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Sustaining University-Community Partnerships in Providing Relationship Education: A Longitudinal Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

Relationship education (RE) has gained much public attention as classes have been implemented through state relationship initiatives. Developing university-community partnerships in implementing RE has been thought to increase access to underserved populations and increase awareness of healthy relationships in a community. Evaluation of these partnerships is just beginning. This three year longitudinal qualitative study represents five Cooperative Extension faculty members' experiences with university-community partnerships in providing RE on a county level. Faculty members described their experiences identifying partners and outcomes from establishing partnerships and forming and sustaining partnerships. Results are discussed in terms of interdisciplinary university-community partnership literature and implications.

Healthy romantic relationships have been associated with positive outcomes for adults, their children, and for the larger community (Adler-Baeder, Shirer, & Bradford, 2007). Many couples who have had relationship problems do not seek professional assistance from marital therapists (Larson, 2004). However, Relationship education (RE) has been identified primarily as a preventive intervention that helps to improve relationships and reaches a broader audience (Larson, 2004). RE represents a broad category of programs that vary in dosage including one-time events, skill-based programming, and series of classes (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004).

RE has gained public attention due to the unprecedented amount of funds that have been allocated for the promotion of healthy relationships in the United States (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004). A primary focus of these funds has been to provide RE for underserved populations (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Reaching diverse and low-income audiences requires educators to use more creative approaches for participant recruitment (Vaterlaus, Skogrand, Bradford, & Higginbotham, 2012). Developing meaningful university-community partnerships with organizations that already provide services for these populations create opportunities for collaborating agencies to refer clients to RE programs or provide relationship educators with an existing audience (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Vaterlaus et al., 2012). The current study will add to existing literature by examining how Cooperative Extension faculty members have developed university-community collaborations in providing RE over time to low-income participants as part of a statewide healthy relationship initiative.

Hawkins and colleagues (2004) concluded that promoting healthy relationships should be a community-wide effort. When relationship educators build university-community partnerships with agencies and organizations within different sectors of the community, there is increased support for establishing and sustaining healthy relationships. Futris (2007) indicated that community collaboration is essential in providing high quality RE programs. His suggestions for identifying community partners included considering the skills and resources needed, recognizing organizations that have these skills and resources, and ensuring that there is a representation of the various services available for relationships in the community. Futris (2007) and The Lewin Group (2003) suggested that once they are formed, community partnerships are maintained through establishing structure (leadership), goals (including plans for these goals), and ongoing evaluation of the collaboration.

Few evaluative studies have been published specifically related to university-community partnerships (also known as collaborations) regarding the implementation of RE. Evaluation of collaborations can include identifying process, impacts, and outcomes (Futris, 2007). Evaluating the process of the collaboration involves recognizing the quality of the relationships, the roles and levels of involvement of the parties of the membership, and sustainability of the collaboration. Evaluating the outcome of the collaboration also requires identification of the results of the collaboration (e.g., the number of people served, the provision of the RE course itself), whereas the evaluation of impact focuses more on the influence of the collaboration on the larger environment (e.g., decreased rates of domestic violence; Futris, 2007).

One study used an ethnographic case study approach to identify how people (n = 9) from university-community partnerships managed challenges in collaboration within a regional healthy relationship initiative (Carlton, Whiting, Bradford, Dyk, & Vail, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were used to identify challenges and successes in the initiative's collaborations. From these interviews, researchers identified four points that are key to collaboration – (a) people: participants commonly mentioned that it was the people in the university-community partnerships that made the program work; (b) relationships: the strength and duration of the relationships depend on the purpose of the relationship; (c) vision: common goals of the university-community partnership; and (d) structure: the operationalization of the goals and vision of the program. Carlton and colleagues (2009) also found that each of these factors were further influenced by elements in the collaboration's process like communication, conflict resolution, and flexibility.

Purpose of the Current Study

Providing RE at a community level is a way to improve not only couple relationships, but the lives of children and the larger community (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007). University-community partnerships are thought to increase access to underserved populations (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Vaterlaus et al., 2012) and community support of healthy relationships (Hawkins et al., 2004). The listed benefits have promoted the establishment of collaborations and now evaluative research on university-community collaborations is emerging (Carlton et al., 2009). The current study is a longitudinal qualitative process and outcome evaluation of collaborations between RE educators in a statewide healthy relationship initiative and organizations within their community. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for understanding of the development, structure, and maintenance of these collaborations over time.

