This chapter describes a model that can serve as a lens for examining community college partnerships with a host of organizational collaborators, the overall potential for achieving intended outcomes, sustainability, and partner benefits.

Demands for Partnership and Collaboration in Higher Education: A Model

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Partnerships in academe are becoming more common, for a variety of reasons. Policymakers view partnership as a strategic way of meeting the state’s education and economic goals. Institutions benefit from facilities and resource sharing (McCord, 2002; Sink, Jackson, Boham, and Shockley, 2004), and students gain access to additional instruction and a smoother transition to postsecondary education (Bragg, 2000). In addition, state governments are formulating policy to reward academic partnership, particularly those between K–12 schools and colleges. Sadly, although these partnerships are growing in popularity, relatively little is known about them. Of the research that exists, most is descriptive, focusing on a single institution or partnership. Of equal concern, most of the research highlights the K–12 institution and fails to discuss the perspective of the community college or four-year institution. To fill this gap in the literature and ultimately strengthen these partnerships, it is critical for policy makers and scholars to consider the process involved in establishing these arrangements, how they function, and the factors that help sustain them over time.

In this chapter, we discuss the elements and interactions involved in our partnership model. We begin by presenting the themes behind formation of a partnership, such as the reason for joining, the context of collaboration, process issues, and enhancing student learning. We then discuss the features of partnership, particularly the elements critical to initial development and
early collaboration. We conclude by presenting some important questions to consider in evaluating collaboration or ongoing partnership. A visual depiction of the model highlights how the various aspects fit together.

**Partnership Themes**

Some researchers describe the community college as a broker, acting as a link between public schools and four-year colleges and often constituting the ideal intermediary among partnering units (Sink and Jackson, 2002). The college serves as an academic bridge for students and is often involved with a broad array of partners both within and outside the educational sector. As an entrepreneurial organization with a tradition of responsiveness, the institution serves as the link among public schools, businesses, and other governmental and community agencies. Finally, through use of distance learning, community colleges break down regional boundaries and expand our conception of and possibilities for partnership. However, in some of the literature on academic partnership the community college does not see itself in the role of broker. At times, it was the other partners that served in this capacity. This suggests the importance of determining, and not assuming, who or what provides the glue for a partnership in order to better understand the relationship and how it functions.

The literature also discusses several other themes that contribute to our understanding of institutional partnership. These themes broadly focus on the reasons for joining a partnership (Russell and Flynn, 2000), the context of a partnership (Watson, 2000), the process involved in sustaining a partnership (Fullan, 2002; Kotter and Cohen, 2002), and student learning issues (Chin, Bell, Munby, and Hutchinson, 2004).

**Reasons for Joining.** K–12 institutions and community colleges enter a partnership for a number of reasons (Russell and Flynn, 2000). Sharing facilities is one such impetus (McCord, 2002), stemming from the historic symbiotic relationship between these two levels of education in which early community colleges were an outgrowth of the K–12 system. Today, facility sharing is based on several strategic and economic factors. External pressures—resource scarcity, state mandates, and institutional goals—frequently constitute a compelling reason for a two-year college to work with other educational organizations. In this instance, partnering may be perceived as less voluntary than regulated or a matter of institutional survival. Technology demands (Sink, Jackson, Boham, and Shockley, 2004) also serve as a motivator for partners to pool scarce resources.

Personal relationships also serve as a reason for joining a partnership. Put another way, individuals from each institution may decide they have common interests that could be strengthened through a partnership. Such relationships may look more like Gray’s definition of collaboration, a term often used synonymously with partnership. Gray (1989) views collaboration as the process by which parties who see the world differently search for
solutions that go beyond their individual perspectives: “Collaboration transforms adversarial interaction into a mutual search for information and for solutions that allow all those participating to ensure that their interests are represented” (p. 7). For example, in the case of developmental education, public school and community college leaders can collaborate to find a mutually beneficial response that serves the learning needs of their common community constituents. Collaboration implies interdependency and joint ownership of decisions. Although not always initiated in collegial fashion, Gray argues that collaboration involves problem setting, direction setting, and implementation, thereby amounting to a fairly logical approach to addressing organizational needs.

