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AN EXAMINATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

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**ABSTRACT**

Using survey research from graduate student and community stakeholder respondents, this exploratory study examines two different dimensions of higher education-community partnerships. First, the role graduate assistantships supporting higher education and community partnerships in the context of graduate student development is examined. Second, the challenges and opportunities created in higher education and community partnerships from the perspectives of community stakeholders are explored. Recommendations for related, more in-depth explorations are provided.

**Keywords:** Research; Higher Education Accountability; Community Development; Partnerships

Partnerships between universities and local and national communities are contextual extensions and natural consequences of the US higher educational system in which democratic values and civic engagement are among the ultimate goals to be achieved (Bender, 1988). The frequent goal of these partnerships is to create new knowledge that may lead to the development and refinement of original or existing theories that are intended to impact real world applications. Such contributions are not assessed based on initial or short-term usefulness (Stokes, 1997; Bush, 1990), but the degree and extent to which the outcomes of such partnerships are perceived to have positive long-term impact on society (Bender, 1988). Community partnerships are part of a broader effort toward increasing the community engagement of universities, including such areas as the growth in service-learning courses, education for citizenship, and the broadening of the definitions of faculty scholarship and service (Rubin, 2000).

Current discussions in higher education focus on the changing system under which universities operate—an environment that has less governmental support, increased industry contracting, increased questioning regarding the purpose of academia, and demand for greater accountability (Jackson & Meyers, 2000). One of the greatest challenges of higher education is to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and adequately prepare its graduates as skilled workforce. Universities have been criticized for the failure to confront critical social issues, develop student citizenship skills, and address research ethics (Jackson & Meyers, 2000). In other words, institutions of higher education have been accused as being out of touch with their local communities, national problems, and global issues. A partial remedy to this negative perception is university partnerships with local communities. Such efforts may often be intended, in part, to demonstrate the utility of institutions of higher education.

Higher education-community partnerships are often maintained by graduate students who support community based research and interventions. There are several reasons for individuals to participate in higher education-community partnerships while in graduate school. Research on graduate students indicates that many of them are challenged by financial issues, personal concerns, curricular requirements, and relationships with faculty (Dolph, 1983; Jacks, Chubin, Porter, & Connolly, 1983; Benkin, 1984; Valentine, 1987; Hirt & Muffo, 1998). The supply of graduate assistantships is often essential for the development of personal, professional, and financial security. The availability of support is especially important during the development of dissertations (Benkin, 1984). Dolph (1983) claims that graduate students with some form of funding are more likely to receive their degrees.

Graduate students with research assistantships are much more likely to succeed both in degree completion and securing a faculty position as a result of their engagement with scholarly

inquiry and subsequent publications (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Assistantships may also provide research and dissertation topics and related sources of data that would be otherwise unavailable. Graduate assistantships create specific opportunities for graduate student publications, close working relationships with faculty, and contexts in which to regularly socialize with peers and establish valuable networking (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Valentine, 1987). Curricular requirements are also critical for graduate student success. For example, programs that develop clear policies and student-friendly procedures such as orientation programs, detailed research proposal guidelines, focused comprehensive exams, and annual reviews of student progress experience lower levels of student attrition (Nerad & Cerny, 1993; Golde, 1995).

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the impacts of partnerships on communities and institutions of higher education and the related benefits for graduate students. We review survey research conducted to determine the relationships between involvement by graduate students in partnership related work and their overall professional development. Additionally, we explore general perceptions by community stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of partnering relationships. Suggestions are made for advancing the questions explored.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the partnership relationship between the institutions of higher education and community organizations. Specifically, this study seeks to:

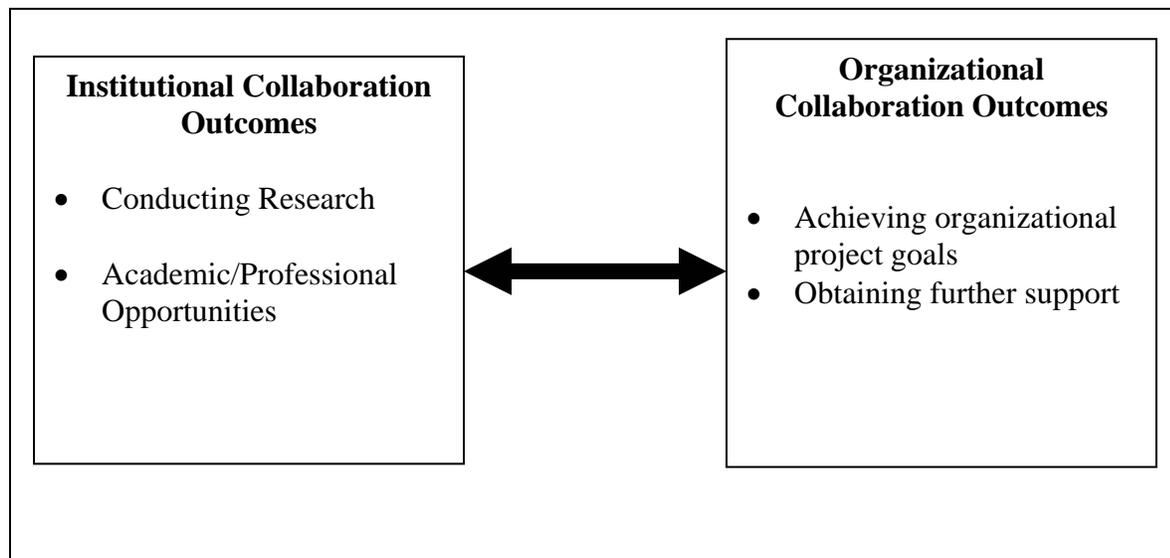
- a) To identify the impacts of higher education-community partnerships and related institutional research on local communities; and

- b) To study the impacts of participating in and conducting related institutional research in the context of higher education-community partnerships on the development of graduate students.

This exploratory examination is aimed toward the development of understanding regarding specific factors associated with school-university partnerships. In an era, when higher education is pressured for further accountability in many dimensions and the expectations of the local, national, and international communities are increasing, higher education institutions are struggling to find better ways to meet these expectations and better serve these communities through research and scholarship.

We examine the collaboration relationships between the institutions of higher education and community organizations as well as the following research questions. Figure 1 below illustrates the relationships in the collaboration between institutions of higher education and community organizations under investigation.

Figure 1. Graduate Student Higher Education Community Partnership Model



A survey of graduate students examined the following research questions:

- 1) How important is conducting research to graduate students?
- 2) What are the outcomes of conducting research?
- 3) What academic opportunities are offered to students as a result of these research projects?
- 4) What influences have these research projects made on graduate students?
- 5) Is there a relationship between the number of research projects graduate students are involved with and the number of conference presentations and publications they produce?
- 6) Is there a relationship between the number of research projects in which graduate students are involved and their networking opportunities?

A survey of higher education-community partnerships explored the following research questions (adopted from Maurrasse, 2002):

1. Were residents integral in shaping the direction of the partnership?
2. Was the self-sufficiency of residents enhanced by the partnerships?
3. Were principle investigators sensitive to community needs and well trained and well equipped to carry out the tasks?
4. Were the community organizations able to leverage additional support of varying types (internal and external)?
5. Were residents knowledgeable about how best to take advantage of the institution's resources?

### **Review of Literature**

The community development literature focuses on a number of aspects including, the elements or conditions that would lead to community change (Keating & Smith, 1996; Baer &

Williamson, 1988; Downs, 1981; Wiewel, Teitz, & Giloth, 1993; Chaskin & Brown, 1996; Checkoway, 1995; Rubin, Innes, & Fleming, 1998) at the individual, social, and economic levels. Chaskin and Brown suggest six dimensions of community and neighborhoods that lead to change (1996). These dimensions include the following:

1. Human capital: includes improving skills and knowledge the individuals in the community through training, continuing education, social services and programs, and leadership development.
2. Social capital: includes improving interpersonal networks, coordination, trust, and cooperation for mutual benefit both among the community members and with the outside organizations interacting with the community organizations.
3. Physical infrastructure: includes improving affordable housing, transportation, play grounds, child care services, and open space.
4. Economic infrastructure: includes increasing goods and services distributed and improving capital flows within the community and between the community and the outside world, such as improving job opportunities and capitalization of private commercial and financial institutions within the community.
5. Institutional infrastructure: includes organization development, and improving the effectiveness of leadership of the community's public, nonprofit, and private-sector institutions.
6. Political strength: includes increasing community's involvement in the political arena at the state and federal legislative levels and their ability to voice their issues and concerns to their political representatives and institutions.