Method

Healthy Relationship Initiative

The current project is part of a statewide Healthy Relationship Initiative (HRI). County Cooperative Extension faculty members, also referred to as Extension agents in some states, applied for funding from the initiative by proposing RE activities designed to meet their individual county needs. To obtain funding, Extension faculty proposals were required to provide services for low-income couples and identify partnerships in the community to assist in program implementation and sustainability. In 2009-2010, 14

county Extension faculty members implemented RE activities throughout a western state. Between the years of 2010-2011 the number of faculty members implementing RE increased to 19, and in 2011-2012 the number grew to 21. The RE activities included one-time events (e.g., experiential date nights, lectures from relational experts) and more formal series of RE classes. Evaluations of the larger HRI have detailed the specific outcomes (Bradford, Higginbotham, & Skogrand, 2014), the successes and challenges of providing RE (Bradford, Huffaker, Stewart, Skogrand, & Higginbotham, 2014), risk of intimate partner violence in RE (Bradford, Skogrand, & Higginbotham, 2011), and providing RE for diverse and low-income populations (Vaterlaus et al., 2012). The current study focuses on evaluating the university-community partnerships in RE implementation.

Sample

At the conclusion of first year of the grant, five Extension faculty members who were actively forming university-community partnerships and reporting on their experiences in grant-related reports/interviews were identified. The five faculty members were invited to participate in the optional longitudinal study through email, and there would be no penalty for declining. All five faculty members elected to participate. The faculty members in the final sample were all female, married, and had earned master's degrees. The faculty members lived and worked in rural (n = 3) and urban (n = 2) counties.

Pseudonyms were given to each of the participating county Extension faculty members to protect confidentiality. To provide some context for each of the faculty members' counties, ethnicity and poverty levels are provided (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, www.census.gov/2010census/). Laura lived and worked in a predominantly rural county with about 28% of the population living in poverty. Laura's county also included an American Indian reservation and American Indian residents represented nearly half of the population in her county. Cathy and Melinda also lived and worked in rural counties. Both counties were predominantly Caucasian and approximately 10 percent of their populations were living at or below the poverty level.

In contrast, Alisa and Natalie lived and worked in urban counties. Alisa's county population included 10 percent of people who identified as Latino/Hispanic descent and approximately 11% were identified as living in poverty. Natalie's county similarly had 11% poverty rate in her county, and more the 16% of the residents identified as Latino/Hispanic.

Data Collection

The five Extension faculty members completed three proposals, 12 quarterly reports, one interview, and one emailed questionnaire during the three years of the HRI. IRB permission was granted for the study. Faculty members each completed a demographic form. Table 1 shows the different data sources used in this longitudinal study by grant year.

Table 1. Qualitative Data Sources by Grant Year

	Grant Year		
	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Data Sources	Grant Proposal	Grant Proposal	Grant Proposal
	Quarterly Progress Reports	Quarterly Progress Reports	Quarterly Progress Reports
	Semi-Structured Interviews		Emailed Questionnaires

Grant proposals. Faculty members had the opportunity to apply for funding various RE activities through grant proposals each year of the grant. Grant proposals were used in this study to identify how faculty members changed/maintained their community partnerships over the three years of the grant. This was done because the proposals required faculty members to specifically identify the community partners that they would use and/or form to make their RE programs successful, in addition to other information such as proposed RE activities, budget, and number of people to be served.

Quarterly progress reports. As part of the grant requirements, faculty members completed quarterly activity reports that were submitted to grant administrators. These reports included specific information concerning progress, successes, and challenges experienced in implementing the RE activities, as well as university-community partnerships. These reports were submitted via email or fax to grant administrators.

Semi-structured interviews. At the conclusion of the first year of the grant in 2010 faculty members were invited to participate in interviews. One of the co-investigators and/or one research assistant conducted the interviews in person. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and asked about a variety of topics, but allowed faculty members flexibility to talk about topics that they identified as important. Faculty members were asked about their partnerships and also discussed them throughout the interview process. The interviews usually lasted 25–30 minutes for each faculty member. Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed.

Emailed questionnaires. In 2012, the five selected Extension faculty members were invited to complete an online questionnaire. Questionnaires were personalized for each faculty member and included four of their own respective statements about university-community partnerships from their quarterly reports or transcribed interviews from the first year of the grant. Faculty members' previous statements were highlighted in red and open space which asked faculty members to "Please re-read your past statement and under each statement write about how your ideas/thoughts about building and maintaining partnerships have stayed the same or evolved."

Design and Data Analyses

A longitudinal qualitative case study approach was selected to "capture through long-term immersion" (Saldaña, 2003, p. 16) Extension faculty members' experiences of working with community partners and to identify any changes of their perceptions of these collaborations over time. There is not a prescribed way for conducting a longitudinal qualitative case study; however, it is recommended that data be collected prior, during, and after the participant's experience (Saldaña, 2003) and this recommendation was used in this study (see Table 1). Following data collection, all data were compiled into individual datasets for each participant. Information concerning university-community partnerships was identified and separated into a separate data set for each faculty member in time-order–organizing the experiences from beginning, middle, to end (Saldaña, 2003).

