

Building Capacity: The Case for Values-based Operations

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Cite as: Allen, J., Trent, S. & Woods, S. (2020). Building Capacity: The Case for Values-based Operations. *Metropolitan Universities*, 31(1), 78-91. DOI: 10.18060/23719

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Editor: Valerie L. Holton, Ph.D.

Abstract

Since the opening of the University of Nebraska at Omaha's (UNO) Community Engagement Center in 2014, both university and community building partners have been guided by a set of core values. Established by a community/university task force after months of focus groups, community conversations, and other data gathering activities, these values have helped provide a foundation for the selection of university and community building partners, decision-making, and ongoing operations. This study explored the ways in which building partner alignment with the Weitz CEC values influenced their subsequent perceived organizational capacity. Results indicated that embracing the values was positively associated with increased perceptions of organizational capacity. Essentially, those who indicated they embraced the values experienced heightened feelings of belongingness, participated in more networking activities, and agreed that the culture was more cooperative, which contributed to their organization's perceived capacity.

Keywords: Values, Capacity Building, Community Engagement, Belonging

Introduction

The number of universities with campus centers or institutes of community engagement is substantial, with a recent investigation into the infrastructure of campus engagement centers receiving 147 responses from various engagement units at different universities (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). Such centers are important hubs of engagement activities at universities and can aid in engagement between a university and its community through efforts to coordinate

service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000), facilitate volunteering and community service on campus (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002), and aid in the building of university-community partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). For institutions that have or are hoping to develop spaces in which community and university entities coexist within a shared facility, understanding the relationship between how a space is framed and participant outcomes is critical. Creating such spaces requires human, financial, and social capital and such investments deserve a clear understanding of the outcomes produced by the space and the collaboration that occurs therein.

The Community Engagement Center (CEC) on the University of Nebraska at Omaha's (UNO) campus, opened in 2014, has adopted many of the community programming practices compiled by Welch and Saltmarsh (2013), but is unique in the provision of shared space, with a total of 15,000 square feet for community and university organizations, which are located and operate directly within the center itself (Woods, Reed, & Smith-Howell, 2016). Partners are selected with attention to their alignment with the CEC's values (e.g., reciprocity, collaboration, communication, diversity, civil and open dialogue, welcoming atmosphere and continuous improvement) and maintain space within the building for three to six years, during which they are provided with resources (e.g., free meeting space, access to capacity building initiatives, access to student volunteers, contacts with faculty who conduct engaged research, marketing and administrative support etc.) to support their growth and sustainability. A detailed accounting of the operations of UNO's CEC may be found in Woods, Reed, and Smith-Howell (2016).

Our hypothesis is that organizations that demonstrate values-inspired behaviors report higher levels of perceived organizational capacity. Capacity is an important factor in determining impact. Capacity building can be defined abstractly as "increasing the ability of an organization to fulfill its' mission," (Wing 2004, p. 155). Capacity provides an indication of an organizations' progression over time. It also provides an indication as to the effectiveness and sustainability of an organization. Shumate, Fu, and Cooper (2018) found that nonprofits with strong collaborative relationships with government agencies had greater strategic planning capacity than nonprofits that did not. Another study by Williams-Gray (2016) suggested that nonprofits that go through a process of evaluating their individual capacity are more likely to build capacity in the future. Finally, Kapucu and Demiroz (2013) found evidence that an organization's capacity can be increased through the use of strong relationships and networks with other nonprofits. Given these findings and the overt focus on a values-framed engagement environment, we investigated the following research question: how does a values-framed engagement environment affect perceptions of organizational capacity?

Method

Participants

Respondents were individuals working within UNO's CEC, including those affiliated with a community organization (i.e., community partners) and those affiliated with a university organization (i.e., UNO partners). A total of 57 community partners and 54 UNO partners filled out the annual survey. Of those who responded, 75.3% of individuals were female, 22.2% of individuals were male, and 2.5% of individuals selected a gender other than female or male. The average age of respondents was 39.36 ($SD = 15.46$), with all individuals between 20 and 79 years old. In terms of education, all individuals had graduated from high school (or the equivalent). Many (48.1%) had a graduate degree of some sort. The survey respondents included some students ($N = 43$) and faculty ($N = 14$) working within partner agencies.

