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Defining Factors of Successful University-Community Collaborations: An Exploration of One Healthy Marriage Project

This study explored university-community collaborations by examining the workings of 1 healthy marriage initiative. An ethnographic case study research strategy was used to study the process of this initiative, specifically looking at how participants worked through and overcame traditional university-community collaboration challenges. Data consist of qualitative

interviews with key initiative collaborators. Findings are organized into a model that offers a new way of looking at university-community collaborations in light of challenge points to be addressed and either resolved or unresolved. The model provides implications for other collaborative efforts and outreach scholarship.

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Successful university-community collaborations require combining the contexts and assets of the higher education system with those of the communities of the higher education institution (Lerner, Ralston, Mullis, Simerly, & Murray, 2000). Compared to university settings, community organizations are more accustomed to service delivery and advocacy than generation of knowledge. Erickson and Weinberg (2000) and Bray, Lee, Smith, and Yorks (2000) counseled that collaborations should be reciprocal and inclusive. Collaborators should recognize the strength of multidisciplinary expertise.

Although collaboration is important, some scholars point to potential inefficiencies or complications in collaborations. Lerner et al. (2000) indicated the downfalls that occur when groups compete for “turf” or leadership or when services

are needlessly duplicated. They also highlighted the need to identify and build on community assets and to create sustainable initiatives. Such joint ventures can be especially challenging for leaders tasked with representing their various organizations and used to functioning according to specific administrative processes.

Challenges and Opportunities of Outreach Scholarship

Outreach scholarship, or the “scholarship of engagement,” as Lerner et al. (2000) called it, allows universities to become directly involved in the communities in which they operate. Chibucos and Lerner (1999) reviewed successful university-community collaborations in their edited work: *Serving Children and Families Through Community-University Partnerships: Success Stories*. To ground our research, we reviewed the various success factors and potential impediments they present. A brief review of these factors is provided here, although a more complete list, including associated references, is shown in Table 1. As each of the featured projects was ultimately successful—that is, they demonstrated that universities and communities could work together productively and achieve positive outcomes (Chibucos & Lerner, p. 9)—we chose to title these “success factors” and “challenge points,” respectively. The term “challenge points” describes aspects of university-community collaborations that presented a significant obstacle that needed to be addressed.

Drawing from the research summarized in Table 1, factors most commonly credited with the success of university-community collaborations included (a) mutual respect and trust, including respect for differences; (b) clear and common goals and vision; (c) dialogue and communication, including open-mindedness and compromise; (d) developing and nurturing relationships; (e) involvement; and (f) prioritizing the community and maintaining a community focus. Challenge points included (a) differing perspectives, vocabulary and concepts, cultures, and expertise; (b) divergent missions and motivations; (c) boundaries and turf issues and duplication of services; (d) local political climates and local needs; and (e) institutional climates, cultures, policies, and procedures.

The identification of these factors through literature analysis grounded our work and led to the dualistic taxonomy of success factors and

challenge points. Although we believe Table 1 offers an excellent summary of some customary characteristics of university-community collaborations, our goal was not simply to cull the extant literature and summarize it; rather, as discussed below, we sought to better understand the key inputs and processes associated with university-community collaborations. These two categories—success factors and challenge points—informed the development of the research questions we used with participants.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

In light of the significant funding appropriated by the U.S. government toward healthy marriage (\$500 million) and fatherhood initiatives (\$250 million), it is likely that many interested parties from academic and community sectors will continue to seek to implement Community Healthy Marriage Initiatives (CHMIs). Assuming that CHMIs can benefit families, it is important to study the workings of these initiatives to learn what helps these initiatives succeed. The purpose of this study was to examine the process of one university-community CHMI collaboration to develop and explicate a clear conceptual and operational framework for further collaborative endeavors. We used ethnographic and case study methodology to explore how the participants from this particular collaboration described their process, as compared to those cited in the existing literature (e.g., Chibucos & Lerner, 1999). Specifically, we pursued the following questions: (a) What have been the specific challenges and successes of this collaboration? (b) How can these findings be organized into a useful foundational framework for university-community collaborations? (c) What lessons for others working on similar current or potential collaborative projects can be derived from these findings? This study was not an evaluation of the *outcomes* of this initiative but of its *processes*. The hope was that, in so doing, we might uncover procedural elements that seem to facilitate positive outcomes for similar projects.