The time-ordered data sets were read and re-read several times for each faculty member individually. Each data set was used to construct an individual case study for each of the five Extension faculty members. Case studies were constructed in time order–listing experiences from beginning, middle, and to the present. This meant that information from all data sources was used throughout each case study.

Following the construction of individual case studies representing each Extension faculty member's experience, themes were identified. Each of the case studies were read and re-read by one researcher, specifically focusing on how experiences evolved or remained similar over time. Four themes emerged and a second researcher validated the themes. When disagreements emerged, the two researchers consult-

ed the data and case studies to ensure the themes were consistent with the faculty members' shared experience. A new data file was created by taking information from each of the case studies and categorizing the information by themes. This data file was used to construct the results section.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the accuracy of the data in this evaluation of collaborations, triangulation and member checking were implemented (Vaterlaus & Higginbotham, 2011). Triangulation was implemented using multiple data sources and methods of data collection (e.g., emailed questionnaire, multiple interviewers, written reports). Also, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, a variation of member checking was used (Cho & Trent, 2006). First, portions of the data from the first year of the grant were sent to each faculty member in the emailed questionnaire. Faculty members were asked to check their transcribed responses. Additionally, after case studies were complete they were sent to each faculty member who were then asked four structured questions to identify the accuracy of the presentation of their experiences. Minor suggestions and changes were implemented into the case studies.

Results

The results are derived from the five case studies. First, the themes identified across the case studies are presented. Following the presentation of the themes, two of the case studies were selected to provide the reader with a relatively richer, more in-depth understanding of benefits and challenges of partnerships for two of the five participants. After reading and re-reading the longitudinal case studies, four major themes emerged: (a) faculty members commonly described their process of identifying organizations in their community with whom they could partner—typically beginning with a broad perspective of potential partners and then narrowed partnership options based on faculty members' specific RE goals; (b) forming community partnerships was discussed in terms of reciprocity of needs between the faculty members and the partnering organization, pre-existing relationships, experience, and challenges; (c) faculty members discussed their methods of sustaining their university-community partnerships as well as the challenges of sustaining these relationships; (d) finally, faculty members discussed the positive outcomes from forming community partnerships. All five faculty members' experiences were represented in each of the themes.

Identifying Potential University-Community Partners

When the Extension faculty members submitted their first grant proposals, they used a shotgun approach in identifying university-community partnerships. Each faculty member listed several potential partnerships on their grant applications, but many of the listed partnerships were never mentioned again or developed over the three years of providing RE. As faculty members began to plan their specific RE activities, they began to identify the needs they had and started to look for partnerships that could meet these needs. Some were identified in the grant proposal, others were newly identified community partners. Faculty members were not just interested in general audiences, but had specific goals for reaching "target audiences." Natalie and Melinda wanted to provide RE for adolescents, and both identified local school districts or high schools with which they could partner. Alisa and Laura intended on providing RE for minority populations and both considered organizations or agencies that could increase their access to these populations. Over time, faculty members were more specific in the grant proposals, even interweaving their community partners' roles in their RE activity proposals for the following two grant years.

Common attributes faculty members looked for in partnerships included "existing audiences" and "already-existing" organizations. All five faculty members talked about the importance of having an existing audience and the faculty continued to recognize the value of this over time. Natalie explained, "Partnerships continue to be the ideal way to find participants for classes." Forming university-community partnerships with existing organizations was valued because of existing structures and, in some instances, the existing relationship between the faculty member and organization. For example, Alisa identified a partnership to reach Latino residents she had made prior to providing RE in her county. She stated, "This group is an already-existing advisory council formed … in 2008 to assist and advise the Latino finance classes in [the county]." Many of these existing organizations identified by the faculty members were local churches, which had access to and rapport with the targeted audience.

Forming University-Community Partnerships

After faculty members identified the community partnerships they sent letters, provided presentations, planned a dinner meeting, and met with these desired collaborators. Faculty members identified common goals that could be accomplished between the university-community partnerships. Cathy ex-

plained that she had an existing marriage coalition in her county with representation from many organizations (e.g., religious, mental health). Their original purpose was to strengthen marriage through a one-time event held in the county. Cathy's leadership of the marriage coalition has increased the coalition's efforts to strengthen marriage. The coalition has now grown to include planning, advertising, and teaching a variety of RE in the county. Cathy explained, "[The coalition] probably only meets about four times a year. They are very good to come and help with our marriage celebration and I've got four of them that teach [RE] classes for me now."

