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School-University Partnerships

The Need for Cross-Level Collaboration
in Educational Reform

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Introduction

A common challenge posed to postsecondary institutions is to define the purpose of higher education. Historically, colleges and universities have served various functions, from educating children of the elite to providing access for all citizens, and from conducting scholarly research to serving local communities. Each of these functions involves the community outside of higher education. However, a longstanding tradition of separation exists between these institutions and their communities. By necessity they may have developed working relationships to address immediate local issues, but they have rarely looked beyond surface level problem-solving to consider where their interests intersect (Goodman & MacNeil, 1999). In recent years, as society's expectations have evolved, institutions of higher education and their communities are coming to understand that they are indeed interdependent (Druckman, Peterson, & Thrasher, 2002; Goodman & MacNeil, 1999; Maeroff, Callan, & Usdan, 2001). At the same time, many leaders in educational reform are realizing the need for systemic change across all levels of schooling. K-12 schools are turning to resources from outside agencies rather than relying solely on their districts. In an environment where colleges and universities are reevaluating their missions to include public service and where K-12 schools are searching for external assistance, both parties' interests might be joined through the formation of school-university partnerships (SUPs)[1]. The time is optimal for those in higher education to combine efforts with those in K-12 on reform issues throughout the educational pipeline, in collaborations that maximize resources as well as potential results. This paper will review the need for SUPs and introduce some common

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[1] Throughout this document, *SUP*s are broadly inclusive of all institutions of higher education. The term *SUP* is widely used by many authors because much of the research in this area has been conducted on universities.

partnership models, concluding with the key characteristics that have been found to be necessary for their success.

A Call to Serve

Recent trends reflect the growth of outreach as essential to the mission of higher education. The literature uses terms referring to the rise of the "responsive university" or the "engaged campus" to describe this new commitment (Kezar, 2000, p. 1). There is renewed interest among urban universities and state and land grant colleges to return to their foundations as service providers. Forces that have contributed to this focus include revenue and enrollment shortfalls, changes in the workforce, the expanding role of technology, new expectations from the public, and the idea that an academic community expands well beyond campus walls (Kezar, 2000; Wilbur & Lambert, 1991). Those that contribute funds to postsecondary institutions, whether as private donors or neighborhood taxpayers, demand to see a meaningful impact in their communities. Colleges and universities are rethinking their missions in response.

This call to serve comes at a time when proponents of educational reform are reaching out for help from outside of the K-12 schools. Educators are recognizing the need for change to happen systematically, across all levels of schooling. They are beginning to see that system isolation between the different levels leads to a lack of effectiveness, which can be detrimental to the students (Galligani, 1990). The greatest challenges in educational reform cannot be addressed without some degree of systemic thinking. Each system, whether it is the K-12 schools or colleges and universities, has

the potential and the resources to make unique contributions in order to reform the system as a whole.

School Reform

John Goodlad (1988) proposes the idea of "educative communities" as a response to this need for collaborative efforts (p. 23). In *A Place Called School*, Goodlad (1984) explains the origins of American schooling as one of three major institutions (the other two being family and the church) which worked together to educate the nation's youth. However, Goodlad argues that over the years, the significance of the family and the church has decreased and the school is increasingly left to stand alone.

> "Not only have the coalitions that created and sustained the educational system withered, but the institutions represented in these coalitions have weakened significantly. Home, school, and religious institution no longer join as they once did in rearing the young. The role of education in enculturation is threatened by serious imperfections in the culture itself" (1988, p. 23).

The expectations for schools today cannot be met by the K-12 system on its own. The educational reform that is necessary to address these expectations must be a blend of efforts within the schools and larger society. This is where colleges and universities have the potential to play a significant role, in combining human expertise and technical resources with those from other segments of the community.

Although this seems an ideal partnership, the relationship between K-12 and higher education has been a rocky terrain. The two educational levels are, for the most part, "self-contained universes" existing in isolation from each other (Maeroff et al., 2001, p. 1). Issues that affect both levels are often addressed from one side or the other, but it is not common for them to find ways to work together. Current pressures for

change may be the catalyst necessary to bring about much-needed collaboration. For instance, demographic changes are reshaping the face of American schools and need to be addressed. The increasing diversity of the K-12 population brings growing numbers of low-income and non-English-speaking students. Are schools prepared to accommodate and adapt to these changes?

Meanwhile, research suggests that the current, piecemeal K-12 reform policies are exacerbating the gap between the directions of secondary and postsecondary education. For instance, there has been a lack of appropriate measures for student assessment in relation to college preparation, resulting in a misalignment between high school preparation and college admissions standards (Kezar, 2000). In an era where economic growth and global competitiveness demand a highly-trained workforce, the K-16 system must work as one in order to bridge this gap.

