

Why Universities Join Cross-Sector Social Partnerships: Theory and Evidence

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Academic life is brilliant at erecting enclosures and less adept at finding ways of dismantling them. Borders play an important part in securing identity of purpose, but the university has to find ways of making its borders transitory and of transcending those that are in place. University life has to become nomadic, where identities and purposes are lived out in border country (*Barnett, 2000, p. 107*).

Introduction

Partnership is the vehicle of choice for many academic forays into border country. Postsecondary alliances with external entities have become highly institutionalized as a mode of organizing, particularly given a national policy environment that actively encourages collaboration with industry (most notably in the form of the 1980 Bayh–Dole Act) and the promise of significant financial rewards flowing from these relationships (*Newfield, 2003*). The pace of collaborative activity shows no signs of abating. In addition to partnerships with business, universities are being asked to join forces with a variety of other entities and sectors, including schools (*Masci & Stotko, 2006; McGrath, Donovan, Schaefer-Peleg, & Van Buskirk, 2005*), communities (*Spangler, 2002; Williams, 2002*), and government agencies (*Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997*).

Social partnerships, as distinct from the more familiar economic partnerships, are also escalating in importance. The social responsibilities of universities—and those of virtually every other organizational type—are changing dramatically with the “thickening networks of interdependence” (*Brown, Khagram, Moore, & Frumkin, 2000, p. 273*) brought about by globalization, changing demographics, and technological advances (*Chisholm, 1998*). Given the array of causes and issues (health care, poverty, pollution, global warming) confronting social institutions, along with mounting pressures for these social institutions to respond to large-scale societal problems (*Margolis & Walsh, 2005; Parker & Selsky, 2004*), it is useful to inquire into the reasons behind university decisions to join cross-sector partnerships supporting social causes. After all, despite the popularity of partnership as a rhetorical injunction and the documented

benefits associated with collaboration, the practice is fraught with conflict (Alter & Hage, 1993), risks (Fulop & Couchman, 2006; Powers, 2003), difficulties (Hardy & Phillips, 1998), tensions (Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996), culture clashes (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Powell & Owen-Smith, 2002), and even threats to the academic enterprise as we know it (Washburn, 2005).

There has been scant attention in the literature to the reasons universities join networks of other social actors to support a common cause. Despite the pervasiveness of partnership as an

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organizational form, coupled with a vast literature on interorganizational relationships and their determinants (Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Oliver, 1990), theories and empirical research on the topic have virtually ignored the higher education sector as a participant in such networks. The literature on collaboration in higher education usually addresses intra-organizational collaboration, typified by interdisciplinary work involving campus units (see, for example, Kezar, 2006). Far less attention has been devoted to partnership with other social institutions or sectors, where the differences

among entities may be even more pronounced and the challenges of working together far greater. In the management literature, the preconditions or antecedents of involvement in interorganizational linkages are well-known, but these are drawn mostly from studies of business–nonprofit, business–government, or government–nonprofit dyads (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Education, including higher education, is typically treated in these accounts as a problem domain to be “solved” by other sectors. What is missing is a sense of colleges and universities as full partners in multisector efforts to address broadly defined social issues.

This article attempts to account for the role of universities in collaborative arrangements by exploring the applicability of extant theoretical perspectives to the postsecondary context. First, I review and distill the major theoretical explanations for the formation of interorganizational relationships in general, with a more specific emphasis on motivations for cross-sector social partnerships as a subset of such relationships. The result is an overarching framework that incorporates and synthesizes the various existing

theoretical approaches or rationales commonly referenced in the literature: efficiency (*Williamson, 1975*), resource dependence (*Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978*), legitimacy (*DiMaggio & Powell, 1983*), leverage (*Austin et al., 2004*), mutuality (*Brinkerhoff, 2002*), and a domain focus that treats the issue or problem itself as an organizing principle (*Trist, 1983*). Then, I provide evidence from a qualitative study of a cross-sector social partnership whose aim is to address the problem of minority underrepresentation in business education and careers in business. Using data primarily from extensive interviews, I analyze university motivations for participation in a network that also includes business organizations, a federal government agency, and a nonprofit coordinating body. Finally, I show where this new evidence mirrors or departs from established theoretical principles, and I suggest how the addition of universities may round out existing conceptions of cross-sector *social* partnership formation.