Faculty members also used pre-existing experience working with target audiences as a way to form university-community partnerships. Laura decided that she wanted to provide RE for American Indian people in her community. Prior to providing RE for American Indians, Laura implemented a research study with American Indian participants. She explained:

> It's absolutely essential to have Native partners if you're doing a Native program. And it's essential to have them involved in the planning of the whole thing. And that's why I feel like the planning for this program was our research study because we had their Native partners who helped us all through the program.

Laura not only used existing partners to provide RE, but also implemented the skills she learned from her previous research experience with American Indians to form new university-community partnerships.

Faculty members also considered the people who would be the best contact to form their university-community partnerships. For example, Melinda wanted to increase healthy relationships for adolescents in her county. Melinda identified student body officers at a local high school and their advisor. In her first quarterly report she wrote:

> [I] met with [high school] student body officers and their advisor to provide incentive funds and brainstormed activity ideas to promote and provide healthy dating and relationship education with supplemental curriculum for the entire student body of 617, plus administration, teachers, coaches, advisors, counselors, and staff assistants.

Through the relationships with the student body officers and their advisor, Melinda was able to reach the students in the school. This university-community partnership met Melinda's need to provide RE and the student body officers' need to provide activities and leadership for their peers.

Faculty members did not ignore the challenges that arose in the process of forming community partnerships. Melinda reported that partnership formation was a time consuming process, "Networking and brainstorming sessions have taken a tremendous amount of time and effort, but will hopefully pay off in the long run. Local buy-in [for the RE activities] is extremely critical for successful programming at the community level." Melinda specifically spoke about the challenges of "matching ideas of local agencies" and "maintaining the integrity and value of local support."

Natalie also partnered with the schools to offer RE. There were some frustrations getting the RE curriculum approved by the school district. When Natalie reflected back on this experience, she said:

> I have realized at the [local] school level that they get rather frustrated with the district level because they get the run around like I did and so often times teachers do whatever they want. Since I did go to the district level and ask permission initially, I have made an effort to respect the district level wishes—but it can be challenging when I have a teacher asking me to do the opposite.

Natalie was able to reach hundreds of adolescents through the university-community partnership with schools in her community.

Sustaining University-Community Partnerships

Over the course of three years, the Extension faculty members talked about the evolution, maintenance, and dissolution of community partnerships. All of the faculty members utilized the old saying, "If it's not broke don't fix it" with at least one of their university-community partners. Alisa continued to hold dinner meetings annually to maintain her relationship with the Latino Advisory Council (LAC) in her county. Melinda continued her relationship with the student body officers through their advisor at the school. Most talked about "making contact," "sending emails," and "attending meetings" as ways to maintain their community partnerships.

Cathy reported that the county marriage coalition, which included multiple partners, changed and evolved over time. Cathy indicated that the marriage coalition had become self-sustaining in membership

recruitment because of the word-of-mouth referrals that came from the university-community partnership. Cathy reflected on her three years of partnering with the marriage coalition:

> Our coalition has remained strong. Most of the members are still on the coalition. Some changed. I have not had to recruit new ones, because they come to me when they hear about us. … We have a great community support from private practice, schools, service organizations, church groups, etc. Four of our marriage education classes are taught by coalition members using the curriculum they helped design.

Not all of the partnerships originally established by faculty members were sustained over the three years of the grant. Challenges in sustaining university-community partnerships related to changes in the actual organization with which the faculty members partnered or challenges in the structure (e.g., leadership) of the partnership. Laura explained that needs and structures of some of her established partnerships changed, which made it difficult to maintain the relationship. Natalie talked about a partnership she formed with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to provide RE for their employees. The partnership was successful during the first year and because of the popularity of the RE classes Natalie was invited to additional sites. Following completion of the first year, Natalie's original contact person was no longer working at the IRS and no courses were offered with this partnership in the second year. However, someone at the IRS had her name and contacted her a year later to provide RE.

Outcomes of Forming University-Community Partnerships

Throughout the three years of the project, county Extension faculty members continued to evaluate the benefits of forming community partnerships. They used words like "essential" and "helpful" to describe the role of university-community partnerships in providing RE. Faculty members specifically talked about outcomes in terms of participant recruitment, program implementation, and creation of new RE opportunities.

Participant recruitment. As stated previously, one of the major reasons faculty members sought to develop partnerships was to gain access to an existing audience. In some instances the partnership itself provided the audience and in others they became essential for advertising. Natalie acknowledged the importance of community partnerships in terms of recruitment for RE. She stated, "Partners often provide a set audience for presentations or at least can help to get the word out about classes and encourage participants to attend. It would be challenging to hold classes successfully without partnerships."