Given the magnitude of the problems in schools and their overlapping interests with higher education, many are beginning to see partnerships as a viable strategy: "A recognition that only a comprehensive joint effort can raise academic achievement and expand educational opportunity, as well as sharing scarce resources, has catalyzed educators, legislators, and community leaders to begin pursuing collaborative projects" (Gomez, 1998, p. 2). Across the nation, legislators and policy-makers are increasingly committed to supporting these efforts (Boswell, 2000). As a result, recent years have witnessed a great increase in both the number and type of SUPs (Kirschenbaum & Reagan, 2001).

Purposes of Collaboration

Successful partnerships typically alter individuals' perceptions about what is possible – both what is possible within their own institutions and through intersegmental collaboration. When participants are able to overcome the initial obstacles, "the 'climate of belief' changes from one of skepticism and limited expectations to a broader vision seeing significant opportunities as being both possible and valuable" (Gomez, Bissel, Danzinger, & Casselman, 1990, p. 105). SUPs offer the advantage of placing college and university professionals into new relationships with teachers and leaders in the schools. These relationships are characterized by courtesy and respect, and by the awareness that the partners are acting out of mutual self-interest. Unlike more traditional relationships between higher education and K-12, these new partnerships are two-way streets, where both organizations benefit from working toward common goals (Albert, 1992).

From the university's perspective, partnerships are often motivated by the desire to make a positive contribution to the community, to provide meaningful field experiences for students, and to create research opportunities for faculty (Kirschenbaum & Reagan, 2001). In fact, many universities are now experimenting with *service-learning* models, where students are expected to provide direct community service as part of a course (Holland, 2001). Service-learning courses are designed to send students into the field for real-life application of theories that are only discussed in the classroom setting. Although some faculty are initially resistant to the idea, claiming that it interferes with traditional academic values, proponents of service-learning believe that it enhances academic performance, increases students' understanding of their responsibilities in the

greater societal context, and encourages students to become more actively involved in the social problems facing their communities (Gray, Ondaatje, & Zakaras, 1999).

Other goals of SUPs benefit colleges and universities by allowing them to increase public visibility in a role that gives back to the community and by creating a more academically prepared, diverse group of candidates for their applicant pool, thereby enhancing the incoming student population.

From the school district's viewpoint, collaboration with colleges and universities contributes to the enhancement of K-12 instructional settings and curriculum, improved training for teachers, and increased access to mentors and tutors (Kirschenbaum & Reagan, 2001). SUPs frequently address a combination of these crucial factors simultaneously.

Overview of Types of Partnerships

Outreach to school systems has an extensive history in higher education, dating back to the 1800s (Kezar, 2000, p. 3). However, it was the mid-1980s that marked the beginning of a period of rapid growth in the variety and number of SUPs. School reform reports, including *A Nation at Risk* (1983), created a great sense of urgency for educational reform, calling for additional resources (as cited in Druckman et al., 2002; Wilbur & Lambert, 1991). With this call for change came new opportunities for partnerships. Schools have since been experimenting with and exploring supplementary resources in the community, including the possibility of working with institutions of higher education. Meanwhile, colleges and universities have recognized their responsibility and self-interest in working with their colleagues in K-12.

Thousands of students are served through partnerships each year, in every corner of the nation, in rural and urban areas, and in private and public schools (Carlson, 2001; Druckman et al., 2002; Wilbur & Lambert, 1991). Wilbur and Lambert's *Linking America's Schools and Colleges: Guide to Partnerships & National Directory* (1991) surveyed over 1,000 partnerships in a comprehensive effort to categorize and describe the different types of partnerships formed between schools and colleges across the nation. Although the range and diversity of the partnerships cannot be sufficiently captured in a few simple categories, the following is an overview of some common models.

Historically, partnerships between higher education and K-12 schools were formed to focus on the professional development of teachers, both preservice and inservice. Colleges turned to local schools as settings for the practical application of student teaching skills. Thus a considerable portion of the literature written about partnerships is limited to the study of teacher professional development partnership programs (Goodlad, 1988). In fact, the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) was created in the early 1980s as a renowned network of SUPs designed specifically to focus on educational reform through improved teacher preparation.

