Evaluating University-Community Partnerships: An Examination of the Evolution of Questions and Approaches

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Abstract

As more partnerships between institutions of higher education and local communities are developed, a small but rapidly growing literature about the partnerships has emerged. They have become the subject of reflections by founders, surveys, interviews, case studies, content analyses, comparative frameworks, and databases, along with the methodological debates about how best to use these tools. This article examines the types of questions being asked, the scope of data collection and methods of analysis, the relationship of the authors to the partnerships, and the intended uses of the work. The development of an intellectually rigorous framework for evaluation of partnerships requires more than appropriate indicators of effective process or outcomes. The research must be based in the formulation of meaningful questions that relate to the core objectives of the partnerships and the programs that support them.

As partnerships between institutions of higher education and local communities have become more numerous and have enjoyed a higher profile, more attention has been paid to how they are formed, how they operate, and what they accomplish. With roughly 200 partnerships having received significant funds from government or foundation sources in the past 6 years, and with community engagement now on the agenda of many national academic and community development organizations, a small but rapidly growing literature about the partnerships has emerged. Many of these writings suggest that the current wave of activity represents something qualitatively different from other community development strategies and from earlier forms of university outreach and technical assistance. If that proposition is to be examined empirically, approaches to evaluating the partnerships will have to be up to the task of defining, measuring, and interpreting their novel and essential characteristics.

This article provides an overview and a classification of the main currents in the evaluation and assessment of university-community partnerships. We examine the types of questions being asked, the scope of data collection, methods of analysis, the relationship of the authors to the partnerships, and the intended uses of the work. Four broad themes about change and diversity are suggested.

Our first observation is that there has been an evolution in the literature over the past decade. Most of the early published accounts were reports of individual cases, including histories and reflections written by the academic participants in partnerships, usually faculty members or academic coordinators. In more recent years, while such accounts continue to appear, there has been a growth in the number and size of more systematic, longitudinal, and comparative analyses. These include evaluations of specific grant programs and more wide-ranging comparative studies.

A second, related factor is that this literature is largely produced by academics who are writing about higher education—the institutional framework that they call home. The authors usually draw upon personal experiences and understandings in ways that are different from their customary writing about institutions and contexts that were, for them, solely objects of study. In many cases, they also have a larger and different kind of potential stake in the outcomes of policy decisions about university-community partnerships than in situations where they are solely observers.

Third, there is a very wide array of disciplinary and professional perspectives among the contributors to the literature, with backgrounds in psychology, education, urban planning, anthropology, political science, sociology, philosophy, and several other fields. This diversity is, overall, a tremendous asset for the understanding (and the practice) of community-campus partnerships. The contributors use different styles of research, make reference to different types of social theory, and concentrate on different issues. They do not always speak the same language, or at least not the same dialect, but most of the writing on this topic has been generally accessible.

The final factor reflects the newness of the field of study. Although published, broad-based empirical findings are relatively rare as of spring 2000, many of the most extensive and ambitious studies are scheduled for completion within the next year. At that point, there should be a substantial amount of useful data, conclusions, and recommendations. In advance of that, this piece will provide not so much a literature review in the formal sense as a user's guide to work in progress.

The development of an intellectually rigorous framework for evaluation of partnerships requires more than appropriate indicators of effective process or outcomes. The research must be based in the formulation of meaningful questions that relate to the core objectives of the partnerships and the programs that support them. Silka (1999) describes the conflicting assumptions and goals that underlie the advocacy of these partnerships and expresses them as a set of contradictory claims or paradoxes. For example: "Are these activities peripheral to the academic endeavor or at the very heart? Do these activities represent a useful approach because they are robust, easy to create and fit with faculty roles? Or do they draw faculty into unfamiliar terrain that fragments the professoriat and diverts attention from the knowledge generation function of universities?" (Silka, 1999.) A close observer of the field could readily find examples of partnership activities that are emblematic of both sides of this and each of Silka's 10 paradoxes. As we will see, many of the writers about partnerships have a healthy respect for the complexity inherent in such multiple perspectives and shifting objectives, and their ideas about assessment are derived from that recognition.