Alisa explained the importance of her LAC in providing culturally appropriate advertising materials and existing trust between LAC members and the Latino residents in her county. Melinda worked closely with the student body officers at a high school to provide relationship education for adolescents and she also worked with the Local Interagency Council (LIC), which is similar to a marriage coalition, to provide RE for adult couples in her county. Melinda rallied her university-community partners to disseminate information about her programs. Melinda explained:

> Flyers were prepared and shared with LIC participants to distribute around the communities, and to their co-workers, clientele, friends and neighbors. … Flyers were also presented to and shared with [high school] student body officers and their advisor to disseminate information to entire student body, administration, counselors, teachers, coaches, and staff assistants.

Program implementation. Over the three years, faculty members commonly talked about the importance of partnerships in implementing programs. They agreed that their partnerships provided culturally appropriate recommendations for curriculum and advertising, instructors, and locations for holding RE classes. Cathy specifically talked about the increased buy-in by the marriage coalition she partnered with over time. She explained that she collaboratively developed a marriage curriculum with people on the coalition and now members from the coalition are teaching the curriculum in the county.

Alisa described her partnership with the LAC as important for ensuring cultural sensitivity. Alisa presented her RE curriculum for the council's review and their recommendations were implemented. Alisa also had members of the council serve as instructors at her RE events. This process was similar for Laura who worked closely with the American Indian population. Laura partnered with an organization that exclusively served American Indians in her county and through this partnership identified an American Indian who was qualified to provide her culturally sensitive RE curriculum. Laura said:

Our success I attribute 100 percent to the fact that this is, first of all, sanctioned by [American Indian Partnership] so they allow their employees to participate. And number two that they authorized [their qualified employee] to be the one to deliver the program.

Creation of new relationship education opportunities. One of the major benefits from forming community partnerships captured in a longitudinal perspective was that new RE opportunities emerged from established partnerships. Melinda talked about how her partnership with the LIC opened opportunities to provide RE for three additional organizations. Natalie explained that her partnerships with teachers provided new opportunities for providing RE every year. She said, "Because teachers generally have new students yearly, I have created some long lasting partnerships where they plan on including me each year as part of their coursework."

All of the faculty members described how partnerships helped them increase their RE opportunities. They also, however, recognized how their established partners learned the value of RE and began to look for their own opportunities to increase RE in their counties. For example, Melinda said this about the student body officers with which she partnered:

> The high school and the student body officers have come a long way, and over time have became so invested in the value of healthy relationships, they looked this year for ways to incorporate RE programming and efforts throughout the entire school year, in addition to the entire month of February.

Case Studies

Two case studies are presented to provide an in-depth understanding of the identification, formation, maintenance, and outcomes of community partnerships over time. Laura's experience included the dissolution of some of her most promising community partnerships, which provided a perspective of some of the specific challenges in maintaining community partnerships. In contrast, Alisa's experience included working with the same community partnership over the three-year period. Together, the case studies highlight both positive and challenging aspects of the themes previously identified from the five Extension faculty members.

Case Study: Laura

In her first proposal, Laura said she would work with members of an American Indian Tribe, the tribal health care organization, the local Domestic Violence Coalition (DVC), the school district, the county's council on aging, a fine arts organization, a women's health resource team, the local university, and the Office of Rehabilitation. Laura received funding to provide marriage education for the American Indian population and RE for adolescents and young adults.

In Laura's second quarterly report she stated, "I called the director of [a local health system serving the tribe] to propose a collaboration." Her intention was to use their building and provide education for the employees. She also indicated that she attended the American Indian tribal meeting in her county. Laura also stated that she held a luncheon for the DVC to educate them on the progress of providing RE on the reservation and to solicit their recommendations on how to make this program successful.

It took more time than expected to build the university-community partnership with the health system. However, the wait was worth it and the chief executive officer agreed to collaborate and offer these classes to her employees. The health system even offered to have one of their employees who specializes in behavioral health and American Indian culture teach the RE classes. In her final quarterly report in 2010, Laura wrote, "Our greatest success was forming strong working partnerships with two significant organizations within two [tribal] communities. These collaborations provided not only cultural insights, but also opportunities to reach participants from the [American Indian community]." One frustration Laura explained was that the leaders of these organizations never attended the RE classes, so they really did not get to see the value of the program.

Laura's second proposal again included RE activities for tribal members and young adults. Laura experienced some challenges with resuming collaborations formed during the first year of the grant. She explained:

> Last year, we had an outstanding partnership with [the tribal health system] to deliver marriage classes on the reservation. However, after meeting with their representatives earlier this month, I learned that they are no longer interested in having marriage classes offered through their clinics. So, I am searching for a new partnership and a new venue for delivering our Strong [American Indian] Marriages/Strong Relationships–Strong Lives curriculum.