The Bluegrass Healthy Marriage Initiative

The Bluegrass Healthy Marriage Initiative (BHMI) is the CHMI examined in this study. It is a collaboration between the Department of Family Studies and the Bluegrass Healthy

Table 1. *Success Factors and Challenge Points of University-Community Collaborations*

Challenge Points	Supporting Articles
Mutual respect and trust; Respecting differences; Appreciation of other's meaning and intent; Respect traditions and structures	Bates, Luster, Massie, and Key (1999); Chibucos et al. (1999); Fabes, Martin, Melmed, and Schneider (1999); Hurd, Larkin, and Ribeiro (1999); Lucy-Allen and Seydel (1999); Mullis and Ghazvini (1999); Nader, Muller, Johnson, and Blakely (1999); Rodgers and Small (1999); Spoth and Molgaard (1999); Walsh, Anderson, and Smyer (1999)
Common goals and vision; Clear goals and vision; Consensus; Compatible missions/goals; Common cause; Shared passion; Fundamental compatibility	Cato et al. (1999); Chibucos et al.; Fabes et al.; Hurd et al.; Martland and Rothbaum (1999); Mullis (1999); Mullis and Ghazvini; Sandmann and Simon (1999); Spoth and Molgaard
Dialogue/communication; Open-mindedness; Voice for all partners; Centralized/clear communication; Negotiation; Compromise	Bates et al.; Fabes et al.; Lucy-Allen and Seydel; Sandmann and Simon; Spoth and Molgaard
"Relationship" focus; Group focus; Set aside individual; Nurture relationship(s); Working relationships; Partnership development	Cato et al.; Chibucos et al.; Fabes et al.; Fine et al. (1999); Lucy-Allen and Seydel; Mullis and Ghazvini
Involvement (of): Students, volunteers Front-line workers Larger community Administrators Stakeholders	Cassidy, Hall, and Hicks (1999); Fine et al.; Hurd et al.; Koblinsky and Anderson (1999); Martland and Rothbaum; Mullis; Mullis and Ghazvini; Rollin et al. (1999); Spoth and Molgaard; Walsh et al.
Active and continuous involvement; Inclusion and ownership	
Client- or community-centered focus and understanding; Prioritize community; University responsiveness to community	Hurd et al.; Koblinsky and Anderson; Martland and Rothbaum; Mullis; Mullis and Ghazvini; Nader et al.
Shared/blended expertise; Complementary and interdependent tasks	Fine et al.; Mullis; Nader et al.; Sandmann and Simon; Walsh et al.
Commitment/Buy-in	Bell, Haley, Felstehausen, and Adams (1999); Cassidy et al.; Lucy-Allen and Seydel; Mullis
Defined roles/responsibilities	Mullis
Planning	Lucy-Allen and Seydel; Mullis
Advisory committee	Mullis and Ghazvini; Rodgers and Small
Funding; Consistent funding; Flexible management	Hurd et al.; Rollin et al.; Walsh et al.
Evaluation, frequent/ongoing	Koblinsky and Anderson; Rollin et al.
Shared resources (human, financial, etc.)	Cato et al.; Hurd et al.; Sandmann and Simon
Local credibility; Community support/interest; External cultural milieu	Cato et al.; Fine et al.; Martland and Rothbaum; Spoth and Molgaard
Administrative support; Leadership and guardianship; Flexible and flat leadership structure	Hurd et al.; Lucy-Allen and Seydel; Martland and Rothbaum; Sandmann and Simon; Spoth and Molgaard; Walsh et al.
Sustainability	Koblinsky and Anderson
Intermediary	Sandmann and Simon
Clear priorities	Nader et al.
Research impact; Timely reporting	Bates et al.
Balancing research and action agendas	Rodgers and Small

