

Building a university-community partnership to promote high school graduation and beyond

An innovative undergraduate team approach

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe a new conceptual model integrating research, university-community partnerships, and an innovative undergraduate team approach to more effectively and efficiently address social problems while enhancing university-community relations and providing valuable learning experiences for students.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper describes the rationale for, and the key components, steps, and activities involved in piloting the conceptual model of university-community engagement. The model integrates research, community engagement, and undergraduate development and education along with ongoing evaluation by the relevant stakeholders.

Findings – As illustrated in a brief case study presentation, the model has significant promise in meeting several university and community objectives simultaneously. Specifically, it focusses on community needs by addressing a mutually agreed upon social issue, it builds and strengthens university-community relationships as a partnership of equals, and it promotes undergraduate development and learning in a way that integrates knowledge and service to society. Specific outcomes in each area are summarized.

Practical implications – This approach is a viable option for university and college professors interested in synthesizing several important foci: research, developing and sustaining university-community partnerships, and undergraduate development and learning.

Originality/value – The initial experience with the model indicates that it is an efficient and effective means for colleges and universities to simultaneously meet the goals of education, individual and collective citizenship, community engagement, and research productivity.

Keywords Conceptual model, Community-based research, School dropout prevention, Undergraduate development, University-community partnerships

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In an era of reduced financial resources, there is a growing awareness of the complex and seemingly intractable problems and issues that beset our communities. In particular, despite encouraging statistics at the state and national level, many communities are still struggling with the school dropout issue and under increasing pressure from state authorities to address the problem. In response to that rising awareness, institutions of higher education – as privileged citizens of our communities – have been called upon increasingly to conduct research that is directly relevant for practice and policy. Fortunately, this greater expectation of colleges and universities for contributing to the common good has elicited a broad range of promising approaches and models. These recently emerging models frequently include interdisciplinary approaches to social



challenges, and often involve direct engagement with communities (e.g. Jentleson, 2011). Such models represent a significant departure from the traditional approach wherein research and practice have been separate and individual disciplines attempt to address issues solely from their respective vantage points (Lerner and Simon, 2014).

One increasingly influential means for bridging research with practice and policy is through university-community partnerships (e.g. Hoy and Johnson, 2013). Universities and colleges are increasingly extending their missions, initiatives, and funding to encompass a focus on community engagement and learning as a priority for students and faculty alike (e.g. Duke Engage, Engaged Cornell). These initiatives often are supported both by departments representing traditional academic disciplines and by national centers such as the Bonner Foundation, Campus Compact, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Of course, university-community partnerships can look very different from one another depending on the purpose of the partnership, the characteristics of the community and the institution, and the pragmatic emphasis of the partnership itself (Soska and Butterfield, 2013). For example, some focus primarily on undergraduate service learning opportunities, whereas others choose to place their emphasis on community-based research and still others attempt to emphasize both aspects in their developing partnership. Likewise, the concept of “community” can imply a locale such as the university or college’s immediate neighborhood, the city or state in which it resides, or some more distant entity (such as partnerships involving communities located abroad).

This paper describes a model that incorporates several key concepts for strengthening the use of university-community partnerships intended to address pressing social problems. The model has the ambitious goal of simultaneously instantiating community-based research and practice that targets urgent issues while also developing and sustaining mutually fulfilling university-community partnerships and promoting undergraduate development. The paper begins with a brief presentation of the model and an overview (necessarily brief) of the relevant literatures supporting its components. Next, we provide an example of the model in action – what was, in essence, a single “iteration” of the model within a single community setting – and go on to offer suggestions for elaborating and extending the model and for implementing it at other institutions. We provide some discussion of how to build and sustain partnerships in ways that address the needs of multiple stakeholders: communities, faculty members, university administrators, students, and others. We acknowledge that it takes a long-term vision and commitment to build and sustain these partnerships, but our experience to date has been very encouraging. We close with a brief discussion of some implications for further application and for higher education teaching and learning.