Laura was disappointed, but also did not give up on the university-community partnership. She stated, "I have not given up on this partner, and will look for another possible format for presenting marriage activities so that we can salvage this partnership." Despite the setback Laura formed a new collaboration with the director of student life at the local university to provide RE for young adults and she continued with the support of the DVC.

As the second grant year continued, success with the partnership increased and several young adults participated in RE activities. In her third quarterly report Laura wrote, "I regret not being able to identify [tribal] partners and venues on the reservation." However, in the end she found a different organization within the American Indian community to partner with, and she was able to provide RE.

In Laura's 2011–2012 proposal for providing RE, she proposed three activities that were not specific to the American Indian population in her county. She partnered with the DVC, the local university, and added the largest local high school in the county. In her first quarterly report of the grant year, Laura stated:

> Coalition members feel dating violence prevention is badly needed in our high schools. I explained that this year's grant allows for healthy relationship classes to be provided at the county's largest high school. The coalition wants to be involved and will help get healthy relationship classes into other high schools.

Laura and the DVC attempted to get the RE curriculum approved for implementation in the high school. The high school rejected the proposal because the curriculum included sensitive information. Laura felt support from the DVC during this time. She wrote, "I reported this barrier at our last DVC meeting and members expressed their surprise and support of the program." A brainstorming session ensued and new ideas for getting the program into the high schools were devised collaboratively. Despite Laura and the DVC's best efforts, the high school did not approve the RE offering. Laura indicated disappointment with this outcome, but she also stated that she felt support from the DVC and she continued to be committed to finding a partnership that would allow her to provide RE for adolescents in her county.

Case Study: Alisa

When considering providing RE for couples in her county, Alisa considered pre-existing university-community partnerships and several new ones. Alisa proposed including RE programming into the work of a pre-existing LAC in her county:

> Members of this council are either leaders and well-known among the Latino community or are actual Latino members of the community. Because of the diverse and, yet, cohesive nature of this group and the work with low-income audiences, in addition to being members of the Latino community, we believe that they will be perfect to serve as the advisory council for the entire RE project in our [county].

The LAC included prominent local church leaders, educators or liaisons with schools, members from other community programs for Latinos, and people from government funded programs (e.g., Head Start). To begin to gain council support for RE in the community, Alisa planned a dinner meeting. She wrote in her first quarterly report, "We sent nearly 100 letters to current and potential LAC members notifying them of our dinner meeting in January, 2010. We also requested help in finding a location for the series."

Alisa found some immediate successes from her partnership with finding a location for her event. She wrote, "[Four members of our advisory council] offered to let us use their buildings for the series. After touring these sites, we chose [the final site] because of its location and setup for the workshops, child care, and dinner." However, Alisa was originally disappointed with her response rate for her dinner meeting. She stated, "Our response to attending the LAC meeting has not been as successful as we had hoped. Only about 20 members of this council have made reservations to attend this meeting."

When Alisa did meet with the advisory council, she acknowledged in her quarterly report that they were supportive in identifying the cultural sensitivity of the curriculum and identifying respected people from the Latino community to provide the RE. Alisa also reported the usefulness of the advisory council for advertising her events with flyers, on the radio and through word of mouth. Alisa explained, "We are relying heavily on our advisory council to assist with helping us get the word out to members of the Latino community." When the actual RE was implemented, the advisory council followed through. Alisa reported, "Workshops were held in April and May. They were taught by members of our LAC and our … Extension intern."

As Alisa reflected on her first year providing RE in partnership with the LAC, she focused on the members/organizations on the council who were most helpful. She stated that the local church partners on the council were especially helpful in the advertising for RE to the Latino community. Alisa also indicated that through her council's partnership she was invited to hold future RE in the local building that houses a variety services for Latinos families in the community. When asked if there were partnerships she would not use in the future, Alisa replied, "I don't think so."

During Alisa's second year of providing RE in her county she, again, stated that she would partner with her LAC. In her proposal she stated that she wanted to increase her council membership utilizing more representation from organizations at the local university. Alisa also stated that members of her council contacted her about the classes this year. Representatives from the organization that invited them to hold the RE classes contacted her in July. Alisa said, "We were delighted to be invited to this beautiful facility!" Through this more specific partnership Alisa and her team had more access to Latino migrant farm workers.