Other authors studied partnerships and collaboration in nonprofit community-based organizations and government agencies from the perspective of improvement of organizational cost-effectiveness, enhancement of the partnership and collaboration capacity, and sustainability of social services (Weiner & Alexander, 1998; Cropper, 1996; Clegg & Hardy, 1999; Harrison & Weiss, 1998).

Collaboration is defined as “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (Gray, 1989, p. 5). By pooling available resources, partnerships and collaborations are more likely to achieve increased efficiency and cost-effectiveness of services and programs, new funding sources and opportunities, and diversify organizational networks (Charns & Tewksbury, 1993; Gray, 1985; 1989; 1996; Smith, Carroll & Ashford, 1995; Wood & Gray, 1991). Other scholars, however, have challenged the general concept of interorganizational or community related partnerships. These challenges include concerns regarding turf and territoriality issues, identifying and addressing differences in organizational norms and procedures, expanding communication both within and across organizations, coping with tensions concerning organizational autonomy and differential power relations, maintaining community accountability and identifying appropriate community representatives, and managing logistical issues such as program monitoring and the time-consuming nature of establishing and maintaining multiorganizational partnerships (Takahashi & Smutny, 2002; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Weiner & Alexander, 1998). The motivations and conditions for a healthy collaborative formation have also been explored in the literature (Wood & Gray, 1991; Hageman, Zuckerman, Weiner, Alexander, & Bogue, 1998; Bazzoli, Stein, Alexander, Conrad, Sofaer, & Shortell, 1997; Feeney, 1997; Israel et al., 1998).

Community outreach activities undertaken by academic institutions are generally expected to produce benefits for both the community and the university in which facilities projects, community development, technical assistance, and community planning are engaged (Vidal, et al., 2002). Some scholars criticize higher education-community partnerships. Such critiques often claim failure of such efforts to address increasing and complex problems and issues emerging US urban communities (Boyer, 1990; Lynton & Elman, 1987; Bok, 1982). These critiques, however, may characterize poorly managed partnerships rather than describe the broad scope of higher education-community partnership efforts. In order to realize the full benefits of a partnership, committed parties need to have means for communicating effectively, efficiently, and frequently, including both formal and informal channels (Austin, 2000).

Research on graduate students indicates that many of them are challenged by financial issues, personal concerns, curricular requirements, and relationships with faculty (Dolph, 1983; Jacks, Chubin, Porter, & Connolly, 1983; Benkin, 1984; Valentine, 1987; Hirt & Muffo, 1998; Akdere, 2004). The availability of adequate funding is crucial for graduate students in financially securing their academic and personal lives. The availability of both financial and academic support can determine who completes degrees, especially when all requirements except the dissertation have been fulfilled (Benkin, 1984; Cryer, 1998). Cooke et al. (2004) stated that students become more concerned about their finances as they progress through university, therefore, according to the aforementioned study, students with high financial concerns feel more anxiety or nervousness.

In addition to learning traditional study skills, students need guidance regarding how to work together, to learn from each other, and to use new technology. Peer support and an academic environments that fosters graduate student interaction as part of the learning process, is

necessary for successful and positive outcomes. Graduate students with some form of funding from any given discipline such as education, sociology, medicine, engineering, management, and humanities are more likely to complete their degree programs (Jack, Chubin, Porter, & Connolly, 1983; Valentine, 1987; Dolph, 1983; Dean & Gray, 1998). Furthermore, graduate students with research assistantships are much more likely to succeed both in degree completion, securing faculty positions as a result of their engagement with research and publishing, and engage in work associated with their work in graduate school (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Cooke et al.'s (2004) study found that graduate students involved in research and publishing in refereed journals, who worked closely with faculty, regularly socialized with their peers, and, consequently, establish valuable networking were less likely to worry about their post-graduate school futures (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Valentine, 1987; Sayed et al., 1998).