Overview of the university-community partnership model

While there are many ways to conceptualize the pathways from research to practice and policy, it has become increasingly clear that as the resources which support such research become more limited, there must be greater accountability throughout the process and a greater emphasis on both process and outcome evaluation as well as real-world impact. Within the academic research community, we are collectively recognizing that we need greater specification and testability in our models, practices, and policies so as to be better able to address social and other issues and problems effectively and efficiently (Urban and Trochim, 2009). The challenge for institutions of higher learning to contribute to the well-being of their communities has never been greater.

While universities are undoubtedly agreeing that the time is now to increase and improve community engagement, there are not always clear blueprints about how higher education, research, and community involvement can be integrated to promote positive results. For example, service learning may be in and of itself important for student development, but typical service learning projects do not always involve systematic evaluation (i.e. assessment of how community centers and schools are improved) or how these partnerships are to be sustained over the long term as university administrators, school district personnel, and local politicians are replaced. Likewise, academic researchers are all too familiar with the tension that can arise in taking a highly specified and controlled intervention protocol into the community, where circumstances may mitigate against a strict implementation that follows conventional dictates of research design. In addition, students often experience a dichotomy or lack of connection between their traditional academic pursuits and the service learning or community engagement activities in which their colleges and universities are encouraging (or requiring) them to engage.

The university-community partnership model set forth here is a response to analyzing and synthesizing goals of research, university-community partnerships, and undergraduate student education and development. In this section, we present the outline of our university-community partnership model (shown in Figure 1), by focussing on the components of the model and the rationale for each. The model is intended to specify in reasonable detail how universities and communities can be ideally synergistic as they go about collaboratively solving important social and other problems, using the school dropout issue as our substantive focus.

The first and most important assumption of the model is that the social problem to be addressed is located neither within the community nor within the researcher but in the hypothetical middle, as an issue to be shared. This conception represents a substantial departure from the traditional view that the university exists to solve the problems of the community. Likewise, the model implies that students are not simply venturing out into the community to help less fortunate others, but rather, that their outreach and research activities represent a collaboration in which both partners benefit. In this sense, the model draws upon the philosophy of science known as critical theory and applies it to the study of educational processes (e.g. Bredo and Feinberg, 1982). This assumption is essential to the model and needs to be discussed and conveyed across all parties: researchers, students, and community members.

Component 1: the substantive social issue

University-community partnerships are motivated by common interests, frequently involving concerns that are shared geographically or economically. As such, our model starts with the most pressing or relevant questions that provide the rationale for the partnership. Within the context of the community of interest (e.g. local school, local

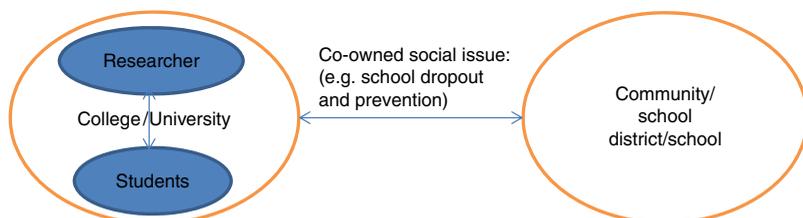


Figure 1.
University-community
partnership model

school district, community, state), the process of forming a partnership focussed on a specific challenge is based on the following questions:

- (1) What are the most urgent problems within this community, according to our own a priori research and experience and our interactions with various community stakeholders?
- (2) What are the broader contexts for these issues? From a systems perspective (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979), what causes and maintains the problems?
- (3) What are the successes that have occurred to date? What is going well within this context as related to the problem of interest? In our experience, this kind of asset-focussed, strengths-based approach has the added virtue of validating the community's efforts on its own behalf (Ordonez-Jasis and Myck-Wayne, 2012; Saleebey, 2002; Swadener and Lubeck, 1995).
- (4) What resources and assets exist to address the issue, within the university as well as the community (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993)?
- (5) Who are the stakeholders with whom we can connect to focus on the problem definition and to generate shared analyses and potential solutions?
- (6) How do we collectively/jointly define the problem and identify possible solutions?
- (7) What are our jointly agreed upon goals for the partnership?
- (8) What assumptions and perceived barriers are evident as we embark on collectively addressing the issue?
- (9) What do we each bring to the partnership in terms of skills and abilities, as well as in terms of work that needs to be accomplished?
- (10) What should be our next steps, in terms of the project's research goals, practice implications, and policy consequences?
- (11) What are we doing to build on this work, in order to maximize likelihood of sustaining the partnership over the long term?
- (12) What are the implications of our work for scaling up, for further research, as well as for practice and policy?