Measures

Values Behavior. The CEC has seven values to help guide partner and staff operations within the building, including: (a) diversity; (b) civil and open dialogue; (c) collaboration; (d) reciprocity; (e) communication; (f) welcoming atmosphere; and (g) continuous improvement. A thirty-three item questionnaire was included within the annual survey to measure the extent to which individuals from partnering organizations agreed they exhibited a variety of behaviors associated with the values. Partners rated their own behaviors on a Likert scale from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). A sample item of each value can be found in Table 1.

Belongingness. Four items from the Sense of Community Scale (Horning, Robinson, & Carroll, 2014) were used to assess the extent to which building partners felt they were a part of the CEC. Items were modified to reference the CEC. Respondents selected their degree of agreement using a five-point Likert scale from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). A sample item is: "If someone criticizes the CEC, it feels like a personal insult."

Networking Frequency. To determine intra CEC networking frequency, building partners were presented with four questions from the Networking Behavior Questionnaire (Michael & Yukl, 1993), framed to seek information about networking occurring within the CEC (e.g., attend meetings, ceremonies, or special events in the CEC). Respondents rated the frequency with which they performed each behavior in their role as a building partner on a Likert scale from zero (never) to four (on a daily basis).

Table 1: CEC Values, Definitions, and Sample Items

	Definition	Sample Item
Civil and Open Dialogue	The CEC is a space where all opinions can be heard, and different ideas are not only respected, but encouraged, because diversity of thought fosters innovation and creativity.	“While at the CEC, I felt free to initiate dialogue around controversial topics.”
Collaboration	Our community faces complex social problems that require unique and novel solutions. The CEC strives to cultivate a collaborative environment, in which people are willing to organically develop creative strategies and partnerships for solving such issues. The partnerships crafted as a result of being in the CEC should not be forced, but rather a product of revealing shared goals and a willingness to build alliances between university and community partners.	“I collaborated with other partners or individuals on projects to address community issues at the Weitz CEC.”
Communication	We encourage thoughtful, respectful, and transparent communication between all individuals who use the CEC including community partners, faculty, staff, and students.	“I used many modes of communication to suit the needs of my target population.”
Continuous Improvement	Basing decisions for improvement on direct feedback and concrete data ensures that organizations can continue having positive impacts on the community. The CEC leadership hopes that community and university partners will grow in many ways, but mostly that all partners will be better equipped to serve the Omaha community as a result of being in the CEC.	“I systematically tracked my organization's progress in the last 6 months.”
Diversity	We actively seek to represent the many diverse ideas, backgrounds, and cultures that comprise Omaha and the university community.	“My organization has come up with original and innovative ideas.”
Reciprocity	The CEC is considered a portal through which the community and the university can exchange resources, ideas, and solutions. Through reciprocal relationships, in which goals and expectations are clearly stated and fulfilled, community and UNO organizations interact with and benefit from each other.	“When completing collaborations, I followed up to ensure expectations were met.”
Welcoming Atmosphere	We value everyone who uses the building and show that by creating an environment that is clean, easy to access, filled with friendly faces, comfortable for all, and meets people's physical needs.	“When hosting an event in the Weitz CEC, I helped to clean-up afterward.”

Cooperative Building Culture. Perceptions of the culture of the CEC were measured with two climate items from the Employment Relationships Scale (Buch & Dysvik, 2010). Questions were reworded to reflect the CEC space (e.g., “There is a high level of cooperation between those that work in the CEC”) and rated by survey respondents on a scale from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

Perceived capacity. To determine building partners’ perceptions of their capacity, we developed three questions for the annual survey to gauge the influence of the CEC on their organizations’ operations. A sample item is: “Being in the CEC has contributed positively to my organization’s sustainability.” Partners rated each statement on a Likert scale from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

Procedure

The CEC annual building survey was distributed to 238 individuals working within the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center. The survey was open for a total of four weeks beginning in April 2017 and lasting through May 2017. Those who had not taken the survey were sent a reminder email every week. Those who took the survey were thanked for their responses. Individuals who completed the survey were entered into a drawing to win a \$25 credit on their UNO MavCard (i.e., campus ID card). Of the original 238, responses were obtained from 137 individuals in the building, resulting in a response rate of 57.56%. For the purposes of the following analyses, 13 individuals were removed from the sample for being staff members in the CEC, as we were interested in the responses from individuals who were building partners. This resulted in a final sample of 124 individuals. After four weeks, the survey was closed and all individuals were thanked, again, for taking the survey.

Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all scales utilized in this study are presented in Table 1. There was evidence of range restriction present with several of the values, including diversity and communication, which ranged from values of four to seven, and a welcoming atmosphere and reciprocity, which ranged from values of three to seven. In spite of these initial concerns, no issues were detected in terms of skew or kurtosis, so we proceeded with analyses. Three sets of analyses were used to explore the overarching research question and are described here.

In the first analysis, we sought to understand if self-reported values behaviors were associated with greater perceptions of organizational capacity. To test this question, we first examined the correlations between each value and capacity. Enacting behaviors of six of the seven values were

significantly and positively associated with reported perceived capacity, including diversity $r(72) = 0.47, p < .001$, civil and open dialogue $r(73) = .34, p = .004$, collaboration $r(73) = .30, p = .009$, reciprocity $r(73) = .42, p < .001$, communication $r(73) = .43, p < .001$, and continuous improvement $r(72) = .42, p < .001$. A welcoming atmosphere was not significantly associated with perceived capacity (see Table 1). To further assess the first research question and to better understand if any values were predictive of perceived capacity above and beyond the other values, we regressed all values upon perceived capacity simultaneously. The amount of time spent in the CEC was also included in the analyses as a covariate, as it correlated with several key variables. The full model for the regression was significant $F(8,81) = 7.87, p < .001, R^2 = .24$, indicating that together with the time spent in the CEC, all seven values predicted perceived capacity, accounting for 44% of the variance in perceived capacity.

In the second set of analyses, we we examined the individual coefficients for each value in the multiple regression model where all seven values predicted partners' reported perceived capacity. The coefficient for two variables, including diversity, $\beta = .34, p = .025, CI [0.03, 0.46]$ and continuous improvement, $\beta = .29, p = .028, CI [0.02, 0.34]$, were significant above and beyond all other values (see Table 2).

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Belongingnes	3.84	0.83	(.87)											
2. Network	1.73	0.55	.33*	(.79)										
3. Culture	4.17	0.72	.25*	-.13	(.65)									
4. Capacity	4.58	0.68	.08	.03	.36**	(.85)								
5. Diversity	5.92	0.77	.40**	.29**	.25*	.44**	(.74)							
6. Dialogue	5.55	0.96	.35*	.29**	.35**	.30*	.68**	(.83)						
7. Collaboration	5.41	0.97	.49**	.50**	.30**	.25*	.67**	.68**	(.75)					
8. Reciprocity	5.71	0.93	.48**	.24*	.32**	.37**	.75**	.57**	.62**	(.82)				
9. Comm	5.68	0.70	.27*	.33**	.38**	.39**	.72**	.58**	.66**	.72**	(.67)			
10. Atmosphere	5.77	0.87	.28*	.39**	.06	.01	.48**	.43**	.51**	.48**	.47**	(.52)		
11. Improvement	5.59	0.97	.47**	.19	.37**	.33**	.50**	.51**	.61**	.51**	.52**	.25*	(.61)	
12. Partner Status	0.51	0.50	.13	-.15	.06	-.12	.01	-.04	.07	.08	-.05	-.02	.11	-

Notes. $N = 83 - 111$. Reliabilities are on the diagonal. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. Belongingness, Culture, and Capacity were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Networking behavior was rated from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*on a daily basis*). All values were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Partner status was coded 0 (*university partner*) or 1 (*community partner*).

In the third and final set of analyses, we examined three factors that may function as intermediary mechanisms, including feelings of belongingness reported by partners, the networking behaviors of individuals in the building, and the overall cooperativeness of the building culture itself (see Figure 1). A series of mediations were conducted to determine if these variables operated as mediators through which any of the values influence perceptions of organizational capacity. We identified eleven significant mediations between various values and partner capacity through intermediary variables. Of particular note were the indirect relationships between a welcoming atmosphere and partner perceived capacity through all three mediators, including belongingness ($b = .05$, Boot SE = $.03$, CI [0.00, 0.13]), culture ($b = .21$, Boot SE = $.06$, CI [0.08, 0.33]), and networking frequency ($b = .07$, Boot SE = $.03$, CI [0.01, 0.13]). Reciprocity also influenced partner perceived capacity through all three mediators of belongingness ($b = .03$, Boot SE = $.02$, CI [0.01, 0.08]), culture ($b = .04$, Boot SE = $.03$, CI [0.00, 0.11]), and networking frequency ($b = .06$, Boot SE = $.03$, CI [0.01, 0.11]). A civil and open dialogue was indirectly related to partner perceived capacity through both belongingness ($b = .03$, Boot SE = $.02$, CI [0.00, 0.09]) and networking ($b = .05$, Boot SE = $.02$, CI [0.01, 0.10]). Collaboration was indirectly related to partner perceived capacity through networking frequency ($b = .04$, Boot SE = $.02$, CI [0.01, 0.10]). Finally, diversity indirectly influenced perceived capacity through networking frequency ($b = .04$, Boot SE = $.02$, CI [0.00, 0.09]). No significant mediators were identified between either continuous improvement and partner perceived capacity, or between communication and partner perceived capacity (see Table 3).

