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Monica Leisey, Valerie Holton, and Timothy L. Davey

Abstract

While university-community partnerships have become a common practice for many universities, little empirical evidence is available exploring the impact of such partnerships for either the community partners or the university. This project collected data from a series of university-community engagement grants funded by Virginia Commonwealth University to understand the importance and consequences of its funding for the community partners, the university, the faculty, and the community members involved with the projects. Characteristics of the funded projects contributing to positive and continued engagement were identified. Differences in outcomes as identified by the university partner and the community partners were also identified.

Introduction

Partnerships with community organizations provide universities opportunities for enhanced scholarship by providing additional settings for service-learning and community-based research. Furthermore, these partnerships can lead to improved outcomes for community members through the application of research findings to targeted areas of concern. Scholars cite university support for community engagement activities as a crucial factor in the success of partnerships (Chickering, 2001; Ferman & Hill, 2004; Fisher, Fabricant, & Simmons, 2004; Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998; Holland, 1997; Holland, 2000; Mulroy, 2004; Thornton & Jaeger, 2006; Ward, 1996). In their study of institutional support for service-learning, Chadwick and Pawlowski (2007) point to the issue of funding as a crucial indicator of an institution's level of commitment. Defining funding as being either "soft" (external) or "hard" (internal), the authors argue that institutions that support community engagement mostly through internal money are more likely to institutionalize and sustain the activity (Chadwick & Pawlowski, 2007). The allocation of university funds for community engagement activities is seen as a strong indicator not only of the support for community-based teaching, learning, and scholarship, but also as a sign that engagement has a value that holds permanence and prominence within the institution's mission.

In addition to official expressions of support for community engagement and the use of university funds to sponsor initiatives, an important element of commitment to the community is the assessment and evaluation of the impact that engagement efforts have had on the community (Holland, 2000). The impact of the projects for both the community partners and the university is important not only to warrant the continuation of the projects, but also to provide data regarding important dimensions of the university-community relationship building process.

As external funding sources move to prioritize translational research, defined by the National Institute of Health (n.d.) as university-community research that moves scientific discoveries from the bench to the bedside. Understanding how to foster and support such engagement is imperative. While the literature offers some evidence about what makes a productive university-community partnership, information regarding the impact of the financial support for the projects is sparse. Given the current U.S. economy and the declining availability of resources for university-community collaborative partnerships, this study was designed to assess the impact of engagement projects supported by Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).

Projects Included

VCU has incorporated working collaboratively with the surrounding metro region into its strategic plan. Included in the plan was creation of the Division of Community Engagement, establishment of a vice provost for Community Engagement, development of a university-wide Council for Community Engagement (CCE), hiring a full-time service-learning director with faculty rank, as well as creating a culture of community engagement in all university units. Financial support as an indicator of sustained commitment

to community engagement has been an important dimension of the University-Community Partnership Experiment at VCU since 1998 when external funding for such projects began.

Two separate funders of university-community projects were included in this impact assessment, as both funding sources focused on the development and maintenance of community collaboration and partnership. One funder was the Institute for Women's Health (IWH) Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Seed Grant program. The other was the CCE's Mini-Grant Program. Both programs support collaboration between the greater metro community and the university; however, the intentions of the programs are slightly different.

IWH awarded funds to investigators who had proposed CBPR projects in the area of women's health. For example, one of the grants funded exploration of the feasibility of providing a Tai Chi class at a neighborhood community center. A second funded measuring changes in perceived risk for cancer following an educational intervention about the human papilloma virus. Inherent to the CBPR methodology is a collaborative relationship between the investigator and the community partner. IWH and CBPR seed grantees are required to demonstrate such relationships within the research proposal. Two rounds of seed grants have been funded and are included in this impact analysis. A total of 13 projects received funding through this source. While the project proposals were submitted by the primary investigator, a relationship with the community partner had to be explicitly demonstrated. In some instances the partners had worked together previously; other partnerships were in the beginning stages of their relationships. Funding decisions were made through a rigorous review panel process created to mirror extramural funding sources.

The CCE projects were designed to enhance and increase university engagement with the community and contribute to scholarship and service-learning. Grants were awarded to proposals that demonstrated interdisciplinary involvement of faculty and students, addressed community-identified needs, and demonstrated substantive collaboration with at least one community partner. For example, one of the research grants funded a project that developed an interdisciplinary mental health program to increase service capacity, improve service delivery, and reduce treatment dropout for adolescent clients at a local mental health program. Another used university students as mentors to help at-risk adolescent boys create documentary films about their community experiences. Twenty-five projects have been funded over the past three years. Decisions were made following a rigorous application and peer-review process through the community engagement grant and gifts subcommittee. This process involved members of the university and members of the public who had worked on similar projects in the past.

