

The Engaged Community College: Supporting the Institutionalization of Engagement Through Collaborative Action Inquiry

Jennifer W. Purcell

Abstract

The purpose of this action research study was to explore how community colleges increase their capacity for community engagement. Faculty and staff members who were identified as community engagement leaders within a public community college participated in a series of interventions to improve community engagement practices within the college. The study produced 4 significant findings for community engagement practices. First, distributed leadership to advance community engagement is derived from college employees' and community partners' boundary-spanning behaviors. Second, the creation and extension of communication channels among multiple stakeholder groups for community engagement parallels the advancement of an institution's community engagement agenda. Third, authentic engagement exists in various degrees throughout distinct stages of institutionalization, reflecting the unique contexts and stakeholder interests involved. Fourth, collaborative action inquiry as a method of professional and organizational development utilizes existing expertise among college employees, strengthens internal networks, and supports the institutionalization of engagement. These findings substantiate the necessary integration of theory and practice in community engagement in higher education.

Conceptual Framework

In order to effect change at the organizational level, individual and group-level learning is necessary (*Watkins, 2000*). Through interventions cocreated by the researcher and the study stakeholders at the college, participants engaged in double-loop learning that created conditions for second-order change within the college (*Argyris, 1997; Burke, 2008; Torbert, 2004*). Argyris and Schon (1978) suggested that organizational learning occurs in modes influenced by underlying assumptions of the learner. As a method of organizational learning, Coghlan (2006) argued that action research supports development of individual learning and practice throughout an organization.

This study was designed to impact first-, second-, and third-person practice through action research and collaborative action inquiry. First-person inquiry-practice enabled participants in the collaborative action inquiry group to engage in self-reflection that yielded self-learning in action as it related to their community engagement practice. The college's organizational structures and activities that emerged from the collaborative action inquiry represent third-person knowledge generated through the collaborative action inquiry. This knowledge generation in the first, second, and third person ultimately results in organization-level change through advancements in the college's pursuit of the institutionalization of engagement.

Kimberly and Nielsen (1975) suggested that such change occurs in three orders: first order, second order, and third order. First-order change involves a targeted subunit of the organization. Second-order change has a broader impact beyond the initial target but remains within the subunit. Third-order change occurs when the success of an intervention specific to the initial target within the subunit has organization-wide influence. In this study, second-order change was evidenced by enhanced infrastructure to support the institutionalization of engagement.

Methodology

The action research methodology for this research study created an opportunity to examine how an organization responds to external and internal forces while attempting to enhance its learning related to a specific topic (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). In this case, the college sought to institutionalize community engagement, which necessitates organizational knowledge of community engagement (Driscoll, 2008). Inherent to the institutionalization process is individual and organizational learning necessary to develop the capacity for community engagement. This study examined organizational learning during a change process including targeted learning interventions to facilitate and guide the direction of change within the organization. These interventions are informed by the continuous action research cycles included in the design of the study. Based on preliminary data collection within the college and a review of the literature, the study's research questions were defined as follows:

- What are the characteristics of leadership for community engagement within the community college?

- Who informs decision making regarding community engagement with the community college?
- How does the community partner voice inform decision making among community engagement leaders?
- How does the informal service leader voice inform decision making among senior leaders at the college?
- What impact does collaborative action inquiry have on individual and organizational change and the community college's learning for engagement?

Findings and Analysis

Data were collected via interviews with community engagement leaders, college leaders, and community partners. Field notes, researcher memos, and document review were also sources of data.

Leadership for Community Engagement

Four themes related to the characteristics of leaders for community engagement within the college were identified through data analysis. First, leadership is distributed throughout the college and has historically been isolated within informal groups and individuals. Second, these isolated pockets of leadership exhibited boundary-spanning characteristics that included individual expertise related to community engagement as well as personal commitment to community engagement. Third, changes in senior leadership at the college occur regularly, which requires that remaining leaders be adaptive to these changes. Finally, community engagement leaders at the college share views on an optimal leadership model for community engagement that is representative, has a centralized structure, and includes formal channels of communication.

Decision Making for Community Engagement

The study revealed that decision making for community engagement includes numerous stakeholders' voices and occurs through an informal decision-making process. Community engagement leaders and community partners inform decisions for community engagement; however, their inclusion had been inconsistent because the channels of communication for these voices in the decision-making process are informal. As the study progressed, decision making for engagement became a collaborative, proactive process among community engagement leaders.

Collaborative Action Inquiry's Impact on Organizational Learning for Community Engagement

The action research study produced two significant impacts on the college. First, it facilitated the development of a community of practice around community engagement. Community engagement and its leadership existed in isolated, informal pockets throughout the college, and the collaborative action inquiry intervention brought these dispersed leaders together to define a common mission and set of goals for community engagement at the college. Second, action research methodology provided a process by which the community engagement leaders and college leaders could recognize and respond to opportunities for organizational growth for community engagement with formal communication channels.