Although a university might want to create a partnership that transcends its own immediate community, we believe that focussing on local community issues enables a faster response to addressing urgent problems. It enables the research to practice to policy connections to be made more easily by focussing entirely on one particular community and addressing the connections among these components within that context. There are different purposes for conducting research, but community-based research enables researchers and students to collaborate with community stakeholders and address issues from multiple perspectives. In addition, research partnerships enable all the relevant stakeholders to participate. This is especially significant given the likelihood that local stakeholders have access to the aspects of the problem that can be most directly studied and manipulated. For example, in the case of school dropout prevention, we focus our analysis of the problem within the particular schools where it is most evident, relying on community partners to guide our initial assessment and to participate actively in our research and intervention efforts. In this approach, both the problem itself and any potential solution are mutually owned and negotiated.

Component 2: the university-community partnership

Here we briefly summarize theory and exemplars of university-community partnerships by focussing on specific efforts to address the dropout issue. Researcher-practitioner partnerships, particularly university-school district partnerships, have tremendous promise for expediting tailored solutions to complex educational issues as they are manifested within particular communities. Researcher-practitioner partnerships have been shown to be successful in addressing youth issues on both large and small scales. Examples of successful large-scale community endeavors include Communities That Care (Hawkins and Catalano, 1992; Hawkins *et al.*, 2008), which takes a comprehensive collaborative community approach to addressing multiple youth issues including substance abuse, pregnancy, crime, unemployment, and school dropout. Other investigators have included a comprehensive approach to pressing issues (e.g. school reform) within a more focussed school setting, such as the ongoing initiatives led by Robert Balfanz of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University (Balfanz *et al.*, 2007, 2008). Balfanz and his colleagues are partnering with Baltimore City and many other schools to develop, implement, and evaluate school reform programs. Smaller scale researcher-practitioner partnerships linking a single university and a single school system have also been successful (Farrion *et al.*, 2000), although as yet there is no “best practices” template available for districts seeking to develop such partnerships.

One of the most important lessons we have learned in our exploration of university-community partnerships is that often there are hidden or underutilized resources that the community can use on its own behalf. A number of community-based approaches to addressing youth issues have met with success as a result of this spirit of empowerment through collaboration, e.g. Philadelphia’s Project U-Turn, which conceptualized the city’s school dropout issue as the broader community’s responsibility rather than solely that of schools or parents. Multiple community stakeholders were brought together and organized to identify goals culminating in greater achievement for students. The project’s success was due in large measure to its emphasis on building a truly comprehensive collaboration involving schools, families, the business community, and the city government (Allen, 2010). Portland, Oregon is another example of a community pulling together for the common goal of improving student and youth outcomes (Martin and Halperin, 2006). Portland’s public schools used their financial resources to contract with local community-based organizations for alternative education programming. Thus, Portland’s at-risk and out-of-school youth had available a range of options for completing education (Martin and Brand, 2006). The notion of the “community school” is one that also incorporates the larger community as sharing responsibility for student outcomes (Blank *et al.*, 2003). Such schools frequently have a formal network of community resources at their fingertips to promote student success. Programs that bridge schools to community resources are often successful as well, e.g. STEM programs, middle or early college high schools, and schools that incorporate job or vocational training, learning about careers and planning for one’s future, field trips to colleges, and mentors (e.g. the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program; Catalano *et al.*, 2002). School programs that incorporate service learning, or community participation, even at the elementary levels, are proving positive for youth development and improving connection with and from the community (Billig, 2000). And although these initiatives can operate with or without a research component, the incorporation of research and program evaluation can significantly improve outcomes and facilitate dissemination beyond the originating partnership.

