



BRIDGES ACROSS THE P-16 CONTINUUM: THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

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The American Graduation Initiative (Obama, 2009) and the Lumina Foundation (2010) focused attention on the fact that the US is losing ground relative to other countries on the number of individuals possessing a college degree (Adelman, 2009). Research shows that a college degree results in higher individual earning potential, contributes to the local economy, and decreases crime and health costs (Baum & Ma, 2007). Higher education does not exist as an independent entity, however, as pre-collegiate preparation and student anticipation for college contribute to the collegiate experience. With educational attainment viewed as a lever for economic improvement and enhanced quality of life, state (Stedron et al., 2010) and federal (US Department of Education, 2006) policymakers continue to create programs that promote education across the P-16 pipeline. Recently, remedial education has been a focus for understanding the links between high school preparation and college readiness (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). One way to bridge the P-12 and college divide is through educational partnerships.

Policy makers often are supportive of partnerships in state and federal policies. For example, the Virginia Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2011 (2011), which is tagged with the public title of Top Jobs for the 21st Century (TJ21), focuses on issues of college access, college readiness, and transfer routes. Partnerships are also advocated by grant and funding agencies. The Obama-Singh 21st Century Knowledge Initiative, for instance, requires partnerships between US colleges and those in India. A focus on educational reform in India highlights preferences for those dealing with vocational training and two-year programming (Fischer, 2011; Neelakantan, 2011). Despite these rationales for partnering, many partnerships fail (Eddy, 2007; Farrell & Seifert, 2007). Thus, it becomes important to understand what factors contribute to successful partnerships and to provide a framework for institutional leaders seeking to partner with other colleges.

PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK

Research on partnerships showcases a number of key factors that contribute to ongoing success. First, it is important to know what

motivates each partner to participate in or seek out partnerships (Amey, Eddy, & Campbell, 2010). Alignment of motivations results in partners having a shared understanding of what they seek from the venture. Intentional alignment among partners can lead to a strategic partnership that helps advance the missions of the partnering institutions (Amey & Eddy, 2011). Second, trust provides a platform upon which partnerships can sustain the tensions that are inevitable in joint work (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Coleman, 1988; Wergin, 2003). Trust builds over time as relationships become deeper and shared norms are created. Leaders of the partnering organizations contribute to the creation of shared norms by framing a particular sensemaking perspective for and by the group (Weick, 1995). Finally, feedback venues in the partnership are important to allow for adjustments due to changes over time. For example, contextual situations may alter and require adjustments in the partnership or central partners may leave the institution and others take over. When the partnership is institutionalized, it is likely that shifts in personnel will have less impact on the process. However, if there is a single champion of the project and that individual leaves, the partnership may dissolve if it was too tied to the social capital of that individual (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). A delicate balancing act exists between being an advocate for the partnership and having the partnership overly reliant on a single individual and that person's social capital for maintaining the relationship.

Central elements of partnerships include: defining the problem, creating a plan, and implementing the project (Gray, 1989). Hora and Millar (2011) further develop these areas and posit five principles for partners: 1) think of organizations and partners in multifaceted terms; 2) plan and get acquainted; 3) engage in a careful design process; 4) cultivate personnel who are boundary crossers; and 5) take advantage of the opportunity to foster new cultural dynamics (pp. 19-22). The framework for partnerships occurs on two levels. First, it is individuals who often broker the initial conversations and pilot activities of the partnership, whereas the second layer involves the educational organizations. Embedded in each of these levels are sources of power and motivations for participation that affect the development and viability of the partnership.