Six Types of Analytical Writing About Campus-Community Partnerships

Campus-community partnerships have become the subject of an increasing number of reflections, surveys, interviews, case studies, content analyses, comparative frameworks, and databases, along with the methodological debates about how best to use these tools. The literature and work in progress can be roughly categorized into six types of projects, each of which will be briefly characterized. These categories can provide a useful order for this fast-growing collection. The categories include:

- Self-study accounts by participants in partnerships.
- Local evaluations of partnerships.
- Proposals and discussions of methods for evaluation.
- Collections and comparative analyses of case studies.
- Creation of permanent data systems about multisite programs.
- National evaluations of programs that support local partnerships.

The Self-Study Accounts by Participants

These partnerships usually engage professors and professional staff of higher education as organizers and practitioners. The faculty members are frequently in the midst of the planning and decisionmaking, are present at many of the major activities, and often make presentations about the partnerships in a variety of academic and community settings. Furthermore, through service learning, many of these faculty members are teaching students to reflect and write about their experiences in the partnerships in systematic ways. It is not surprising that some of these faculty participants have documented the evolution of the partnerships with which they have been associated. While these articles do not represent evaluations in the formal sense, they do capture some systematic examination of complex processes by people with unmatched access.

Over the past 5 years, *Metropolitan Universities Journal: An International Forum*, the *Journal of Public Service and Outreach*, the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, and the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* have been among the outlets for many of the accounts of faculty leaders of partnerships. Many of these articles and reports began as conference papers, often for sessions and symposia organized in a particular academic discipline or for grantees of a particular program. Many of the reflective accounts are characterized by the authors' recognition, after the fact, of a pattern to how their partnerships changed over time. Rubin (1995), for example, described three stages in the first 8 years of the University-Oakland Metropolitan Forum. The forum had spent the first 3 years building trust and understanding among the partners, identifying some common goals, and conducting small, discrete policy analyses. Once sufficient credibility and trust had been established and a mixture of crisis and opportunity came into play, the partnership carried out much more ambitious, multifaceted strategic plans for citywide change in public schools and neighborhood development, and later moved into a period of widespread technical support for community-based organizations. Three years later, in a second article, Rubin (1998) described how the partnership had changed again to emphasize the universities' assistance to comprehensive, multiagency community-building initiatives.

An important theme of the self-studies is that through the process of building partnerships, universities have had to rethink many of their motives, practices, and assumptions

about what kinds of activities and products would be of value. Reardon, in a number of articles (1997, 1999), has documented the interactions through which the East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP) has been crafted by the University of Illinois and its community partners. By these accounts, each phase began with a high degree of skepticism on the part of the community residents about the usefulness, sincerity, or sustainability of the university's commitment. As significant as the tangible accomplishments of the project may have been during its first several years, the model was continuously being challenged and changed. With each chapter in its evolution, ESLARP came closer to what its partners considered authentic empowerment, including shared decisionmaking, democratization of technical expertise, and long-term commitments to building community-based institutions. In turn, the development of ESLARP had, by Reardon's accounts, meaningful influence on many aspects of the university, including teaching, interdepartmental collaboration, faculty assessment, and budgeting. Dewar and Isaac (1998) also wrote about the ways in which the University of Michigan's Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) project in Detroit led to the dissolution of the traditional technical assistance format. The experience required new roles for faculty, students, and community partners to bring about a kind of mutually supportive praxis in the manner advocated by Paolo Freire.

A third theme prominent in many self-study accounts concerns the importance of high-level leadership and the role of the partnerships in the overall positioning of the university in the community and the broader society. Many of the prominent partnerships are based in chancellors' attempts to make tangible the mission of their specifically urban, public universities. For example, as Wiewel and Lieber (1998) wrote about the COPC program at University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), "… the program happened to come along as a perfect fit with a set of institutional priorities that had just begun to be developed. UIC's Great Cities program expresses the university's commitment to direct its teaching, research, and service programs to address urban issues in the Chicago metropolitan area." In that article, the authors analyze reasons for the relative success or failure of various components of the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative. They conclude that a simple model of rational planning does not suffice for understanding or managing these partnerships. Effective collaborative planning requires an incremental approach and constant attention to building and maintaining trust in relationships among the partners.