**Defining the Context of Collaboration.** To understand and assess partnership, one has to examine the context in which the partnership exists. Context typically involves internal and external organizational factors, sociopolitical climate, human resource concerns, and timing. The decision to partner takes place in a context, and that context shapes the decision and eventual development of any partnership. Because collaboration holds varying meanings for those involved (Watson, 2000), it is critical to develop a common understanding of relationships and roles involved in the partnership (Essex, 2001). These relationships span a continuum from formal to informal (Russell and Flynn, 2000), and their formality affects partnership stability and the extent to which relationships and roles need to be managed (Essex, 2001).

Consortia are a type of partnership that, though not always informal, are often perceived as voluntary and under member control. Baus and Ramsbottom (1999) describe the rise of educational consortia in the 1960s and 1970s to address common issues, primarily concerned with student needs. Often begun as voluntary collaboration, a consortium is multi-institutional and multifunctional and has long-term member support. Initial incentives to form a consortium typically revolve around academic issues such as cross-registration, faculty exchange, or use of other academic resources. Leadership at the highest level is typically required to make this form of partnership operate, especially if institutional policies and resources are centrally controlled. Clear role definition and communication of expectations are also required.

**Process Issues.** The literature also supports the idea that partnership is process-oriented and must be viewed as a living system (Morgan, 1998). Considering this, one sees it is critical to examine certain aspects of the partnership—such as who instigates the partnership, how members understand and interpret the relationships within the partnership, how the partnership changes over time, and how problems are resolved.

As with any other institutional endeavor, there is often a champion that pushes for and sustains the collaboration. The initiator can be an individual within the community college or a K–12 school, a member from the community, an employer, or students. Initiators bring with them forms and levels of power that are relevant to the partnership, notably reputation, resources, political influence, and expertise. The formal role of the initiator
affects whether he or she has the power or authority to develop the partnership and sustain it over time. Moreover, the power bases are not evenly distributed or equally relevant to the partnership, so status differences may develop and cause relationship concerns.

Another process element is the development of the partnership itself. Even in a mandated arrangement, those involved participate in a kind of developmental process in their understanding of their roles, their work, and how they interact across organizational lines. To help explain this developmental process, Amey and Brown (2004) designed an interdisciplinary collaboration model that is based on a series of evolutionary stages. The model shows how members of a cross-organizational initiative (in this case, coming from departments) move from an individual orientation to a group orientation to a collaborative one. The Amey and Brown collaboration model shows that leadership shifts from being directive to facilitative, and then to inclusive and servant-oriented. As the partnership develops, aspects of it can be institutionalized. Establishing common language along with shared understanding as well as developing expectations, goals, and assessment measures represent movement toward making a partnership part of the life of the institutions involved.

Following on these more foundational aspects of sustainability, research on partnership development and organizational change emphasizes the need to make change stick (Kotter and Cohen, 2002). To institutionalize change efforts, the leaders must help others understand the link between the actions occurring and the desired outcomes (Fullan, 2002). Framing the partnership can result in multiple interpretation among partners, making sense of the situation for themselves (Eddy, 2003; Weick, 1995). Thus developing a shared meaning helps sustain the relationship.

Enhancing Student Learning. Many of today’s K–14 educational partnerships are designed to strengthen student learning through high school achievement, college participation or degree attainment, or workplace preparation. Partnership is often developed to support cooperative work experiences that allow situated learning (Chin, Bell, Munby, and Hutchinson, 2004). Others focus on the transition for students from K–12 to higher education, from K–12 to work, and from community college to work (Bragg, 2000). Coupled with these initiatives is the concept of service learning that is frequently embedded in academic programming in schools and community colleges.

