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Community development initiatives offer special opportunities for partnerships among institutions of higher education.

Consortia and Institutional Partnerships for Community Development

Mitchell R. Williams

The need for effective community development to address social, economic, and environmental issues is perhaps stronger now than at any other time. Making communities functional and livable is critically important to our society. There is a renewed interest in using the resources of higher education to assist communities and regions through community development initiatives (Livermore and Midgley, 1998; Usnick, Shove, and Gissy, 1997). To illustrate the contribution of colleges and universities to building sustainable communities, this chapter examines the development of community leaders through institutional partnerships and consortia involving different types of institutions of higher education.

Contemporary community development has come to represent the idea of improving communities through diverse and inclusive participation of citizens, and it is associated with the advancement of strong leadership. Leadership development programs train citizens to work together to effect positive change, and they exist in dozens of communities across the country. These programs help men and women learn how to perform roles that are essential to successful community development, and they are often offered by community-based organizations.

There is a fundamental dilemma associated with many community leadership development programs. Although most of these programs emphasize the importance of collaborative leadership, the sponsorship of these programs themselves all too often does not involve any institutions of higher education or just a single institution in collaboration with nonacademic
organizations. In order to make comprehensive community leadership development programs as effective as possible, multiple institutions of higher education should work collaboratively—with each other and with community-based organizations—to plan, implement, and evaluate these programs. For practitioners interested in community development, collaboration among diverse institutions of higher education provides opportunities to address community challenges by bringing together different philosophies, points of view, and curriculum resources.

**Higher Education’s Role in Community Development**

Higher education’s place in community development has changed and evolved, with a role that varies from “activist participants to dispassionate analysts” (Baird, 2001, p. 122). Usually reacting but sometimes initiating community change, colleges and universities have been shaped by and helped to shape the communities that surround them. Although Hamilton (1992) referred to community development as “a stepchild of the educational establishment” (p. xiv), these institutions have become increasingly willing to serve as active partners in community development activities (Usnick, Shove, and Gissy, 1997). Higher education is now considered a driving force for citizen participation and is positioned to become a major component in community development strategies. Service is one of the three basic missions of higher education, and community development activities are now incorporated into the mission of many institutions of higher education.

One of the best ways for colleges and universities to demonstrate their commitment to community service is through participation in the sponsorship of community leadership development programs. Successful leaders often seek to build coalitions and sustain cooperative participation. Developing leaders who can meet the demands of this century will require new mind-sets and methodologies within these programs. For example, Rost (1993) pointed out the need to develop people who want to engage in leadership as collaborators: “people who want to work collaboratively with other people to change organizations, committees, and or society, who want to work in teams to institute change that reflects the majority of the team members” (pp. 101–102).

It is clear that collaboration should play a significant role not only in the curriculum of community leadership development programs but also in the sponsorship of these programs. Different organizations naturally bring different strengths to these programs, and the right combination of sponsoring organizations can mean the difference between a successful program and a disappointing one. Too often, however, program sponsorship either excludes institutions of higher education or does not take advantage of the benefits of involving multiple institutions acting in a partnership or consortium. A consortium or institutional partnership has a broader perspective,
more extensive linkages in the community, and more diverse resources than any single institution. A community leadership development program created through efforts involving a consortium or partnership of institutions of higher education should have tremendous integrity, value, and ingenuity.

One obstacle to the involvement of higher education in community leadership development programs may be a perception that community organizations do not want colleges and universities to share in program sponsorship. Data indicate that this is not the case. A study was conducted to determine what constitutes ideal partnerships in the sponsorship of community leadership development programs and where the disparities are found when comparing current sponsoring partners and the perceived ideal partners (Williams and Wade, forthcoming). Sixty-seven randomly selected administrators of community leadership development programs responded to questions about current collaboration in the sponsorship of their programs and about the organizations they perceived to be ideal partners in such efforts. The organizations reported as currently involved in the sponsorship of community leadership programs were then compared with organizations perceived as ideal partners for sponsoring these programs. The largest difference between the current partnerships and the ideal partnerships was found among three types of institutions of higher education: public four-year universities, private four-year colleges and universities, and community colleges. Forty-three respondents indicated that public universities would be included in an ideal partnership for collaborative relationships in sponsoring such a program, but only sixteen respondents indicated public universities were already involved in the sponsorship of their programs; similarly, thirty-one respondents felt community colleges would be involved in ideal partnerships, but only twenty-one had two-year colleges among their current program sponsors.