Whether or not school-based partnerships include a research component directly, it is clear that evidence-based practice is important for all these programs and initiatives to be successful and to be sustained most effectively and efficiently. In particular, practice, program, and/or policy evaluation can serve as the connection between research and practice. According to Urban and Trochim (2009), researchers and practitioners can come together to agree on outcomes of interest and develop what are termed logic models to address those outcomes. Using a program evaluation perspective, researchers and practitioners can together employ all the means to understand an issue, use their emerging understanding to develop/select and implement interventions, evaluate the impact of the interventions, and then revise the entire approach in a progressive and iterative fashion. In Urban and Trochim's approach, evaluation theory and practice is the main conceptual framework for a school-based partnership and guides much of the set of activities conducted by the partners. In addition, such a program evaluation framework can guide the development of objectives, identification of resources, strengths, limitations, needs, and help determine next steps in developing new or revising existing programs and policies.

Several community-based approaches that draw upon theory also provide examples of successful researcher-practitioner partnerships. These include a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), a critical theory approach, such as Habermas' (Ewart, 1991), and participatory action research (PAR) (Whyte, 1991), among others. PAR (Whyte, 1991) is a powerful strategy to advance both science and practice. PAR is a model for translating basic knowledge into applied settings that involves practitioners in the research process from the initial design of the project through data gathering and analysis to final conclusions and actions arising out of the research. Community-based participatory research (CBPR; Israel *et al.*, 1998) incorporates elements of these perspectives to focus on social, structural, and physical environmental inequities through active involvement of community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process. Partners contribute their expertise to enhance understanding of a given phenomenon and to integrate the knowledge gained with action to benefit the community involved. CBPR has been shown to be a successful approach in addressing serious community issues such as a tobacco cessation intervention within public housing neighborhoods (Andrews *et al.*, 2012).

However, while all of these models and paradigms have shown substantial promise, to our knowledge they have yet to be applied systematically within the specific context of university-community partnership development. We felt there was an urgent need for a theory-based approach to establishing partnerships between schools and communities, in part to deal more effectively with the challenges of contemporary K-12 education. In particular, universities and colleges can play an important role in working with schools and school districts, and by doing so can also help to establish principles that ultimately lead to easier dissemination and implementation.

It is an essential component of this model that the primary goal of the college or university is the building and sustaining of a partnership for its own sake. Our experience has been that too often, schools and other community institutions only have contact with university-based researchers when the latter are trying to identify a sample or location to conduct an already-designed research project. By instead prioritizing the partnership *per se* and explicitly including community stakeholders at every point in development and execution, a particular project becomes part of a broader effort toward strengthening collaborations. In turn, these collaborations make it easier to regularly bring together constituents to address problems and to access the strengths

that each can bring to the collaboration. Our model takes a long-term approach focussed on sustainability rather than a short term, “one-shot” approach that is primarily guided by expediency or the requirements of a particular research project. A broad goal for community-based researchers and practitioners can be to build a healthy community, defined by Kendziora and Osher (2004) as one that both buffers risks and strengthens protective factors that face community members. Similarly, much of the community-based intervention research of Hawkins and Catalano was based on models of bridging research and practice to strengthen communities (Hawkins *et al.*, 2002).

Whereas many researchers (ourselves included) have a tendency to approach community stakeholders after the research question has been identified and the approach planned, placing primary emphasis on the collaborative interactions and mutual strengths is more likely to generate long-term benefits for all participants. We have observed informally that some of our colleagues see this collaborative approach as too indirect and time-consuming, but generally we have been successful in balancing time requirements (e.g. funding deadlines) with a genuine desire for a collaborative partnership. Furthermore, based on the theories noted above, it is ethically appropriate and scientifically legitimate to begin the collaboration with the explicit view that all stakeholders are experts in various ways and as such, are equal partners in the overall scheme of the project. Critical theory, for example, would stipulate that all members of the community – researchers, residents, leaders – “own” the problems of that community and have both a personal stake in its solution and a valuable perspective on how to solve it (Israel *et al.*, 1998). As we will note below, we explicitly extend this commitment toward joint ownership to the undergraduate students who become involved in our research and outreach activities.

