How to Avoid Stumbling While "Walking the Talk": Supporting the Promise of Authentic Partnerships

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Abstract:
This article discusses challenges faced by research centers engaging in community partnerships, as well as potential solutions. While many challenges in community-campus partnerships involve the engagement of community and the characteristics of the partnership, some university structures and policies can impede the collaboration even given a strong partnership. The lessons shared highlight potential pitfalls that need to be addressed as well as possible solutions that can support the campus in developing authentic collaboration.

Article:
CENTERS AND INSTITUTES AS VEHICLES FOR ENGAGEMENT
Universities have long been positioned for extensive outreach and engagement activities. In fact, the scholarship of engagement has been held up as a natural conduit for the civic engagement of our nation's universities *(Hoyte and Hollander 1999; Kellogg Commission 1999; Pasque et al. 2005)*. One university highlighted its efforts at university-community partnerships by placing a series of paid advertisements in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* during the spring of 2006 *(e.g., Freedland and Menino 2006; Freedland and Minehan 2006)*. The number of organizations and vehicles that support such outreach and partnership—like Community-Campus Partnerships for Health and the Annual Outreach Scholarship Conference—has grown tenfold in the last two decades.

On campuses themselves, universities have witnessed a proliferation of centers and institutes over the past decade. According to the *Research Center Directory,* there were 6,000 centers by 1980 and more than 13,000 by 2003 *(Hedblad 2003)*, although this figure likely is an underestimate. Whether interdisciplinary or not, at their best, university centers and institutes function as organizational units that offer a dedicated forum for teaching, research, and/or community service activities. However, at their worst, they have been labeled university "urban sprawl" *(Mallon 2004)* and can reflect disjointed governance structures. Along with these new organizational structures have come emerging categories of personnel such as research scholars, nonteaching faculty, and research scientists, referred to by Kennedy *(1999)* as an entirely new academic class. It is not unusual for large, research-intensive, doctorate-granting institutions to

house over seventy-five centers. For example, the flagship university of the North Carolina State System lists nearly one hundred operating centers and institutes. With this growth in centers as part of campus infrastructure, centers that embrace community partnerships as part of their mission must examine how to stay true to authentic partnerships while operating in the institutional climate of the university. This article offers an in-depth illustration of insights gained and lessons learned in the areas of ethics and institutional review boards, staffing, recognizing accomplishments, and financing, as seen from the perspective of a university-wide interdisciplinary center.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE CENTER FOR YOUTH, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

The Center for Youth, Family, and Community Partnerships, formerly the Center for the Study of Social Issues, was established in 1996 to encourage interdisciplinary research and to bring the resources of the university to address issues in the community *(MacKinnon-Lewis and Frabutt 2001)*. After undergoing a strategic planning process in 2004, the center changed its name and refined its focus. The name reflects both focus and key partners; that is, youth, families, and communities as well as how we work: through respectful partnerships. The center's mission is to build the capacity of families, service providers, researchers, teachers, and communities to ensure the health and well-being of children, bridging research, policy, and practice. The primary purpose of the center is to partner with key stakeholders from the community and the university to:

- carry out basic, applied, and community-based action research;
- infuse community perspectives into university research and teaching;
- translate research into effective programs and practice; and
- facilitate quality programs, practices, and policies that yield positive outcomes for children and their families.

The center is funded primarily through a diverse portfolio of federal, state, local, and foundation grants and contracts. It is located within the Office of Research and Public/Private Sector Partnerships, which is within the Office of the Provost. The center's role is to advance the research and outreach vision and mission of the university, to build social capital, and to raise the visibility of UNCG's research enterprise (for more information see http://www.uncg.edu/csr).

ETHICS AND INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS

One of the major foci of the center has been developing a portfolio of action-oriented research projects in areas such as youth violence prevention, early childhood mental health, and health literacy among vulnerable populations. In executing this work, the center has come face to face with points of disconnect with campus-based institutional review boards (IRBs). This tension between action researchers and IRBs is not a new phenomenon *(Lincoln and Tierney 2002, 2004)*. Indeed, Gunsalus and colleagues *([2006]; also see Brydon-Miller and Greenwood 2006)* point out that from a historical perspective, IRBs were designed to address mostly biomedical investigations—and largely positivist approaches. Judging the basis of IRB risk protection from that perspective almost ensures a mismatch with more organic, change-oriented research. For example, it is common at our center to engage in research projects where the methods and data

collection tools will be jointly developed with a community-based partner. In such cases, it is not possible to meet all IRB application requirements at the project outset (e.g., "please attach copies of all data collection tools").