The involvement of institutions of higher education in program sponsorship is far below the level practitioners desire. The results of the study suggest that institutions of higher education should be more open to participation in community leadership programs and that the participation of multiple institutions of higher education, acting in partnership, may be especially valuable to these programs. Also, in a period of public scrutiny and accountability for institutions of higher education, colleges and universities should be eager to work with community organizations in order to demonstrate leadership and service.

**Leadership Jackson: A University–Community College Partnership**

Western Carolina University is a public, regional, comprehensive university located in a rural valley between the Blue Ridge and Great Smoky mountains, fifty miles west of Asheville, North Carolina. Its service area includes some of the most rural counties in the state, in a region that historically lags
behind the rest of North Carolina in terms of per capita income, employment opportunities, and educational attainment. Western has conducted several community development outreach programs with services for small business owners, local government officials, and managers of nonprofit agencies. In 1997, a group of citizens in Jackson County, the university's home county, met with university leaders to discuss the need for a leadership development program to prepare promising leaders to help address the community's historical and emerging challenges. The university was quick to respond to this request and placed administrative responsibility for the new community leadership development program in its Division of Advancement and External Affairs.

With limited human and financial resources, it was evident from the beginning of the process that a collaborative effort would be needed to initiate and sustain the program. The first task of the committee formed within the university was to identify community-based organizations that might be interested in partnering with it to design, plan, and implement a community leadership development program. The first call was to the local community college.

Southwestern Community College (SCC) is a comprehensive two-year institution serving Jackson and two other counties in southwestern North Carolina. Although the institutions are separated by little more than five miles in a rural county, there had been little collaboration between SCC and Western on community development initiatives. Nevertheless, SCC quickly became the first and most important partner in the leadership program planning process. As veteran community college leaders themselves, SCC's president and administrative staff had a great deal more experience than their university colleagues in community education, including adult and non-credit continuing education, along with numerous other services to county residents. Based on studies of the social, economic, and political environment within Jackson County, they helped to identify other community stakeholders to include in the program planning process (for example, the chamber of commerce, major employers, and the county planning office) and helped to build a coalition of support for a community leadership development initiative.

The university–community college partnership worked extremely well in planning, designing, and implementing what was called the Leadership Jackson program. Program leaders at both Western and SCC realized that institutional diversity and differences in institutional mission are great strengths of the higher educational system and in higher education's response to community needs. For example, large public research universities and community colleges have different but equally important missions and diverse but valuable roles in responding to external community demands for services such as community leadership development. Western and SCC, institutions with very different missions, recognized and appreciated this diversity when they collaborated with each other to establish a
community leadership development program. Each institution could bring its unique strengths to focus on the leadership program. For example, the university could serve as a source of knowledge and information, provide data on trends and issues related to community leadership development, supply expertise, and (if necessary) conduct applied research related to community concerns identified through the leadership program.

Community colleges emphasize community service and have developed processes to position themselves to play major roles in resolving community issues such as leadership development. In addition to a tradition of community service, the community college could contribute to this community development project through in-depth knowledge of the community and the ability to customize programs. By combing the strengths of their institutional missions as well as pooling resources, the university and community college provided a community leadership development program that was much stronger and more comprehensive than the program either institution would have offered on its own.

By publicizing their successful joint effort regarding Leadership Jackson, Western and SCC enhanced their images in the community and on their campuses as well. Community leaders are now more likely to see these institutions as resources for community development rather than as simply major employers in the community. The successful collaboration of these two institutions in community leadership development was followed by other cooperative initiatives that benefited the community and surrounding region.

On each campus, one successful partnership has led to others. Through faculty-led initiatives, these neighboring schools have subsequently worked more closely on professional development projects and enhanced academic articulation agreements.