In general, reflective articles by university-based veterans of campus-community partnerships have chronicled how the community-campus relationships evolved over a number of years. They have placed the growth and development of particular projects within the broader context of change in higher education and within the theory and practice of community planning. Rather than employ much specific new data collection, the authors have drawn mainly upon the materials and experiences that they had at hand. As the first type of literature widely available about this relatively new phenomenon, these articles have voiced many of the themes that have become central to the field and to subsequent research.

Local Evaluations of Partnerships

As many of the partnerships obtained multiyear funding and became more complex, they began to support their own evaluations of their processes and outcomes. Some Federal and philanthropic funders required local evaluations, while others simply permitted or encouraged them. A number of universities have supported evaluations for internal purposes, such as faculty assessment, or in the hope of having evidence that would guide future decisions and support future fundraising efforts.

Since the partnerships are often based on campuses that include faculty members with relevant experience and interest, many of the local evaluations have been conducted by

professors and researchers from the same university, as opposed to outside consultants. Many of these efforts are still underway and, consequently, there is not as much published or otherwise available in the public domain in the category of evaluation research as there is in the previously described reflective self-studies. We can, however, describe some trends and examples and make references to evaluations that will soon be available.

A central purpose of many partnership evaluations has been to track and document what community residents are seeking from the relationship with the university and how they believe the work toward those goals is progressing. Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond uses, among other techniques, instant polling in partnership meetings using electronic handheld devices, to immediately register, tabulate, and display participants' anonymous preferences on a wide range of issues (Allison, 1999). Results from the first several years of that partnership suggest that the level of trust has grown and that the partnership is considered generally responsive to the residents while also serving the university well. UIC anthropologists have conducted interviews with dozens of participants for 5 years in many of the projects of the university's Neighborhoods Initiative and issued detailed annual reports (Lieber and Pinsker, 1997). The UIC evaluation covers the process by which projects are developed, with particular attention to how partners from various backgrounds, with different assumptions and interests, create working relationships and make adjustments when their initial strategies are not successful.

The findings from a local evaluation can be the basis for a more effective ongoing planning process. In ESLARP, the evaluation was managed by a St. Louis University faculty member who was otherwise unaffiliated with the project and conducted in part by the residents. The results have been used in, among other settings, the annual planning retreats of residents and University of Illinois professors, staff, and students.

Whatever the method, many of the local evaluations are intended to be used in the formative periods of a partnership when the early results can be compared with the plans and changes can readily be made. This is also a period when relatively new alliances may be strengthened through a frank examination of what has worked and what needs improvement. It is too soon to generalize from the findings of the local evaluations. However, within 2 years, when scores of HUD COPC and Joint Community Development grants will have been completed, there will be a substantial number of local evaluation reports from which common lessons can be drawn.

Community partnerships such as those promoted by COPC grants are part of a larger movement toward engaged universities. Progress toward that goal will depend on faculty being able to operate effectively as teachers within the community context. Portland State University (PSU) has been a national leader not only in creating a curriculum tied to community engagement but also in assessing student learning and faculty teaching in those courses and independent study projects. Davidson, Kerrigan, and Agre-Kippenhan (1999) describe the process at PSU of collecting common, comparable data on instructional efforts while simultaneously encouraging faculty members to design customized assessments of their partnership activities. Case studies of 10 new courses showed the administrators how much institutional support for the faculty would be needed and guided the formation of vehicles to provide that support. According to the authors, the process of evaluation also enhanced the mutual understanding and working relationship of the university and the community.

Many other universities also conduct local evaluations of their outreach-oriented curricula. The evaluation of service learning goes beyond the focus in this article on community partnerships, but the two are closely related. Many partnerships rely on

service-learning courses and independent studies for much of their student participation. Organizations such as Campus Compact and the Corporation for National Service as well as campus institutes such as the University of California at Berkeley's Service Learning Research and Development Center have compiled information on methods for measuring changes in students' attitudes, skills, and knowledge as a result of their service-learning experiences. Such instruments can be an important part of a well-rounded evaluation strategy for a partnership.