Table 1. *Continued*

Challenge Points	Supporting Articles
Loss of control/expertise	Fabes et al.
Different perspectives; Unique focus/expertise; Different vocabulary and concepts; Cultural differences; Different motivations; Differing missions	Erickson and Weinberg (1999); Fabes et al.; Rollin et al.; Spoth and Molgaard; Bates et al.
Boundaries and turf issues; Turfdom; Interdepartmental turf issues	Erickson and Weinberg; Fabes et al.; Mullis and Ghazvini
Local politics/climate; Local needs/issues	Mullis and Ghazvini; Cato et al.
Duplication of services	Rollin et al.
Finding collaborators	Cato et al.
Institutional climate and cultures, especially fiscal; Institutional attitudes; Organizational procedures; University reward system for faculty	Cato et al.; Erickson and Weinberg (1999); Lucy-Allen and Seydel; Spoth and Molgaard
Individual actions of stakeholders	Cato et al.
Fragmentation of partners	Hurd et al.
Absence of research or action plans	Hurd et al.
University image; Public perception of university	Cassidy et al.; Erickson and Weinberg (1999)

Note. All references are from Chibucos and Lerner (1999).

Marriages Partnership (BHMP), a local nonprofit community action group. BHMP comprised professionals and citizens interested in relationship strengthening activities. BHMI seeks to improve children's well-being by supporting healthy marriages and coparenting relationships. This initiative partners with local organizations to facilitate a variety of research, education, and awareness activities to help marriages to be successful. It is funded by a Section 1115 waiver awarded to the state by U.S. Administration for Children and Families, Region IV.

METHOD

The goal of this study was to closely examine one university-community healthy marriage initiative collaboration "to offer lessons for further conversation rather than undebatable conclusions" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744). As such, we employed both ethnographic and case study qualitative methods. Ethnography was appropriate because of our focus on insider attitudes, perspectives, and experiences of a culture-sharing group (Harrington, 1997). Ethnography is characterized by its occurrence in a natural (or relatively natural) setting, use of interactive and humanistic methods, its emergent and interpretive natures, and the systematic recognition and inclusion of researcher reflections, particularly when the researcher becomes a participant observer (Creswell, 2003). However, case study design was also

apt because we were focusing on a "bounded system," which included only initiative participants (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). As such, case study methodology is helpful for evaluating programs such as ours, where the focus is on the lessons learned from the case itself (Stake, 1995).

Yin (2003) recommended collecting direct observations, participant observations, documents, and interviews for case study research. These were used in this study, with the primary source of data being semistructured, ethnographic interviews with those who had key roles in the BHMI project. Interviews followed an outline of questions and varied in length, depending on responses and the depth achieved in the interview. Patton (1987) described an emergent process called depth interviewing that involves questions about experiences and behaviors or about beliefs and opinions. Using the interview guide as the foundation, the first author asked questions of participants that explored their experiences, emotions, reactions, values, perspectives, personal expertise, and knowledge. Questions were generatively focused and designed to let participants provide open, subjective, and evaluative responses on the project.

Participants

This study consisted of interviews with nine participants representing core partners in the collaboration, namely the Department of Family

Studies (faculty, staff, and administrators; $n = 3$ of 6), BHMP (members of the board of directors; $n = 2$ of 6), and the U.S. Administration for Children and Families ($n = 1$ of 3), as well as community partner representatives ($n = 2$ of 15) and past project staff ($n = 1$ of 2). Participants were experienced in service delivery, research, and grant management and were purposefully chosen to represent various roles within the project. To the extent possible, researchers sought a diversity of age, race, and gender among participants. Those interviewed had been involved since the project's inception and thus could provide rich data related to the process of the collaboration. Although a denser description of each participant would be desirable for purposes of qualitative rigor, the need to protect participant identity was also a concern. Each representative was solicited via e-mail or phone to volunteer for interviews and was free to accept or refuse.