A focus of educational partnership occurs in looking at the P-16 continuum. The assumption that public schools and colleges are natural allies builds on unfounded beliefs that both sectors share motivations and understandings of educational issues. Public schools must educate all students for whom compulsory education is required, whereas colleges have an application and selection process and are ultimately viewed as a private good because of the benefits of greater income and higher standard of living potential accruing to graduates (Marginson, 2007). Because the educational sectors are not inherently aligned yet the demands on the entire educational system increase, many states have instituted P-16 councils or initiatives to address challenges and to emphasize the importance of supporting the educational pipeline. Partnering between schools and colleges may include dual enrollment programs or student transfer programs, workforce development, shared resources or space, or coordination for college readiness. Recently, the 2011 *Closing the Expectations Gap* report found that 22 states have P-20 data systems in place to track progress of students throughout their education. Assessing these data can highlight the ways in which partnerships are successful and areas of need for future efforts.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Knowing that critical points exist in creating and sustaining partnerships helps identify promising practices. Partnerships that use a strategic orientation and are intentional in fostering programming that reinforces this shared orientation are more likely to be successful. Taking time to develop relationships within a partnership and in building trust pays off with more successful outcomes, and more importantly, lasting partnerships. Finally, partnerships that address systematic change versus quick fixes also have staying power beyond individuals, distinct initiatives, and specific funding cycles.

Most strategic partnerships emerge due to a desire to change something or in response to a crisis. As such, it is important to look at partnering using a change lens. Change occurs on a variety of levels and often focuses on how individuals create schemas of understanding of what is going on in their own institutions (Harris, 1994; Senge, 1990). First-order change involves incremental adjustments following a given trajectory and thought process. These changes often involve improving processes for what already occurs in the institution e.g., a new form for charting transfer courses or an improved website of existing course information. Whereas, second order change requires questioning fundamental assumptions about institutional goals and operations in which individuals alter their underlying schemas (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). Many partnerships experience first-order change during implementation of their joint activity. In this case, each partner proceeds in ways that support their historical operations and individual organizational mission. If issues appear that question these traditional patterns, tensions arise for individuals that may lead to the partnership dissolving. When partners look at the partnership more critically and reflectively and begin to question how shared norms and meanings are created among the group, why certain aspects of the arrangement exist, and whether the arrangement is mutually beneficial, second-order change occurs. At

this stage, partnership capital emerges (Amey et al., 2010). Here, individual motivators recede and attention to the benefits for the group allows for deeper reflection of understanding of meaning.

A change model for partnerships (Eddy, 2010) builds on Kotter and Cohen's (2002) generic model for change. The partnership eight-stage model includes:

1. Verbalizing motivation and context for partnering
2. Aligning social capital of champions and leveraging organizational capital
3. Establishing partnership goals and team governance
4. Framing the partnership to stakeholders
5. Negotiating conflicts
6. Framing outcomes
7. Evaluating the process
8. Institutionalizing the partnership. (Eddy, 2010, p. 25)

At the core of change for partnerships is acknowledging the underlying beliefs of the individual partners and a willingness to question this schema. Inherent in this process is how leaders frame change for institutional members and how the partnership is framed across the partner groups. The shift to strategic partnerships requires environmental scanning on an institutional level to determine how internal strategies align with potential partnering organizations. Central to this process is a commitment to organizational learning that requires active and critical reflection of underlying belief structures (Argyis & Schön, 1974) and a willingness to regularly examine organizational functions, policies, and practices.

Following are some examples that showcase promising practices in partnerships across the P-12 and college divide. A brief analysis of each example highlights critical stages of the partnership and indicates how others might learn from these examples.

Example 1—Sharing Space. Watson (2007) presented the case of an educational partnership that revolved around building a new high school. Three individuals were highlighted: the school superintendent, a mid-level community college administrator, and a high-level university administrator. The blank slate of creating a new high school building allowed the partners an ability to provide educational access and support to a broader range of students. The high school was planned to physically provide access to community college and university courses; the plan involved the creation of building wings that afforded the opportunity to offer segmented or specialized opportunities in different locations. For instance, one wing of the building was dedicated to a ninth-grade academy that supported student transition to high school. Another wing accommodated students in their junior and senior years taking college level courses taught by community college and university faculty using a flex-scheduling option. The belief was that the presence of college faculty would model for high school students that college was possible and reinforce high standards throughout the building in ways that did not occur when advanced students took college courses off-site.