Component 3: student development

Perhaps the most surprising component of our model (at least, in retrospect, to us!), in terms of its ultimate influence on the quality of the partnership and the success of the project, is the critical role that undergraduate students play as researchers, interventionists, observers, interviewers, and representatives of the university. Undergraduate development encompasses both acquisition of substantive knowledge and a willingness to engage in personal growth experiences that ideally are integrated into the overall curriculum (Saylor *et al.*, 2013). Substantively, it is important that students come to know an issue from multiple perspectives: the statistics and trends, the history, the relevant classic as well as contemporary theories, the relevant research, the methodological options for pursuing the question (both quantitative and qualitative), the current practices and policies, the controversies, and the related issues at both micro and macro levels of analysis. As such, we have found it critical to engage students by providing case examples and helping them to identify how seemingly disparate aspects of an issue or problem are likely to be connected. We also find it essential to continually ask students to critique, to create, to compare, to contrast, and to evaluate. For example, a number of our undergraduate students have used their involvement in university-community partnerships to create, implement, and evaluate curricula designed to meet particular needs of individual schools. Those incipient partnerships, in turn, often grow into larger projects for which students can gain additional credit, receive honors, and even publish in scholarly journals.

It is important to recognize that the element of personal growth is as much a part of a student’s engagement in these projects as are the development of knowledge and skills. From a mentorship perspective, pedagogical strategies that identify students’ compelling interests, teach them that their prior work and life experience is important

and useful, and then encourage them to bring those interests and experiences to bear on a problem, are particularly beneficial. The theoretical traditions from which our model emerged stipulates that all kinds of knowledge, including prior experience, are important to bring to bear on a problem or issue (e.g. Ausubel *et al.*, 1968; Freire, 1970; Gowin, 1981; Novak and Gowin, 1984). This principle, in turn, promotes the student's sense of empowerment and feelings of ownership over their own learning. Likewise, it teaches them that just as we respect their prior knowledge, we do the same for our collaborators when we work in the field with practitioners and others. This commitment to respecting knowledge and expertise is particularly important to model for students whenever interacting with community collaborators or stakeholders.

Mentoring students in their research, practice, and policy work within communities has taken many forms or entry points. For example, some of our students have participated in a seminar on School Dropout and Education Policy, where they have been expected to become engaged in some kind of interaction with communities, either via mentoring, curriculum facilitation, conducting interviews for their study, or conducting a program evaluation. Other students (as well as some who previously had participated in the seminar) have become engaged in our research efforts by registering for independent studies, honors theses, and/or internships. In each of these, students are able to obtain academic credit toward graduation for their work. Students also learn from each other through their ongoing engagement in project-related group activities. In the case study presented below, we summarize one such project that is being piloted at Duke University, funded by the Bass Connections program.

Ultimately, students are asked to work at their highest levels: to be critical and creative thinkers, to compare and connect their literature reviews to their prior and current experiences, and to challenge conventional thinking. As noted, they are involved in a variety of tasks under the overall project umbrella: they develop curricula, they participate in and contribute to advisory boards within the community, and they engage in program evaluation. We believe that this level of responsibility and intellectual opportunity represents fertile ground for the development of leadership skills, informed citizenship, and intellectual rigor. None of their projects are simulations or "exercises", but rather all are real-world interactions with the stakeholders and individuals most closely involved with the issue at hand. We believe it is essential that the activities in which students engage are considered useful and are valued by communities.

In an era of scarce financial capital, undergraduates not only gain skills, knowledge, and character development, but are important sources of social capital to communities. They are the future in terms of investment in communities all across the globe. Consistent with the mission of our university and many others, it is essential for them to see how their civic engagement experiences in college provide them with the knowledge and skills they will require in the future by partnering with communities to help improve them. In addition, consistent with our research philosophy, the students learn that they are partners in a larger and more complex enterprise in which each participant has relevant expertise. Whether they are interviewing the school district superintendent or an elementary school student having difficulty reading, they learn to identify potential power differentials and to adjust their goals and methods accordingly.