Data Recording and Transcription

Interviews were recorded while the researcher simultaneously made handwritten notes. Krefting (1991) suggested that these notes help the researcher recall specific themes from the interview, guide follow-up questions during the interview, and aid in processing his or her experience of the interview(s). As expected, some participants were not available for in-person interviews, so some interviews were conducted on the phone ($n = 2$). These were recorded and annotated in a similar fashion. Finally, the interviews were professionally transcribed.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis of the data followed standard qualitative procedures as delineated by Creswell (2003, 2007) and Patton (1987). Each of the nine interviews was read and noted at least three separate times by the first author, who highlighted themes presented by each of the participants. During the analysis, sections of the text were labeled according to the thematic or conceptual content that they seemed to describe and were then grouped into general categories as described below. Categories were not exhaustive and may have overlapped with each other, but they included all dimensions of their respective conceptual themes (LaRossa, 2005). A reflexive field jour-

nal (Krefting, 1991) was kept wherein the researcher recorded reactions to each interview, developing themes, and personal thoughts. As themes from previous interviews were woven into future ones (e.g., "One participant said this. What do you think?"), we tested the validity of the themes and emerging categories throughout the interview process.

Qualitative Rigor

Acock, van Dulmen, Allen, and Piercy (2005) listed several guidelines for evaluating qualitative research. These include (a) the researcher's owning of his or her own perspective, (b) comprehensive description of the sample studied, (c) providing credibility checks, (d) grounding the research in examples, and (e) creating themes and findings that resonate with readers. Krefting (1991) advocated a model originally developed by Guba to assess the rigor of qualitative research. This model seeks to assure qualitative studies meet four domains of research rigor—(a) truth value, (b) applicability, (c) consistency, and (d) neutrality—without compromising the naturalistic context inherent to qualitative research.

Truth value is the confidence the researcher has in his or her findings or the credibility or internal validity of the study. Adherence to this domain was accomplished through a reflexive field journal used throughout the research process, as well as audits, described below. The journal included reflections on the researcher's own background, perceptions, and interests, especially in relation to the emerging data (Krefting, 1991). *Applicability* is the ability of findings to be applied or generalized to other situations or groups and is achieved through dense data from participants. As described above, this data density was obtained through active, in-depth interviewing (Patton, 1987). Krefting defined *consistency* in terms of dependability. "The key to qualitative work," she said, "is to learn from the informants rather than control for them" (p. 216). Dependability speaks to whether or not the data would be the same if the study were replicated with the same subjects or context. To test the reliability of the data within our study, a code-recode procedure was used, wherein the researcher initially coded a portion of the interview data and then returned to the data 1 week later and recoded it comparing the results. *Neutrality* is the degree to which the findings emerge from the context of the research and the participants rather than

from other biases. Recognition of research biases and the roles researchers take in the study are keys to a good qualitative study. This was particularly relevant for us, as the primary researcher (first author) was a participant in the initiative being studied.

Researcher as instrument. The researcher’s recognizing and acknowledging his or her own perspective are critical aspects of qualitative rigor (Acock et al., 2005). The bias inherent in the dual role of researcher and participant observer may be minimized but not entirely eliminated by adherence to rigorous qualitative methodologies (Yin, 2003). This study was supervised by faculty as part of the requirements for a graduate degree. As such, both an internal audit (review of the analysis and results by someone close to the project) and an external audit (review by someone outside the project) were undertaken to help minimize researcher bias (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, the first author answered all questions in the interview guide and included reflections on these thoughts in the field journal and subsequent development of relevant themes and categories. This helped to provide rigor by combining the author’s points of view with others’—allowing his voice and perspectives to be included in but not dominate the process. The goal was for the categories to be derived from participants’ responses and not any predetermined, theoretical supposition by the researcher(s) or the existing literature that was reviewed. The field journal was also helpful, as it allowed the researchers to review the process of reflection that occurred when the interviewer was wrestling with naming a theme or category.

Regardless of precautions taken for rigor, it is important to acknowledge the socially constructed, interactive nature of qualitative findings (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Still, the steps taken, including participant reviews of initial analyses, the researcher field journal, internal and external audits, code-recode procedures, inclusion of past participant themes in the interview process, and presentation of results through the use of quotes, all helped to track and minimize bias. By using these several procedures, we exceeded Creswell’s (2007) recommendations that at least two standard validation strategies should be used.