In writing higher education into the literature on interorganizational relations and cross-sector social partnerships, three main uniqueness factors are underscored: (1) universities are distinct social forms that should not be assumed to be covered by theorizing about other social institutions, (2) social partnerships are not the same as other forms of alliances, and (3) intersectoral partnership is different from other kinds of collaborative activity, specifically internal (or intra-university) collaboration that draws on a reservoir of common academic norms and understandings. This argument is developed in the sections that follow.

Definition and Significance of Cross-Sector Social Partnerships

What is a cross-sector social partnership, and how is it distinct from other forms of collaborative activity? Selsky and Parker (2005) define cross-sector social partnerships as “projects formed explicitly to address social issues and causes that actively engage the partners on an ongoing basis” (p. 850). A simple deconstruction of the term can serve to elaborate its key features.

First, the types of linkages that are of interest have to do with organization-level alliances, rather than those that occur between individuals or groups of individuals from partnering entities. Many scientific research partnerships feature university-based scientists and their counterparts in industry (see, for example, Slaughter, Archerd, & Campbell, 2004); while a detailed typology of interorganizational collaborations between universities and other organizations would certainly include such interactions, they typically do not involve institutional decision makers in matters of resource

allocation, structural modifications, or policy changes on the scale required of organization-level commitments.

Second, the approach is cross-sectoral (occasionally termed “intersectoral”), as opposed to within-sector, which means that organizations from business, government, education, and civil society are involved. As Waddell (2005) has noted, “the core rationale for creating intersectoral initiatives is to achieve outcomes that integrate the distinct logics of the sectors” (p. 96); that is, collaboration across sectors helps organizations achieve what no organization or sector could achieve on its own.

Third, the focus is on a social problem, issue, or cause (Selsky & Parker, 2005). While economic, scientific, or technological partnerships may address social issues, they are not typically formed with this express purpose in mind.

Why Focus on Formation?

Models of interorganizational collaboration roughly divide the activity into formation, implementation, and outcome phases or stages (Gray, 1989; Selsky & Parker, 2005). The formation stage is critical to the health and maintenance of collaborations over time (Logsdon, 1991). Formation can be understood as a compound of starting conditions (Oliver, 1990), motivations (Schmidt & Kochan, 1977), and framing (Brown, 1998; Doz & Hamel, 1998). According to Austin et al. (2004), it is important to understand the motivations for cross-sector social alliances because “they are the cornerstone on which alliances are built” (p. 29). As theory and empirical research offer little acknowledgment of the specific role of universities in these arrangements, an understanding of the initiating factors and motivations may help predict collaborations, activate them, or cast situations as potential collaborative opportunities, thus contributing to an acceleration of social problem solving.

Theoretical Approaches to Partnership Formation

In this section, I review and distill the major theoretical explanations for the formation of interorganizational relationships in general, with a more specific emphasis on motivations for cross-sector social partnerships as a subset of such relationships. For the most part, these approaches have been developed in the management literature. The overarching framework presented here synthesizes the various existing theoretical approaches commonly referenced in the literature.

In order to develop this integrative framework, several sources from 1990 to the present were consulted, and similar or recurring

dimensions across the sources were grouped. The major sources were Oliver's (1990) critical contingencies, Gray and Wood's (1991) theoretical perspectives, Doz and Hamel's (1998) value-creating logics, Barringer and Harrison's (2000) theoretical paradigms, Austin et al.'s (2004) Partnership Motivational Spectrum, and Selsky and Parker's (2005) analytic platforms. Oliver's summary of the literature covered the period from 1960 to 1990; in effect, then, these sources capture nearly 50 years of organizational theories and empirical evidence on the phenomenon of interorganizational relations.

Efficiency

Efficiency-based motivations are those concerned primarily with increasing the ratio of output to input for a given system. Microeconomic theories, and particularly transaction costs economics (Williamson, 1975), have been most influential in developing this perspective. Among the considerations of organizations concerned with improving efficiency will be lowering production and transaction costs, reducing waste, and minimizing bureaucratic structures or processes that impede the speed of delivery. Given the interdependence of organizations, key questions concern how to maximize the efficiency of already existing exchanges and transactions with other entities and how boundary-spanning activities can be organized to reduce the various costs associated with coordination and collaboration (Barringer & Harrison, 2000).

