Higher Education-Community Partnerships: An HRD Perspective

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Using survey research, the paper explored higher education and community partnerships, and assessed their challenges, problems, and the role of partnerships in community development and higher education practices. The purpose of this paper is also to investigate potential contributions of such partnerships in HRD’s community development respective. This paper contributes to our understanding of how higher education and community partnerships interact and what solutions the field of HRD may offer to advance such collaborative efforts.

Keywords: Higher Education, Partnership, Collaboration

The primary research methodology: Quantitative Research

Partnerships between universities and local and national communities are contextual extensions and natural consequences of the U.S. higher educational system in which democratic values and civic engagement are among the ultimate goals to be achieved. In any given higher education and community partnership, there are usually three parties involved in or directly or indirectly related with the outcomes the partnership may offer. The first party is the people who live in that particular neighborhood and may be subject to the problem or issue which the partnership attempts to address or offer solutions. In this context, neighborhood members may be represented by resident organizations which contract the partnerships with the second party—the institutions of higher education. They participate in this effort through offering various types of funding, faculty and research support, and dissemination of knowledge. The third party who is impacted by partnerships is the other stakeholders who may not necessarily be residing in that particular area but who has a vested interest in the success of these collaborations such as the political leaders and nonprofit service professionals. The ultimate goal of these partnerships is to create new knowledge that may lead to the development of new or refinement of existing theories, which may then impact the practice applications in the real world. This contribution is not assessed based on initial or short-term usefulness of the knowledge to the society (Stokes, 1997; Bush, 1990), but the degree and extent it contributes to the well-being of the society (Bender, 1988).

According to McLean and McLean (2001) “HRD is any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults’ work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation, or ultimately, the whole humanity”. Based on this definition, the role of HRD in community development and improvement efforts have been discussed and presented through a number of empirical studies in the current HRD literature (Akdere 2003, 2004; Hatcher, 2004; Wilensky & Hansen, 2001). This paper is a continuation of this effort in which a survey study of higher education and community partnerships in the Midwest U.S. is examined to understand the interactions among the participants and present alternatives to their challenges and issues to improve communities and fulfill the mission of higher education.

Background

Community partnerships are part of a broader effort toward increasing the community engagement of universities, including such diverse phenomena as the growth in service-learning courses and education for citizenship and the broadening of the definitions of faculty scholarship and service (Rubin, 2000). Consequently, this has led to more emphasis by higher education administrations as they began to view the faculty involvement as a community service and outreach. The higher education and community partnerships have evolved over time to emphasize the universities’ assistance to comprehensive, multiagency community-building initiatives (Rubin, Innes, & Fleming, 1998).
Current discussion in higher education focuses on the changing system in which universities operate and their response to change in which the institutions of higher education operate in an environment that has less governmental support, increased industry contracting, increased questioning of academia’s purpose, 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 the graduates as skilled workforce. They have further been criticized for the failure to confront critical social issues, develop students’ citizenship skills, and address research ethics (p. 126). In other words, they are considered as being out of touch with their local communities, national problems, and global issues. Hence, establishing partnerships within their local communities is one way of addressing this criticism and improving the system under which institutions of higher education function.

From a community standpoint, the economic challenges, lack of affordable housing, increasing poverty and unemployment have been on the rise with the national economic recession and global social, economic, and political turmoil. As a result communities are forced to seek solutions to address these emerging problems. Engaging in partnerships with institutions of higher education presents promising opportunities for community development purposes.

Review of Related Literature

The literature on community development focuses on a number of aspects of community including, the elements or conditions that would lead communities change (Keating & Smith, 1996; Baer & Williamson, 1988; Downs, 1981; Wiewel, Teitz, & Giloth, 1993; Chaskin & Brown, 1996; Checkoway, 1995; Rubin, 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). Furthermore, through the opportunity of 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, express significant challenges and issues as the concept of partnership continues to grow, including 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;
Huxham, 1996; Weiner & Alexander, 1998). The motivations and conditions for a healthy collaborative formation have also been explored in the literature (Wood & Gray, 1991; Smith, 1997; 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, like the partnership relationships that create and sponsor them, are generally expected to produce benefits to both the community and the university in which facilities projects, community development technical assistance, and community planning are among the activities that most likely may result in a general neighborhood benefit (Vidal, Nye, Walker, Manjarrez, Romanik, Corvington, Ferryman, Freiberg, & Kim, 2002). Some scholars view university-community partnerships as failure to address increasing and complex problems and issues of emerging U.S. urban communities (Boyer, 1990; Lynton & Elman, 1987; Bok, 1982). However, to realize the full benefits of a partnership, the parties need to have means of communicating effectively, efficiently, and frequently, including both formal and informal multiple communications channels (Austin, 2000).