Although traditional partnership models involved schools of education exclusively, there has been a new shift away from this, as other forces began to spark the creation of SUPs (Druckman et al., 2002). A common goal for recent partnerships is to aid in the transition of students from high schools to colleges and universities. Programs focus on student guidance, counseling, and the improvement of curriculum and instructional support (Wilbur, Lambert, & Young, 1988). They aim to address public concerns such as the difference between high school graduation standards and college

admission requirements, issues that create significant barriers to higher education for many students (Boswell, 2000). These partnerships work through various formats, such as offering pre-college students the opportunity to enroll in college-level courses and obtain college credit. They aim to improve general academic readiness, assisting students in developing an understanding of the commitment necessary to be successful in higher education (Wilbur et al., 1988). A key network of these SUPs is the California Academic Partnership Program (CAPP), established in 1984 by state legislature. CAPP partnerships work to encourage secondary and postsecondary institutions to work cooperatively in preparing and motivating students for higher education - particularly those students under-represented due to historical, economic, or geographic factors (Galligani, 1990).

Other partnerships focus on creating early-intervention programs, generally providing direct services for "at-risk" students (Wilbur & Lambert, 1991). Programs targeted toward students who are deemed "at-risk" address critical thinking and problem-solving skills, provide counseling and remedial assistance, and assist students in completing the necessary academic requirements to prepare them for higher education or career options. Support mechanisms to maximize student success include tutoring and mentoring, activities such as field trips to museums and hospitals, and increasing parent involvement.

These are just a few types of existing SUPs and an overview of the issues that they address. Many recent partnerships have been formed as creative collaborations that utilize a variety of structures in maximizing the contributions of both schools and universities.

Some Perspective on Partnerships

To make a point about the impossibility of "college-lower school cooperation,"

Martin Haberman (1971) used the following analogy:

> *"Slow-witted, lumbering elephants circle each other for a century only to discover that they are both males and incapable even of friendship"* (as cited in Clark, 1988, p. 52).

Faculty and administrators from both K-12 and higher education are at times reluctant to

become involved in partnerships. Both parties may be skeptical of the potential for SUPs

to adequately address issues of reform. Some feel that their institutional structures are so

different that they are "simply incompatible" (Schlichtemeier, 1996, p. 20). Goodlad

(1991) explains that university faculty and administrators are accustomed to bringing

their expertise to the schools, often as consultants. In traditional roles, university

perspectives and knowledge have often been viewed with greater prestige and considered

to be of higher value (Johnston, 1997). As a result, university representatives sometimes

experience an initial difficulty in recognizing their counterparts at the K-12 schools as

equal partners (Goodlad, 1991). They may assume that they know what is best for the

schools, or view their work in the schools as a one-way service rather than a mutual

relationship addressing mutual goals (Clark, 1988). Moreover, leaders and teachers from

the schools display a degree of skepticism toward university faculty and administrators.

They may be wary of the university's motive, which might turn out to be nothing more

than to gather data for publishing (Goodlad, 1990). Oftentimes there is an unspoken

assumption that "ivory-towered" professors know little about the political realities of

what actually goes on in the schools (Trubowitz & Longo, 1997, p. 73).

Another barrier to involvement stems from the lack of recognition awarded to faculty for partnership work and service to the community. Commitment to an SUP requires a significant amount of time and effort. However, university faculty may be trapped in traditional higher education cultures that do not value work with partner schools. University structures for tenure and promotion must be reevaluated to support these efforts, in order to encourage and reward faculty involvement (Ginsberg & Rhodes, 2003; Schlichtemeier, 1996).

Although such issues tend to complicate the formation of SUPs, they are obstacles that can be overcome in order to achieve common goals. The inherent differences between schools and universities should be viewed as strengths rather than weaknesses. Goodlad (1988) terms the necessary relationship as *symbiosis*, referring to "unlike organisms (or institutions) joined intimately in mutually beneficial relationships" (p. 14). He explains that the conditions necessary for a symbiotic partnership require "dissilimarilty between or among the partners; mutual satisfaction of self-interests; and sufficient selflessness on the part of each member to assure the satisfaction of self-interests on the part of all members." The first condition inherently exists, but the other two must be mindfully created.

True collaboration between higher education and the K-12 schools is necessary in order to maximize joint efforts. SUPs are not just about colleges and universities taking it upon themselves to do good for the community. It is not up to one party to define what is beneficial or necessary for all. As one faculty member expressed,

> "Traditionally, we, the faculty and staff at institutions of higher education, have taken it upon ourselves to make these determinations. When was the last time we invited the community to join the conversation about current community and global issues and the ways the universities and colleges

might respond to those issues? How can we know with greater certainty
that our good intentions are matched by actions well received by the
community?" (Goodman & MacNeil, 1999, p. 20).

