

Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 4

August 2012

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Recommended Citation

Bowen, Glenn A.; Richmond, William B.; Lockwood, Frank S.; and Hensley, Glenda G. (2012) "Canton Connections: A University-Community Partnership for Post-Disaster Revitalization," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 4. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol5/iss1/4>

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Canton Connections: A University-Community Partnership for Post-Disaster Revitalization

Glenn A. Bowen, William B. Richmond, Frank S. Lockwood, and Glenda G. Hensley

Abstract

Back-to-back hurricanes prompted the creation of a partnership between Western Carolina University and an affected community in western North Carolina. The partnership was designed to promote the economic, social, and cultural revitalization of the community while creating opportunities for civic engagement and enriched student learning. The principal stakeholders in the partnership were the university and the municipal government, representing the community at large. The partners undertook several projects over a three-year period as part of a comprehensive, multifaceted initiative. In this article, the authors discuss the benefits and impact of the projects on participants and the community. They also share the insights gained and lessons learned from the initiative and comment briefly on factors inherent in effective university-community partnerships.

Natural disasters provide a special opportunity for university students to assist affected communities. Moreover, when such disasters occur, university faculty and community partners are often expected to generate knowledge from these occurrences through research (Richardson, Plummer, Barthelemy, & Cain, 2009). For the “engaged campus” (or “engaged institution”), responsiveness to the attendant needs and concerns comes naturally, reflecting a commitment to sharing institutional resources and expertise with the greater community (Edgerton, 1994; Kellogg Commission on the Future of the State and Land-Grant Universities, 1999).

In many cases, civic engagement projects are developed by individual faculty members and negotiated directly with particular community agencies. This decentralized approach is very flexible and matches the distributed decision-making rights maintained in higher education. However, because it tends to be ad hoc, such an approach often leaves gaps in the service and capacity-building support that higher education institutions could provide to their surrounding communities. The emphasis on institution-wide engagement efforts addresses that shortcoming. Furthermore, current engagement efforts demonstrate a renewed commitment to the civic responsibilities of higher education (Sandmann, Jaeger, & Thornton, 2009; Schneider, 2000).

University-community partnerships are usually based on “transactional” or “transformational” relationships (Clayton, Bringle, Senior, Huq, & Morrison, 2010, p. 6; Enos & Morton, 2003, p. 24). A transactional relationship operates within existing structures, where entities collaborate because each has something that the other

perceives as useful. It is a short-term, project-based relationship with limited commitments. In contrast, a transformational relationship involves long-term, sustainable commitments that set the stage for growth and change among the parties concerned. As Clayton and her colleagues note, a university-community relationship could also be “exploitative” (i.e., so unilateral that, intentionally or unintentionally, it takes advantage of, or even harms, the parties involved).

Transactional and transformational partnerships provide a fulcrum for civic engagement projects that can be mutually beneficial. Civic engagement projects can enrich the curriculum; create new, potentially fruitful interdisciplinary linkages; and energize faculty work by raising new questions and topics for teaching and research while enhancing community capacity to address issues and solve problems that arise (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2002). Civic engagement gives substance to the rhetoric of partnership and positions the institution as a contributing member of the community. Further, civic engagement supports the development of “community capacity,” defined as the combined influence of a community’s commitment, resources, and skills that can be deployed to build on community strengths and address community problems (Mayer, 1995).

Building community capacity is rife with challenges. For example, cultural differences in the way a higher education institution and a community agency generate knowledge and solve problems constitute a significant challenge for effective communication and coordinated action with regard to mutual goals and shared vision (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Academicians view knowledge

as residing in specialized experts, many of whom are geographically dispersed; community residents view knowledge as pluralistic and well distributed among their neighbors. Faculty are stereotyped as being isolated, contemplative, theoretical, and overly cautious; community leaders are action-oriented, focused on results, expansive in looking for local resources, and responsible for making day-to-day decisions about their communities (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

In this article, we present a case study describing a partnership between one institution and one community in the aftermath of a natural disaster. We outline the context for the initiative and the conceptual framework for our study; discuss the approaches to establishing the partnership, along with pertinent issues; and highlight several projects that were implemented. Finally, we share insights gained and lessons learned about effective university-community partnerships.