Partnership Model Development

Thus far, this chapter has focused on understanding the role of the two-year college as the entity responsible for drawing partners together. Despite perceived initial benefits, many partnerships fail to obtain desired results, cannot be sustained, or cease to benefit both parties. It is therefore also important to look past the rhetoric found with most calls for educational alliance and explore how these partnerships function. Highlighting impor-
tant elements of educational collaborations is a way of evaluating their effectiveness and efficiency, and it can be accomplished by asking questions that examine their key components:

- What was the impetus to initiate the partnership? the reasons for joining? the antecedents (Gray, 1989; Russell and Flynn, 2000)? state, federal, or institutional policies?
- What is the context of the partnership? What are the economic, political, and sociocultural circumstances? What is the motivation for each partner to participate?
- How is the partnership understood by others, and what is the role of leadership in framing the partnership for constituents? How do the institutions involved and their members make sense of partnership (Watson, 2000)? Who is communicating with members about the partnership (Fullan, 2002)?
- What are the outcomes, benefits, and costs of the partnership? What kinds of assessment and benchmarking data about the partnership are gathered? Are goals and objectives revised appropriately? Do the data feed back into the partnership process (Kotter and Cohen, 2002)?
- What is required to sustain the partnership? If it is decided to continue the partnership, how will this be accomplished (Amey and Brown, 2004)? What resources are needed? How will they be garnered? If the partnership is to be dissolved or dramatically changed, who will manage this process and communicate it to others?

Using these questions as a foundation, we developed a multidimensional model based on the literature on K–20 partnerships as well as member checks with state community college representatives. The partnership model presents a fluid, interactive relationship. As we looked to better understand postsecondary partnerships and move beyond the descriptive narrative found in most of the literature, we used three frameworks to guide our thinking. Negotiated order theory (Strauss, 1978) informed our analysis of the origins of partnership, including who was involved, why, and to what ends. Sense-making theory (Weick, 1995) and framing (Eddy, 2003; Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996) presented ways to contextualize partnership and understand various perspectives that each player brought to the relationship. Finally, the framework of interdisciplinary collaboration (Amey and Brown, 2004; Creamer, 2003; Lattuca, 2001) allowed us to consider how partners might relate to and work with one another.

**Partnership Development Process**

Within the partnership development model (Figure 1.1), there are several components to consider: antecedents, motivation, context, and the partnership itself. Antecedents derived from the context and issues facing individual
partners act as an incentive for the partnership. External policies or regulations, prior relationships, resource needs, or a challenging issue can all serve as an impetus. A precursor to successful collaboration involves developing shared understanding of the relationships and roles for all involved. These core relationships are on a continuum from very formal to informal. For example, colleges joined in partnership through an articulation agreement describe these relationships as very formal and probably do not think of them as collaboration so much as a form of cross-institutional contracts. At the other end of this continuum, a rural community college that opens its fitness facilities to local school teachers has an informal relationship that builds good will and the potential for more substantive collaboration in the future.

Motivation and its interplay with context are also important. As noted, reasons vary for institutions creating or joining a partnership (Russell and Flynn, 2000). The context of the initiative plays a critical role because the environment typically furnishes at least part of the rationale for initial involvement and usually has an impact on sustainability. State mandates, declining institutional enrollment or revenue, opportunities to share costs, grant funding initiatives, community needs, limited instructional capacity in certain subject matter, and unused facilities are just some examples of context that may stimulate the need for partnering. Within the motivation component of the model, partners may bring to the relationship varying levels of power or rationales for being involved. In part, the power that the partners bring comes from individual social capital (Coleman, 1988), which is grounded in the level of relational trustworthiness the individual engen-
ders. The density of the relationship (Granovetter, 1983), which is based on the closeness of relationships, adds to the amount of power any one or more partners bring to the partnership. The champion in a partnership often has a high level of social capital to impart to the group. Another level of power emanates from organizational power or capital. Here, the partnering institutions and members have their own level of power to bring to bear within the group. Organizational capital emanates from control of resources or technology, information, and process (Morgan, 1998).

