Innovative Expansion of a University and Art Museum Partnership

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Abstract

Many universities have partnerships with community organizations. However, the focus of traditional partnerships can be limited in scope. A partnership between a university and an art museum that traditionally focused on art and humanity classes was expanded and enhanced when faculty from two different departments not usually involved with the museum created novel projects. The projects were not paternalistic/theory-testing partnerships. Rather, one had characteristics of a professional/expertise partnership and the other was an empowerment/capacity-building partnership. These projects were designed to integrate foundational learning for students into solutions to real-life problems meaningful to students, the art museum, and the community in which the university and art museum were located. Universities may be well served to examine their current partnerships for innovative ways to benefit both institutions.

Universities across the country have partnerships with a variety of community organizations. Many of these partnerships have been in place for a number of years. Local partners in these arrangements may include schools, hospitals, museums, and other community entities. Both university students and faculty members benefit from these relationships through research, internships, and learning opportunities. Often, however, these relationships are narrow in scope and primarily serve the university. For example, relationships with hospitals often involve training students under the supervision of faculty from health and allied health professions or departments. Relationships with schools most often involve student teaching assignments and faculty supervisors from education departments.

Typical university-community partnerships may also contain a service-learning component (Holland, 1997). Service-learning is a type of experiential education. In service-learning models, students not only seek to achieve objectives for community partners but also gain skills and a deeper understanding of their field of study. While service-learning is designed to benefit both students and community partners, once again the emphasis often is on the students' learning needs. More recently, universities and community partners have sought to evolve from "paternalism to partnership" (Ray, 2016, p. 1) so that each entity can benefit equally from faculty/student projects. To ensure that partnerships remain current and collaborative, they should be reexamined periodically to check for mutual benefit (Maurrasse, 2002). Traditional partnerships can grow once they are examined for additional ways in which both entities can benefit from them.

One of the benefits of university-community partnerships is that students can engage in community-based learning as a form of service-learning. Community-based learning (Holland, 1997) is the application of classroom content to issues and concerns in the community; thus it is a form of applied learning. This type of learning allows students to have meaningful experiences that benefit their communities, local businesses, and their own lives. Ideally, community-based learning would take the form of faculty-implemented projects that are supported through nonprofit collaboration, the institution of higher education's vision, and strategic planning. Just as the institution must be respectful of the community site, the community site must be committed to the institution, and it must be willing to incorporate any changes, whether physical or social, that the projects may create.

Collaboration Through Partnerships

Guo and Acar (2005) defined *nonprofit collaboration* as "what occurs when different nonprofit organizations work together to address problems through joint effort, resources, and decision making and share ownership of the final product or service" (p. 352). Collaboration between nonprofits can vary based on their level of interdependence, ranging from a simple, one-time interaction to a full legal merger of the two organizations (Murray, 1998). Another term used synonymously with collaboration is *strategic alliances*, which suggests a shared goal and the

"ability to recognize its variations and complexities" (Gajda, 2004, p. 68). Many institutions of higher education include collaborations with the community in their mission, vision, and/or strategic plans (Holland, 1997).

As collaborations transition into partnerships, it is important to recognize the dynamic established between the entities involved. Nye and Schramm (1999) described three types of university-community development partnerships: (a) the paternalistic/theory-testing partnership, (b) the professional/expertise partnership, and (c) the empowerment/capacity-building partnership. First, the paternalistic/theory-testing type of partnership focuses on the delivery of new knowledge based on hypotheses tested in the community by the university. This type of partnership allows the university to maintain more control, and the community site is minimally involved. Second, the professional/expertise partnership allows the university to address problems and provide solutions to issues within the community. This type of partnership allows for specific, short-term projects. More community-site involvement is needed, but reliance on the university is evident. Third, the empowerment/capacity-building partnership helps the community carry out the solutions as the university provides guidance and assistance. This partnership gives community members more control and involvement in the process in conjunction with the university so that solutions can be inclusive and sustained.

A crucial factor in building partnerships is motivation (Amey, 2010; Amey et al., 2007). Local community organizations may be motivated by what they can gain from partnerships with higher education institutions, such as access to research that can positively affect the organization and/or the chance to build relationships with researchers and students who can help the organization achieve its goals. At the same time, institutions of higher education are motivated by the opportunities a partnership can provide for students to gain real world experience and civic understanding (Leiderman et al., 2002). All members involved must understand why the partnership has evolved so that the focus does not change and the motivation can remain high even if specific goals change over time.