Proposals and Discussion of Methods for Evaluating Partnerships

For 5 years there has been an intermittent but valuable conversation under way about how campus-community partnerships can be evaluated effectively. A 1996 symposium in Wilmington, Delaware, brought together 20 researchers affiliated with local COPC partnerships and national comprehensive community initiatives. The participants sorted through the many dimensions of these partnerships that need examination. The remarkable diversity of the partnerships, with regard to type of institution of higher education, type of neighborhood, historical relationship between town and gown, nature of the substantive issues being addressed, and other contextual factors, was seen as a central complicating factor in any national evaluation, and that diversity has only increased since then. The partnerships existing at that time, including those funded under the same grant program, were already exhibiting a wide array of structures, operating styles, and underlying assumptions about everything from the relationship of the partnership to teaching and research to the placement of the partnership managers within the university.

Recent evaluations of other types of partnerships funded by the Federal government and national foundations provided several analytical frameworks that were measured against the particular issues of partnerships involving universities. The conceptual and methodological issues of evaluating comprehensive community initiatives were well-summarized in two edited volumes produced by the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families (Connell, Kubisch, Schorr, and Weiss, 1995; Fulbright-Anderson, Kubisch, and Connell, 1998). Among the questions the experience with those initiatives presents for university-community partnerships is the extent to which the latter embody a coherent, measurable theory of change. A theory of change evaluation requires that the model of community context, dynamics, and planned interventions can be explicated through interaction with the participants and then measured over the course of several years. This approach has been used for several large national community initiatives. Although there was interest in the theoretical approach among many potential evaluators of university partnerships, the daunting diversity of the COPC projects and the apparent lack of a unified theory of change for the national program made it seem unlikely to be the overall methodological answer.

The Wilmington symposium also addressed two other dilemmas common to evaluations of process-heavy partnerships. There was a perceived need on the part of Federal funders such as HUD for concrete, tangible, quantitative measurements of community benefits. How many houses were rehabilitated? How many computers were installed and how many residents trained to use them? Did proposed job creation and business development schemes produce the anticipated results? After all, the support comes from scarce community development appropriations and the partnerships were committed to completion of important, discrete projects. How can outcomes of this kind be attributed to a partnership's activities in light of the combination of overlapping initiatives and many sources of funding and expertise in most neighborhoods? For most evaluations, given

limited resources, the importance and feasibility of assessing these outcomes and attributing them to a particular intervention has to be weighed in relationship to the need for intensive qualitative analysis of the process by which working relationships are built and maintained among the partners.

The symposium was an insightful, intriguing, but inconclusive airing of the array of issues that confronted the field. The symposium led HUD to commission three proposed designs for the national evaluation of the COPC program from teams at COPC universities. While the three designs differed in many respects, they all emphasized that both process and outcomes were critical and that the national evaluation should also represent an important opportunity for the local partners to learn about their own programs. The extent to which partnerships become mutually advantageous collaborations that the partners would choose to continue and the extent to which they build political, social, and intellectual capital are among the most important aspects to evaluate (Innes, Fleming, and Rubin, 1997; Rubin, Innes, and Fleming, 1998).

Community partnerships are part of a broader effort toward increasing the community engagement of universities. The broader movement includes such diverse phenomena as the growth in service-learning courses and education for citizenship and the broadening of the definitions of faculty scholarship and service. Therefore, increased attention is being given by higher education bodies to the methods by which faculty involvement in outreach can be evaluated. The volume *Making Outreach Visible* (Driscoll and Lynton, 1999) summarizes the key themes in this movement through the experiences of four institutions that made a commitment to the scholarship of outreach. In their article, "Assessing University-Community Outreach," Davidson, Kerrigan, and Agre-Kippenhan (1999) state:

> Evidence of that commitment was based on tenure and promotion guidelines, senior administrative support, and resource allocation. The four institutions dedicated their efforts to developing a model of documentation and a framework for addressing the scholarship of outreach that paralleled traditional scholarship and provided ways of capturing the continually developing nature of outreach. (Davidson, Kerrigan, and Agre-Kippenhan, 1999.)