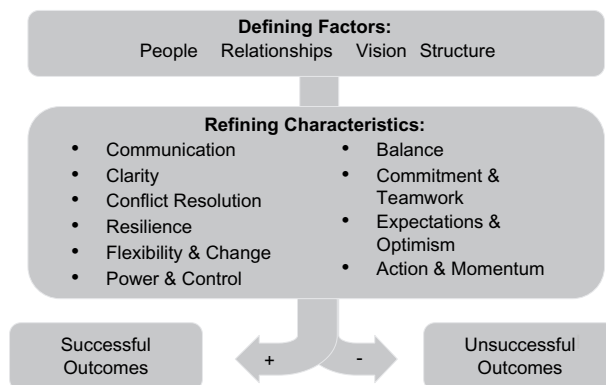
RESULTS

Existing literature on university-community collaborations has identified several factors that contribute to or challenge successful collaborations (Chibucos & Lerner, 1999). However, this literature has not been synthesized, nor does there exist any sort of operational framework that helps project participants prepare for or evaluate their work. This study’ provides a framework (see Figure 1) of foundational components—*defining factors*—and procedural elements—*refining characteristics*—that seem to contribute to the potential for successful university-community collaborations.

Defining Factors: What Are the Key Challenge Points?

Participants in this study offered a variety of insights into some of the most important factors that enable university-community collaborations to

FIGURE 1. FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS.



work effectively. There were four categories of challenge points that all participants mentioned as central to collaborative projects. We call these the *defining factors* of the project. These four central categories—people, relationships, vision, and structure—are explicated below and further illustrated by quotes from the participants.

People. The factor most consistently indicated was the people involved in the collaboration. Each participant in the study pointed to the critical role of the people involved, saying something very similar to one participant's comments, "The number one factor that's caused us to be successful is personnel. ... [Having] the right people to do the job is critical to anyone's success and I think it's been critical here." That each participant mentioned this aspect first, and with such poignant simplicity, is indicative of this factor's importance.

Relationships. "All of this is hand in hand ... we're all here to serve the same people." The strength and duration of the relationships in collaborations depend not only on the purpose thereof but what each individual invests into and receives from it. Participants pointed out a tangible difference between interinstitutional and interpersonal respect. Although institutional differences may create large gaps between the parties involved, the people at the heart of the project perform the critical bridging function, allowing differing cultures to share a horizon on a particular issue. Several participants indicated the vital role of interpersonal respect in maintaining collaboration.

Vision. Vision is the seed that becomes the project. It serves as the guidepost to nearly all future actions and developments of the project. One participant said, "More than anything [what has contributed to the success of the project is] a vision of what could be. ... Despite our differences, we are linked by a common cause." Participants said that a shared vision allowed them to blend their multidisciplinary expertise into something beneficial: "It was the vision [of] a group of people. It was a vision of constantly expanding circles of people who got more and more involved and who, in a sense, fed off or nurtured each other."

Further, participants were clear that to be successful, the vision must be specific enough to clearly delineate the present goals and activities of the project, yet also broad enough to be simultaneously conscious of the past and be forward

thinking. "I think sometimes any group can be guilty of getting myopic and just taking care of the tasks that are right in front of you instead of having a larger vision." Others expressed that this myopic tending to day-to-day tasks or goals relevant to only one party or organization resulted in frustration and disenfranchisement of key stakeholders and, in the eyes of some, kept the project from progressing.

Structure. The final defining factor indicated by participants was the importance of starting on a solid foundation and building a strong, well-defined structure within which to work. As one participant reported:

Any project like this takes an enormous amount of foundation laying. ... We got together and we did a good job of identifying what our vision was, what we needed to do to achieve it, and, subsequently, we have really operationalized those things.

Another participant pointed out the difference between collaboration and cooperation: "Cooperation is where people of goodwill work together to achieve a goal. Collaboration extends cooperation to the point of design and innovation that comes about from a dialogue process of people talking and getting excited and creative." As suggested by these participants, collaboration is characterized by a high degree of dialogue, creativity, evolving process, and excitement.