In terms of the personal concerns for graduate students, significant differences between the expectations and the realities of graduate school result in high levels of discomfort and dissatisfaction among graduate students (Baird, 1978). Curricular requirements are also critical in graduate school experience. For example, programs that develop clear policies and student-friendly procedures such as orientation programs, detailed research proposal guidelines, focused comprehensive exams, and annual reviews of student progress experience lower levels of student attrition (Nerad & Cerny, 1993; Golde, 1995). Academic socialization and development has been classified into three consecutive influential stages in the graduate school process: (1) transition to the program; (2) acquisition of skills; and (3) conducting research (Tinto, 1993). Outstanding graduate students have experienced strong developmental opportunities in all three of these stages. Available research implies that graduate assistantships can lead to development at the social and professional levels and create greater likelihood for future success, can improve the

overall outcomes for projects on which they (graduate assistants) work, and can lead graduate assistants to professional roles in areas associated with their work in graduate school.

### **Methodology**

This is a correlational research study. The target population of this study includes: graduate students in higher education institutions, and community organizations. Respondents are graduate students from a tier one research university in the Midwestern United States and associated representatives from local and state-wide communities. For the purposes of data gathering, a questionnaire is designed for this survey method. The sample size was 382 graduate students and 213 community organizations (n = 595). For the graduate student survey, the return rate was 214 (56 per cent), and for the community organizations, 128 (60 per cent) surveys were returned. The survey instrument was in closed form; multiple-item and 4-point scales were used to rank the items in the questions. Questions regarding demographic variables are also included at the end of the questionnaire. Before conducting the survey, a pilot testing was conducted among a sample of individuals and organizations from both of the populations. The data from graduate students were collected via questionnaire sent by US Mail. Data gathered from community organizations were collected using online surveys.

The frequency of responses was conducted to assess the distribution of the participants. Means and standard deviations were also calculated for each item and scale to assess potential central tendencies. Descriptive statistics of demographic variables of the samples were presented in order to analyze the independent variables. Multivariate correlational statistics were done in the form of multiple regression to identify how much variance of the dependent variables will be accounted for by the combination of the independent variables. The Pearson Product-Moment

Correlation Coefficient ( $r$ ) was used to measure the degree of relationships between the variables.

## Results

The results component of this paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, the research questions in regards to the graduate students are addressed. In the second section, the research questions related to community organizations are investigated. And finally, in section three, the relationships between higher education and community collaborations are presented.

### *Research Questions on Graduate Student Experience*

*Research Question 1: How important is research experience to graduate students?*

This question asks four different aspects of possible research experience of graduate students. The participants were asked to respond to these items by choosing a value on a 1 to 4-point scale; 1, being the very important, 2, being somewhat important; 3, being not too important; and 4, being not at all important. The results are illustrated in Table 1. Importance of Conducting Research

<b>The Criterion Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Research experience	1.708	0.954
<b>The Predictor Variables</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Students' professional work	1.250	0.607
Financial contribution	1.458	0.658
Academic & scholarly dev.	1.291	0.624
Professional development	1.375	0.646

Consequently, professional work, financial well-being, academic, scholarly, and professional development are positively related to graduate students' research experience ( $r_s = 0.063$ ;  $p = 0.013$ ).

*Research Question 2: What are the outcomes of conducting research?*

This question inquires about the outcomes of students' research involvement. Based on the frequency analysis, the most significant outcome of these projects is that they complement students' coursework (50%). The ranking continues as follows: fulfilling a requirement for an internship (26%); changing students' career direction (17%); and providing material for thesis/dissertation (6%). These statistics confirm the existing literature that research involvement provides many outcomes for the graduate student development and experience (Baird, 1978; Hirt & Muffo, 1998).

*Research Question 3: What academic opportunities are offered to the students as a result of their research involvement?*

This question asks students whether any of their research involvement led to an article publication in a journal; a conference presentation; or a graduate thesis or dissertation. The assumption is that these projects present students with at least one of these opportunities. The results indicate that majority of the students (50%) were able to present their research findings in a conference, while 34% of them used their research projects for their graduate thesis or dissertation, and 16% of them were able to publish in a refereed journal. Getting published for a graduate student is naturally a great challenge and the findings undoubtedly verify this struggle. Nevertheless, research involvement makes a significant contribution to the overall academic and scholarly development of graduate students.

