

A Multidisciplinary Collaborative Approach to a University-Community Partnership: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

Universities often respond to community needs through a traditional, single disciplinary expert outreach model. However, multiple perspectives are required to solve complex community problems. In this case example, a multidisciplinary university team was selected to work on a contracted university-college partnership project over an eighteen-month period. Lessons learned from using this problem-focused multidisciplinary approach to outreach intervention are presented. Topics discussed include the time needed and issues associated with multidisciplinary team development; leadership changes during the project; the need to bridge organizational structures across partners; the ways in which faculty cultures may inhibit outreach activity; and the importance of intellectual and organizational neutral space to multidisciplinary team success.

The tradition of the land-grant university is rooted in the mission of community service. However, many urban communities that are engaged in redeveloping and redefining their communities have not experienced particularly successful partnerships with many universities. Traditionally, universities approached such relationships using an intervention model rooted in a single discipline with mixed results. If we assume, instead, that multiple perspectives are required to solve complex problems (*Sandmann and Flynn 1997*), then a case can be made for a different university intervention model when working with the challenging issues facing urban communities and society in general. One such strategy for improving outreach is to strengthen the university's capacity to organize knowledge around problems as well as around disciplines (*Votruba 1996*). The experience of university faculty and administrators in one university-community-state agency partnership provides examples of the challenges of using a problem-focused, multidisciplinary approach to outreach intervention.

The partnership on which this article is based was funded by a contract with a state social service agency. It provided for the creation

of an urban community council and for the training and technical assistance needed to establish and manage a community center. Several aspects of the partnership that affected the experiences of university participants are worth noting. First, from the beginning the community council was given full voice in identifying their training and technical assistance needs. They set the parameters for much of how the partnership project unfolded, and therefore shaped the way the university team was involved. As part of the contract, the council and the social service agency controlled access to the community, and were responsible for review and approval of all materials about the project intended for publication. This contractual stipulation challenged an important justification for university members' participating—conducting and disseminating research. Second, when the university was contacted for involvement, the administrator designated to lead the project intentionally assembled a multidisciplinary team by selecting members with expertise in working with communities in building human and/or economic capacity. The administrator was aware of the potential for disciplinary paradigm clashes inherent in a multidisciplinary approach and that infighting might produce results with limited utility. Nevertheless, the administrator believed there was a need to organize different knowledge bases around the problem at hand rather than defer to a more traditional intervention model.

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This approach to outreach organization was unique at this institution, so a research team was asked to study the university members and their experiences. The focus of the in-depth qualitative study was on the ways university members developed and enacted a multidisciplinary team and the leadership issues associated with intra- and inter-group cohesion. Data were collected through observations of team meetings, audio-recorded interviews with team members, analysis of project documents (i.e., minutes, memoranda, reports), and analysis of reflective papers written by team members that highlighted important team decision points and other perceptions of group processes. Formal data collection began almost eleven months into the project. All existing project documents were

compiled and independently reviewed by the research team members. Analyses were compared, initial codes generated, and preliminary themes developed. During this same period, the partnership meeting observations began, with one or two researchers attending regular meetings and compiling field notes. Analyses of the reflective papers, group process observations, and verbatim interview transcripts were conducted through open coding to identify categories, concepts, and patterns (Patton 1980; Strauss and Corbin 1991). From these analyses, a model was developed to capture the complexity of outreach activity (Amey and Brown 2000), and a series of themes emerged in the form of “lessons learned” when using multidisciplinary teams for postsecondary outreach.

Lessons Learned

Multidisciplinary team building takes time. The team was intentionally constructed as a multidisciplinary team because of the belief that complex community problems require complex thinking and problem solving (Sandmann and Flynn 1997). In addition to the developmental struggles common within any group or team, the university team had the added challenge of overcoming deep-seated paradigm conflicts associated with the strong disciplinary socialization that is part of research university life. Team members had to move away from the expert model common in outreach activity and the power plays that were part of trying to position one’s perspective as dominant and “best.” They had to allow their own disciplinary perspectives to blend together with others’, rather than to dominate, so that new solutions could emerge. Collective understandings and ownership of team processes among members had to be established, requiring not only a shift in pragmatic orientation but in the way individuals worked together on the team.

Team members also had to develop a common language for their work. Since each member came from a different disciplinary background and research orientation, terms were often used indiscriminately and members ascribed different meanings to them. This lack of common language led to misunderstanding, miscommunication, and sometimes, mistrust. Attending to this component of team development was critical in order that information and ideas could be exchanged freely and accurately. As new members joined the team, they were socialized to language and meaning, as well as other aspects of team life.

All of these elements of team growth and development required respect and trust, which needed time to develop. As is often the

case with funded activities, including outreach efforts, little time was afforded in the contract cycle for this kind of intellectual maturation, yet it proved essential to producing a quality outcome. Balancing the press of contract deadlines with the space and opportunity for developing respect and trust was a difficult leadership responsibility. Members slowly built respect and trust for the views and expertise of others through sharing common experiences such as regularly scheduled meetings and time spent driving back and forth together from the community site. Also, as early work deadlines were met, albeit typically through completion of tasks by individual “experts,” the group became more willing to discuss the initial problems and engage in dialogue about ways that pieces of the project might develop differently. This dialogue was strengthened by the leader’s willingness not to always step in with answers and mediation.