Inherent in this partnership were unequal power bases among the central partners. The superintendent had more formal authority as he controlled resources and key-decision making points regarding the building's construction. Both of the college administrators possessed high levels of social capital that allowed them to move the partnership forward in their institutions and for the benefit of the group in ways that other individuals with less social capital could not. Yet, upper level college leaders with more formal authority could trump decisions or withdraw commitment from the project. Trust was a central characteristic of this collaboration because each key player needed to trust the others would follow through on agreements made, since none held all the leverage and resources necessary to accomplish the goals independently, and each knew the partnership could be overridden by outside forces beyond their control. As well, the case highlights how alignment with institutional strategic goals is critical. For the college partners, as long as the collaboration continued to meet institutional goals of student access and entrepreneurial approaches to course delivery, the program was on solid ground. If resources shifted, top-level leaders transitioned or new goals were established that did not align with the partnership objectives, however, the collaboration could be in jeopardy.

Example 2—STEM Initiative. Urban District Education Project (UEDP) was a publically funded program to improve math and science education for students in K-12 schools by establishing partnerships among university-based STEM and education faculty, and K-12 administrators and teachers. The premise of the project was making organizational changes in school districts and colleges and universities that would lead to improved student learning in schools. The five-year funded project started in 2003, and Hora and Millar (2011) studied the processes and evolution of four working groups within the larger partnership. They developed a conceptual framework for understanding UDEP and other partnerships that includes examining individual mental models; cultural models; relationships; structure and technologies; and routines and practices. Some highlights and important recommendations for practice emanating from their study are briefly mentioned.

There were pre-existing relationships among several members of UDEP that were also assumed to exist after the partnership ended; moving forward, it was believed that UDEP would fit within these relationships and not confound them. This necessitated certain individuals to act as spokespersons and information conduits so as not to disrupt what was in place for the long haul. Negotiating these parameters and relationships at the start of UDEP was important and also gave opportunity to air assumptions about capacity, resource availability, scope and responsibilities of members of the partnership. These conversations are always critical at the start of a partnership but perhaps differently so when pre-existing relationships may cause individuals to base decisions on past actions that may not be relevant in the new circumstances.

In studying UDEP, Hora and Millar (2011) differentiated the importance of structural and cultural features to partnership operations over time. They found that getting beyond the stereotypes

and assumptions partners have of each other at the onset is necessary in effectively orienting everyone to the partnership organizing principles e.g., that K-12 teachers have more daily pressures and timelines forced upon them than university faculty so that task allocation should be distributed accordingly. Because formal structures will undoubtedly change, or at least adjust as the partnership develops, the authors focused on the importance of cultural models of partners because they are more indelible and subconscious, and will most likely move with members of the partnership from their “home organization” into the new one. Hora and Millar also identified three partnership structures as examples of the forms partnerships may take: business transaction (limited structural interaction and little change); friendship (coordinated structures, and some adjustment); and marriage (collaborative and more integrated structures). This variation suggests that other factors in the partnership may be more important across the structural continuum even if structure is the more obvious place to focus. Taking stock of mental and cultural models may be as valuable in helping the partnership effectively move forward.

Finally, Hora and Miller describe the “3rd space” as that conceptual arena in which the work of partnership development actually exists and “where competing interests and perspectives play out as different organizations come together” (p. 207). This space creates a dynamic environment of on-going negotiation of ideas, values, cultural beliefs, structures, patterns of work, and identities. As the partnership develops, the 3rd space represents the emerging organizational identifiers of the new partnership entity similar to the ways in which teachers talk about interdisciplinarity emerging from many disciplines (Klein, 2010) or partnership capital as the recognizable artifacts evolving from cross-unit collaboration (Amev et al., 2010). An important component of partnerships is the space required to do the work of organizational development in addition to the actual goals and tasks of the partnership in order for the member units to meld and morph into a recognizable “other” that can be owned by members and recognized on its own.