A final report was required identifying whether project objectives and goals were met. The report was submitted by the primary investigator, but was expected to be written by the investigative team, not just the primary investigator. Investigators for this study were interested in moving beyond knowing whether the projects were successful as measured by outputs to what impact the funding of the projects had for both the community partners and the faculty members who were awarded the funds. In essence, the investigators wanted to get to the "so what" question—why should the university continue to support such projects given the diminishing fiscal resources available. An online survey was created to capture data to help answer this question.

Method and Procedure

Using Inquisite software, two similar yet different surveys were developed for the two groups of participants: the community partners and the faculty members. The survey included questions pertaining to project outcomes, contribution to scholarship, and development of the collaborative relationships as well as those exploring the extent to which grants helped leverage other support and student involvement. Faculty members who received the grants and their contact at the community partner organization were invited to participate in the confidential survey via email. The email included the name of the project as well as information pertaining to each project's goals and objectives and the amount awarded for the project. The recruitment email and survey were sent by an administrative assistant ensuring the survey's confidentiality.

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted for the quantitative data using SPSS 17.0. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed by two of the investigators, comparing identified themes and negotiating differences of interpretation. Qualitative themes are provided with supporting data to demonstrate the investigators' understanding of the categories.

Results

Participants included 21 faculty members and 16 community partners; 16 of the participants had been funded by the CCE grants and 5 of the participants had been funded by the IWH grants. Community partners included 8 nonprofit organizations, 5 area schools, and 3 local government agencies. Faculty participants included 5 members from the College of Arts and Humanities, 2 each from the schools of Education and Medicine, and 1 each from 7 other schools or departments. Participant responses were grouped according to their role: community partner participant or faculty member participant.

As these projects were intended to be collaborative, both groups were asked about their perception of the faculty members' role. Perceptions of the role of the faculty member in the projects were very similar. Community partners reported that the majority of faculty members related to the project as a partner (71.4%), not as a leader. Faculty also reported that they perceived their role primarily as partner (78.9%). It is interesting to note that 81.3% of the community partners had collaborated with a VCU faculty member before collaborating on this university grant-funded project.

Student participants were also queried. They were asked about the number of students involved and whether or not there were opportunities to use their participation in the project for future scholarship. Community partners reported that for most of the projects (60%) there were between 1 and 10 students involved; however, there were also projects that included between 10 and 30 students (20%). Data disclosed that several students were involved in small research efforts, and that at least one student used the project for additional research beyond the scope of the funded project. Two other students participated as part of their internship experience, linking their course work with hands-on experience.

Faculty participants reported similar student engagement. At the time of the impact analysis, 14 students were working with faculty on presentations and 5 on publications resulting from the project. The survey showed that several students went on to graduate school based on their experiences, using the data for doctoral dissertations; one had used the experience as entry into the professional world, giving credit to the project for his ability to obtain and succeed in his position.

Project Outcomes. Interestingly, there were differences between the participant groups on whether the projects were able to meet stated project outcomes. Community partners asserted that in 86.7% of the projects, all or most of the outcomes had been met. Faculty partners reported that 75% of the projects met all or most of the stated outcomes. Reasons for meeting the project outcomes were quite similar; however, it was interesting to note the differences shared.

Data from community partners identified two themes regarding the ability to meet project objectives: relationship with faculty and organizational commitment, with the latter seeming to be the most salient factor. Reasons provided by the community partners included "outstanding collaboration, cooperation, and partnership between all of the involved entities, and excellent, effective, and efficient collaborative partnership between our organization, university staff, and students."

Commitment was also important on the part of the organization. As one community partner stated: "Commitment from the organization to utilize information generated from the project" was an important aspect of being able to meet the project's stated goals. Community partners were also able to identify time as one of the most important issues with respect to meeting the stated objective, for example, one partner said:

> We began the summer classes very quickly after being notified of the grant award, so we struggled to launch our program initially. However, we are now moving closer to having enough participants; and the project has not yet been completed and has not yet had a chance to reach all of its goals. The goals will take at least a few years to be reached completely. However, the project is well on its way.

