large and increasing immigrant population. These individuals were struggling with ways to connect with the local education system (k-16) and find the appropriate answers and information that would help their children be successful throughout the learning careers. The way CAM was designed was a simple model of bringing a core group of community members (community advocates) into a centralized location, training them on the information the university wants to transmit to the broader community and then letting the community advocates go back and spread the information. This model is based on the fact that many universities do not have long lasting and well established relationships with their surrounding communities. Therefore, many people in the local community will not listen or participate with any interaction with the universities. With this in mind, by bringing in a small group of well-respected and key community members who do understand the value of a university community partnership, the universities can then rely on these community advocates to go back to the general population and spread the ideas. The key concept around this thought is that an individual who lives in the local community would be more likely to take advice or information from someone who lives in the neighborhood and shares their background.

The CAM model in Salt Lake City was implemented with very good results. Both the people who were trained as community advocates and the people in the communities the University of Utah was trying to reach with the information spoke very highly of the model. The qualitative data collected from interviewing the participants showed the community advocates felt the information they received about the educational system in Salt Lake City and how to meet their academic needs was valuable enough that they wanted to go back and share it with
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their communities (Burbank and Hunter, 2008). This study has credibility because the authors not only point out the strengths of the study, but also point out the weaknesses of the research study. For example, the community advocates did not feel they received enough training regarding the specifics of the proposed community partnerships and that more specifics would have been helpful in discussing with the residents of the communities.

**Prioritize, permit time and promote community ownership model**

The second model is based on the research of Sanders and Lewis (2005). The authors conducted case studies at different k-12 public schools that had successfully established and maintained community partnerships. The study looked at why the k-12 schools began to pursue community partnerships, what it took to sustain community partnerships, and (most importantly for the purposes of this essay) what advice these school leaders have when it came to building community partnerships. The results of their work produced three distinct steps that educational leaders should do in their effort to build community partnerships; prioritize, permit time and promote community ownership.

In regards to the first step of prioritizing, the educational leaders in the Sanders and Lewis (2005) study offered tips such as have a clearly defined plan, start small and continually evaluate where the partnership stands. The second piece of advice offered was to permit the proper amount of time for the relationship to evolve. It is critical that partners do not try to rush people into arrangements that they are not ready or able to commit to in regards to services for the partnership. The partnership must develop naturally over time and some community partnerships take years to fully evolve. The last piece of advice offered by the educational leaders was to allow the community to own their portion of the partnership. The natural tendency is for the k-12 school to take over the partnership but the community has to be fully invested.

**Building trust, participatory process, and respecting the culture model**

The third model we will examine is loosely based on the writings of Hamel-Lambert and Murphy (2009). According to Hamel-Lambert and Murphy, the university attempting to reach
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out and form a partnership should follow three basic steps. These three distinct steps involve: building trust, creating a participatory process and respecting the culture and climate of the agency you are attempting to partner – a very simple model of building partnerships. With any new partnership, the step of building trust should be critical. Questions should be asked and answered such as; what are we trying to accomplish, what do we have to offer to the partnership, what are the goals of the partnership? It is also critical that both partners be upfront about possible funding and funding streams. Nothing can derail a proposed partnership faster than undisclosed funding issues. Step two involves designing the partnership as a true participatory process. Involving the locals or community members in decisions regarding the goals and funding is critical. Whether you are a university or a community member, everyone likes to have input or at least be made aware of decisions that will likely affect them. The third step of respecting the culture and climate of the agency you are attempting to partner with is a step that is often overlooked by much of the literature surrounding the building of community partners.

**Analysis of Literature**

Even though community and university partnerships are now gaining momentum across the country as a powerful force in revitalizing communities, fostering civic engagement and strengthening the core missions of higher education, it is clear from a review of the literature there are barriers when it comes to the partnership building phase. The two most significant barriers are 1) the university may not be ready to begin building a partnership and 2) determining the appropriate method to build partnerships that have equal balance of power (to avoid the university holding the balance of power in the partnerships). These two issues must be examined, understood and acted upon by universities as they attempt to reach out and provide meaningful services to their local communities.