That example and numerous similar others support Boser's *(2006)* contention that ". . . action research presents a set of social relations which the current framework for human subject protection is ill-suited to address" *(12)*. Participatory research partnerships demand new ways of thinking about both the ethical supports and limitations of IRB processes. Boser *(2006)* outlines a tripartite model for ethical issues in action research, encouraging that attention to ethics: (a) be guided by externally developed guidelines focused on relationships, patterns of power, and potential risk; (b) be integrated into each stage of the action research cycle to inform decision making; and (c) be transparent to the larger community. In short, ethics issues should be handled openly, on an ongoing, iterative basis, with special consideration given to the social and political relationships among all stakeholders (e.g., community partners, research participants, investigators).

Similarly, Brydon-Miller and Greenwood *(2006)* shared insights in regard to four areas surrounding review processes for action research. First, they noted that knowledge about the full scope of a project is not always available at the project outset, so IRB approval must be handled in phases. Sometimes it helps to have an action research liaison on the IRB who can handle such requests quickly. Second, issues of participant protection take on a different slant when the community has a significant say in the procedures and execution of the project. Since the process is not wholly investigator-driven, the question arises "When does protection become paternalism, and concern become control?" *(122)*. Third, norms regarding confidentiality have different implications in some community-based research projects. For example, although researchers may typically use pseudonyms or initials to identify participants, IRBs must be open as well to research partners/stakeholders that want their names and identifying information used. Last, Brydon-Miller and Greenwood described issues surrounding coercion in action research projects, noting that in the context of long-term research partnerships, collaborative relationships emerge that fundamentally change the nature of coercion itself. They caution to "... always be cognizant of the power and privilege we carry with us into our interaction with research participants, and at the same time not allow these concerns to immobilize us in working for social change" *(2006, 125)*.

So how do centers immersed in community-based projects and investigations stay true to their mission while successfully navigating institutional review board requirements? First, it is imperative to continually raise awareness of community-based, participatory research approaches among campus stakeholders. Hosting speakers, colloquia, and panels, and highlighting students' involvement in action research all provide opportunities to raise the profile—and understanding—of such work. Second, Trestman *(2006)* highlighted two strategies for streamlining the IRB review process: meet with the IRB chair in advance of submitting an action research protocol and begin to think like a reviewer. By anticipating issues and concerns and addressing them in the original proposal, one is in a better position to problem solve *with* the IRB rather than taking a more passive posture. Third, change from within is a powerful catalyst. Action researchers must move beyond an *us versus them* mindset as far as IRBs are concerned and begin to realize that *they are us*. The second author of this article began serving as an IRB

member in 2005. As a critical mass of IRB reviewers and committee members develop and display expertise in community-based research, there is a concomitant increase in the sophistication level of the risk-benefit discourse on university IRBs.

STAFFING
One of the frequently cited advantages of university centers and institutes is the ability to provide a forum for individuals of varying disciplines, departments, and affiliations to come together to work on a *particular* issue or initiative. As noted by Lee and Bozeman *(2005)* and others, there is an assumption that this collaboration automatically brings greater productivity. While this has certainly been our experience, it is not always the case. To maximize the potential benefits of partnership and collaboration, one needs to consider that the typical faculty/instructional staffing structure may not best serve the mission of the center. Particularly for centers such as ours, it is critical that each initiative have what Bozeman and colleagues term sufficient "scientific and technical human capital" *(Bozeman and Corley 2004; Lee and Bozeman 2005)* to get the job done. Scientific and technical human capital is defined as the "sum of scientific and technical and social knowledge, skills and resources embodied in a particular individual. It is both human capital endowments, such as formal education and training, and social relations and network ties that bind scientists and the users of science together" *(Lee and Bozeman 2005, 674)*. This concept can be examined within one individual and can also be applied to a center as a whole; it best illustrates our center's approach to staffing our various initiatives.

Being university-based, our center does include graduate research assistants and faculty as partners. However, due to financing and time constraints, all our center staff are full-time employees of the center. The responsibilities and schedule of traditional faculty (e.g., teaching, service on university committees, research, and nine-month terms) often do not blend well with the responsibilities of maintaining a full-time, full-year center. One potential "culture clash" between a center such as ours and the communities we serve is that the social issues we endeavor to address don't take summer vacations. That said, incredible technical knowledge can be brought to bear through the strategic use of faculty on projects. We have maximized the benefits of collaboration by structuring a "win-win" situation in which the faculty in various departments across the university collaborate based on their interests and the degree to which their scientific, technical, and social knowledge match the initiative.