Faculty reported two main reasons for having reached the stated objectives: partner relationships and additional resources. Partner relationships included such statements as: "Wonderful support from community partner." "Key players were committed to the project and there was ample support." "Community partners were flexible and supportive."

Resources noted were: "Additional grants that I wrote have been funded and have helped to provide resources." "Additional teacher training workshops." "Training curriculum was developed successfully." Faculty partners also identified the same reasons—partner relationships and resources—for not being able to meet stated objectives.

Issues with partner relationships that did not help meet goals included: "Difficulty with two faculty members' participation in a timely manner." "Still in progress, community partner and IRB delays." Resources were also identified as a reason for not meeting stated goals: "Our community partner experienced the loss of a major contract." Reasons for not meeting the stated goals also included statements that may have hinged on partner relationships, including "Several partners abandoned the project." "[The project was] overly ambitious." "Data collection was difficult because of trust issues within the community, translation issues, recruitment of adequate number of participants into focus groups, and lack of resources for student support."

While not an explicit project outcome, the application process for both funding sources had indicated that scholarly outputs were an expectation of the projects funded. Faculty members reported that 10 of the projects resulted in one publication or conference presentation, seven of the projects resulted in two publications or conference presentations, and two of the projects resulted in multiple publications/conference presentations.

Unexpected Project Outcomes. Community partners and faculty partners also identified outcomes that went beyond the stated goals/objectives for the funded projects. Community partners asserted that the projects were instrumental in their having a better process of providing services. These comments included: "We have improved the management of our donated medication stock." "Both students and faculty prefer the online method to site-based older model." "Better understanding and perception of mental health issues studied."

Faculty partners asserted that all participants in the funded project benefited in ways that were not expected. From the faculty member's perspective, students, regardless of whether they were in high school or college, benefited. Examples of the added value included: "High school students are being offered provosts' scholarships and opportunities to participate in Honors College programming as freshmen." "Graduate students report greater comfort in practicum and internship experiences." "Increased numbers of graduate students request clinical placements." Similar benefits were identified for VCU as follows: "[VCU] developed an elective." "[VCU provided] further funding for a resident to expand model." "Significant clinical effects that were not expected [knowledge building]."

The unexpected benefits identified by the faculty partners for the community partners included increased ability to provide services as noted by the community partner responses: "Expansion of the model to other free clinics," and "Project has a potential benefit in recertifying providers in a more convenient and cost effective manner." But the faculty members also identified additional unexpected positive outcomes for the community partners that included: "Project included in grant application." "Participants all felt their lives were changed as a result of participating."

Possible Future Collaboration. All survey participants were asked about their interest in collaborating on another university-community partnership. All the community partners reported that they would be open to collaborating with VCU faculty in the future. Reasons provided depended on the positive experience with the faculty partner: "This has been a very positive partnership." "I have personally enjoyed my association with the instructor, consultant and the students." With the added resources that VCU was able to bring to the project, "[the university] has been able to provide knowledge and expertise, as well as resources to the project." "Faculty and students commit time, funding, mentoring, [and] training support that is invaluable to all area students and particularly those from underserved communities."

Interestingly, the vast majority of faculty members also reported being willing to collaborate again (89.5%), with only approximately 10% not sure or unwilling to collaborate with community partners in the future. Reasons provided for continued interest in collaboration included: "They were enthusiastic, and contributed much to the project." "Great partner, strong staff, resource shares—willing to develop and implement innovative models, collaborative clinicians." "It was a very good working relationship." "They have been very supportive and open to my work." Only one negative comment was provided by faculty members to support their unwillingness to again collaborate with the community partners: "Complete lack of response to calls and emails, and apparent racism." While this comment was not explained, it seems clear that this is an example of a lack of relationship between the community partner and the faculty member.

Impact. While important, meeting the stated goals/objectives for the funded projects was understood by the investigators as an insufficient measure of the actual impact of the funding

provided. Additional qualitative questions were asked of the participants in an attempt to understand the impact of the projects for VCU and the greater Richmond community.

When asked about the impact of the project, both community partners and faculty partners identified added value for the students. Students were understood to have experienced benefits beyond the funded projects by both faculty partners and community partners. Community partners shared that: "Students who participated in the project will be better prepared to contribute professionally." "[The project] provided several students real life experiences." "[The project] provided an opportunity for the students to understand the caregiver's role, the responsibilities, the frustrations and the rewards." "[The students experienced] positive and emotionally supportive learning environment." Faculty members reported: "[Students achieved an] enhanced understanding of an underserved community and population within minutes of campus." "[The project] provided publication opportunities for graduate students." "Raised interest for graduate students to pursue and apply for seed grants." "Increased training opportunities for [VCU] graduate students."