As regards relationship formation specifically, alliances are desirable when they are seen as helping solve problems of efficiency. For example, it may be more cost-effective to buy expertise in the form of a partner than it would be to develop critical new skills internally. This "make or buy" question is an important one in rapidly changing environments, where technological complexity and the emergence of new markets often exceed the internal adaptive capacity of organizations. Exploration or exploitation of new markets often requires the expertise of partners, so the traditional "make or buy" decision becomes an extended matter of "make, buy, or partner" (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 371). University outsourcing of various auxiliary services—bookstores, vending, and so on—has elements of efficiency-based partnership.

Resource Dependence

Resource dependence theory starts with the idea that organizations depend on exchanges with their external environments in order to survive. This is a classic open systems view of organizations (Scott, 2003). The theory postulates that organizations actively

shape conditions in their external environments (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) by exercising a full range of strategic response options when confronted with turbulence or instability (Oliver, 1991). From a resource dependence perspective, organizations partner for two primary reasons: “to obtain access to critical resources and to increase their power relative to other organizations” (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 373). Conditions of resource scarcity and environmental uncertainty prompt organizations to enter into cooperative arrangements with other entities (Schermehorn, 1975) or to exert influence over other organizations and their resources (Oliver, 1990), but this must be done in a way that does not simultaneously increase dependence on those sources beyond a threshold of acceptability (Gray & Wood, 1991).

Examples of resource scarcity and environmental turbulence in higher education have been thoroughly documented (see, for example, Newfield, 2003; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Increased market competition from new service providers and the advent of technology-mediated education solutions have created instability for colleges and universities. Sources of revenue, particularly among public institutions, have shifted over time; the proportion of total funding derived from state legislatures has declined, and the funding portfolio draws from many more private sources such as corporations and private foundations. Industry funding of university-based research and development has increased (Krimsky, 2004), as has the number of licenses with royalties and licenses with equity granted to universities (*Association of University Technology Managers, 2001*). The structural elaboration of offices to facilitate commercialization and technology transfer is one indicator of the growth of these activities in higher education. Meanwhile, state legislatures, coordinating bodies, and systemwide offices have mandated cost-cutting measures (Gumpert, 2002). One of the net effects of spiraling costs, higher tuition, reductions in state support, budgetary cutbacks, and calls for greater accountability has been an acceleration in “linking behaviors” that provide access to diversified revenue sources and innovation capital (Austin et al., 2004). Scarce resources and uncertain environments predict patterns of cross-sector relationship formation initiated by universities in an attempt to secure and stabilize the situation.

Legitimacy

Beyond interests in efficiency and access to resources, organizations enter into partnerships because they are guided to do so by social norms and the desire for legitimacy. This is the crux of

the institutional perspective, a symbolic-interpretive theory articulated in the foundational work of Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983). According to institutional theorists, organizations are rewarded (in the form of resources and other critical support) for their conformity with sociocultural expectations and requirements.

Universities may be mandated or legislatively required to collaborate with other sectors (see, for example, Pusser, 2001). Some state legislatures have tied collaboration requirements to various performance measures (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Zumeta, 2001). Beyond the government arena, expectations for university collaboration are articulated by accreditation bodies, state agencies, foundations, and professional societies (Kezar, 2006). These effectively function as indirect mandates. Additional indirect or informal (though powerful) mandates flow from industry (Siegel, 2006).

External priorities and pressures are reflected in the significant resources that are available from private foundations and corporate foundations—as well as from sources like the federal government—to support collaborative approaches. It is well-known that private foundations favor coordinated strategies, interdisciplinary approaches, and interorganizational arrangements (Weeden, 1998). As Oliver (1990, p. 256) has noted, “Organizations that project the appearance of rationalized activity and cooperation through joint program activity often are able to mobilize more funding” than they could if they acted as independent agents. Indeed, the major theories and models of interorganizational relationship formation identify “image” as a central concern of organizations, in the sense that organizations strive to *appear* to be aligned with prevailing rules and stakeholder wishes (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Newfield, 2003; Oliver, 1991). Over and above whatever financial gain might result from closer ties with industry or other entities, in other words, universities pursue the legitimizing power of alliances. Engagement in such alliances signals to authorities that universities are acting in good faith.

Leverage

Whereas theories of relationship formation up to this point tend to view organizations as responsive to external pressures, another class of theories views organizations as more entrepreneurial and oriented toward gaining some competitive advantage. From this perspective, universities and other organizations collaborate in order to learn about or gain entry into new markets (Austin et al., 2004), establish a competitive advantage over rivals,

access networks of innovation, or further develop core competencies (Larsson, Bengtsson, Henriksson, & Sparks, 1998).