*Research Question 4: What influences has conducting research made on graduate students?*

The question attempts to explore the influences of conducting research on graduate students. According to the frequency statistics, the majority of the participants (39%) indicated that their research experience provided useful networking opportunities and resume enhancement

that helped in obtaining employment, promotion, or salary increase. This supports the existing literature about that fact that graduate students with access to research opportunities are able to establish professional networking and enhance their academic credentials (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Thirty-three percent of the students, on the other hand, stated that their experiences influenced their involvement with their respected fields. By increasing graduate student involvement within their respective fields, universities support broader institutional goals regarding outreach and service. Nineteen percent of the students stated that their experience influenced their choice of profession, while 9% indicated that it influenced their academic research and teaching agendas; thus, bridging teaching and research.

*Research Question 5: Is there an association between the number of research projects graduate students are involved with and the number of their conference presentations and publications in journals?*

Based on the responses from the participants, there is a positive relationship between the number of research projects in which graduate student participated and the number of conference presentations and publications in journals they produce ( $r_s = 0.071$ ;  $p = 0.014$ ). Although this may not be surprising, it does indicate that graduate student work leads to focused, scholarly productivity. This finding supports available research regarding the relationship between the research involvement and publishing and conference presentations (Dolph, 1983; Valentine, 1987; Bowen & Rudenstein, 1992)

*Research Question 6: Is there an association between the number of research projects in which graduate students are involved and their networking opportunities?*

The relationship between the number of research projects in which graduate students are involved and their networking opportunities is positive ( $r_s = 0.062$ ;  $p = 0.018$ ). This result

supports the existing literature in that research involvement is an important part of networking within the academia (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Valentine, 1987).

### ***Research Questions on Community Organizations***

*Research Question 1: Were residents integral in shaping the direction of the partnership?*

On a 1 to 4-point scale; 1 being the highest level of involvement, the mean for this criterion is 1.1, indicating that majority of the organizations have been integral in determining the direction of the partnership. Given the nature of the partnership, however, this is not surprising. These community organizations establish such partnerships through the funding opportunities they receive from the higher education institution. Therefore, they are only required to follow the funding guidelines and it is completely up to these individual organizations to decide what direction they want with the partnership effort. In some unique cases, however, due to the nature of funding organizations may feel restrained by these requirements. The importance of organizations to be in charge of determining the direction of the partnership in terms of achieving success has also been indicated in the literature (Cox, 2000; Harkavy & Puckett, 1991, 1992; Hackney, 1986; Bender, 1988).

*Research Question 2: Was the self-sufficiency of residents enhanced by the partnerships?*

This question explores whether the resident capacity was improved as a result of this partnership. This criterion may include multiple levels and aspects of personal skills, referring to human capital of the residents, including that of the community leaders. On a 1 to 4-point scale; 1 being the highest level of self-sufficiency enhancement, the mean for this criterion is 2.3, indicating that certain portion of the respondents felt the enhancement of self-sufficiency among their residents. This is partially due to the planned outcome of their individual projects, suggesting that some of the partnerships did not consider this potential as an outcome, and

consequently did not view the collaboration from this perspective. This is an essential expected outcome of any given higher education-community partnership (Kanter, 1994; Vidal et al., 2002; Rubin, 2000; Burke, 1999; Rubin et al, 1998; Wood & Gray, 1991).

*Research Question 3: Were the principle investigators sensitive to community needs and well trained and well equipped to carry out the tasks?*

On a 1 to 4-point scale; 1 being the highest level of sensitivity and research training, the mean for this criterion is 1.9, indicating a significant level of sensitivity towards the community and training in research in various settings. This question poses a central issue in conducting research, especially in field studies. As a matter of fact, the competency and experience in conducting research that involves multiple epistemologies may be a detrimental factor in the success or the failure of the partnerships (Vidal et al., 2002; DeMulder & Eby, 1999; Maurrasse, 2002; Potter & Chickering, 1991; Jackson & Meyers, 2000). Since institutions of higher education are represented by these researchers, their conduct of research and expertise becomes a more critical issue in partnerships.

