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Book Review: Pursuing opportunities through partnerships: Higher education and communities

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BOOK REVIEWS



Dr. Heather Pleasants
Book Review Editor

Behringer, B., Bach, B., Daudistel, H., Fraser, J., Kriesky, J., & Lang, G. (2004). *Pursuing opportunities through partnerships: Higher education and communities*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press. 277 pages. ISBN 0-937058-93-9 (\$45.00).

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When an author writes a journal article, there is often not enough space to discuss a program or event in full detail. The author's perspective may be shared, and perhaps that of the participants, but not much else, as only highlights or lowlights can be discussed before proceeding to a discussion of the methodology and research results. Unlike a journal article, a book gives the author, and reader, the opportunity to examine a program from multiple perspectives and from varying levels, both within and outside of the university. This is precisely what Behringer et al. accomplish in *Pursuing Opportunities Through Partnerships*.

Building upon their successful "Community Partnerships for Health Professions Education" program, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 1991, East Tennessee State University (ETSU), the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), West Virginia University (WVU), and Northeastern University (NU) reunited a second time to "boldly take on an even greater challenge—changing the entire university structure" (n.p.).

In 1996, Kellogg commissioned a study that involved the university presidents from all four institutions. The "underlying charge for the study was to consider if the concept of community-university partnerships that had been previously tested in the health sciences could be expanded and embedded within other units of the general university" (p. 23).

These four institutions formed the Community Partnerships in Higher Education Consortium and were awarded \$1.25 million over four years from Kellogg "to form partnerships with cooperating communities using models similar to those established in the health sciences to reach deeper and broader into the expertise of academe with educational approaches based in community issues" (p. 26). The Expanding Community Partnerships Program (ECPP) became the way in which these universities built upon their former success and took their grant beyond their universities and into the community.

The book begins with an introduction written by Dr. Gail McClure, Kellogg Foundation vice president for programs. McClure illustrates the importance of the ECPP as perceived by the Kellogg Foundation. This is buoyed by the preface written by Dr. Ronald Richards, University of Illinois-Chicago professor and former program director at Kellogg. Their comments about relationships, university-community partnerships, and the learning outcomes obtained through this experience provide

the reader with an informal backdrop as to what will unfold in the chapters to come.

Part one is written by three of the editors of the book: Bruce Behringer, assistant vice president and executive director of ETSU; Gerald Lang, provost and vice president for Academic Affairs and Research at WVU, and Jill Kriesky, former director of the Office of Service-Learning Programs (OSLP) at WVU. Behringer, Lang, and Kriesky provide details as to how the presidents of the four institutions worked together to formulate the four program principles: student socialization, faculty reward systems, structured partnership with communities, and interdisciplinary collaboration, that would guide the ECPP community-university partnerships and “promote deep and lasting transformative change to the benefit of both the universities and the communities they serve” (p. 25). Although the four program principles were the same among the institutions, the ways in which they were implemented differed. This is illustrated in the way the rest of the book unfolds.

Just as the ECPP is a partnership, the writing of this book is as well. Parts two through four of the book are written by the faculty, staff, students, and community partners who participated at each of the four institutions. Each part is separated into five chapters. The first chapter is written by the person responsible for the daily operations of the program, and as such it provides the reader with insight into how the ECPP philosophy was perceived and implemented at each institution. Chapters two through four are written by faculty, students, and community partners who provide their perspectives from a programmatic level. The fifth chapter, written by the principal investigator, sheds light on the institutional impact of the ECPP.

While each part of the book is written by individuals from within the same units within an institution (i.e. faculty, students) or even from outside the university (community partners), the experiences are vastly different. This is illustrated by the unique perspectives found in each section of the book. For instance, in part two, chapter one, Dr. Donald R. Johnson, professor of English and former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at ETSU, shares his concerns about getting his faculty motivated to work on projects involving rural counties. However, after working with the other members of the institutions of the ECPP, he changes his philosophy, acknowledging that “I was still thinking of the University as the area’s reservoir of knowledge and talent, not as a fountainhead charged by the numerous springs, creeks, and rivers that nurtured our region” (p. 41). Later, Johnson shares some of the benefits the ECPP gave to him personally as an administrator, but also in how these partnerships strengthened the local community and the university. The detailing of this kind of reflection and action is a strength of the book, as the stories these individuals share encourage others to make an effort to think outside the box to create successful partnerships in their own neighborhoods.

The WVU perspective is illustrated in part three of the book. Highlights from this section include the way in which students were included as full partners in the ECPP. In chapter one, Kriesky, former OSLP director at WVU, discusses how her institution expanded its office to better facilitate the ECPP partnership. By employing three different strategies the OSLP became the office through which grant resources were distributed. One unique strategy used by the OSLP was to involve the University’s extension department to better reach community partners. This provided opportunities for students to work in service-learning projects with community members who functioned as “real world” instructors. Students were able to act as “legitimate contributors to community projects” and were transformed from ‘knowledge consumers’ to ‘knowledge producers’ through the service-learning experience” (p. 102). This is explored in more detail in chapter three, written by Goss and Prettyman, two undergraduate students, who share information about four

service-learning projects and their impact on WVU students.

Part four of the book includes information from Northeastern University. In chapter four, Sandras Barnes shared her experience as a community partner: “As we interacted with the University people over time, we saw that they really listened to us and did not try to impose their ideas on us” (p. 211). As part of the ECPP, all four institutions met at an annual conference. Each year the conference was conducted by a different institution. Barnes reflected on how the university introduced the conference idea to the community partners and how the partners quickly got involved and started working with the university partners to make the conference a reality. Barnes said, “The ease with which we worked together reflected the deep level of trust we had established and the sense of ownership we felt” (p. 211). The inclusion of community partner experiences offers an important perspective that is not always shared at the culmination of a project.

The University of Texas at El Paso’s part five highlights the way in which the community-university partnerships created by the ECPP influenced not only a campus, but also a community at large. One of the book editors, Howard Daudistel, professor of sociology and dean of the College of Liberal Arts at UTEP, shared his perspective on the community of El Paso. His reflections discuss the realities of making change happen within a university campus. Daudistel credited University President Dr. Diana Natalicio with the vision to see how these three elements—“having a vision and articulating it simply, linking change to an institution’s history, and breaking down barriers to collaboration” (p. 258)—could impact the university and the local community in order to make change. Daudistel reminds the reader that “success flows from the commitment and efforts of people—faculty, students, and community members” (p. 262). His comments remind the reader of the importance of the depth of the commitment that is made when creating community-university partnerships.

The final part of the book discusses what occurred when the five-year effort to develop the ECPP came to an end in 2003. In that year, principal investigators from each institution met to share their experiences. These meetings culminated in the production of eight shared “lessons learned” that emphasized the impact of community partnerships within multiple levels of a university, how to sustain these vital partnerships, and the learning outcomes that can be obtained by providing the members of a university with avenues to work within the community. Overall, this book provides the reader with unique perspectives on the realities of a true community-university partnership as experienced by administrators, faculty, students, and community partners. Each part of the book gives first-hand accounts of “aha” experiences, skepticism, challenges, and success stories of the ECPP. The reader will find the book easy to read and will most likely identify with the authors while learning about the efforts made in building and maintaining sustainable community-university partnerships.