Connections among the components

As the reader no doubt has noticed, there is nothing unique about the individual components of this model. Our intent has been to integrate and systematize existing knowledge and to draw directly upon the expertise of investigators and practitioners

who specialize in the individual components. And indeed, different pairings of the components can and do exist in currently available models. That is, two can be combined productively without the third, e.g., researchers can conduct research in communities, students can participate in service learning or research experiences in communities, and universities can partner with communities without a research focus. However, the present model postulates that the three components of research, university-community partnerships, and student development, combined in specific ways and via specific steps and assumptions, can improve the likelihood of addressing social and other issues in a way that promotes sustained results at the same time it creates opportunities for intellectual and personal growth for students. As we will try to illustrate in the following section, we believe that the respective components of the model are highly synergistic. That is, our experience to date is that the whole has been even greater than the sum of the parts.

The model in action: a brief case study

An opportunity at Duke University arose in which university researchers could identify a pressing social problem and address it in collaboration with a team of undergraduate students. Bass Connections is a year-long program whereby students meet weekly with professors to carve out their own projects within the larger focus of the group. Professors can collaborate with each other, are encouraged to incorporate interdisciplinary approaches, and student teams are formed whereby students represent various levels of seniority and a range of disciplines and majors. The Bass Connections program serendipitously offered an opportunity to explore all aspects of this model and evaluate its potential from the point of view of faculty, students, and community members.

Our Bass Connections team was part of a broader initiative to develop and sustain university-school district partnerships for the purpose of increasing high school graduation and college attendance rates and improving overall life outcomes for disconnected youth. Our first step in building a university-community partnership was to conduct a state-level analysis of the counties' high school graduation rates. We identified a county close to the university that had the lowest graduation rate in the state. It also had a higher unemployment rate, higher teen pregnancy rate, and higher poverty rate than the NC state average. Essentially, the county appeared to have substantial unmet social needs, it was close enough to the university to make visits feasible, and perhaps most importantly, the county's schools had no prior formal connection to the university. Next, we called and met with administrators of this primarily rural school district and discussed our interest in collaborating to address the goal of increasing graduation rates. In our meetings (which included the researchers, the students, several senior school district administrators, and the school district's Dropout Prevention Coordinator), we applied the list of questions that represented one of the components of our model to inquire about: the current educational situation, including historical context of educational issues within the county; existing strengths and resources (i.e. what was going well in terms of dropout prevention from the school district's standpoint); a specific and detailed list of the dropout-related problems that were of greatest concern to the administrators and teachers; and the district's long-term goals, anticipated next steps, and their initial impressions regarding how we might be able to help.

Having obtained some background regarding the county's history, needs, strengths, and goals, we then presented our model for a collaborative partnership. We were careful to emphasize that according to the research philosophy that underlies our model, each of the parties involved in the collaboration has skills and expertise, and we

are truly working in partnership (in contrast to an arrangement in which university-based experts take control of assessment and problem solving). We explained our theoretical approach to school dropout prevention, e.g., that it involves an appreciation and consideration of a systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); a positive youth development approach (Lerner, 2005; Catalano *et al.*, 2002); an emphasis on early identification of who is at-risk for dropping out (Balfanz *et al.*, 2007), and an emphasis on the importance of strengthening social capital in the form of providing direct support and encouragement to at-risk students (Coleman, 1988). We also noted that we valued collaboration and shared expertise, rather than a working relationship which would be inherently hierarchical and contain within it a significant power differential. Finally, we reiterated that we had genuine respect for the school district's efforts and intentions and that we were not there to "save the schools" but rather to collaborate and facilitate as our community partners identified targets for change.

Our working structure at the university involved weekly team meetings. The meetings included a number of regular agenda items, including: planning for the school district meetings and involvement, discussion, and revision of the plan of action and next steps in the school district, discussion and written reflections of field experiences, discussion of relevant research and readings, and reflections on the team approach. Our other activities included regular visits to the county to meet with administrators, to tour the local town, to tour the school sites, to interview the principal, and for the undergraduates to regularly mentor students at-risk of dropping out at an alternative high school.