Significance to the Field

This study produced four significant conclusions on capacity building for community engagement. First, distributed leadership to advance community engagement is derived from college employees' and community partners' boundary-spanning behaviors. Leadership for community engagement is not encapsulated in a single individual or office. Instead, leadership is distributed throughout the organization and within the community through community partners. Further, this distributed leadership leverages boundary-spanning traits including enhanced communication skills, individuals' connections to multiple contexts internal and external to their institution, and serving as an information gatekeeper between two contexts (*Tushman & Scanlan, 1981*). Second, the creation and extension of communication channels among multiple stakeholder groups for community engagement parallels the advancement of an institution's community engagement agenda. Colleges and universities are complex organizations that require extensive communication channels internal and external to the institution in order to advance an organization-wide agenda.

Third, authentic engagement exists in various degrees throughout distinct stages of institutionalization, reflecting the unique contexts and stakeholder interests involved. Best practices for authentic community engagement may be reflected at varying levels throughout the institutionalization process depending on unique organizational context and situational factors. Such seemingly inconsistent indicators are learning opportunities for enhanced organizational awareness and capacity building. Fourth,

collaborative action inquiry as a method of professional and organizational development utilizes existing expertise among college employees, strengthens internal networks, and supports the institutionalization of engagement. The process, though not a panacea for organizational change, is a proven effective means by which colleges and universities can build capacity for sustained change.

Figure 1 illustrates the introduction of a learning intervention to support the advancement of community engagement when distributed leadership is apparent within the college. This learning model for distributed leadership shows how learning and change are connected in relation to cycles of developing leadership behaviors and structures that emerge through collaborative action inquiry. The model builds upon Coghlan's (2006) model of first-, second-, and third-person learning. Multiple cycles of inquiry and action are represented in the model in addition to the progression of learning for the first, second, and third person. The model illustrates the influence of individual, group, and organization on organizational change. The model also illustrates the influence of organizational change on learning within an organization. Through iterative cycles of action inquiry, leadership behaviors are honed; thus, service engagement leaders have a stronger influence on the institutionalization of engagement.

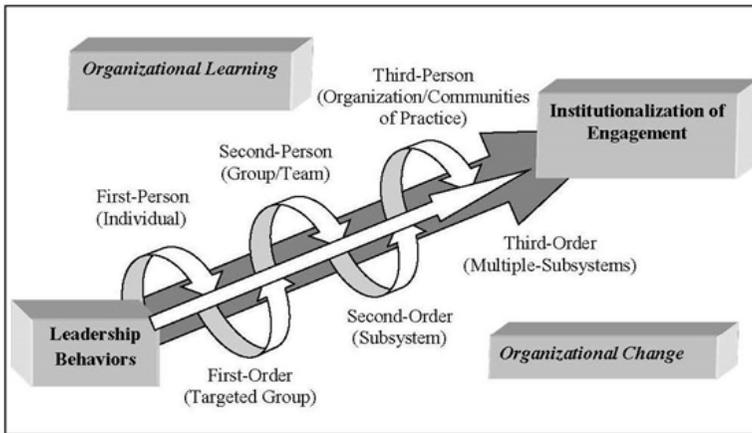


Figure 1. Learning model for distributed leadership of community engagement.

Conclusion

The study illustrated how collaborative action inquiry supports organization-wide change and leverages existing resources within community colleges. The study also identified leadership characteristics needed to support community engagement. The case explored channels of communication within and external to the community college that influenced decision making related to community engagement. Furthermore, this study documented the real-world response to such interventions and offered recommendations for practice and for further research based on the learning that emerged through the action research cycles in the study. In addition to providing documentation of a real-world case of the institutionalization of engagement, this study provided evidence of applied theory in the community college environment. The case illustrated how individual and group learning support organization change related to community engagement. In sum, this research study yielded findings on practice and theory and provided a basis for further research on the institutionalization of community engagement within the community college sector.

References

- Argyris, C. (1997). Single-loop and double-loop models in research on decision making. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21, 363-375.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Burke, W. W. (2008). *Organizational change: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Coghlan, D. (2006). Insider action research doctorates: Generating actionable knowledge. *Higher Education*, 54, 293-306.
- Coghlan, D. & Brannick, T. (2010). *Doing action research in your own organization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Driscoll, A. (2008). Carnegie Community Engagement Classification: Intentions and insights. *Change*, Jan/Feb, 38-41.
- Holland, B. A., Green, L. W., Greene-Morton, E., Stanton, T. K. (2003). Community-university partnerships: What do we know? Proceedings from The 2003 National Symposium on Community-University Partnerships. San Diego, CA.
- Kimberly, J. R. & Nielsen, W. R. (1975). Organization development and change in organizational performance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 20, 191-206.
- Torbert, W. R. (2004). *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Tushman, M. L. & Scanlan, T. J. (1981). Boundary spanning individuals: Their role in information transfer and their antecedents. *Academy of Management Journal*, 24(2), 289-305.

Watkins, K. E. (2000). Learning by changing: Action science and virtual organization development. *Adult Learning*, 11(3), 20-22.

About the Author

Jennifer W. Purcell is an assistant professor of leadership studies in the Department of University Studies at Kennesaw State University, where she teaches a variety of community-engaged leadership courses. Her research interests include the institutionalization of community engagement and leadership to support civic engagement, including cross-sector civic leadership. Purcell earned her Ed.D. in Adult Education with a focus in organizational development from the University of Georgia.