How does a university or a community that wishes to bridge the gap or tear down the long established walls which have separated them for decades begin to proceed? The Community Advocate Model of university and community partnership building developed by Burbank and Hunter (2008) is an excellent one. The CAM model could be easily transferrable
from the specific university outreach effort case (in Salt Lake City) to any proposed partnership with the inclusion of any needed adaptations based on regional differences. This model is worthy of serious consideration, especially in concentrated urban areas, for universities wishing to connect with their communities.

The best way for the community to be fully vested is if the community feels they have ownership in the partnership. It is critical that the educational leaders truly listen to the needs, wants and desires of the community partners. The model presented by Sanders and Lewis (2005) is a model worth considering because it demonstrates that it is possible to build school and community relations in any setting, whether it is a high school, a community college or even a large institution because of the generic community partnership building steps incorporated in this design. This model also takes into account the issue of university readiness in regards to partnership building and allows the community partner to have some measure of control in the process. I believe if a university and community apply the steps outlined by Sanders and Lewis of prioritizing, permitting time and promoting community ownership, it would certainly increase the chances of a successful university and community partnership.

The model presented by Hamel-Lambert and Murphy (2009) is a strong example to follow when attempting to build community partnerships and one that could yield positive experiences for both the university and community. I favor this model of university and community partnership building because of the way it is written and developed with regards to building partnerships in Appalachian regions. From my own personal experience of building partnerships with the university I work for and the local surrounding community, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of respecting the culture and climate when attempting to build partnerships. Although it is often overlooked, this step is critical, especially in rural areas.

Special care should be taken in outreach efforts by universities in these rural communities because of the lack of trust that often exists in rural communities toward their local universities. This lack of trust stems from the decades of the universities trying to control the local communities. Wilson (2004) observed, “Too often universities venture into communities like a bull in a china shop; we posture ourselves as “know-it-alls” having the
expertise that communities need and hell-bent on applying it with little or no regard for the
history and culture of communities, as this is a perfect recipe for a bad marriage” (p. 20). It
should be clear from the beginning and then followed through by the actions of the university,
that the university is not trying to impart their vast knowledge and control over the community,
but rather that the university is willing to respect and honor the culture and climate of the
community they are attempting to partner. Prospective partners in any relationship need to
feel valued and respected, and at the point they do not, developing a true partnership becomes
nearly impossible. This model of partnership building is a way for universities and communities
to connect and meet the needs of both parties, while still respecting the culture and climate of
the community. This model also clearly accounts for balancing the division of power between
the university and the community and allows for the time to ensure the university is ready to
begin partnership building.

All three of these models of partnership building are ones that a university seeking to
reach out and build bridges into the community can consult to begin the process. All three
models (in some form or fashion) take into account the two biggest issues when it comes to
partnership building; the universities readiness, and the unequal balance of power held by the
university. These models of partnership building are excellent reference tools for a university to
help determine if their university is ready to begin partnership building with their local
community and to allow the local community to have some measure of control in the process.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of universities there has been a constant struggle to balance
their place within their local communities. Most often, the universities largely ignored the
greater needs of the communities and even competed with the communities for funding and
resources. The universities were not viewed favorably by the surrounding communities with
many communities seeing the universities as promoting themselves as elitists. This less than
favorable relationship was the norm for much of modern history until the severe economic
downturn over the last few decades. With this downturn in the economy, many universities
have begun to offer outreach services or attempt to partner with local communities in ways to
benefit themselves and benefit the local communities. This outreach effort by universities has not been received with open arms by many communities. Therefore, many universities have struggled in their efforts to build solid and useful community partnerships because these partnerships can be time consuming to form and they take time, knowledge, interpersonal skills and resources to sustain (Bailis & Melchoir, 2004).

The biggest hurdles to building these partnerships has been the unequal balance of power between the two partners and if the university is truly ready to build a partnership. The three different university and community partnership building models discussed within this essay offer research based advice regarding suggestions on how to move this relatively new area of partnerships forward while understanding and respecting the unequal balance of power held by the university and accessing if the university is truly ready to begin a partnership building attempt. It is my hope that both universities and the communities they serve will use the provided partnership building models to move forward in their relationships. It will be very interesting to see how this relatively new area of university and community partnerships will develop into the future. This is certainly an area where further research and attention is required as universities and the communities they serve struggle to maintain a balance that is beneficial to both.
References