Partnerships are often successful when collaborators' vision statements, missions, and/or strategic plans intersect. *Vision statements* provide an organization or institution with a path for the future. According to Lipton (1996), the vision statement "serves as an enduring promise" (p. 85), as it connects stakeholders to the purpose of the organization or institution and provides the basis for the strategic plan. The *mission* is linked to the vision and states the organization's purpose; it defines the goal of the organization's operations, the services it provides, and the individuals and geographic area it serves. *Strategic plans* are devised to provide the organization or institution with a strategy for achieving goals through set priorities and allotted resources. When the vision, mission, and strategic plans within a partnership are aligned, the results are more likely to be successful.

Expanding and Innovating a Traditional Partnership

A recent example of an expanded collaborative partnership is that between Worcester State University (WSU) and the Worcester Art Museum (WAM). The president of WSU along with the director of the WAM initiated an expanded partnership designed to allow WSU students and faculty members full access to the WAM's resources (WSU, n.d.). Through a variety of interactions with the museum and its collections, WAM provides opportunities for students, traditionally those in art classes and/or humanities classes, to enhance their learning and build skills. The aligned vision statements of both institutions supported and complemented the partnership (Table 1). They were also helpful guides in expanding the relationship, as they provided a clear path for the formation of future partnerships and community collaborations.

Once the expanded partnership launched, the university and museum developed and launched pilot projects that connected course curricula from new disciplines, such as computer science, criminal justice, psychology, and physics, with art objects from the WAM collection. Thus, WSU and the WAM expanded their partnership beyond the traditional art museum–art department collaboration to one with enhanced curricular offerings and community service opportunities for students. This type of expanded university-community partnership requires reciprocal commitment and recognition in order to develop a transformative relationship of mutual benefit (Ray, 2016).

The goals of WSU's strategic plan emphasize the development and expansion of programming for student learning outside of the classroom. WSU has a long history of partnerships with public and

Table 1. Comparison of the Vision Statements in the WSU-WAM Partnership

WSU's Vision for 2020

"Its academic program, which creatively integrates classroom learning with experiential learning that takes place beyond the classroom, will be responsive to the identified priorities of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the evolving needs of a complex global community. As a public university grounded in the liberal arts tradition, WSU will be preparing well-rounded, culturally sensitive and socially conscious critical thinkers and problem solvers who are well prepared for chosen professions or advanced study.

"Reflecting its longstanding and deep commitment to community engagement, WSU will be more tightly and broadly connected with its surrounding neighborhoods, the City of Worcester, and the wider world in ways that enrich students' academic experiences and expand their worldviews. The university will be perceived and appreciated in Worcester and the region as a committed community partner" (Worcester State University, 2015).

WAM's 2020 Vision

"As a highly motivated team, we further connect with our communities and build on the synergy with our partner institutions, including the eleven colleges and universities in Worcester" (Worcester Art Museum, 2012).

Table 2. Key Aspects of the WSU Strategic Plan

Goal 1: Enhance our undergraduate academic programs and expand graduate programs in a community of learning that promotes academic excellence and innovation.

- **Strategy #1:** Develop and offer innovative, integrative academic programming that supports and advances a model of transformative change in students
- **Strategy #5:** Develop and offer distinctive programs that emphasize community impact, service learning, creativity, and environmental stewardship
- **Strategy #6:** Make stronger connections between students' classroom learning and experiential learning achieved through extra- and co-curricular programming

Goal 2: Leverage our distinctive strengths, both to enhance our reputation and to prepare our students to lead, serve, and make a difference in the world.

- **Strategy #2:** Expand efforts to integrate arts and sciences in innovative ways that enhance learning and distinguish WSU
- **Strategy #3:** Better articulate the relationship between academics and workforce alignment, particularly in the arts and humanities
- **Strategy #5:** Cultivate and enhance local, regional, and global connections to benefit students and strengthen WSU's contributions in the wider world
- **Strategy #6:** Nurture student interest in and appreciation for diversity, global awareness, environmental literacy, and engaged citizenship

(Worcester State University, 2015)

private entities in the surrounding community. In fact, WSU's strategic plan supports and encourages such partnerships (Table 2). WSU has partnered with numerous community groups, including public and private schools, hospitals, clinics, long-term care facilities, museums, and public works departments. However, these partnerships tend toward the traditional, as previously described.

The WSU-WAM partnership also presented an opportunity for WSU students to help the WAM understand how to better serve its community. Thus, the two projects discussed in this paper helped the partnership evolve from one that heavily benefited the university (in terms of student learning at the WAM) toward a mutually beneficial relationship. Faculty,

staff, and students from WSU developed and implemented these two projects in cooperation with WAM staff. This collaboration primarily used professional/expertise and empowerment/capacity-building partnerships.