Background and Context

In the fall of 2004, the western mountains of North Carolina bore the brunt of the remnants of two hurricanes—Frances and Ivan. Canton, the second largest town in Haywood County, was especially hard hit as the paths of the hurricanes marked an “X” over the town center. Frances and Ivan visited the area only 10 days apart, prompting the authorities to declare two states of emergency. Twenty-eight inches of rain fell into the county’s watersheds. Stream gauges placed in the Pigeon River, used to measure the great floods of 1916 and 1940, indicated record-high water levels after Frances let loose her wrath across the county, only to reveal even higher levels caused by Ivan. The “500-Year Storm” left downtown Canton under as much as 12 feet of water, destroying many businesses and closing the paper mill, thus dealing the community a stunning economic blow.

The paper mill laid off most of its 1,500 employees for more than six months. The loss of the plant’s payroll adversely affected many businesses that depended on it as their source of revenue. The mill underwent a \$330 million restoration and upgrade, and after two years was back in operation. In the meantime, the General Assembly of North Carolina established the Hurricane Recovery Act of 2005. Under this legislation, the state funded a business recovery assistance program and offered low-cost loans to businesses affected by the hurricanes. The University of North Carolina’s Small Business and Technology Development Center (SBTDC)

at Western Carolina University (WCU) would function as a regional business recovery assistance center. (WCU is a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina.) The SBTDC would conduct interviews with more than 60 businesses and monitor those subsequently receiving loans, mainly to replace fixtures and inventory.

By that time, although the water had receded from Canton’s physical infrastructure, it had not fully subsided from the community’s psyche. Indeed, the floods continued to have a profound impact on the economic, social, and cultural systems of the community and on the personal lives of its citizens. After nearly two years, a substantial part of the downtown area had not rebounded. Many stores remained closed and boarded up; unemployment increased and property values decreased; and the out-migration of teachers, entrepreneurs, and citizens, which started in the immediate aftermath of the hurricanes, continued at an alarming rate. By 2008, Canton’s population, which previously stood at nearly 10,000, declined to 3,900.

A WCU entrepreneurship professor (the third author) researching the impact of the hurricanes became aware of the devastation experienced in Canton and saw an opportunity for his students to enrich their education through engagement in the community’s recovery efforts. At the same time, the Community-Based Learning Initiative (CBLI) at Princeton University announced the availability of funds from a grant awarded by the Learn and Serve America program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Community-based learning aims to enrich coursework by encouraging students to apply the knowledge and analytical skills gained in the classroom to the pressing issues faced by local communities. In response to the CBLI announcement, three members of the university’s College of Business faculty (including the second and third authors) devised a plan to develop a partnership with the Canton community, located about 35 miles from the campus. The Princeton-based program provided a small sub-grant to support the three-year (2007–2009) initiative that would eventually be called Canton Connections.

Research Method and Framework

In our research, we used the case study method. A case study is an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, following systematic procedures and drawing on multiple sources of evidence (Stake,

1995; Yin, 2009). Data sources for this study were students' reflection papers and journals, informal interviews with community members, faculty feedback, and our field notes.

A sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995) combined with the concept of situated learning (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996) provided the theoretical underpinning for our study. A sensemaking perspective focuses on how people construct meaning; it also illustrates how theories contribute to understanding community as an arena shaped by human interaction (Domahidy, 2003; Weick, 1995). Further, as Domahidy explains, sensemaking is social (engaging multiple actors in sharing their understanding of what takes place) and retrospective; and it focuses on extracted cues (i.e., elements most salient to the actors). In situated learning, learning results from a social process intricately tied to the interactions of social actors, settings, events, and processes (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996). According to Domahidy, sensemaking and situated learning raise questions about forms of association and patterns of social interaction, which may be considered within a rich context of university-community partnership.