Refining Characteristics: What Influences the Outcome of the Key Challenge Points?

Each of the above-mentioned key challenge points—people, relationships, vision, and structure—was affected by a number of smaller factors. By refining the operationalization of these points, each of the *refining characteristics* discussed below helped determine the trajectory and outcome of each challenge point. (Note: where no direct quotations exist below, concepts have been summarized from individual and aggregated participant responses.)

Communication. The level of open, respectful communication and commitment to resolving differences determined just how much relationships in the project could be characterized as trusting or durable, or both. The unknown that resulted from silence bred distrust.

Clarity. The need for clarity in the structure—a clear and focused approach—was quite evident. As one participant said, “The project was not written tightly enough to foresee the loopholes that caused it to drag.” Respondents indicated that clarity in roles and tasks was important in allowing people to know what they were to be working on and why, which was particularly necessary when major staffing changes and turnover in collaborators occurred.

Conflict resolution. One of the greatest potential stresses on any collaborative project is conflict between collaborators. Because perspectives are often quite different, especially between universities and communities, some degree of conflict was inevitable. How such conflict was handled (e.g., whether difference of opinion escalated into conflict) was the key characteristic.

Resilience. Resilience is generally understood to be the degree to which a person or group of people is able to withstand a given stress or set of stressors. Each of the defining factors and characteristics can be a stressor (e.g., the need for a unifying vision). Normal pressures from the demands of the tasks at hand can combine with additional stressors such as staff changes, delays in funding, conflict of interest, and other phenomena to create a pileup of stressors. Resilience allowed participants to maintain the collaboration in the face of disagreement or frustration, or both.

Flexibility and change. No project vision, no matter how detailed, is able to predict the eventual path the project will follow or the stressors it may encounter along the way. “If as a team we hadn’t been able to modify the structure of the grant ... I think that would have diminished its success or eventually contributed to its entire failure.” The ability to respond productively to change, to be resilient in the face of stress, seemed to be a strong determinant of why the project was able to bend and adjust rather than snap and die when obstacles arose.

Power and control. The manner in which control or authority is determined and executed in collaborative projects has a significant bearing on its outcome. According to participants, this was one of the most challenging aspects of the project. Although some noted the positive position in which the project now finds itself with regards

to collaborative spirit, their recognition of the dilemmas of power and control, especially early in the project’s development, was clear.

Balance. Achieving a relative state of balance in the roles and responsibilities of collaborators was another characteristic mentioned by participants. “There is a feeling of, ‘Where did our emphasis go? Where did our partnership go?’ We felt that the partnership did lose some of that balance.” When balance was lost, disenfranchisement and frustration resulted.

Commitment and teamwork. Misunderstandings and imbalances may have been inevitable. What enabled the project to endure was a level of personal commitment to the project that allowed individuals to overcome personal hurts and strive to function in relationship (i.e., in collaboration) with others. “It has to do with how much you let things be obstacles.”

Expectations and optimism. What one expects or assumes, or both, of others has a strong effect on interactions with others. Doubtful or pessimistic views of others contributed to parochialism and team-defeating behaviors. Expecting the best from others and being optimistic had a softening and a healing effect, even when bad things happened. “Good will and assumption of good intentions [has] provided the glue for the project.”

Action and momentum. Action and tangible results create optimism and provide momentum, which facilitates further investment by individuals and institutions into the collaborative process. “You’ve got to start [doing] fairly quickly in order for people’s excitement to be up, to see results, to get the sense that it is worthwhile.” Inertia is unrealized potential and over time can be not only frustrating but also wholly paralyzing. Further, the existence of potential does not equate with the actualization of success. A successful project does not just happen. In the words of one participant, “You don’t order success. You develop and nurture and grow success.”