Example 3—Developmental Education. The community college system in Virginia is redesigning its developmental education program as part of its strategic initiative, *Achieve 2015*. The six-year strategic plan identifies student success as one of its goals, which targets increasing graduation, transfer, or certificate awards by 50%. A cornerstone in achieving this goal is moving more students successfully through developmental coursework. Three specific outcomes were identified by Virginia's developmental education task force: 1) reduce the need for developmental education; 2) reduce the time to complete developmental education; and 3) increase the number of developmental education students graduating or transferring within four years (*The Turning Point*, 2009, p. 5). Math courses represent the first point of focus for change efforts. Beginning in 2012, the entire developmental math curriculum will change system wide with students now successfully passing modules in which they have need to improve skills versus taking a traditional semester-long course that might review material they already know (Gonzalez, 2011). At the heart of discussions regarding developmental coursework is the fact that many high school students are not college ready upon high

school graduation. Operating concurrently with the VCCS strategic initiative is a cooperative effort, the Virginia College and Career Readiness Initiative (CCRI) with the Commonwealth of Virginia's Department of Education that includes the VCCS, the State Council for Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV), and the Virginia Department of Education. The CCRI targets improving high school student preparation to help eliminate the need for remediation in college. This outcome would be achieved by aligning the state assessments to measure mastery of more rigorous math and English standards as co-determined with college faculty.

This burgeoning partnership highlights how shared goals and vision serve as prime motivators to partner and how the collaboration aligns with strategic initiatives of both VCCS and the DOE. Framing has occurred within the individual organizations with the top level leaders of each group signing a joint agreement outlining expectations and with progress being measured and evaluated and ultimately publically reported out each year. Individual college campuses have leaders on campus that are framing the initiative and communicating the plan to campus members. Using the change framework outlined above showcases how the key stages are being addressed. Continued evaluation of this partnership will determine the ways in which it is ultimately institutionalized, but the progress to date indicates that steps are in place for the strategic partnership to be successful.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

The continued decline in state funding for higher education and the perpetual underfunding of community colleges results in policy makers looking to partnerships in the educational sector as a means to solve these problems. History indicates, however, that mandates for partnerships based on financial rewards typically are not sustainable (Eddy, 2007) because once the funding is gone, the need to partner often disappears. McDonnell and Elmore (1987) identified four main frameworks employed by policy makers to obtain change. These include mandates, inducements, capacity-building, and system-changing. Typically, we see policy addressing the first two options, requirements and incentives, utilizing coercion or extrinsic motivators (Herzberg, 1959). Results in these instances are usually short-lasting and unsustainable.

The prime element used in capacity-building is money, a similar motivator as in inducements, however, the funds target increasing the capacity of the organization to benefit from changes. There is an unknown element operating as the benefits are anticipated versus directly linked to funding as in inducements. Ultimately, system-changes alters underlying modes of operation and is only possible when mental-models (Senge, 1990) are challenged and assumptions questioned (Argyris & Schön, 1974). In this policy approach, authority serves as the conduit of policy change (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). Complementing this policy process is seeing leadership as transactional, e.g., if you do this for me, I'll do this for you, versus transformational, e.g., we are empowering followers to meet ends via means that are most appropriate. As policy makers consider the various levers at their disposal to achieve change, attention should be paid to the type of outcome

desired and the means used to achieve it. Mandates and short-term inducements will elicit particular outcomes, but are not necessarily the best levers to help sustain partnerships whereas capacity building and system-changing routes can create a context that is ripe for sustaining partnerships.

Attention to the P-16 continuum has been inconsistent. Some states have put substantial resources behind efforts (e.g., Kentucky, West Virginia), whereas others that had created P-16 councils waver on their on-going support (e.g., Michigan, Virginia). Recent attention to student outcomes and a focus on graduation rates calls attention again to student progress through the pipeline. How we look at the critical stages of student success and how we create partnerships across the divide are now more important than ever.

Looking forward, areas of particular attention for partnerships between public schools and community colleges will focus on developmental education, support for students of color, first-generation college students and low SES backgrounds, non-traditional student needs, and college persistence. Partnerships that focus on alignment of strategic initiatives and build on the creation of shared norms and understanding have more chance for success. Policy makers will find more success in implementation when policy moves beyond short-term mandates and addresses instead underlying structures that may create barriers to the type of changes desired.

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