Initial Approach to the Partnership

The Learn and Serve sub-grant proposal included an outline of a preliminary revitalization plan for the Canton community and a list of prospective collaborators. The WCU professors had selected the Canton town government as their primary external partner. Together they identified other entities to be brought into the partnership. At an early partnership meeting in the municipal government's boardroom, the mayor presented a list of 10 action items that the town council considered important. The restoration of business operations was high on the list. During a series of follow-up meetings, the collaborators formulated their Initial Plan. At that time, the principal players in the partnership were municipal leaders (i.e., mayor, aldermen, and town manager); SBTDC; Haywood Community College; Haywood County Economic Development Center; Blue Ridge Paper; and WCU.

A number of proposed projects with a corresponding timeline were included in the plan. One of the larger projects was a museum dedicated to the paper industry, which would be a tourist attraction for the community. A vacant building that needed rehabilitation was available for this purpose. Apart from featuring a history of the paper industry, the Museum of the Art and

Science of Papermaking would also house the community college's papermaking program and provide a creative outlet for hobbyists. University and community college faculty members saw disciplinary overlaps, leveraging their students' knowledge and skills in public history, construction management, interior design, and marketing for the benefit of the community. Another large project proposed for Canton involved helping small businesses develop recovery plans. Teams of university students taking an entrepreneurship consulting course were to assist 12 SBTDC clients who had received loans under the Hurricane Recovery Act of 2005 by developing plans that would market each business and bring back its customers.

Initial Results

A WCU student team gathered information from towns that had experienced similar disasters and had implemented recovery plans. One such town was Franklin, Virginia, which experienced severe flooding from Hurricane Floyd in 1999. The WCU-Canton partners used information and best practices from Franklin and other towns to create a revitalization plan. In the meantime, another WCU student team worked with Haywood Community College students and faculty to develop preliminary plans for the museum. At the same time, a WCU faculty member made arrangements with the SBTDC for students to assist the unit's clients. The students would serve as consultants, assisting business owners with identifying new target markets and preparing an advertising strategy.

An informal assessment of the initiative, conducted at the end of the first semester (spring 2007), revealed mixed results. The research done by university students yielded valuable information that could be used for planning a countywide post-disaster revitalization program. In addition, two university faculty members administering the Learn and Serve sub-grant made strong connections with the municipal administration, and the SBTDC was poised to assist with the recovery of small businesses. However, plans to establish the museum were hampered by the unsuitability of the available building and issues related to the building permit. Meanwhile, elected officials (aldermen) who had been deeply involved in the partnership failed in their reelection bid. Consequently, various community partners disagreed about how to move the project forward. Also, while the SBTDC developed productive projects with its

clients, most of the clients immersed themselves in working to rescue their own businesses without the assistance of student groups. To make matters worse, Blue Ridge Paper, a major partner in the revitalization endeavor, was sold to a New Zealand company with no ties to western North Carolina. Whereas the former management of the paper mill had been cordial and supportive, the new managers were unresponsive to requests for meetings and discussions.

The assessment identified the lack of measures of success as a major shortcoming of the initial approach to the partnership. The assessment also revealed that communication between the Canton-based stakeholders and the university partners was hampered by conflicting schedules. Additionally, competing priorities had diverted the attention of some faculty members from the initiative to which they had made a commitment. To make matters worse, project organizers encountered resistance from some students, who were unenthusiastic about driving to Canton when there were opportunities for service-learning projects much closer to the campus.

Revised Approach

Although the project organizers did not clearly define what success would look like, it was clear that the initial approach did not achieve the desired results. Therefore, they decided to restructure the partnership with new players from both the community and the university. The partnership would include not only elected or appointed officials but also leaders of community-based organizations as well as ordinary citizens of the community. The university representatives would include not only College of Business faculty but also faculty from other academic programs as well as the university's service-learning administrator.