DISCUSSION

Previous literature on the topic of university-community collaborations identified many

factors associated with these projects. One of the major contributions of this article is not in reiterating what has been said but in organizing it and operationalizing it in such a way that we get beyond the categorical listing of “what worked, what didn’t” and more into the content and process elements of projects that work well. This study seeks to organize and operationalize the components and processes of university-community collaborations and to offer a concise framework, whereby those involved might improve a project’s performance. Interestingly, this framework bears a resemblance to one the lead author discovered through further research in the area of collaboration. This model was in relation to public-private healthcare partnerships (Gannon-Leary, Baines, & Wilson, 2006). Indeed, a further and broader review of the literature conducted by this same author after this study was completed revealed discussion on university-community collaborations in the fields of social work, gerontology, community psychology, mental health, education, management, public administration, community health, and others. Throughout these references, many of which are cited below, many of the same challenges seem to arise, and common defining factors are often highlighted. This transdisciplinary similarity suggests there may be a highly applicable and generalizable framework that is well grounded in the literature and supported by empirical, qualitative evidence from collaborators.

Success Factors Versus Challenge Points: A New Framework

The literature tends to categorize success factors and challenge points separately as elements that either contribute to successful project outcomes or limit a project’s ability to function effectively. The data from participants in this study, however, suggest that there are fundamental underlying successful (or unsuccessful) processes that are deserving of appropriate attention for collaborations to proceed and be successful. Given the nature of collaborative work, each of these defining factors—people, relationships, vision, and structure—presents a challenge point to the collaborators and their combined efforts. How they answer the challenge may largely determine the outcome of the project. This framework is depicted in Figure 1.

Taken together, these findings suggest that recruiting the right people is key, that relationships tend to be healthier when well grounded in a shared vision, and that it is important to put time and effort toward assuring a shared vision among collaborators and a structure that facilitates collaboration. Projects should consider an inclusive strategy, whereby motivated individuals are continuously engaged to offer their various expertise and skills. Efforts should be made to nurture the relationships between these individuals. The current results suggest that collaborative success is most likely the result of a series of consistent, regular, generative actions by many people, over time, and in the right context. To the extent that this is true, initiatives are unlikely to succeed overnight and, by definition, require the sustained work of the group. The results thus tend to describe success as a process. On the basis of these results, this study attempts to contribute to the literature by providing an empirically derived framework with defining factors. Specific implications, limitations, and suggestions for future study are discussed below.

The involvement and recognition of key collaborators may well be the most fundamental factor contributing to the success of university-community projects (Cook, Ruggiero, Shore, Daggett, & Butler, 2007; Frazier, Abdul-Adil, Atkins, Gathright, & Jackson, 2007; Milofsky, 2006; Whipple, Solomon-Jozwiak, Williams-Hecksel, Abrams, & Bates, 2006). It thus seems increasingly important to find leaders throughout the community and engage and involve them to the fullest extent possible (Caldwell et al., 2005). People must be valued for their participation, recognized for their contributions, and respected for their perspectives. Respondent comments suggest that projects need passionate and talented people. Failing to find them is unfortunate. Losing them can be devastatingly costly.

These findings further suggest that individuals need not have similar skill sets as much as they need a shared vision as identified through ongoing dialogue (Caldwell, Domahidy, Gilsinan, & Penick, 2000; Davies, Edwards, Gannon, & Laws, 2007; Frazier et al., 2007; Papamarcos, 2005). Rather than working in silos, collaborators need to work openly with each other. Generally speaking, universities and community groups have fundamentally different, culturally ensconced perspectives and processes. These differences have important implications for the way projects function, what its objectives are seen to be, and how

participants feel about the work. Having a clear sense of why each collaborator is participating and how they feel they can most fully contribute can help others create a shared vision (Cobb & Rubin, 2006). An appropriately defined structure is key. One way this may be accomplished is by outlining from the outset the relationships between organizations and individuals, including their roles and responsibilities.

The framework of defining factors and refining characteristics set out in this study may help collaborators in determining whether the right people are involved, that respectful relationships exist between them, and that care is taken to assure that the vision of the project is a dialectical process and not a unilateral mandate by any one party. This framework provides a foundational guide but does not provide an action model to guide collaborative projects throughout their life span. To this end, the Community Coalition Action Theory (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002), an empirically grounded model oriented to both content and process, could be used in conjunction with the foundational framework presented herein.