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The study examines the higher education and community partnerships in the Midwest, U.S. The institution of higher education places students in part-time research assistantships for a semester to work on issues defined by the community to help the community achieve its goals. This study is conducted in order to assess the impact these research projects and the consequent partnership have had on the neighborhood organizations who engaged in a partnership agreement with this university in terms of their community development efforts, organization development interventions, addressing their challenges and issues through research and collaboration to seek assistance and alternative solutions. Even though, there are many assessment methods and tools in the existing literature on program assessment, it is important to utilize the tools that are most related to partnership programs between institutions of higher education and community organizations. Therefore, in order to achieve a thorough and comprehensive analysis and assessment of the effectiveness and impact of higher education and community partnerships, this study will use Maurrasse’s measurement tool (2002) that is specifically designed and empirically validated to assess and evaluate higher education-community partnerships includes the following (p. 135-136):

1. Residents were integral in shaping the direction of the proposed work.
2. Administrators were in support of the proposed work.
3. Prospects for residents’ self-sufficiency were enhanced by the partnerships.
4. Principle investigators were sensitive to community needs and were well trained and well equipped to carry out the tasks.
5. Higher education and community representatives, by the end of the partnership agreement, felt a sense of mutual gain.
6. The lessons from the partnership are positioned to influence the broader field.
7. The institution of higher education was not only philosophically but structurally prepared to support the project’s implementation.
8. The community organization was able to leverage additional support of varying types (internal and external), especially financial.
9. Residents were knowledgeable about how best to take advantage of the institution’s resources.
10. Both higher education and community representation transcended a small handful of especially committed people.
11. Structural holes were effectively filled by brokering or intermediary entities when necessary.
12. Resident participation was able to reach the most disadvantaged, transcending larger nonprofits and local “leaders.”
13. The project was connected to a broader collaborative rather than being an isolated effort.

Maurrasse further suggests that the evaluation of these partnerships should pay significant attention to process, in which this measurement tool is designed to identify the processes that may lead to future success.
Methodology

This correlational study will utilize a measurement tool adopted from Maurrasse (2002) and examine the following variables as they relate to higher education-community partnership:

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

The target population of this study is the nonprofit community organizations that engage in partnerships with institutions of higher education. The accessible population is the community organizations engaged in partnerships with a comprehensive research institution in Midwest, U.S. By utilizing the university’s partnership program database, two hundred and thirteen community organizations were selected. For the purposes of data gathering, a questionnaire is designed to be used in this survey method. The questionnaire is in closed form; multiple-item and 4-point scales are 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 is done among a sample of individuals from the population from which the study intends to draw the survey participants.

The data is collected via questionnaire mailing. Each participant organization is given a code to prevent duplication and use in the follow up with nonrespondents. Descriptive statistics of the variables are presented in order to analyze the variables. Statistical analyses are conducted to explore the relationships between the variables.

Results

Five research questions addressed in this study aim to understand the nature, challenges, issues, significance, contributions and future directions of higher education-community partnerships. Table 1 illustrates the means and standard deviations for each criterion.

Research Criteria 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 Criteria 2: Were the residents’ self-sufficiency enhanced by the partnerships?
This criterion inquires 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 utilize the collaborative 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 Criterion 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 very integral 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 Criterion 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 are 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 level of success in the ability to leverage additional support. Given the recent history of higher education-community partnerships, this is a considerably significant level, especially in an economy that is in recession. However, this result may provide some additional directions to the institutions of higher education as they re-design and re-structure their partnership efforts to include a dimension to help community organizations improve their ability to increase their resource and funding opportunities.

Research Criterion 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 I: Research Criterion 1-5: Means and Standard Deviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Criterion</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Criterion 1</td>
<td>1.103</td>
<td>0.467</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Criterion 2</td>
<td>2.311</td>
<td>0.672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Criterion 3</td>
<td>1.985</td>
<td>0.588</td>
</tr>
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<td>Research Criterion 4</td>
<td>2.979</td>
<td>0.781</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Criterion 5</td>
<td>3.184</td>
<td>0.896</td>
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</table>

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aimed to understand the partnership efforts between institutions of higher education and communities as a potential area of research and practice for the field of HRD. This paper further contributes to the existing literature on HRD in community development (Akdere 2003, 2004; Hatcher, 2004; Wilensky & Hansen, 2001). In addition to contributing to the existing HRD literature, the results of this study provide evidence for potential multi dimensional implications of HRD to community development. First, the challenge of competency is significant in higher education and community partnerships. Developing competencies and subject expertise is a widely studied topic in HRD. Second, these partnerships focus on the outcomes as a measurement of success and improvement. Outcome-based practice and assessment of organizational interventions is an area where HRD provides research and practice. Third, as stated earlier, human capital and social capital are important themes in these partnerships; therefore, new methods to increase community members’ and the community organizations’ human capital and social capital are needed. HRD has focused on developing human capital and social capital as means to unleash expertise in organizations, and therefore, can significantly offer new perspectives on these topics through its research and practice tools. Fourth, as a multidisciplinary field, HRD relies its study and practice on partnerships with other departments and organizations. Therefore, HRD has a considerably fair amount of knowledge and experience in the
realm of partnership. Fifth, one of the goals of partnerships is to provide training to increase individuals’ human capital. Training and development (T&D) is considered an area in which HRD has the most significant level of expertise and experience. Sixth, partnerships often aim to improve the community organizations through bringing change. This can be done through Organization Development (OD), which is again a realm of HRD research and practice. The last, but not the least, is that the issue of performance improvement in the partnerships is evident. One of the goals of HRD is to increase performance at individual, work group, and organization levels. Higher education-community partnerships can learn from the way HRD achieves these in various applied fields of practice.

In summary, 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). We believe that the field of HRD has the potential, expertise, and experience to provide this opportunity to higher education and community partnerships.

References