The fact that partners have their own reasons (motivations) for participating is not inherently problematic so long as the partnership is mutually beneficial. If benefits begin to accrue significantly more for one partner than another, motivation to participate can change. Those with less pressing or more tangential motivation tend to fall away from involvement in the partnership, become less active, or bow out altogether. Conversely, those with greater motivation to participate may overinvest without necessarily reaping comparable benefits. The key to the model, and partnership success, is how the institution and its members frame the partnership and how this changes as the partnership continues.

Once the partnership is established, it moves to the second stage of the model, which describes the long-term projections for the collaboration (sustainability, dissolution, failure, or completion of initial purpose). It is important to recognize that a partnership may end at any time in the process, before or after stated goals are accomplished, by mutual consent or without it. These ends may be positive and a natural finish (perhaps the objectives were fulfilled) or they may be “unnatural” (the project failed). It is also possible that individuals may leave the partnership for any reason. Although the partnership framework could still exist, the values, personalities, and working styles present at the onset may be altered considerably, thereby making the arrangement far less tenable or successful.

Two additional factors can be overlaid on this model to represent how partnership evolves: feedback and the champion. Within the early development and maintenance stages of partnership development, feedback is critical; it helps organizational members make sense of intended and actual outcomes. How the champion or organizational leaders frame the partnership is central throughout the process, and it also affects sustainability. Ongoing feedback is necessary and shapes decisions and contexts in all phases of the partnership, including whether to continue or dissolve the collaboration.

Another overarching factor in a partnership is the role of a champion. The champion is a person or group that advocates for the initiative. Typically, the champion believes in the partnership and its goals. The champion needs to have the support of the positional leader but does not have to be in a particular position of traditional power within the organization. This interpretation of the role differs from the change literature, which argues that the champion has to be in a formal leadership position. In a more inclusive approach to the champion role, the personal, cultural, and social
capital that the champion maintains is often what contributes to success. At the same time, overreliance on a champion can detract from the institutionalization of the partnership. As with most features of academic organizations, those that continue over time become part of the culture and are built into administrative processes of the organization. This affords a greater degree of stability than the interpersonal dynamics associated with being too closely tied to a single individual within the organization.

Conclusion

While many believe that partnership is an effective strategy to meet K–16 educational demands, the reality is that this cross-organizational collaboration is often challenging to develop and hard to sustain. Having a conceptual model to analyze partnerships allows thinking more deeply and critically about the process of collaborating as well as constituting a means to determine if the partnership is successful. Institutional policy makers in turn can begin to look at a potential partnership by asking key questions of the partners.

Partnerships change and morph over time as issues change, the role of champion shifts, and new partners become involved. Sustainable partnerships are based on being flexible to new inputs and adjusting accordingly. If the partnership is seen as part of the organization’s academic processes and therefore longer-term, new ways of conceptualizing and planning for the partnership need to occur, including considering how it will be sustained and institutionalized. If the collaboration is mandated or considered short-term, the developmental process is often ignored or short-changed and the partnership entails assumed rationale and buy-in. Such an arrangement is not often sustained; does not meet the objectives; or results in ill-will, misuse of resources, and organizational dysfunction. For viability over time, one must raise some additional questions that move beyond those accounted for in the conceptual partnership model:

- For how long in the process can differing motivations to partner coexist? How are motivations tied to institutional mission?
- How do you move past the champion role to institutionalizing the partnership? What is the role of the champion after the partnership has been institutionalized?
- How do you reconcile fundamental differences in organizational context?
- What happens if a critical person leaves the partnership?
- What is the impact of partner inequality on sustainability?
- Do differences in outcome for each partner affect sustainability?
- Is the partnership intended to be long-term or short-term?

The answers to these questions allow partners, policy makers, and constituents to think more fully about the goals of the partnership. Awareness of mental models underlying the motivation to participate in the group allows
dialogue that creates shared meaning. Even the term *partner* may evoke contrasting meanings for those involved. Allowing for awareness of these elements of difference can lend support for the partnership so as to weather a period of contention or disagreement. Bringing the role of power differences to the surface aids acknowledgment early in the process. Policy makers in particular can use this model to better understand how to create a climate that promotes the type of partnership for which they are advocating.

**References**


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