Because of the nature of our center's work, other individuals have become key partners, bringing unique knowledge that isn't always captured by formal education and training. All of our projects include some mix of community partners (e.g., county manager's office, law enforcement, direct service providers, policymakers) as well as consumers (e.g., of mental health and substance abuse services, adoption and foster care, juvenile court involvement) as paid consultants. There is no doubt that the inclusion of these stakeholders is key to our work. Because of their expertise, we feel strongly that these partners should be compensated for their contribution.

Many centers may use community and consumer input, but it may be at the level of a focus group to inform a project with minimal stipends provided as compensation. When one moves to a different level of reimbursement, there can be numerous challenges in getting "nontraditional" staff hired within a university structure. One such challenge relates to job descriptions, job titles,

and salary. For example, when the key qualification of a particular position is being the parent of a child receiving mental health services, the first hurdle is developing the job description. The second is finding or even creating a job title that matches the responsibilities. In one instance, human resources indicated that we could say that "preference" would be given to a parent but that we could not "require" that as a qualification. Even when a description is written and a somewhat compatible job title is identified, there is the issue of compensation. Salary schedules within universities, even for part-time employees, are understandably based on a scale determined by formal education and training. Only with great negotiation have we been able to advocate for a reasonable hourly fee or consultant rate for some of our partners who do not have a college or advanced degree. Fortunately, more universities and other systems have begun to recognize the enormous capital available through hiring community and consumer partners, and there are more examples and resources available (e.g., sample job descriptions posted on Web sites [see Institute for Family-Centered Care for sample job description for parent coordinator; http://www.familycenteredcare.org/advance/pafam.html]) to move the system along, but the amount of time involved in making the hire sometimes deters all but those truly committed to campus-community partnerships from extending those partnerships to paid positions.

RECOGNIZING ACCOMPLISHMENTS
The diversity within the staffing structure brings challenges in how a center recognizes the accomplishments of key partners. "Credit" for good work is clearly contextual. For example, for faculty partners, publications and sharing other benefits of grants (e.g., co-PI status, sharing of indirect costs disbursement) is likely the "currency." However, for nonuniversity, community, and/or consumer partners, the credit might be different. We have had great success in ensuring alignment between our mission and values of partnership and how we handle this issue. Be proactive, address the issue up front, do what's fair, and be flexible to change if the involvement changes. For example, if the faculty partner played a key role in the conceptualization of the grant, brings unique expertise to the team, and will have a key role in the implementation, analysis, and dissemination of the results, there should be equal compensation in terms of recognition as a co-PI, as lead author on some of the publications, and in the even distribution of resources such as support for graduate students and indirect costs. In contrast, if the faculty member is serving on the project advisory committee, the credit may be acknowledgment for service with the department chair and reimbursement for time spent on the advisory committee.

For community partners and consumers, it is best to ask what would be fair compensation and not assume. For some partners, credit and compensation might mean access to the data for analysis to show the efficacy of their service. For consumers, it might be a fair wage for their time plus child care and travel costs or the center providing pro bono help for an advocacy group in applying for a small grant to support their operation. The key is that when centers are engaged in these campus-community partnerships, they must nurture all partnerships—not just the ones within the university—and consider the context when determining appropriate compensation.

For our center, one challenge has been to recognize the accomplishments of our full-time staff. The currency of advancement in most universities is the stepwise faculty designation of assistant, associate, and full professor. However, if staff are not tenured or housed within a department, these faculty designations are not applicable. Many centers assign a descriptive job title that illustrates the role within the center (e.g., deputy director, associate director), but these titles

often are meaningless to other universities, and there is typically no identified structure for promotion. Still others use a mixed term such as research scientist or associate research professor, but unlike traditional departments that may have well-articulated internal operational policies and a host of permanent and ad hoc committees, centers or institutes often do not. Another option is the adjunct faculty appointment, which works well for new appointments. However, when one seeks to "promote" an adjunct, the criteria that a department uses to assess the appropriateness of moving an assistant adjunct to an associate adjunct is not always aligned with the criteria within the center. For example, teaching is a benchmark often used for adjunct faculty. But in a community-based, participatory research center where the primary expectations are to develop a solid portfolio of funded projects and to develop and nurture key community networks, teaching courses is not a reasonable part of the job description, which leaves the center and the department at an impasse. The culture of the university defines how academic departments recognize accomplishments, and this currency is not always well matched to the culture of an effective community-based research center. Finding ways to speak each other's language requires time and dedication but is essential in maintaining the scientific and technical capital within one's center.