The framework includes three general elements: purpose, process, and outcomes. The themes and approaches described in *Making Outreach Visible* have been taken up by the newly formed East/West Clearinghouses and National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement that will evaluate portfolios of faculty being reviewed for promotion and tenure by their universities.

The overall case on behalf of universities' commitment to engagement has been specified in the most detail and with the broadest backing by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. The Kellogg Commission's third report (1999) makes the case for updating the land-grant mission with a strong commitment to sharing and reciprocity rather than the one-way transfers of knowledge that characterized traditional extension, outreach, and technical assistance functions. The report stresses that engagement activities must be rigorously evaluated and addresses the possible criteria for assessing institutions' levels of involvement, referencing typologies of indicators produced for this purpose by Holland (1997) and Gelmon, Holland, and Shinnamon (1998). The Gelmon evaluation concerned the community engagement of schools in the health professions, but the typology is of equal value for other fields. It encompasses the formation of partnerships, the impact of service learning on the students, faculty commitment, institutional capacity, and the impact of the program on the community partners.

Collections and Comparative Analysis of Case Studies

Conclusions about partnerships drawn primarily from one case study experience will be limited by the particular circumstances of that community and those activities. In the past 2 years a number of researchers have been compiling extensive information about more than one community-university partnership and developing some general findings from these collections of cases. These reports are not, strictly speaking, evaluations of grant programs, but rather attempts to identify common themes and critical differences among a variety of partnerships.

Building Higher Education-Community Development Corporation Partnerships, written by Nye and Schramm for HUD (1999), is an example of such a collection. The report categorizes and describes the activities of a number of colleges and universities that have worked with community development corporations on housing, commercial revitalization, workforce development, and other issues. Although designed more as a guide to effective practices rather than as a program evaluation, it provides some of the same types of lessons. The report is organized by the types of roles for universities and the broad issues areas, and draws from the various cases to illustrate each section rather than separate chapters on each partnership.

Four other comparative analyses are in the process of being completed in 2000. The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives is examining partnerships between neighborhood groups and nearby anchor institutions, such as medical centers, museums, and universities. The Rockefeller Foundation is conducting an exploration of campus community partnerships with four case studies, including a historically Black university, an urban State university, a private research university in a central city, and a community college in a low-income neighborhood. A report detailing that research will be available in 2001 (Maurrasse, in press). Both the Aspen Institute and Rockefeller Foundation studies are centrally concerned with the equity of the relationships, the capacity of community partners to work effectively with institutions of higher education, and the prospects for long-term sustainability.

HUD's Office of University Partnership has commissioned four comparable case studies of universities and colleges that have a strong recent history of successfully institutionalizing community engagement within their overall framework for teaching, research, and service. The four cases will be published as a single volume in late 2000. Fleming's dissertation (1999) uses an overview of the COPC program and three case studies of local COPC partnerships to create a theoretical framework with which to understand the process by which significant change in support of community engagement is brought about within universities.

The analyses cited above will cover a range of partnerships initiated and supported by many different sources so, taken as a group, the conclusions will not be specific to COPC or any specific grant program. They appear to complement each other well, given that some of them focus primarily on the internal workings of the university and others on the capacity of the community partners. Some, such as *Building Higher Education-Community Development Corporation Partnerships* (Nye and Schramm, 1999) are very specific and instrumental about how working relationships are formed.

Creation of Permanent Data Systems About Multisite Programs

The volume of information about university-community partnerships has grown tremendously in recent years. Every partnership generates grant applications, progress reports, and final reports for its funders, in addition to the varied substantive products of its work

and the Web sites that display them. For example, if each of the 90 COPC partnerships started between 1994 and 1999 provided 6 semiannual submissions to HUD and even just 5 major written products resulting from their community projects, that would result in nearly 1,000 documents. In fact, a review by the author of the many Web sites established by university-community partnerships shows that a far greater number of documents have already been completed, ranging from full-scale neighborhood plans and major applied research projects to individual student papers.