The greater Metro community also experienced benefits not explicit within the funded projects. Community partners identified additional community resources, as an important dimension of the project's impact. They stated that: "Community was provided enhanced care and more patient appointments." "At-risk African-American males found their voice and a vision for their future." "[The project] helped the community understand the value of a resource in their midst." One community partner shared that: "The community, especially the students, now has a huge buy-in to seeing the resource developed in a responsible manner–promoting conservation while allowing others to enjoy the opportunity to explore nature," an important yet unmeasured impact of this particular project. Faculty partner perspectives of the impact on the greater community included statements such as: "Area teachers were exposed to concepts, ideas, and curriculum ideas that they could take with them." "A citizen's grassroots group has come back to life and shows good support for the program." "Improved quality of mental health care for families in Richmond." Additionally, one faculty member commented that: "Underrepresented students from Richmond had the chance to experience VCU."

Less explicit benefits for the greater Metro region were also noted by both faculty partners and community partners. These were mostly in the area of data collection in order for the region to be better understood, for example: "Project provides useful local data in order to understand Latino community needs." "Data will hopefully provide a better understanding of the factors studied." Additionally, the opportunity to build a relationship with VCU was also an added benefit noted by both a community partner and a faculty partner.

The community partner organizations and the university also experienced added benefits. According to community partners, the VCU experience enhanced their scholarship and their connection with the community, will "provide valuable research for the school" [and] "additional field sites for university staff." An important benefit noted by one community partner was that the project: "Brought together experts from a number of different disciplines and one of the lasting effects will be the continued team approach to research." Faculty partners identified university benefits in terms of VCU's ability to achieve its mission: "The project built stronger relationships among the departments." "[VCU's] mission of community engagement has been highlighted." Community partner benefits were perceived in similar fashion: as an increased ability to provide services…"build a health careers pipeline," "resource sharing," and "providing innovative models of care in the underserved."

Discussion

Increasingly universities are recognizing that engagement with their local communities for either collaborative projects or for research are positive additions to a university's mission. With the advent of the community engagement classification through the Carnegie Foundation, more universities are searching for collaborative opportunities with their local communities. This impact analysis demonstrates that the benefits of such projects are widespread and valuable. The community partner and the faculty partner experience explicit and implicit benefits. There are corresponding benefits for the community partner agency, the university, and especially for any student lucky enough to be involved in the project.

Collaboration between community partners and universities can be a difficult process as there

are often differences in professional expectations. As reported by Bruning, McGrew, and Cooper (2006), relationships between universities and their local communities have a history of being difficult. As universities have begun reaching beyond their walls for research sites and internship opportunities, they struggle with recognizing the needs and priorities of the community (Shannon & Wang, 2010). It is essential to explore the impact of such projects in order to demonstrate the "so what" dimension of the work being done. The outputs from each of these studies are important for the individual projects, but they may not be enough to demonstrate the actual impact of supporting university-community collaboration. Assessing the impact of VCU's projects is a beginning look at why such projects are important.

Limitations

It is important to note that this project is limited, as all surveys are. Because respondents were not randomly selected, it is possible that community partner participants were only those who were pleased with their collaborative experiences; all community partner participants said that they were very pleased with relationships with the university. It is also possible that the community partners were not comfortable disclosing negative information for fear that their answers would be linked to their name or organization, even though the recruitment email promised confidentiality. Additionally, all the community partners stated that they had worked with the university on projects prior to the funded grant project. This may also indicate that only community partners with positive track records collaborated on the funded projects. As is the case with all open-ended survey questions, some of the data provided did not respond to the questions asked. This could be an indication that there were important questions not asked of the participants, or that the questions were not worded well. One last limitation is that some of the projects had been finished for over two years, possibly shifting how the participants remembered the projects.

Conclusion

The movement toward research methodologies that enhance the ability to facilitate community change, such as community-based participatory research, is still relatively new for many universities. The impact of university-community partnerships must incorporate an evaluative process to understand the outcomes of projects for both partners and the differences that partnerships and projects make. This project provides insights into the ways that outcomes and differences are understood by each partner. It also raises important questions about the relative importance of the outcomes of the project, when compared to the impact of the relationship between the university and community partner.

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