Doz and Hamel (1998), for example, have shown that many interorganizational alliances are built to win a learning race or to create and capture value. Organizational learning is widely discussed as a motivator of interorganizational relationships; the connective tissue between entities permits a flow of knowledge that can then be uploaded into participating organizations and applied in a variety of ways (Gherardi, 2006).

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Leverage is the covering term for these interlinked considerations of organizational learning, strategic positioning, and innovation. Although leverage shares elements with the

resource dependence perspective, it is distinct in that it operates on more of an enterprising, opportunistic, or prospecting basis.

Hagedoorn (1993) has summarized the motives of firms in forming strategic technology alliances, and his insights are a useful way to think about the leverage-related motives of organizations in any innovation scenario. These include speeding the delivery of new products and discoveries to market, minimizing the risks and costs associated with research and development, expanding product offerings, monitoring environmental and technological changes, smoothing the progress of technology transfer, and capitalizing on the specialized technological capabilities or knowledge of other firms and then internalizing these.

Mutuality

As noted by Brinkerhoff (2002), mutuality describes a condition of interdependence entailing “respective rights and responsibilities of each actor to the others” (p. 22). Within this category of theory-based explanations for alliance formation, the focus shifts from organizational self-interest to collective interest. Organizations are depicted as centrally located in vast networks of other social actors, including stakeholders, suppliers, competitors, partners, and those served by the organization. Their position within these networks compels focal organizations to attend to the “legitimate interests of all relevant stakeholders in the important operational and strategic decisions that it makes” (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 376). Interorganizational alliances are viewed as a mechanism for advancing common interests and goals. The focus here is on

commons-protective behaviors; that is, the interests of the social collective are deemed to be primary.

Not surprisingly, norms of reciprocity figure prominently in mutuality-based conceptions of alliance formation (*Alter & Hage, 1993*). That is, organizations are guided by the expectation that their communitarian acts will yield some return from other alliance members observing their own duty or obligation to provide for the welfare of the group. Stakeholder theory (*Phillips, 2003*) also factors into this category of rationales. Interest groups that are owed an obligation (normative stakeholders), as well as those that are able to influence organizational decisions and actions (derivative stakeholders), are taken into account.

Domain Focus

According to Trist (*1983*), complex societies create systems of problems called meta-problems, problematiques, or messes. Poverty, environmental degradation, public health crises, and racial inequality are examples. These large-scale problems resist solution by single organizations or sectors, partly because of the “fuzzy boundaries of social metaproblems” (*Parker & Selsky, 2004, p. 461*). Trist notes, “The response capability required to clear up a mess is inter- and multi-organizational” (*p. 270*). A *domain* can be understood as a problem area that members of an organizational field engage. Trist (*1979*) asserts:

Domains must be cultivated by all parties concerned. Unless the meta-problems are commonly appreciated the messes will never be cleared up. This entails a more future-oriented as well as more holistic posture. When a longer-time horizon is taken, people tend more readily to see the interdependencies of their objectives and to envisage more of the consequences which will affect them all. They are therefore more prepared to collaborate. (*p. 450*)

If social problems arise in part because organizations are attempting to secure self-interested advantages at the expense of communal benefits, a domain focus can be understood as one way to alleviate or correct this problem (*Morgan, 2006*). The notion of citizenship in a cause is consistent with domain-based approaches. To claim citizenship in a cause is to redraw organizational boundaries in such a way that the cause itself becomes the central organizing principle. This is the crux of a domain focus: letting a specific issue,

problem, or challenge confronted by a field of interconnected entities serve as the magnet that draws them in to solve or address the matter. The domain level of analysis amounts to a fundamental departure from classic ideas of organizational self-interest in collaborative contexts.

The Case of LEAD

The foregoing theoretical explanations of interorganizational partnership formation specify some of the conditions and motivations at work in various forms of collaboration. However, these theories do not make reference to the postsecondary education sector

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as a partner of interest. In this section, I provide relevant background on a cross-sector social partnership in which universities play a critical role. In the next section, I describe the study I conducted to learn of the reasons for university involvement in the initiative.