What follows is a description of the main elements of the partnership. We go on to summarize significant projects and outcomes and then to share lessons learned from the partnership experience.

Elements of the Partnership

The revised approach to the partnership included seven elements: (1) New and renewed connections; (2) specific stakeholder roles; (3) campus-wide coordination; (4) manageable projects; (5) community-engaged pedagogy; (6) explicit learning outcomes; and (7) a capacity-building focus. We describe these elements below.

New and Renewed Connections. The faculty

leaders, with support from the Canton town manager and the service-learning administrator, organized the Canton Connections Faire in fall 2007 to bring together interested campus and community members. By then, there was renewed faculty interest in the initiative. The event fostered community involvement in the development of the partnership agenda based on a shared vision of what could be achieved. University and community participants made new connections and renewed old ones.

Held in Canton's historic Colonial Theatre, the fair featured a showcase of university programs and resources. Twenty-five members of the Canton community attended, as did a 15-member group of faculty, administrators, and students from the university. It was a veritable marketplace of ideas (Menard, 2010), as business owners, mill workers, municipal employees, elected leaders, and ordinary citizens discussed project possibilities with university representatives. Together, they identified more than 40 potential projects. The event got a good press, and the prospects were exciting. Canton representatives remarked that the university was "truly a partner" with the community, rather than the perceived ivory tower. The university sponsored a follow-up fair at the same venue near the end of the academic year (in April 2008). Project leaders highlighted the collaborative efforts and tangible results of the partnership. The event served to build understanding and a positive relationship between the university and the community.

Specific Stakeholder Roles. The principal stakeholders in the partnership were the university and the municipal government. Other stakeholders were identified and roles were specified. Municipal leaders would provide information on local economic and social issues or needs; SBTDC, supported by the Haywood County Economic Development Center, would counsel small businesses and coordinate business development projects in partnership with the U.S. Small Business Administration and the state university system; and WCU would coordinate the partnership and engage students, supported by faculty, in community-based projects. The university also would take the lead in ensuring regular communication among the collaborators.

Campus-wide Coordination. After the faculty leaders from the College of Business assessed early results of the initiative, they decided to transfer administration of the Learn and Serve sub-grant and coordination of the fledgling partnership to

the Center for Service Learning. An academic support unit, the center promotes course-based community service and functions as the campus clearinghouse for engagement opportunities in the wider community. The center was better suited to building the necessary relationships across campus and with the Canton community to advance the revitalization plan. Moreover, the center would be able to monitor ongoing projects, track the outcomes of the grant-funded work, and submit regular reports to the funding agency.

Manageable Projects. The collaborators agreed to maintain Canton Connections as a comprehensive, multifaceted initiative that would support post-disaster revitalization of the community. Shortly after the first Canton Connections Faire (in spring 2008), the collaborators started eight projects. Four were dropped mainly because the project scope was too large to fit the semester's schedule. In addition, the 45-minute drive between the university campus and the mill town proved problematic in relation to the class schedule. The university and community collaborators decided to concentrate on short-term, manageable projects with an eye to long-term projects as circumstances changed.

Community-Engaged Pedagogy. Faculty members teaching a variety of courses were offered opportunities to employ community-engaged pedagogical strategies focused on collaboration with Canton. Community-based learning could take the form of service-learning, undergraduate/community-based research, practicum, or senior capstone.

The strategy most widely embraced was service learning, which connects community and curriculum by integrating relevant service into courses of study (Bowen, 2008; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). With its experiential and reflection components, service learning facilitates opportunities for applied learning beyond what is possible in traditional college classes. University students and faculty have been known for their service-learning projects in post-hurricane situations (Richardson et al., 2009; Steiner & Sands, 2000). For example, after Hurricane Floyd caused devastating losses in eastern North Carolina (in fall 1999), a medical school modified its curriculum to allow students to aid flood-affected communities while fulfilling learning objectives (Steiner & Sands, 2000).