FINANCING

Another staffing challenge also serves to illustrate the nature of unique financial challenges that arise in maintaining a healthy center or institute: administrative support. Many centers and institutes are funded primarily by "soft" money or grants and contracts. While they may function similarly to other university units such as departments (e.g., processing invoices, payroll, hiring graduate students), they typically do not have the same resources as a department, such as faculty salary lines or administrative support. As centers or institutes grow, the need for administrative support becomes key. For example, most grants do not allow the inclusion of administrative support staff as direct costs. The assumption is that this expense is included in the indirect costs (IDC) associated with the grant or contract. However, given the typical disbursement of IDC, it is unlikely that administrative personnel can be fully supported from IDC.

As an illustration, the salary and benefits of an administrative secretary could easily cost $40,000. If the center receives a $400,000 one-year grant and a $750,000 three-year grant, using a university IDC rate of 40 percent, the university would receive $260,000 (40% of [$400,000 + $250,000]) in indirect costs in that year. Universities vary in their policies for disbursing IDC back to the unit that generated the grant, but for illustration purposes, a center may recoup 10 percent of the IDC that it generated, or $26,000—just over half the salary and benefits. If the center is expected to use those disbursed indirect costs for other overhead, such as postage or phone, or if the grant or contract limits IDC (e.g., education training grants typically limit IDC to 8%), even less is available to cover support staff. Some research centers use postdoctoral positions to help cover some of these functions, but it is not a long-term solution, is not always an appropriate use of a postdoctoral fellowship, and may not be effective for projects requiring continuity of staff (even support staff) in interactions with the community. Educating administration about the hard numbers and the case for administrative support is key, particularly as centers' growth and development yields increased need for administrative support. A diverse approach is necessary in order to make this work, which might include sharing these functions among centers, looking for legitimate opportunities to charge expenses as direct costs in the grant, using IDC, and getting university support for these positions.

As illustrated, many universities assume that the typical IDC disbursement policies in place for departments and other units will work for centers and institutes. They may, but it is key to look at where the center or institute is housed, its governance structure, and whether its core operating functions are covered in any other way (e.g., a center housed within a department or affiliated with a particular school or college within a larger university). Actually calculating what it would take to finance support staff, as in the example above, is critical for any center that must fund its own support staff.

Another issue with critical financial implications is funding of the core center staff. As mentioned, our center has part-time partners and consultants including faculty, community partners, and often consumers of direct services. However, the key staff is full-time, twelve-month employees. Because the center is funded primarily through grants and contracts, unlike departments with faculty lines, growth can occur only with the acquisition of new grants and contracts. If staff are 100 percent covered by grants and contracts, they are technically devoting 100 percent time to those projects, leaving no time to write and develop new projects or to engage in the creative process. At some point, centers and institutes will be "maxed out" in terms of productivity and, in order to grow, must confront the challenge of bringing on new staff. Financing for each center must be individualized and examined closely with creative but fiscally sound solutions identified. For example, at the beginning of each fiscal year, our center estimates the amount of salary and benefits currently supported and makes additional projections of grants and contracts likely to be funded over the year. We receive partial university funding for a few positions and can use those dollars, if those staff have grant support, to bring on new staff. However, in order to be financially solvent, we have to calculate the amount of dollars that we have available, what salary we can offer, and how much time we can give the new employees before they must be generating their own portfolio of grants and contracts. While this approach might not work for all centers, especially those who may have other resources such as fulltime university support for the center director, something akin to a business plan can be very helpful in plotting a center's growth.

Another potential challenge is the possible disconnect between financing structures of the university and a center. One of the potential advantages of a center or institute relative to a university is its ability to respond quickly to a changing market. However, sometimes other university structures may not respond as quickly. For example, many centers, such as ours, have several fee-for-service contracts, particularly around research and program evaluation. The community partner wants to examine the efficacy of a given program, has identified your center as partner, and needs to have the project completed in four months. The funder has a finite amount of money that must be spent in this fiscal year and has allocated it for evaluation. This scenario poses several potential challenges. First, what are appropriate indirect costs (IDC) for this type of venture? Although the typical federally negotiated rate for most universities would price a center's consultation out of the market, the university should get some compensation for processing paperwork, payment, and so on. What is fair? Second, the typical processes for getting a budget and contract approved through university contracts/grants and sponsored program offices may not be fast enough to meet the time frame for the funder. Third, there is the question of whether this type of work constitutes research and whether it needs to go through the IRB. Even an expedited IRB review may set a time frame that will preclude the center from accepting the contract. We are exploring at our university ways to streamline these processes for

fee-for-service contracts, including the establishment of a market rate for administrative costs for such projects and standard contract templates to ensure compliance with university policies and procedures so the center can enter into the partnership.