**Considerations for Success for Community Development**

By forming strategic alliances, colleges and universities from different sectors of the higher education community can take community development to new levels. The Leadership Jackson project discovered discrete best practices for community development activities involving institutions of higher education in consortia or institutional partnerships:

- It is vital for four-year institutions to use cooperative and collaborative relationships with community colleges to promote community development. Institutions must determine an appropriate division of labor and avoid duplication or competition within the partnership (see Ferro, 1993).
- The participation of community colleges is helpful in identifying community or regional needs that can be addressed through consortial initiatives.
- Participation in the partnership or consortium should increase each institution's capability to respond to community development needs.
- It is important to publicize collaborative activities and achievements in university publications in order to communicate to the campus community the importance of becoming involved in community development partnerships.
- Colleges and universities are often "well-kept secrets in their service areas. The buildings are visible, but community leaders don't see much there to which they can relate" (Ferro, 1993, p. 25). Consortia and partnerships involving different types of institutions of higher education can help to surmount these challenges by giving service to the community a high priority and by making new as well as existing services more readily available and accessible to the community.
- Consortia and institutional partnerships can facilitate efforts to recognize and reward the community development activities of faculty and staff. Although the publish-or-perish mind-set will likely continue on individual campuses, cooperative efforts may help to convince leaders in higher education to uphold the pool of valuable expertise and resources available to community development and provide rewards to faculty for university-based community initiatives.
- Pooling resources from two or more campuses can produce community development programs that cannot be initiated by one campus alone, but there must be a clear commitment on the part of institutional leaders, including an assurance of financial and human resources, if community development partnerships are to be effective.

**Barriers to Success**

In addition to factors that might contribute to the success of higher education alliances related to community development, the Leadership Jackson case study identified several potential obstacles to successful interinstitutional collaboration. First, turf issues play a role in many institutional relationships in higher education. During the initial planning of Leadership Jackson, there was a tendency among some at SCC to resist the participation of Western Carolina University in what was seen as a community education function. Conversely, there were those at the university who felt the community college tried to be "all things to all people" whenever an education-related need was identified in the community. Strong leadership and constructive dialogue among staff members put an end to this obstacle.

Another barrier that was quickly overcome might be referred to as academic snobbery, or the idea that a community college should not be an equal partner with a regional comprehensive university in a community development project. A few people at the university questioned why SCC was considered an equal partner in Leadership Jackson when Western was clearly the "senior" (that is, more prestigious) institution. Any hint of academic
snobbery was set aside when it was agreed that the university chancellor and the community college president would have equal roles in the opening ceremony of the leadership program and in presenting certificates at the end of the program.

Finally, institutional self-centeredness can be a barrier to collaboration. All institutions within the higher education community have strengths, and diversity of mission is a strong point of the higher education system. Collaborating partners must acknowledge and celebrate their institutional differences rather than minimize or deny them; there should also be an acknowledgment that the partnership needs the expertise offered by each participating institution. For Leadership Jackson, institutional self-centeredness was quickly dispelled when staff members at the two institutions emphasized the areas where the roles of community colleges and universities could complement each other rather than lead to competition.

Conclusion

Community leadership development should be a collaborative function that develops community leaders through partnerships involving multiple institutions of higher education. The process offers an ideal opportunity to demonstrate the potential of multi-institutional collaboration and partnership among diverse institutions of higher education. For example, interinstitutional relationships involving two- and four-year institutions of higher education can be especially effective in community development and may be more beneficial to the participating institutions than had previously been considered (Pennington and Williams, 2001). Particular benefits can result from encouraging institutions to experiment with nontraditional institutional partnerships (for example, involving community colleges and four-year liberal arts colleges or community colleges and research universities) in providing community services such as leadership development.

Community college leaders may be more likely than leaders of four-year institutions to consider participating in interinstitutional agreements to provide community service such as leadership development. This is probably due to the fact that community service is a central part of the mission of the community college. Two-year colleges seem more capable of forming the essential associations critical to addressing specific community concerns.

Higher education can make a unique contribution to community development initiatives. Partnerships and consortia involving diverse colleges and universities can be especially useful in these efforts. The synergy created by bringing together diverse institutions of higher education through consortia, institutional partnerships, or informal alliances can create community development opportunities that no single institution could possibly provide. Moreover, nontraditional institutional partnerships like community colleges and research universities can be especially effective in providing essential services such as community leadership development.
References


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