Professional/Expertise Partnership

The professional/expertise type of partnership was evident in a project completed by WSU's Occupational Therapy (OT) Program at the WAM. The focus of the project was to evaluate and improve the accessibility of the museum's physical environment so that community members with disabilities could visit the museum and enjoy cultural experiences similar to those afforded to guests without disabilities. Institutional review board (IRB) approval was not sought or necessary because this project was a classroom exercise and involved no human participants. In the classroom, general course content focused on legislation, accessibility guidelines, and universal design. Student groups were assigned to assess specific locations at the museum (parking, café, gift shop). The senior-level OT students researched best practices for accessibility and created checklists for their own use as they evaluated the museum environment and provided recommendations to increase accessibility and inclusion at the museum. Although the project initially focused on accessibility for museum guests with physical disabilities, students learned that a wider audience of visitors could benefit from the recommendations based on universal design principals. If an individual using a wheelchair had difficulty with a tight turning radius, for instance, so might a parent who must maneuver a child in a stroller. The feedback from the students ($N = 43$) was overwhelmingly positive, and many stated that this "real-life" experience helped them understand and apply concepts they had learned in the classroom.

This partnership also allowed the museum to benefit from the expertise of the OT faculty member and helped students develop that same knowledge. The OT students and faculty member were allowed to explore an environment that provided numerous learning experiences for the scaffolding of course materials.

Empowerment/Capacity-Building Partnership

A project by WSU's Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) Department demonstrated the empowerment/capacity-building partnership.

The goal of this project was to teach WAM docents how best to work with museum visitors with communication disorders or language differences. It was developed in conjunction with the WAM's associate curator of education and received WSU IRB approval (Project 1415-94-0). The participating docents were volunteers trained by the WAM to introduce the museum's collection and artifacts to the public via tours. Most of the docents were adults who had retired from their previous professions.

The new docent education program included dedicated training on how to communicate effectively with museum visitors with communication disorders and language differences. Supervised graduate students in the speech–language pathology program trained docents to use optimal communication practices and clear speech when providing art talks for the public (Meyer et al., 2016). Docents learned to express their ideas clearly, using fully formed and grammatically correct sentences while avoiding complex language and unfamiliar vocabulary. They also were trained to use and optimize visual cues, such as facial expressions and gestures toward the topic of conversation, to facilitate their audience's comprehension. In addition, docents were made aware that a clearly visible face allows listeners to benefit from lip movements and facial expressions and that written information can offer effective support. Docents practiced these modifications in their presentations and developed confidence in accommodating museum visitors with communication disorders and language differences, including visitors with diverse linguistic backgrounds (Teeters & Jurow, 2019). A community group of individuals with hearing loss commented on the improved accessibility of the docent-led tours. They were able to listen meaningfully and supplement the information they heard with the visual supports provided by the docents (Meyer et al., 2017).

The graduate students in speech–language pathology developed and implemented the training program for the docents, an experience that afforded them clinical experience in teaching effective communication. The skills they practiced will be an important component of their future work, in which they will help family members of individuals with communication disorders learn how to successfully adapt their communication styles. Students also experienced firsthand the importance of access advocacy for clients with communication disorders or language differences.

These real-life, community-based experiences made students' coursework concrete and prepared them for their future careers.

This partnership allowed the museum staff to benefit from the expertise of the faculty and graduate students in speech–language pathology. The docents who learned to adapt their presentations were able to confidently accommodate individuals with communication disorders and language differences during museum tours. The museum also invited the CSD Department to conduct the training on an ongoing basis as part of the coursework for new docent groups. One of the curators stated, "The project was a step forward to improving accessibility for the museum" (K. Stacy, personal communication, May 12, 2015).

Successes of the Partnership Projects

The OT and CSD Departments at WSU took the initiative to develop projects that would enhance student learning, benefit the WAM through universal design suggestions, and improve museum visitors' experiences. Members of these departments were motivated to form partnerships with the WAM for several reasons. First, both departments are accredited by external agencies with standards for student education, some of which emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration. Second, both OT and CSD faculty members aim to help students develop an understanding of and appreciation for community involvement, and they also guide students to apply the information learned in the classroom to the community (Miller et al., 2019). Third, all parties were motivated to take advantage of the WSU-WAM partnership and to ensure its success. Faculty members used the museum as a new teaching environment. Students learned new skills that they could use in their careers and to serve their communities. Both the university and the museum benefited from the innovative outcomes presented and from the new (or renewed) cultural experiences provided to students, faculty, and the greater community.