In the financing of our center, we have found that three things are critical. First, for those centers like ours where all the work relies on partnerships, the time estimate for the task must include the time required to build and nurture the partnership. For new endeavors where the trust has not been built, and even when bringing new members into a group where trust has been established, the success of the initiative is directly tied to the time devoted to getting that group functioning well. However, we have often made the mistake of not factoring that into cost estimates for contracts or even into our overall financial plan. Collaboration can yield great results—often better than solo ventures—but collaboration is time consuming when done correctly, and that needs to be factored in up front.

Second, centers should not shy away from working on something even if the contract is not clearly in hand. Centers must learn the benefits of loss leaders. Pioneered by Edison in the 1880s in its traditional usage, loss leaders involve selling an item below cost to stimulate other sales. In community-based research, it can mean working on a project with a new partner for the amount of money available in the hope of building a relationship and the opportunity for future work. Loss leaders can be great strategies or disasters. It is important to have a good estimate of what the center can afford to give away, the value of that project or partner to the long-term strategy of the center, and perhaps most important, concentrated effort to ensure that that budding partnership or new project does well.

Third, particularly for centers that are primarily funded on soft money, centers must strive to adhere to their stated mission and vision. The temptation is great to go after the easy money (although that's becoming more and more scarce). Potentially inappropriate ventures include the contract that a center knows it can get because of its relationship with the funder but that involves deliverables not aligned with the center's mission or vision and loss leaders that pose similar risks. Ventures not clearly aligned with the center's mission and vision can, in the long run, incur dramatic costs, as they will divert synergy, staff, and focus away from core efforts.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE
Some overarching strategies may help any center or institute. First, centers must cultivate partnerships, particularly those within the university at key points of leadership, and educate those partners about these challenges. These partnerships will vary by institution but most likely will include both academic affairs and business affairs.

Even for those centers whose staff do not have tenure track positions and therefore are not expected to participate on committees, center faculty and staff should be involved in the university governance structure, particularly in strategic key leadership roles. Researchers such as Ikenberry and Friedman *(1972)*, Hays *(1991)*, and Stahler and Tash *(1994)* have pointed out that historically centers and institutes have not been well integrated into university governance. "Researchers at centers are not 'real' faculty members, lacking traditional faculty prerogatives.... centers and institutes are not major contributors to the academic mission and governance structure of the university...." *(Mallon 2004, 67, 68)*. However, this is changing and needs to

change. Centers and research institutes do influence decision making but often in informal ways. While keeping this informal influence, centers need to participate in formal governance. Leverage points may include serving on the IRB, which can educate the board about community-based research, or participating on the search committee for the head of the university's office of contracts and grants to ensure that the new hire comes in with an understanding of centers.

Second, center directors and leaders should identify resources such as other centers and institutes both within and outside their university for networking and learning opportunities. National forums such as the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health Annual Conference and the National Outreach Scholarship Conference are prime examples. These networking outlets can help to identify issues that centers should be addressing and may introduce powerful solutions to nagging problems at one's own institution. Being able to identify a potential problem for a center is important, but the power to identify a potential solution—with a concrete example of where it has worked elsewhere—is even more significant. That insight and knowledge born out of networking can change the institutional landscape more quickly than simply complaining about the existing structure.

Third, centers must identify key stakeholders for their work. This is especially important in those centers engaging in community endeavors or initiatives and should go hand in hand with developing a good business plan. Once stakeholders are identified, centers should clearly document worth to them and remember that, as with compensation, the culture or context is important. Centers need compelling stories, but they also need data. Centers should nurture community partnerships but also need to document their worth to the university. What was the value of that program evaluation? For consumer stakeholders, it might be the improved quality of services that can be documented through a testimonial or focus group. For the agency partner, it might be that the report led to continued or expanded funding for the agency. For the teaching mission of the university, it might have meant a stipend and unique placement for a graduate assistant that led to the gathering of data for a dissertation, a conference presentation, a publication, and a great postdoctoral fellowship. For the research mission of the university, it might have meant increased federal funding or the financial benefits derived from increased indirect costs. Centers and institutes can be powerful vehicles for supporting authentic campus-community partnerships as long as these potential challenges are identified. And most important, if solutions are developed in a way that is also authentic, one can avoid stumbling while "walking the talk."

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