Together with the school administrators, we determined that our primary form of collaboration at this initial point in the partnership would be for the Duke students to regularly mentor a group of students at-risk of dropping out. In addition, we discussed creating a community-wide advisory board to address the district's school dropout prevention goals which we could be part of (but not take responsibility for leading). We discussed writing grants and other ways we could continue to be involved into the future (the sustainability aspect). We quickly identified the need to delineate phases to our work: year one, direct mentoring and planning; year two, conduct focus groups about needs and strengths and what is already existing that is working, and identify barriers and resources within both the school district and the city and county and state. We discussed data collection and analyses (qualitative – focus groups and interviews; quantitative – examining data sets for patterns related to Balfanz's indicators for educational attainment).

We were especially cognizant of the need to attend to the interpersonal aspects of our collaboration. As such, meetings were a highlight of our joint efforts. Key themes that arose regularly in our meetings and other activities included: building trust, taking our time to get to know the administrators and the community, helping them learn about us, and coming to an initial understanding of common ground about where we could help now and into the future. We took both a macro and a micro view: we were able to learn about and participate in the District's goals and plans as well as provide direct services to students, and to see how administration and provision of services connect and where as-yet unmet gaps might be. The undergraduate students were involved in all these aspects of this complex unfolding process, which helped allow them to gain an understanding of how complicated it can be to address social and policy issues that have implications for so many levels of analysis.

Even within the relatively limited goals that we set for our initial year of collaboration, we were pleased at what it was possible to accomplish. Our collaborative efforts resulted in stronger trust between university and community, the identification of needs that we could collaboratively address, the establishment of a longer term plan

of action, and the ability to identify research and practice and policy opportunities for all stakeholders. In addition, there was direct service provision in terms of mentoring students at-risk of dropping out by the undergraduates. Our team approach helped us address issues in depth and bring all of our complementary perspectives to bear. For instance, we could help in terms of serving as a new force or source of initiative within the community and a like-minded approach to one of the community's main concerns (educating its children). We made consistent efforts to ensure that our roles were complementary (e.g. the researcher led in conducting interviews, communicating with administrators; the students also communicated with administrators, and had the direct presence in the schools). With the cooperation of the school district's administrators and teachers, our undergraduates were brought into all aspects of the community involvement, able to see "behind the scenes", and were not shielded or forced to settle for a partial degree of involvement.

As of this writing, we have completed the first year of the partnership and all the stakeholders view this past year as a pilot project that also allowed for in-depth examination of the assumptions that underlie our model. One of the main challenges included the fact that the district was 45 minutes away and there was no public transportation between our city and the county. Otherwise, we were able to bridge very different roles, backgrounds, and experiences for the common goal of improving graduation rates. The partnership clearly was mutually beneficial, and the undergraduate students were extremely proud of their contributions and excited to share their experiences as part of a presentation of the work of Bass teams. We are continuing the collaborative process and exploring additional ways to harness the respective strengths of our university, our students, and the local community. Further, we made sure that we established a relationship that could be maintained efficiently and built upon over time. The main ingredient was to take our time and build trust, as Bryk and Schneider (2002) stated is a key component to effective schools. Finally, our impression has been that this incipient partnership is beneficial to the academic and personal development of the undergraduate students themselves. A majority of the students chose to continue their involvement beyond their initial year in the Bass Connections program, with each developing their own specific research or intervention focus. If we are successful in further development of the program, then both the partnership itself and the undergraduate students' identities will be established over the long term.