Experience has shown that for a partnership to succeed, both institutions must play active roles in determining its goals and how to achieve them, both must obtain benefits from the joint effort, and both should contribute resources to the program (Wilbur & Lambert, 1991). The K-12 and postsecondary institutions work to establish a common agenda, dealing with existing problems that were dealt with independently before entering the partnership. In a collaborative agreement, the members are viewed as equal parties that maximize each other's complementary strengths in satisfying shared self-interests (Goodlad, 1988, 1991).

Characteristics of Success

Developing a collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary institutions can be likened to building a house. "The foundation must be well laid, level, and firmly seated before construction begins above. If materials are shoddy or constructed of poor quality, the structure will not be able to withstand storms. Each beam needs to be capable of carrying its weight, and it is the combined strength of all the pieces that gives the structure its integrity" (Rakow & Robinson, 1997, p. 68).

In his report analyzing the two initial phases of CAPP partnerships, Galligani (1990) identified ten characteristics that are present in successful SUPs. These characteristics have been independently and recurrently upheld by other research studies:

1. **A clear definition of project goals that is recognized and developed cooperatively.** Partnerships require a balance of "selflessness and selfishness" in recognizing the mutual goals of both parties and the equal role that each plays in shaping the relationship (Goodlad, 1988, p. 24). It is important that all participants be aware of and understand the goals of the SUP (Borthwick, 1995).

2. **Development of mutual trust and respect among all partners.** A study of one SUP found that participants appreciated that their views were recognized, and they grew more willing to express themselves in the partnership setting as the level of trust among participants increased over time (Borthwick, 1995). In explaining true collaboration, Goodman (1999) uses the family dinner table as a metaphor to contrast with the polite conversation that takes place over dinner with a formal guest. At a family dinner table, there is "noise, dissention, and a bit of chaos. Underneath it though, is trust and participation, because everyone is a stakeholder who cares about the long-term health of the family and knows that we will all have dinner together again tomorrow" (p. 20). Without this familiar trust and respect, the ability to make genuine progress and engage in meaningful dialogue is undermined.

3. **Shared responsibility and accountability among partner institutions.** A key ingredient is the solid commitment from members in the collaboration and the recognition by each partner of what the other can contribute (Schlichtemeier, 1996). Successful partnerships require not only mutual commitment, but an appreciation of each institution's resources, needs, and limitations (Outcalt, 2000). Additionally, the importance of involvement from all parties is supported

by research findings that the end products produced by diverse workgroups are superior to that of homogeneous groups, even though the goals may take longer to achieve (Goodman & MacNeil, 1999). Thus, effective partnerships include members of political, geographic, vocational, and social diversity (Borthwick, 1995). It is important for campuses to reach beyond their own constituents to involve members of various levels from the partnership community.

4. **Willingness to recognize and understand the different cycles and languages of the various educational segments.** K-12 and postsecondary decision-makers have historically operated independently from one another, resulting in education policy made in isolation (Boswell, 2000). Although the two partner institutions consist of entirely different structures, the partnership itself should be viewed as an organization – one that incorporates feedback from its environment (Borthwick, 1995). Both parties should not only respect each other's differences, but also recognize their ability to collaborate as a result.

5. **Sufficient time to develop and strengthen the relationship.** The effort should not be perceived as just a "quick fix," but an ongoing process between the different educational levels. Time is necessary to achieve successful collaboration, after difficulties have been overcome (Trubowitz & Longo, 1997).

6. **Continual interaction between top administration and the faculty directly involved.** Change cannot be created nor sustained without the continued investment of both top-level administration and committed faculty who carry out the day-to-day responsibilities. Research shows that members of an SUP expect

commitment from individual participants as well as their organizations (Borthwick, 1995).

7. **Crisp lines of communication – formal and informal, regular, and frequent.** Successful partnerships are characterized by efficient sharing of information and knowledge (Goodlad, 1991). Moreover, the culture of the partnership should be created around effective knowledge exchange in order to overcome initial differences (Holland, 2001).

8. **Committed individuals who have primary responsibility for the development of the partnership projects.** The support of an institutional leader who is in a position to bring about organizational change is key. Because of their formal position of authority and personal relationships developed over time, these individuals have access to necessary resources and can motivate faculty interest. (Gray et al., 1999). Of course, another critical factor is the support of a few dedicated faculty members from both partnering institutions.

9. **Partners must recognize the evolutionary process of change.** Any attempt to address educational reform must recognize the long-term nature of the endeavor. Many partnerships fail because the impact affects only the current situation, or else it cannot be sustained because of shortsighted planning. "A partnership must acknowledge from its inception that the results of significant educational changes … do not come about quickly" (Gomez et al., 1990, p. 128).