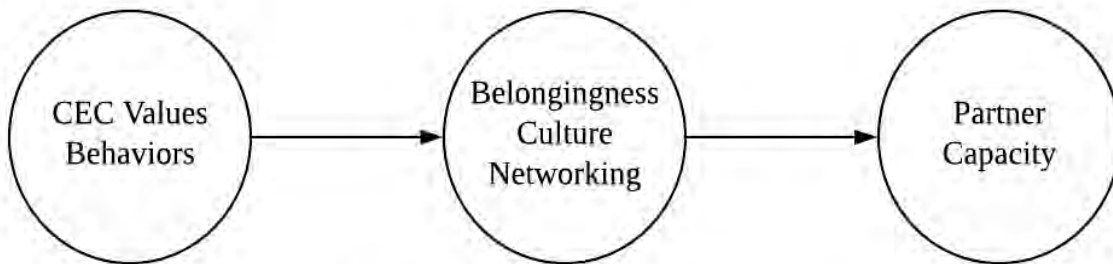


Figure 1. Hypothesized indirect effect of CEC values behaviors on partner capacity through belongingness, building culture, and networking frequency.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analyses of All Values Behaviors and Partner Report Capacity

	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	95% CI
Constant	7.15**	0.38	1.68	0.45		3.74	[0.79, 2.58]
Civil and Open Dialogue			0.03	0.08	0.05	0.39	[-0.13, 0.19]
Collaboration			0.00	0.07	0.00	0.00	[-0.13, 0.13]
Communication			0.06	0.11	0.49	0.49	[-0.18, 0.29]
Continuous Improvement			0.16†	0.09	1.94†	1.94	[-0.00, 0.33]
Diversity			0.21†	0.11	1.86†	1.87	[-0.01, 0.43]
Reciprocity			-0.01	0.08	-0.08	-0.08	[-0.17, 0.16]
Welcoming Atmosphere			0.04	0.08	0.48	0.48	[-0.12, 0.20]

Note. *N* = 96, ***p* < 0.05, **p* < 0.01, †*p* < 0.10.

Table 4: Indirect Effects of Values Behaviors on Partner Reported Capacity through Belongingness, Culture and Networking

	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Boot SE</i>	95% BC CI
IV: Civil and Open Dialogue			
Belongingness	0.03*	0.02	[0.00, 0.09]
Networking	0.05*	0.02	[0.01, 0.10]
IV: Collaboration			
Networking	0.04*	0.02	[0.01, 0.10]
IV: Diversity			
Networking	0.04*	0.02	[0.00, 0.09]
IV: Reciprocity			
Belongingness	0.03*	0.02	[0.01, 0.08]
Culture	0.04*	0.03	[0.00, 0.11]
Networking	0.06*	0.03	[0.01, 0.11]
IV: Welcoming Atmosphere			
Belongingness	0.05*	0.03	[0.00, 0.13]
Culture	0.21*	0.06	[0.08, 0.33]
Networking	0.07*	0.03	[0.01, 0.13]

Note. *N* = 96, BC CI = Bias-corrected Confidence Intervals. Only significant

relationships are depicted. Communication and continuous improvement did not

significantly influence capacity through mediators.

Discussion

The increasing number of community engagement units or centers underscores the need for attention to factors which influence their effectiveness, but relatively few studies have explored this area. The goal of the current study was to add to existing knowledge by evaluating the role that building values may have upon the operations of campus centers of engagement. Specifically, we sought to examine: (a) if higher levels of self-reported values behaviors were associated with greater perceived capacity; (b) if some values behaviors predicted perceived capacity above and beyond other values behaviors; and (c) how values behaviors might influence perceived capacity. Although some literature has explored characteristics of campus engagement centers (e.g., Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013) and other has focused on best practices derived from a case study of a particular unit (e.g., Grorack & McCall, 2018), no studies on campus engagement centers to date have utilized annual survey data gathered from the community and university partners working directly in the unit or building. Given the findings just discussed, there are several implications for organizations of higher education interested in establishing or re-invigorating shared spaces.