Implications

The current findings yield specific implications for university faculty and staff, community leaders and participants, and project sponsors:

University faculty and staff. University personnel would benefit from a vivid awareness of the inherent power of their positions as well as the procedural boundaries within which they operate. Community collaborators may become frustrated by a perceived lack of action when university stakeholders are actually actively working to make processes faster. University participants need to respect university procedures while flexibly and creatively implementing them as efficiently as possible. Above all, university collaborators would do well to actively include community stakeholders, sharing as much power as is procedurally appropriate and practicing open, honest, and ongoing communication and fostering creativity and innovation. One participant suggested that universities employ “community grant navigators” tasked with facilitating and advising university personnel on collaborating with community organizations and leaders. Experienced with the process of university-community collaborations, these individuals

could harness the desire of universities and community groups to work together, facilitating a “path of least resistance” between both parties and their common goal(s). These navigators could help make projects more “user friendly” to all—bridging gaps, synergizing effort, and assuring collaboration.

Community leaders and participants. As university actions often require layers of administrative approval, success is more likely to the extent that community participants remain patient and understanding, balancing the desire for tangible activities with the university’s slower research efforts and administrative processes, the tangibility of which often is evident only over time. Whereas the university should be mindful not to wield an undue amount of power, community collaborators may need to respectfully, yet firmly, maintain their position and their voice in collaborative projects. Community leaders should advocate for a balanced approach to the shared project.

Project sponsors. Although not all university-community collaborative efforts are sponsored, universities are increasingly involved in projects through research and programmatic funding from either private or public sector sponsors. These sponsors are in a unique position to encourage and ensure collaboration. Tying funding to collaborative structures, where appropriate, is one method by which sponsors can facilitate creative and innovative solutions to existing social problems. Sponsors may set and maintain clear objectives that include requirements or provisions, for collaborative work, or both. They may also suggest specific guidelines or models for collaborative work and provide coaching in the development, maintenance, and enhancement of collaborations. Finally, sponsors can facilitate dialogues and mediate conflicts that may arise between participating organizations and individuals.

Limitations

This project examined the workings of one university-community collaboration. The purpose of the study was not so much to discover new principles but rather to describe and frame occurrences that may arise under similar circumstances. Although generally supported by existing literature and evidenced in other projects, the experiences shared during the interviews may be limited to the project at hand

and not in other university-based community initiatives. The practice area of the project—healthy marriage initiatives—is one that is potentially polarizing among several sectors of society. Other projects that address an area that is not so politically charged may already benefit from more general support or readiness by both university and community players to respond more creatively and openly to each other. The study is limited by the number of interviews conducted ($n = 9$) and because all the participants were from the context of one university-community collaboration. Although the study would have benefited from greater contextualization of the participants, this was limited itself by the need to maintain adequate confidentiality of the participants. Conducting additional interviews with others involved with the current project, or comparative interviews with different university-community collaborations, would improve the study's generalizability. Finally, the dual role of the researcher in a position of primary influence in the project may provide a particular filter to the findings and should be considered accordingly.

Suggestions for Future Studies

Future research on university-community collaborations could involve multiple interviewers or a series of interviews, or both, with the same participants by multiple, rotating interviewers who might focus on different themes. Studies of projects funded by nonfederal sources would help clarify the generalizability of the current findings, as would the use of a researcher independent from project involvement. Future research might also examine multiple types of projects comparing and contrasting results. Research questions might be quantified for statistical analysis. Finally, it would be helpful to explore each of the core factors—people, relationships, vision and values, and foundation—in more depth. Such explorations could yield even richer narratives on the workings of university-community collaborations.

CONCLUSION

A wealth of literature and experience exists on university-community collaborations. However, until now no attempt has been made to synthesize and operationalize this literature. This study provides a conceptual and operational framework of the foundational components and procedural ele-

ments, which may lend themselves to successful university-community collaborations. Although more research may help to better define these elements, the current data suggest they are important parts of a framework that may be used toward effecting social change.

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