The LEAD (Leadership Education and Development) Program in Business is, by definition, an intersectoral collaboration designed to create a pipeline of talented underrepresented students pursuing elite business education and careers in business. It was

begun in 1979 after a group of corporate executives at McNeil Pharmaceuticals, a division of Johnson & Johnson, returned from a recruiting trip to some of the nation’s elite schools of management, where they were struck by the lack of minority students pursuing the M.B.A. degree. The executives approached the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business, where McNeil enjoyed a strong relationship, with an offer to start up a program that would begin channeling talented underrepresented students through the business school pipeline and, eventually, into leadership positions in corporate America. Over the years, the network has expanded to its current membership of twelve universities, nearly forty major corporations, and a federal government agency, with LEAD Program in Business serving as the nonprofit coordinating body.¹

Every summer, each of the participating schools hosts approximately thirty rising high school seniors for a residential Summer Business Institute lasting three or four weeks. While on campus, students learn the basics of a range of business-related subjects—

accounting, finance, marketing, strategy, operations, ethics, leadership, entrepreneurship, and others—from senior business faculty and corporate presenters. Additionally, students receive tips on applying to college and interact extensively with corporate sponsors through site visits and in-class presentations. LEAD is characteristic of other precollege initiatives in areas such as the health professions (see, for example, Erwin, Blumenthal, Chapel, & Allwood, 2004) and science and engineering.

The Study

With the support of a generous grant from Lumina Foundation for Education, I studied the interorganizational partnership dynamics in LEAD for a 15-month period during 2005 and 2006. LEAD was selected for in-depth study because of its unique combination of characteristics: its membership of more than 50 organizational partners is drawn from multiple sectors, it is focused on the social issue of diversity and equality of opportunity for underrepresented minorities, and it is a pipeline development initiative that involves partners on an ongoing basis in cultivating pathways of postsecondary access and career success for student participants.

This field study entailed interviews with 77 informants across sectors, direct observations of the program in action, and analysis of relevant documents. An interview protocol guided discussions with informants, with questions covering various aspects of partnership formation and development. The results reported in the present analysis are derived from an isolated treatment of university rationales for involvement in the program, the justification being that a specific understanding of university reasons for joining networks such as LEAD is an appropriate starting point in building higher education into the literature on cross-sector social partnerships. Those seeking a more comprehensive account of the LEAD study and its other dimensions of interest may wish to consult Siegel (2008).

Data Collection and Analysis

For this particular portion of the study, data were collected through semistructured interviews conducted face-to-face with 40 informants across the twelve institutions participating in LEAD. Nearly all of these informants were located in the institutions' business schools and included deans, admissions personnel, faculty members, corporate and foundation relations officers, and other administrative staff.

On each campus, I interviewed individuals who had participated in LEAD since its inception, as well as those whose involvement with LEAD was much more recent. I spent a minimum of two days at each site. An interview protocol guided the process, with the primary question being “How and why did your institution become involved in the LEAD program?” Probes were used as appropriate, but this open-ended way of phrasing the question was meant to capture (1) the starting conditions motivating participation and (2) the specific rationales used to explain membership. All informants were asked the exact same question. In conducting the interviews, I attended to how informants talked about the institution’s assessment of the opportunity (the ordering of and weight given to self-interest versus altruism, for example) and noted any differences in how they framed the rationale.

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into QSR NVivo qualitative research software. Data analysis began with an initial reading of interview transcripts and then proceeded through three phases, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). In the first phase, data were open coded. This procedure produced a tentative set of patterns from text segments. In the second phase, the initial patterns were reduced and refined, yielding four themes. In the last phase of data analysis, the themes were examined against extant theories of interorganizational and intersectoral alliance formation. The veracity of the data was checked against documentary sources and with an “insider” at LEAD Program in Business.

As the overall study was not in the first instance an examination of reasons for joining LEAD (this being only one of several areas of exploration), a review of the theoretical literature on this topic was not conducted a priori. The importance of rationales emerged during the interview process, prompting an extensive review of theory ex post facto in order to situate the results of the study in larger conceptual understandings. In other words, reference to theory was necessary for purposes of contextualizing the data. (Note that this is different from the grounded theory approach, which aims to *generate* new theory inductively from data.)

Assumptions and Limitations

A general starting assumption is that universities exercise strategic choice (Hrebiniak and Joyce, 1985) in whether—and with which entities—to partner. Even in cases where institutions are “mandated” by higher authorities to engage in partnerships in the abstract, the specifics of the process are usually left to the discretion

of the institutions. A specific assumption guiding the present study was that informants exercised conscious (or calculated) choice, rather than simply reflexively embracing an opportunity to join the network, and that they could represent the elements of this calculation in interviews. Still, an allowance must be made for the possibility that what is really going on when interviewees reconstruct the details of any decision-making process or other organizational phenomenon is retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995). There is the additional possibility that more recent justifications for involvement routinely get substituted for original justifications; this would constitute evidence that rationale *construction*—an ongoing project of sensemaking, rather than a static view of what happened and why—is a more fruitful way to frame discussions of rationales.