Conclusion

The university-community partnership model described herein builds on efforts by universities and colleges to increasingly connect research to practice and policy and researchers and students to communities by specifying how the areas of research, university-community collaboration, and undergraduate education and development can be brought together in specific and systematic ways, that are theory and research driven, to address social problems that communities and universities face. It emphasizes the importance of creating solutions through genuine partnership, by building slowly and carefully, and emphasizing the skills and expertise of all stakeholders. It has a long-term focus of sustaining and growing the partnerships as well as providing opportunities for undergraduate student development both academically and personally. This model has implications for future theory, methodology, research, practice, and policy. Such implications include joining together traditional research/intervention practices with an explicitly collaborative model, partnering with community members on practices, grants, research, publications, presentations, etc., and allowing research projects often confined,

by practicality, to the campus to benefit from the external validity of outside collaboration. Universities and communities can benefit each other in ways that are continuing to be explored. This model provides a blueprint to develop these partnerships from a strong theoretical foundation. It will be elaborated on and tested in future projects both to facilitate initiation of new projects and to determine the staying power of the model in terms of focussing on a particular problem within a specific partnership over time.

We also are optimistic regarding the potential of the model to facilitate research progress toward substantive challenges. As is well known, many factors and processes over time contribute to school dropout and disconnection. The research of Balfanz and others has shown that students can be identified early on as at risk for not graduating from high school by means of a small number of school-based factors, such as attendance, behavior and course grades (Balfanz *et al.*, 2007). Balfanz and his colleagues have advocated for, and implemented in several partnerships with school districts, a prospective tracking system to identify students at risk as early as elementary school, to monitor them over time, to provide appropriate interventions and resources, and ensure their success. Balfanz and colleagues have been able to use data the school district already collects and show high predictability of educational attainment with just a few salient school-based factors. While other factors certainly can contribute to efficient identification of those children most at risk, the school-based factors are easily obtainable, trackable, and identifiable at early ages for most public school students. Our partnership focussed immediately on the possibility of identifying variables that are the most robust trackers of student outcome within this particular school district, over and above the variables identified by Balfanz's national research.

We have been privileged to develop our model in cooperation with community partners whose primary focus has been on identification of at-risk youth and bringing existing resources to bear on addressing the risk factors that may impair their ability to graduate and move on to higher education and careers. The county's priorities include improving high school graduation rates, greater college attendance rates, and enhancing the ability of their graduates to compete successfully in a larger labor market (i.e. outside of the county itself). One particular advantage of a researcher/school district partnership is that it allows for fine-tuning of data analyses to better match the characteristics of the district itself. For example, the county has less of an attendance issue, and more of a school suspension and low academic grades issue, than other North Carolina school districts on average according to initial discussions with administrators. Thus, use of the Balfanz indicators approach as part of this developing partnership will be important but also will be nuanced based on the county's particular issues in order to match students with appropriate interventions.

It became clear early in the collaboration that our university and the county/school district had complementary strengths that each brought to the partnership, consistent with the intent of the model. Our university has academic resources that are highly relevant to the county's educational goals (e.g. students willing to volunteer to be mentors and seeking independent study, research, and service learning opportunities). Our university also has a well-established program in service learning activities and promotes this aspect of education throughout its undergraduate majors. Multiple units on campus support this endeavor, including the university's central administration and community outreach offices. In turn, the county has specific expertise in the students, families, and communities they serve. A CBPR approach, such as was discussed above, takes the respective strengths of researchers and community members into account in guiding joint activities aimed at understanding and solving important social problems.

We also want to emphasize that the collaborative model on which the partnership is based assumes, as in the theories noted above, that both parties to the partnership will benefit. Those of us from the university who are engaged in the project will have the unique opportunity to learn continuously from participation in both research and training activities with the county's teachers, staff, and students.

One important test of this model is the extent to which tangible benefits accrue for community members as well as for researchers and students, and ultimately improve the creation of new knowledge and problem solving. A collaborative approach is essential to combine research, practice, and policy synergistically in order to improve community outcomes. The school dropout issue itself is one exemplar of a potentially productive focus for university-community partnership, just as our university is one example of an institution of higher learning that can benefit from a formal model guiding community collaboration. The dropout issue itself can be couched within a larger conceptual framework, one that could ideally be focussed more broadly in the form of a connected youth collaboration or initiative. Thus, it is important to begin with the research questions as they are embedded within a community issue and realize the need for a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach, one that includes researchers, undergraduate and graduate students, practitioners, K-12 students, parents, community members, and policymakers working together in a systematic way to address the issues.

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