10. **Periodic formative evaluation to ensure that the focus remains on reaching the mutually developed goals.** One of the "minimum essentials" for structuring a partnership is an ongoing effort to document, analyze, and communicate how

well it is achieving its goals (Goodlad, 1991, p. 41). The lasting effects of partnerships should be examined, both as critical information for the continuation of the existing SUP and as a contribution to the understanding of educational partnerships in general (Gomez et al., 1990). Borthwick's (1995) study found that participants remained in the SUP because they found the project to be successful and its goals worthwhile. This highlights another need for proper documentation and evaluation of the project's ability to meet its goals.

A Word on Evaluation

In reviewing the existing literature on this topic, I initially intended to analyze case studies of selected successful SUPs. However, although thousands of such partnerships are in place, I discovered that there is no standard against which the success of an SUP is measured. This led to the question: How is success evaluated? It seemed that any partnership which had survived its initial few years could consider itself successful.

When I reviewed SUP case studies more closely to identify the evaluation procedures implemented, it appeared that success is generally assessed through participant feedback. If an individual participant was satisfied that she had made an impact on the students that day, then the program might be deemed a success. Despite research findings on the necessity of systematic evaluation, there seem to be no consistent measures used to evidence the success of partnership work. In fact, it has been found that assessment and evaluation are often undervalued or overlooked in the planning of new programs (Holland, 2001). A well-designed system of assessment not only measures the

impact of the work, but also provides continuous feedback for improvement of the SUP model. The type of data gathered through evaluative processes is necessary to provide substantial evidence of accomplishments and to sustain both internal and external support. Potential funders and current participants alike want to know how effective the partnership model truly is. Appropriate assessment also helps to build a body of knowledge about best practices and lessons learned to share with other similar models (Holland, 2001).

Partnership evaluation should include both qualitative and quantitative measures, reviews of implementation as well as outcomes, and analysis of both anticipated and unanticipated results (Gomez et al., 1990). Each of the parties involved should contribute to the formulation of evaluative processes, so that members are aware of the purposes behind the procedures. Assessment should be planned in advance to capture data from the inception of the partnership, but also responsive to continual feedback and open to modification.

Evaluation should be a built-in, ongoing process in the structure of an SUP, and not treated independently from the activities of the partnership (Gomez et al., 1990). Recalling the analogy of a house used to describe the foundations of an SUP, it must be pointed out that even a well-constructed house, if not properly maintained, will soon succumb to ruin and disrepair (Rakow & Robinson, 1997).

Conclusion and Further Study

School-university partnerships have made considerable advances in educational reform. Many of these accomplishments are captured in publications discussing their

work, but the majority of SUPs are operated independently, in isolation from one another. Although these endeavors are scattered across the nation, they share commonalities such as dedicated faculty and staff who wish to improve the existing educational structure and are open to experimenting with novel ways of achieving this goal. There is a wealth of knowledge developed through the experience of each of these SUPs, but no centralized approach for them to use in gathering and sharing information about their efforts and findings. Most of the literature on SUPs consists of research on case studies, usually describing the work in a few partnerships and exploring individual implications for more effective collaboration (Kirschenbaum & Reagan, 2001). In order to make progress in the refinement of SUP models, more research must be done on the broader perspective of partnerships as a whole. This includes the review of appropriate evaluation and assessment measures, which would allow for meaningful comparisons between different partnership models. Existing documentation frequently discusses the structure and organization of SUPs, but further studies might focus more on the potential for successful reform through collaboration (Gomez, 1998).

Despite the difficulties faced in forming long-term partnerships between higher education and K-12, their prospects for addressing system wide issues of educational reform are enormous. As educators, we must work beyond those barriers and aim to create a K-16 system where collaboration between the various levels becomes the prevailing standard. From the perspective of K-12 schools, it may take considerable effort and commitment to create a willingness amongst teachers and principals to embrace the capabilities of a partnership with higher education. Yet the obstacles are minute compared to the potential for change if a true collaborative effort might be

undertaken. From the university's point of view, the number of faculty willing to

dedicate resources to such efforts may remain small, but even a few invested professors,

staff, and students could contribute to a lasting impact (Brouillette, 2001).

Ultimately, the benefit to students that may be affected through school-university

partnerships is of significant magnitude. As leaders in education, we must promote the

acceptance of partnership work as a fundamental means for addressing change in the

existing system. This potential for combined contributions to result in magnified

outcomes is a quietly budding field on the verge of blossoming, waiting to be discovered

and appreciated.

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