Leadership needs evolve as the team develops. Leadership needs of the team vary as the partnership develops. The university team needed firm and purposeful leadership in the beginning phases of the outreach partnership. The early stage of team development was characterized by political wrangling, including contract and budget negotiations, members exerting undue influence over project definitions and strategies, interpersonal struggles for control, and testing of emerging norms and boundaries. Team members looked to the leader for vision, direction, clarity, conflict resolution, addressing external agents, communication, and framing roles, goals, and tasks. As the team developed its own culture, norms, and control mechanisms, it became more intrinsically motivated and self-directed. Leadership could become more facilitative than managerial. The interpersonal maintenance and nurturing of the team were still important, but they took different forms and could be performed by members other than the leader.

Even so, when external factors caused conflict, the team looked for direction and decision making from the leader, who still maintained the power of final decision making. “Crises” often caused a rift between the community and university team or among team members that challenged the gains made in trust and respect. The team leader needed to quickly address these situations.

Organizational structures across partners need to be bridged. One of the common challenges of university partnerships is bridging organizational structures across partners (Fairweather 1988). In traditional consulting relationships, contract arrangements are often limited to single units or even individuals. This simplifies many management functions, such as budgeting and payroll, because the contracting unit’s administrative systems dominate. When the

partnership involves a university, a government contractor, and a nonprofit organization, numerous and often disparate management processes need to be brought in line.

In this case, the partnership was compounded by the involvement of several university departments, whose procedures differed. Conflicting management philosophies, practices, timetables, and personnel (across the many units represented) all affected the university team's development, as did the partnership itself. The team had to construct its own norms, operating procedures, monitoring mechanisms, and so on, to accommodate the background biases of its members. At the same time, certain funding and personnel evaluation activities remained with participants' home departments, including the Office of University Outreach, which was the home department of the leader. Finally, the project was eighteen months long, extending through

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two departmental budgets, and affecting staffing patterns, faculty workload, productivity, and reward structures. Whether people participated was determined in part, by the extent to which their departments' organizational structures adequately accommodated the partnership activity and time frame.

Existing faculty cultures may inhibit outreach participation. We mentioned ways in which disciplinary orientation was a factor in the team's development. It also represents a framework through which faculty culture is understood. Faculty culture, especially at a research university, shapes the way professional work is defined, evaluated, and rewarded. Whether departments valued the kind of outreach activity we studied impacted who felt able to participate. The nature of the partnership, its duration, its contractual restrictions on data collection, publications, and presentations, and its interdisciplinary collaborative approach challenged the traditional faculty cultures and role structures of the research university.

Faculty are trained to be independent researchers and are rewarded for individual achievement, especially traditional research activities leading to public dissemination through refereed conference presentations and journal articles (*Fairweather 1993*). Outreach activity, even when defined as knowledge application instead of as “service,” is most often viewed by faculty personnel committees

as something that detracts from the higher status activities of teaching and research. Faculty carefully weigh participation in activities that are more difficult to classify and evaluate within traditional reward structures, especially if they are pretenure or in the promotion process (Blackburn and Lawrence 1995). The same is true for activities that require sustained engagement or that take longer to produce publishable data, as did this outreach partnership. Academic departments and disciplinary sub-units need to address outreach activity more directly. This involves, at a minimum, articulating clearer definitions of what outreach means within distinct disciplines and making explicit ways of honoring and assessing outreach performance.

Intellectual and organizational neutral space is key to multidisciplinary team success. One way the team was able to move past disciplinary paradigm conflicts and “turf wars” was to create an intellectual and structural neutral space. During the early stages of paradigm exploration, the team found intellectual neutral space that opened up dialogue around disciplinary distinctions applied to the problem at hand. Initially, each team member’s disci-

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plinary orientation toward outreach activity brought with it a philosophic bias that was in conflict with the views of others and of the community members themselves. Through sustained engagement on site, team members finally began to hear the voices of the community members who used the concept of guardianship.

Team members recognized a perspective outside those previously considered. Because the concept did not come from any single disciplinary perspective, it was not a point of political dissension among team members, as other ideas had been, and thus created the intellectual neutral space needed for dialogue.

Skilled leadership facilitated the construction of neutral space and the culture of dialogue around the community’s idea of guardianship until team members had internalized it enough to move forward with the project. In finding this one idea around which dialogue could occur, members began to change the way they approached discussion on other topics. It became safer to explore issues and consider the merits of alternative perspectives. Without such exploration and dialogue, the integrative thinking that is a

hallmark of multidisciplinary teams is unlikely. In the team we studied, the opportunity for integrative thinking was found through intellectual neutral space.

Similar to the value of intellectual neutral space, finding neutral organizational space clearly removed from unit politics and domination was very helpful. Multidisciplinary outreach activity sponsored by an office without strong disciplinary ties enhances the opportunity to move toward integrative thinking and collaborative work. A “neutral” unit allows for suspension of departmental artifacts and influence, and distance from the political machinations of typical academic departments (e.g., who gets the overhead reimbursement). Neutral space is sometimes found within existing academic meta-structures, as in graduate schools or outreach offices, or can be created through matrix organizations.

Conclusion

University partnerships with local communities and state agencies present their own challenges to faculty teams. Using a multidisciplinary approach to address complex problems further compounded the challenge that the university team faced. Yet new approaches and new solutions that result in mutually beneficial problem solving (*Ramaley 2000*), will be found only through multidisciplinary approaches such as the one experienced here. The challenges may be greater, but so are the results of multidisciplinary team-community partnerships. Perhaps the greatest challenge is removing the barriers to participation that traditional university cultures and structures present, and creating an organizational culture of engagement (*Boyer 1990; Ramaley 2000*) with the societal problems that surround every postsecondary institution. Community service is rooted in the mission of the land-grant university, and multidisciplinary approaches to community partnership should be nurtured in order to fulfill that mission.

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