Explicit Learning Outcomes. In the curriculum framework for the partnership initiative, the participating course instructors

specified learning outcomes that reflected both disciplinary and liberal-learning perspectives. Liberal-learning outcomes include intellectual and practical skills (e.g., inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, effective written and oral communication, teamwork, and problem solving); personal and social responsibility (including civic knowledge and engagement); and integrative learning (demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007) lists these outcomes as essential for university students. Theatre students, for example, would hone their performance techniques while developing critical- and creative-thinking skills.

Capacity-Building Support. Capacity building brings social actors together to identify and address complex community issues. It involves developing, utilizing, and retaining knowledge, skills, and abilities; setting goals and planning strategies; and identifying constraints. The WCU-Canton initiative supported efforts to build community capacity for social, cultural, and economic revitalization. In support of civic engagement goals, the partnership organizers emphasized the need to enhance community capacity to address issues and solve problems that would inevitably arise (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2002), beyond the life of the existing partnership.

Significant Projects and Outcomes

Several significant projects were implemented as part of the revitalization efforts in Canton. Faculty and students from the College of Fine and Performing Arts and the Kimmel School of Construction Management and Technology joined College of Business students as participants in service-learning projects in the hurricane-affected community. One notable project brought life back to the town's theatre; another addressed a need identified by the local credit union; and a third supported the improvement of the local government's building permit process. Three small businesses benefited from engineering and technology projects.

Participating students were required to summarize, analyze, and synthesize their experiences vis-à-vis learning objectives. Some students used wiki technology to create interlinked web pages that allowed them to reflect on the lessons learned from their community-based projects. Others documented their experiences and responses in journals or reflection papers.

Theatre Productions. Canton officials and WCU representatives discussed the need to bring patrons back to the Colonial Theatre, which was a vital part of the community's cultural life. The municipality acquired the 347-seat facility in 1998. The theatre first opened in 1932 and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2000. Before the floods, the municipality spent \$1.2 million to renovate the building and its fixtures. After the floods, it spent an additional \$2 million to restore the facility.

The university's Theatre in Education (TIE) program came into the picture. At WCU, TIE was a liberal studies course designed with a sharp focus on service and engaged learning. The TIE company consisted of students from theatre, art, music, and education, who took responsibility for all aspects of a production. TIE faculty served as mentors, encouraging the students to make all creative decisions and to reflect critically on their decisions.

The TIE company collaborated directly with partners in Canton to resolve a number of technical issues as they promoted and prepared for the first of two productions. Before too long, it became clear that cultivating the partnership was a worthy priority for the TIE company as it would contribute considerably to the participants' theatre production know-how. The company staged "Dogwood's Search" (in summer 2008) and "Tales of Trickery" (in spring 2009) in the Colonial Theatre. Nine students contributed approximately 90 hours of their time to the first production; 20 students (mainly upper-level performance majors) were involved in the second, logging nearly 200 hours. For "Tales of Trickery," the students were enrolled in a three-hour course (taught in the fall) followed by a two-hour practicum (in the spring), highlighted by the "tour" in the Canton community. They staged the latter production with support from the university's Gamelan Orchestra and attracted dozens of area middle-school students. The TIE company played to full houses and provided curricular support material to teachers in attendance.

In their reflection papers, participating students reported that they gained significant appreciation for the Canton community, its citizens, and its revitalization goals. Follow-up discussions showed that the students "get it," according to one of their professors. Evaluators observed that the first production, in particular, empowered students' sense of advocacy as emerging artists and educators and prepared them

for post-performance discussions at a conference of the American Alliance for Theatre and Education in ways superior to class discussions. The students developed critical-thinking skills and creative abilities while honing their production and performance techniques.

Credit Union Project. The local credit union wanted to introduce a new financial product to benefit community youth. A professor of finance restructured his course to incorporate the proposed project because he thought it would help his students develop appropriate skills for working with a client and understanding a community's financial needs.