General Implications for Practice

Institutes of higher education and community partners may use the findings provided here to help them in their efforts to create a collaborative value-based environment. Essentially, other institutes of higher education may want to replicate a values-centered framework within shared-space facilities. This could be done in three meaningful ways. First, given the association of values behaviors with perceived capacity, organizations may want to build a culture of value-based behaviors within similar shared-space centers (e.g. Tyler, Dienhart, & Thomas, 2008). These institutes may want to include things like reciprocity between agencies that are partnering on various initiatives, maintaining an atmosphere where individuals feel welcome, advocating for a civil and open dialogue, and so on. Additionally, some institutes may already have values and simply may need to emphasize them (Giberson, Resick, & Dickson, 2009), encourage more formal adoption of them by partners, and expect new partners to buy into the values-centered approach.

Second, since two values, diversity and continuous improvement, emerged as influential predictors above and beyond the other values, those institutes seeking to start fresh with a values-centered framework may want to incorporate these specific values over some others. Both values might serve as a starting point for universities hoping to get their community or other university partners more engaged and involved at their campus centers. Specifically, organizations which show a high level of diversity, whether within the organization itself, in terms of the individuals who are served, or in terms of the ideas the agency represents, may be more likely to build

capacity in a shared-space setting (Hawkins, 2014). Conversely, organizations with a dedicated focus on tracking their progress and finding ways of continuously improving their programs and services would likely also thrive (Al-Tabbaa, Gadd, & Ankrah, 2013).

Third and finally, even though the findings on the intermediary mechanisms did not support mediation, they serve as additional areas of emphasis for any institute attempting to foster a values-focused shared space (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). For example, a notable finding had to do with networking frequency, which as a mediating variable, explained the influence of five of the seven values on organizational capacity. In other words, the values chosen and emphasized at the Weitz CEC appear to help support networking, which in turn influences partner perceived capacity. Regardless of the values selected, the networking frequency mechanism is likely an essential functioning variable in the success of a shared collaboration space (Herman & Renz, 2008).

Limitations and Future Research

The present study is not exempt from limitations. First, data were gathered using self-report measures at one-time point and are thus cross-sectional in nature, making it impossible to infer causality. However, in alignment with current theory and practice, when ascertaining information about individual perceptions (e.g., capacity) and attitudes (e.g., belongingness), it is appropriate to utilize self-report instruments (Conway & Lance, 2010). A more accurate method of assessing behaviors, such as networking frequency, would be of interest for future research.

Second, although our measurement of perceived capacity was of use in understanding the overall influence of values behaviors, future studies could focus on how values influence different types of impact rather than overall capacity. For example, a recent article by Srinivas, Meenan, Drogin, and DePrince (2015) found some evidence that impact can be understood through seven dimensions, including: (a) social capital; (b) skills and competencies; (c) motivations and commitments; (d) personal growth and self-concept; (e) knowledge; (f) organizational operations; and (g) organizational resources. Evaluating the relationships between values behaviors and multiple dimensions of perceived capacity could provide information on which values are the critical in different situations.

Third, data were gathered from community and university partners housed within UNO's CEC. Although we believe many of the relationships captured in this study would hold true between university and community partners operating in partnership with other campus centers of engagement around the country, it is possible that some of the high scores obtained in our sample would not come through if partners and their respective organizations were not housed in the same building. For example, partners may have fewer opportunities to network when spread

across greater distances or feel a decreased sense of belongingness with the campus if they spend less time physically present.

Conclusion

The findings in this study reinforce the importance of emphasizing values within campus centers of community engagement with a high degree of university and community partner participation (Woods, Reed, & Smith-Howell, 2016). Overall, both direct and indirect relationships between values behaviors and partner perceived capacity stress the utility of identifying partners with shared values if the sustainability of partnering organizations is to be enhanced. Specific findings regarding networking frequency, as well as the importance of diversity and continuous improvement in the prediction of partner perceived capacity provide a starting point for those seeking to build a culture where the satisfaction and effectiveness of a university's partners is upheld.

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