*Research Question 4: Were the community organizations able to leverage additional support of varying types (internal and external)?*

One of the goals of higher education-community partnerships is to encourage community organizations to seek internal and external support to increase and maximize their sources, especially in the form of funding (Cox, 2000; Wiewel et al., 1993; Jackson & Meyers, 2000). In fact, some of these partnerships were established solely to serve this purpose of providing evidence of success or potential improvement of a community program or service to use as a basis for further funding both from governmental agencies, nonprofit organizations, and corporate sector. On a 1 to 4-point scale; 1 being the highest level of utilization, the mean for this

criterion is 2.9, indicating a moderate to below moderate level of success in the ability to leverage additional support. Given the history of higher education-community partnerships in the context under study, this moderate level of response could be viewed positively, especially in an economy that has been in recession. However, this result may point to an important element for further exploration as future partnerships as they are re-designed and re-structured.

*Research Question 5: Were the residents knowledgeable about how best to take advantage of the institution's resources?*

This issue is related to the efforts of the higher education institutions in terms of reaching out, publicity, and marketing. But, in a partnership situation, this may become even more important in order to maximize the outcomes and long term benefits of the collaboration (Williamson, 1985; Burke, 1999; Kanter, 1994, Austin, 2000; Backman & Smith, 2000; Provan & Milward, 1995; Takahashi & Smutny, 2002). On a 1 to 4-point scale; 1 being the highest level of knowledge and resource utilization, the mean for this criterion is 3.1, indicating an average level of knowledge on the resources of higher education institutions. To enhance the level of partnership, universities view on these collaborations should go beyond the consideration of partnerships as projects of providing research opportunities to their faculty and graduate students and include a broader perspective of more in-depth collaboration at all possible levels.

Table 2: Research Question 1-5: Means and Standard Deviations

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Research Criterion 1	1.103	0.467
Research Criterion 2	2.311	0.672
Research Criterion 3	1.985	0.588
Research Criterion 4	2.979	0.781

Research Criterion 5	3.184	0.896
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***Relationships between higher education and community collaborations***

The relationship between higher education institutions and community organizations in terms of collaboration were explored using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient. The correlation analyses presented a significant relationship among the variables of conducting research, academic/professional opportunities, achieving organizational goals, and obtaining further support. Table 3 presents the correlation results.

Table 3. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient for Higher Education Community Organization Collaborations

**Correlations**

	Conducting research	Academic /professional opportunities	Achieving organizational goals	Obtaining further support
Conducting research	-	.877**	.675**	.624**
Academic/ professional opportunities	.877**	-	.704**	.659**
Achieving organizational goals	.675**	.704**	-	.689**
Obtaining further support	.624**	.659**	.689**	-

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The above results suggest strong intersections between the variables identified. The connections between participation in higher education-community partnerships and opportunities for achieving academic and professional goals and development provide preliminary indications regarding the positive intersections between higher education-community partnerships and graduate student development leading, ultimately, to professionals who have expertise associated with the partnerships in which they have been involved.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the impacts of partnerships on communities and institutions of higher education and the related benefits for graduate students. Our analysis of survey research conducted identified relationships between involvement by graduate students in higher education-community partnership related work and their overall professional development. Additionally, we explored general perceptions by community stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of partnering relationships and the intersections between higher education-community partnerships and the development of higher education stakeholders, particularly graduate students.

Although our study, largely, treated data regarding graduate student development and the perceived effectiveness of higher education-university partnerships separately, our findings do provide preliminary indications regarding the potential fruitfulness of additional investigation. It is our desire to utilize more sophisticated analysis to explore interactions within the data set reported within. More importantly, studies should be designed that explore more specifically the interactions between higher education-community partnerships and stakeholder development. Graduate students are one category of several layers of participants and stakeholders in higher education-university partnerships. The impact of such partnerships on these the personal and professional development of these stakeholders is an important future consideration. A more specific research agenda is provided in the presentation associated with this paper (but is not included within due to space limitations).

Supportive institutional structure, commitment by organization leaders, and commitment of resources are necessary ingredients for successful partnership formation in which the formation of community partnerships requires serious commitment on the part of all participants

(Jackson & Meyers, 2000). In this new era of accountability, especially among the public institutions, there is an increasing focus on civic engagement and character building at all levels.

We hope that this exploration may stimulate additional work considering the broad array of potential impacts for higher education-community partnerships.

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