Sixteen students took on the challenge of researching, analyzing, and defining an appropriate product for the credit union. After completing about 60 hours of work, they presented a report in which they recommended a special credit card offering for young people. The credit union accepted and implemented the recommendation as part of its operating strategy. As a result, membership in the credit union increased. The students gained real-world experience on a project typically handled by experienced consultants. As reported by their course instructor, "the students projected [a sense of] empowerment, and all were successful in the spring job market."

Building Permits. Canton's chief building inspector requested that an information system be developed to enable his office to manage the building permit process more efficiently. The manual process being used was time-consuming; assembling the reports required by the county was onerous. Computer information systems (CIS) faculty embraced the opportunity to incorporate a relevant project in three classes over two semesters. In the first semester, a team of students taking both a systems analysis and design course and a database management course analyzed the business processes and defined the system requirements. They also designed the system and database for the building inspector's office. In the following semester, as part of a CIS capstone, the same student team developed the system that they had designed with faculty supervision.

The students made presentations to the staff in the building inspector's office. After a few changes were made to what they proposed, the new system was pressed into service. The students had spent about 340 hours on this relatively large project, which provided them with experience in the full software development lifecycle. They had learned to work as a team on a real project for a real client

and to be responsive to the client's requirements. Moreover, as the project assessment revealed, the students developed project management skills. In the end, they also better understood the role of information systems in delivering governmental services efficiently and effectively. The course instructors concluded that multi-semester, multi-course projects were feasible, offering advantages in terms of a systematic process of project identification, development, and completion.

Engineering and Technology Projects.

As a complement to their regular coursework, engineering and technology students, based in the Kimmel School, completed three projects to support businesses in the community. Learning outcomes from these projects included the ability to analyze and summarize research findings and make effective presentations. One group of students assisted the Canton facility of a company that manufactures lightweight aluminum components for the heavy-duty transportation industry. That group conducted a study of a component inventory and organization for warehousing and manufacturing, and made applicable recommendations. Another group of students completed a warehouse overstock analysis for the local operations of a fiber-based packaging solutions company. The students submitted reports that included a cost analysis and suggestions for handling warehouse overstock. The third project entailed a space utilization study to determine the feasibility for expansion of a small machining company.

In their reflections, students noted that they "made connections between learning, experiences, and skills" and "learned to transform knowledge into actions to benefit the greater community." The "opportunity to engage in collaboration and problem solving" was also meaningful to students.

Other Projects. Students as well as faculty were involved in the implementation of other projects. A small student team volunteered to help in creating a hiking trail for the Canton community. Reflecting on that project, one student said she "felt it was [her] civic duty" to lend a helping hand while another mentioned his "small contribution to help improve [residents'] health and well-being." Art students visited the community and proposed the creation of murals, which they would design as part of a service-learning project. At the same time, faculty offered their expertise as consultants to community-based organizations, and small-business program administrators assisted merchants in developing business recovery plans.

As the initiative drew to a close, community members expressed appreciation for the support received at a time when they needed it most, and municipal leaders regarded the partnership as "fruitful." According to the town manager, Canton benefited from "public exposure" and received a "feather in our cap." The community had gained access to the knowledge and resources of the university through collaboration with faculty, administrators, and students.

Insights Gained and Lessons Learned

We evaluated the overall partnership experience by means of informal interviews, observations, and a review of relevant documents, such as students' reflection papers and journals. Guided by our experience as practitioners and scholars, we constructed meaning from the qualitative data analyzed and then elicited feedback from partnership collaborators.

From a sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995), we have come to understand and appreciate that process should sometimes be valued as much as, if not more than, outcomes. In retrospect, while many of the original goals of the Canton initiative were not accomplished, engaging meaningfully in the social process of collaboration was itself an accomplishment. Collaboration was based on a common agenda, purposeful activities, regular communication, an incremental approach, and collective responsibility.