The array of documents, both printed and in cyberspace, is valuable raw material for extensive analysis of the processes and outcomes of the partnerships. Indeed, at the local level, the materials are often widely disseminated, discussed, and put to productive use. At the national level, efforts are under way to create greater access and more standard reporting. HUD's University Partnerships Clearinghouse has in the past year produced several hundred abstracts of COPC grantee activities in 10 categories and indexed these by topic and State on the Clearinghouse Web site (www.oup.org). The abstracts are also linked to the Web sites of most HUD-funded partnerships, with more links being added as new sites are launched. HUD's next step will be to create a unified, Web-based information system that can link the standardized information reported by all of the Department's partnership grantees. This would allow for much faster, more accurate, and versatile summarizing of trends than currently possible—a boon to HUD's internal planning and that of the community and the public. This versatility of combining data from numerous sites would permit the assessment of aggregate progress in many aspects of the national program and expedite sharing of contact and information among people from different cities who have similar interests.

National Evaluations of Programs That Support Local Partnerships

The five types of writing, research, and data collection described above can all contribute to effective strategies for evaluating a national program of support for partnerships. The self-study accounts, local evaluations, and comparative case studies have raised issues and provided detailed insights into the workings of many partnerships. They have brought the experiences and theoretical perspectives of researchers from a variety of disciplines to bear on the issues. The discussions about evaluation strategies have sharpened the research questions and provided a de facto screening of the relevance and feasibility of various methods and forms of documentation. The proliferation of linked Web sites and abstracts has heightened the mutual awareness of practitioners around the country. Recent discussions and writings about the role of these partnerships in the process of change in the community and within the university are, in this writer's view, much more sophisticated than they were 5 years ago.

These contributions should be valuable in various ways for the current and upcoming evaluations of national programs. An evaluation of the COPC program is under way this year (Urban Institute, 2000) as are evaluations of the University Center Program of the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration, the Fannie Mae Foundation's University-Community Partnership Initiative, and several other foundation-sponsored initiatives.

The COPC evaluation began with an analysis of available program data, including grantees' proposals, reports to HUD, published products, and Web sites, and will progress through 25 first-round site visits and 8 detailed case studies (Urban Institute, 2000). The methodology will take into account the great diversity of COPC contexts, styles, and goals but still should find many dimensions for productive cross-site comparative analyses. It will examine the processes of building the partnerships and the outcomes of

grant-supported activities. The analyses will give comparable attention to the changes within the institutions of higher education and those in the neighborhood served by the partnerships. The financial and organizational sustainability of the partnerships and of the specific projects and activities that they have undertaken will be a focal point of the study. The evaluation is intended to provide findings that will guide the future of the national program and the practice of managing partnerships at the local level.

Conclusion

The stage appears to be set for the generation of new information and new knowledge about the processes and outcomes of university-community partnerships. However, the very nature of the field will create some interesting challenges. Because the partnerships are action-oriented, there is a powerful need to determine the extent to which they are productive vehicles for community capacity building and development and to allocate future resources accordingly. Because the projects are relatively new and thus vulnerable to shifts in budgets and policies, there is, understandably, strong interest in strategies that can make them sustainable beyond their initial sources of support. Because they are a key element of the broader, highly contested effort to create the engaged university, there is keen interest in how well they can redefine and enhance students' learning and faculty members' teaching and research.

Findings that provide insight into these matters and recommendations that prescribe viable courses of action will be widely welcomed. However, we should keep in mind that something about universities and partnerships makes the search for definite answers not only difficult but also potentially limiting. Almost all of the partnership veterans cited above emphasized the complexity of the endeavor and the importance of building trust, strong relationships, and social capital. They discounted the value of simple, static prescriptions or rational comprehensive planning and advocated ongoing, incremental, open-ended planning processes that stress continual learning. And learning, not coincidentally, is what higher education is supposed to be about. As Silka writes, we can use the paradoxes of partnerships to good advantage if we do not rush to resolve them so much as try to learn from them. "To bring partnerships inside the academic world, we need to recognize just how fully partnerships mirror some of the same issues with which researchers struggle." (Silka, 1999.) The evaluation and understanding of university-community partnerships will benefit from an appreciation of this connection.

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