Alisa held a dinner meeting in September, 2010 with her LAC. She took the opportunity to evaluate the program from the year before with the members and identify ways to improve the classes to be held in the Spring of 2011. She explained in a quarterly report:

> … we met with our Latino Advisory Council to critique the Latino program from last spring and to discuss changes we might want to make to the upcoming series. They also helped us fine-tune our advertising. Many members of the Advisory Council took copies of the flyer to share with the members of the Latino community with whom they work.

Alisa reported strong turnouts to her Latino RE courses in the second year. She said, "The Latino relationship classes were very successful. To be able to reach an average of 80 adults and children who are members of the Latino community is a satisfying accomplishment." The partnerships continued to prove positive for future RE opportunities. The two organizations that provided the facilities for RE in 2010 and 2011 both invited Alisa to hold classes in their facilities in 2012.

The LAC remained important to Alisa's RE offerings in her county in her third year (2011-2012)

providing RE as well. Alisa proposed similar RE activities and Alisa followed her previous pattern used for maintaining her relationship with the council. She wrote:

> January 24, 2012–We were pleased to have 32 people attend the LAC meeting at a restaurant. This group was able to assist us with fine-tuning our plans for the Latino Relationships Series in April… . Several people volunteered to teach and/or knew of others who would be willing to teach a workshop. The group also helped us make our advertising more Latino-friendly. Everyone agreed to advertise for us as soon as the updated flyer was available. I believe that this council is the key to successful Latino programming.

In reflecting on her partnerships over three years, Alisa, again, focused on the benefits of individual members of her LAC. Alisa stated, "Local pastors and church leaders in the area … seem to be doing a great job of getting the information out to their members. On evaluations, many participants indicate that they heard about the program from their church." Alisa also focused on the current status and value of her LAC in general:

> Our LAC continues to actively help us make our Latino programming a success. We have approximately 40 active members who meet annually to help us tweak our advertising, identify speakers/workshop presenters, approve curriculum, and recommend topics for the workshops. In addition, they provide locations such as schools, churches, etc. to hold the Latino programming. Each member of the LAC takes a very active role in helping us advertise the program.

Alisa concluded her thoughts on her experiences with partnerships in providing RE by saying, "Our collaboration with other agencies and organizations is essential to our success."

Discussion

The results illustrate that university-community partnerships are vital in offering RE, and that these partnerships constitute an evolving process. The case studies provide contrasts in quality and maintenance of partnerships. Laura's partnerships evolved due to changes in the community organization. In her in-

terview, Laura mentioned that the size and remoteness of her county made for challenges in travel and even in communication; an aspect that would likely be different in an urban setting. Alisa capitalized on her partnership with the county's Latino Advisory Council, a group with regular meetings and whose purposes included not only RE but other issues. Together the Extension faculty members articulated their experience with the identification, formation, sustainability, and outcomes of their university-community partnerships.

Identifying potential partners is obviously a key step in the process, but the data from this longitudinal study makes it clear that some proposed partnerships came to fruition and others did not. It is clear that these participants had to become comfortable with change and uncertainty when it came to collaborations. Moreover, partnerships changed over time as the vitality of the partnering organization itself evolved. Futris (2007) indicated that process of identifying community partners requires university faculty to identify their needed resources and skills and then to recognize community organizations that meet these needs.

The Extension faculty members in this study identified their needs primarily as audiences and organizations with existing structure. Schools, churches, and existing coalitions were identified as desired community partners. This is consistent with previous research on university-community partnerships (Jackson & Reddick, 1999; Prins, 2006). For example, Jackson and Reddick (1999) identified churches as community partners to develop early health detection and prevention networks for African Americans residents. Also, Prins (2006), in her case study of key members in a university-community partnership developed to plan a community park and provide youth development services in a rural California town, identified schools as effective partners. Schools have been identified to be ideal community partners for implementing university programs that are designed for eliminating social and economic problems in rural settings, because schools are both civic and social centers.

The themes from all five agents and the two case studies make it clear that partnerships help in terms of tapping into existing audiences, as well as gaining access to existing organizational structures and even physical facilities. The methods of initial contact were not surprising (e.g., letters or email, presentations), but the study results also highlight the importance of identifying the right contact person within a given organization. In their study of university-community partnerships, Carlton et al. (2009) similarly

found that "having the right people to do the job is critical to anyone's success" (p. 34).

Faculty members involved their community partners from the beginning of the program which allowed many of the community partners to catch the vision of RE in their community. They did this through holding meetings and seeking advice on cultural sensitivity of recruitment and program implementation. Jackson and Reddick (1999) indicated that successful university-community partnerships were formed when the community organization was involved early in the planning process. Community organizations may have limitations in resources, such as money, education, to provide large-scale projects. By involving partners early in the planning they can catch the vision about how reciprocal needs can be met through the university-community partnership.