Project-related activities encouraged increased interaction among community members, facilitated student rapport with faculty, and fostered reciprocal relationships between the community and the university as a whole. The community-based projects "took us out of our comfort zone" and "made learning come alive" (students); "enhanced the learning experience" (faculty member); "connected the community with the university" (municipal leader); and "created a good picture of an engaged institution" (administrator). As researchers, we gained valuable insights into the pitfalls and promises of a university-community partnership.

The partnership that developed between WCU and Canton was based on a transactional relationship, designed to be instrumental in the completion of specific projects (Clayton, et al., 2010; Enos & Morton, 2003). This was more appropriate than the long-term, transformational relationship sometimes advocated by proponents of campus-community partnerships. Transformational relationships are clearly appropriate and de-

sirable when all partners are seeking change and growth. In this case, the partnership was focused on the revival of the community. Consistent with previous research (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002), we found that cultural differences in the way a university and a community entity produce knowledge and solve problems posed a challenge for coordinated action toward mutual ends. In this regard, our faculty colleagues were sometimes slow to respond to requests, and some indicated that their departments did not seem to value interdisciplinary work.

In a situated learning context (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996), the partnership experience generated several insights and lessons:

- Establishing and maintaining a university-community partnership is a demanding enterprise. It requires coordination by professional staff, who can serve as liaisons among various constituencies, including students, faculty, administrators, and community partners.
- Creating a social marketplace of ideas (Menard, 2010) to gather information and share ideas on proposed projects is an effective approach to university-community collaboration.
- Project planners need to be mindful of the possibility of faculty or student resistance because of time and travel constraints. It is important also to recognize the unpredictable nature of community-based work and the need to provide flexible scheduling options for faculty and students.
- Community issues often call for collaborative problem solving, drawing on the knowledge, perspectives, and skills of diverse disciplines and programs. In our view, a major community-support initiative, coordinated across disciplines and departments, has a better chance of success than projects by academics acting independently. Institutions that value engagement with their surrounding communities should recognize and reward faculty for pursuing interdisciplinary work.

- Assigning clear roles and responsibilities to stakeholders is a fundamental element of a successful partnership.
- Regular, frequent communication between university and community partners is essential to the success of a partnership.
- Community-based (civic engagement) projects allow students to apply knowledge and skills gained in the classroom to real-world issues. Projects can help to build higher-order skills such as critical thinking, analysis, and problem solving.

Conclusion

Canton Connections represents one university's attempt to foster collaboration aimed at revitalizing a community affected by a natural disaster. The intention behind the partnership was to facilitate the implementation of a variety of projects that would help to breathe new life into the community while simultaneously enhancing student learning. The WCU-Canton partnership achieved some measure of success, as evidenced by the projects completed and the learning outcomes realized. Through practical approaches and instrumental action, students addressed issues that benefited the community in small, immediate ways. The extent to which the partnership was instrumental in sustaining social and economic renewal through community capacity building is yet to be determined.

For future initiatives of this kind, we recommend that measures of success be defined clearly and expectations discussed thoroughly by all concerned. It is important, from the outset, that stakeholder roles and responsibilities be clarified, community-wide support be mobilized, and participants communicate regularly with one another. It is important, too, that projects be given visibility and the accomplishments of the partnership be reported frequently on the campus and in the community. All of these factors contribute to the effectiveness of a partnership.

In the final analysis, an effective partnership is fundamentally one that is greater than the sum of its parts. It is characterized by synergy among stakeholders, who work collectively to achieve objectives to which they are all committed. In post-disaster situations, higher education institutions can make knowledge socially responsive and

demonstrate good institutional citizenship by initiating partnerships that ultimately help to build community capacity and capabilities.

About the Authors

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Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge, with appreciation, their collaboration with Canton Town Manager A.B. "Al" Matthews. We also appreciate the support of university colleagues, including Dr. Robert Anderson and Dr. Austin Spencer, as well as the Office of Public Relations. We extend a special thanks to the Community-Based Learning Initiative at Princeton University for providing funds to support Canton Connections.

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