The university itself encouraged the partnership because it aligned with aspects of its strategic plan, specifically in terms of developing and strengthening community engagement. The WAM participated in this partnership because it understood the benefits of university involvement, especially in a city rich with institutions of higher education. In addition, the WAM is committed to equity and accessibility for all members of the community. Therefore, the benefits of the WSU-WAM partnership expanded from merely an enhancement of opportunities for both institutions to possible benefits for the greater community. It should be noted that WAM received final reports from both projects and was involved with the assessment and evaluation of the projects' effectiveness.

The OT project was successful in that the OT Department's recommendations for enhanced accessibility at the WAM would also reach a large audience of visitors (including elders, parents with strollers, etc.). A list of recommendations was useful to the WAM in planning across fiscal years to mitigate budgetary constraints. The OT students participated in a unique learning experience that augmented the classroom; they applied course content in a transformative manner and appreciated that their solutions were meaningful to the museum and to community members.

The CSD project was successful in that the WAM docents learned to adjust their communication style to benefit all visitors to the museum, and they learned how to improve their presentation abilities to enhance all visitors' appreciation for the museum's artistic artifacts. Docents also gained knowledge of the diverse nature and needs of visitors with various communication disorders and language differences . In addition, graduate students in speech–language pathology obtained clinical experience and came to better understand their professional responsibility to improve access for clients with communication disorders or language differences. Finally, the community benefited from docent-led tours that were accessible and enjoyable for all visitors, including those with and without communication disorders and language differences. This benefit relates to the concept of universal design and its ability to enhance experiences for all members of a community.

Overall, the WSU-WAM partnership, driven by the institutions' aligned vision statements, enabled both institutions and these projects to serve the community and its members. Although both institutions benefited in different ways, the community benefited the most through the cumulative effect of the partnership. The WSU students' docent training and their recommendations regarding the museum's physical environment enhanced the museum experience for visitors. In addition, WSU students, as future practitioners, will be able to build upon the real-life experiences and knowledge that they gained through these projects as they progress through their careers.

Challenges of the Partnership Projects

Although the partnership described in this paper demonstrated numerous successes, it was accompanied by some challenges. For students, additional time was required outside of the classroom to immerse themselves in the projects, and some students struggled to embrace a new type of learning. For faculty, challenges included finding the time and fiscal support needed to investigate, create, and scaffold projects based on availability within the community and the diverse learning preferences of the students. The university faced the challenges of harvesting and sustaining new, innovative ideas. The community partner received final reports that included the cost associated with each project in terms of staff members' time to implement the recommendations. The community partner also may shoulder the burden of providing the additional resources needed to implement any changes. Because changes in established work patterns may not be embraced by all staff members, any given partnership's suggested changes may not ultimately be implemented.

Finally, both the university and community partners may face challenges posed by changes in staff, faculty, and student schedules as well as divergent expectations of the partnership (Ray, 2016). For example, students often work on a project for only one semester, which might be frustrating for the community-based partner. Also, in any one semester, the faculty/student work with the community partner may have a different focus than the one that the community-based partner expected. As a result, "community partners can easily find themselves without the kind of sustained and reliable higher education relationships they want and need" (Ray, 2016, p. 6). Partnerships can only be sustained by a shared vision, and challenges can be overcome through commitment and persistent attention to the shared benefits.

Conclusion

The innovative expansion of the preexisting, long-standing partnership between WSU and the WAM benefited both parties. Although the original partnership was relatively traditional, further examination by new leaders of the institutions allowed faculty members to think in new ways about the possibilities for community engagement and student learning. With the support of the administration, faculty members at WSU and staff at WAM developed programs that included students in community engagement activities that went beyond the conventional and toward the ideal. The innovative projects with a focus on universal design and inclusion aligned with both the university's and the art museum's visions and strategic plans. The educational benefits were multifold. Students applied theoretical concepts and participated in educational experiences that will later transfer to their future careers as occupational therapists, speech–language pathologists, and, more broadly, community advocates. Students' feedback was overwhelmingly positive. For example, one student stated that the experience "will not only help in my future career but will also help me advocate for accessibility within my own community." The museum gained additional insight into universal design and training in improved accessibility.

The same principles that guided these collaborations can be applied to other community partnerships to ensure that they are less paternalistic and more collaborative. Examples of partnerships to examine include those with theatres, senior centers, hospitals, and schools. A question should be asked of all existing partnerships: "What are we doing and who are we serving?" If the answer is heavily weighted toward "the institution of higher education," then a deep analysis of how to better serve the partner and the community while still serving the students and the university should be considered.

Overall, to ensure that a collaboration turns into a true partnership, there must be a commitment on the part of university administration and faculty along with a commitment on the part of the administration and staff of the community partner to reach for a mutually beneficial and rewarding relationship. Universities are well served when they examine their existing partnerships to determine ways in which these partnerships could be expanded.

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