Power differentials may arise in university-community partnerships because of the imbalance of resources, knowledge of the community, education, or skills (Prins, 2006). Sorenson and Lawson (2012) developed university-community partnerships to revitalize a city with services such as landscape architecture, community clean-up, and the establishment of computer labs throughout the city. One identified challenge was that community members in the partnership did not have the skills to allow them to collaborate on an equal level with students and faculty. Formal training sessions were implemented for community members and also knowledge was transferred through working/participating together. This may be similar to the process of faculty members in the current study, they involved their partners in identifying the purpose of RE and over time partners participated in the events, began to teach at events, and even found ways to provide RE independent of the university. This also sounds consistent with Hawkins and colleagues' (2004) recommendation to make RE a community wide effort.

Laninga, Austin, and McClure (2012) implemented community design and development projects in three rural communities in Idaho through university-community partnerships. They explained that forming university-community partnerships was a time-intensive process. Faculty members in the current study validated this challenge in the formation process. Different than results in the current study, Laninga et al. (2012) described their formation process as contractual—a formal contract was developed outlining responsibilities, key roles, and financial contributions from the community and the university. Faculty members did not address the structure of their community partnerships beyond frequency of

meeting and who served as members on coalitions. Additional research on the structuring of university-community partnerships and RE is necessary.

Futris (2007) suggested that the structure, leadership, goals, and evaluation are the qualities that sustain university-community partnerships. The faculty members illustrated that, once formed, partnerships benefited from ongoing maintenance. In some cases, this was accomplished via formal coalitions that held regular meetings, and in other cases, check-ins were less frequent and less formal. This is again consistent with the results from Carlton et al. (2009), specifically regarding not only the strength but also the duration of collaborative relationships (including interpersonal respect). Faculty members indicated that many of their partnerships were self-sustaining and that they continued to work with partnerships that seemed to be working well. It may be that the interpersonal relationships developed with these community partners helped sustain the university-community relationship. Jackson and Reddick (1999) concluded, "It appears that a core system of personal interactions sustains the relationship and serves as a foundation for building strong ties and effective collaborations" (p. 673).

None of the faculty formally talked about their leadership, structure, or evaluation of their partnerships. It was implied that many faculty members perceived that their community partners did value their own role in providing RE in their community. Israel and colleagues (2006) formed university-community relationship to address issues of public health in three urban communities. They identified that sustaining community partners required a clear evidence of community benefit and a public recognition of the contributions of the community partners. Faculty members acknowledged the value of partners in their reports, but there was no mention of formal recognition of their partnering organizations accomplishments.

Conclusions and Implications

The current study provided a rich understanding of the processes involved in identifying, forming, and sustaining university-community partnerships to provide RE over time. Through university-community collaboration unique audiences were reached, support was provided for program implementation, and increases in RE involvement were apparent at a community level. It appears that current practices within this sample are close to the best practices identified in the broader university-community literature (e.g., Jackson & Reddick, 1999; Sorenson and Lawson, 2012). A strength of the particular study was

that both urban and rural counties were included in the analyses. Prins (2006) indicated that the majority of university-partnership studies have focused on only urban counties. There are limitations to this study because of the homogeneity of the sample, and only the university side of the partnership was evaluated. Future research should investigate the process of university-community partnerships from RE facilitators who represent different ethnicities, gender, and locations. Also, collecting data concerning the partnering community agency would be essential.

Practice and research implications can be derived from results from this study. It appears that facilitators of RE are identifying community agencies with which to partner that meet their needs. It is unclear whether formal structure or leadership is present in the university-community relationships. Models of effective university-community partnerships have suggested that structure and leadership is needed for sustainable partnerships (cf. Futris, 2007). Formal structure and leadership is apparent in university-community partnerships in different disciplines (Laninga et al. (2012) and perhaps additional training and research of how to formally structure these relationships in practice is needed in applied family science. Structure, leadership, goals, evaluation (Futris, 2007), interpersonal relationships, and community partners recognition of the benefits of the partnership (Israel et al., 2006) are the proposed qualities for partnership sustainability. The current study provided some evidence of common goals and strong interpersonal relationships. However, there was not a clear understanding of how faculty members evaluated their partnerships beyond continued contact and participation or how community partner's accomplishments were publicly recognized.

This study adds to the current literature about university-community partnerships in that, although these partnerships were not very structured or formal, they did work. It might be useful to explore in more detail, with future research, why they worked. Is it the interpersonal relationships that sustained the relationships? Is it what could be described as somewhat of an intuitive approach to partnerships, rather than formal structure, leadership, and evaluation that held them together? If so, what is that process, and how can others be trained to use it?

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