As the organizations of interest are business schools, which are typically highly practiced (if not always effective) in collaboration and partnership, the sample represents a group with the capacity—knowledge, networks, and access to revenue—to engage in partnership. Clearly, this kind of capacity is distributed unevenly in the general population of academic units. As an empirical matter, informants' responses to questions may be expected to reflect a degree of comfort and familiarity with partnership dynamics so that these considerations are not rendered an active part of the decision to join the network. To put this in the form of an example, organizations that are not accustomed to partnership may have as part of their decision-making calculus a whole stream of considerations about the nature of partnership itself (quite apart from the particular circumstances of the proposed linkage). Business school informants, on the other hand, may not openly discuss such dynamics because they are fairly standard practice and therefore largely taken for granted.

Central Elements of Decisions to Join

Four significant and overlapping themes emerged from an analysis of interview data. These four themes are interlinked but analytically separable. First, informants spoke at length about the *issue* of diversity itself, its importance, the pressures and expectations confronted by universities to become more diverse, and how these considerations conditioned schools to become actively involved in a pipeline development initiative such as LEAD. Typically, this discussion framed underrepresentation as a wider societal problem, with environmental forces and factors naturally impinging on universities to play a role in solving it. This led to a second theme, which had to do with the formation of cross-sector

alliances to address the multidimensional nature of the problem. Informants indicated that any attempt to diversify the workforce would depend on multilateral interest, resources, and coordination. In other words, the problem-solving apparatus or architecture—*partnership* itself—was the key point here. A third pattern was the use of *stories of entry*, which tended to relate the specifics of how LEAD came onto the university radar, who issued the invitation to join the LEAD network, and the general reaction of the school in considering the offer to join. Fourth, the *rationales* themselves—and, in particular, whether they were primarily self-interested or altruistic in nature—offered the most straightforward accounting of university decisions to join LEAD.

Issue Framing

Issue framing emerged as a central activity in informants' accounts of their schools' involvement in LEAD. Informants across the sites maintained that their schools' initial interest in LEAD flowed from a larger commitment to diversity that was stimulated by social pressures and by organizational self-interest. For example, changing demographics, the evolution of a global economy, the problem of minority underrepresentation in professional life, and corporate efforts to create a more diverse workforce were all regularly cited as societal-level forces and factors of considerable influence. The desire to build a recruitment pipeline in recognition of the value of diverse perspectives to the overall learning environment was presented as an organizational—or local—priority.

One dean explained the reason for his school's focus on diversity plainly: "We can't do our job without being committed to a diverse population." From his perspective, diversity must be experienced in the classroom, and not just in theory. The dean continued by noting the special place that diversity has in management education:

I don't know if there is much of a difference once you get into the operating room whether you are operating on a person from Ethiopia or operating on a person from Japan or from Iowa. I don't know, but certainly when you are going to manage an organization made up of human beings that work there every day of their lives, where you have customers from 20 different countries, you'd better understand more than just the mechanics, and that takes a lot of interaction with people that are not like yourself.

Institutional attention to diversity was encouraged, facilitated, and rewarded in large part by the marketplace, according to informants. Business deans, for example, uniformly explained that their schools' established corporate partners—recruiters, advisors, and supporters—*required* a diverse student body. One said flatly, "Some companies will decide where to recruit based on how diverse is the student body." Another related, "We get a lot of that pressure from our customers—corporate investors." This observation was confirmed by three directors of corporate and foundation relations, who were in accord that diversity is "a hot topic for all companies."

The overarching interest in diversity described by interviewees was accompanied by a more specific concern about minority underrepresentation in business education and careers in business. Expanding the pool of minority students pursuing business was presented as a major challenge confronting the entire field of business. Informants across the twelve institutions expressed a shared sense of obligation to address the problem, and they routinely talked in terms of being "helpful *to the issue*" and "doing our part" to improve the situation.

Market interest in LEAD (or in the kind of outreach typified by LEAD) was the closest informants came to describing a regulatory regime requiring diversity-related efforts. Directives from accrediting bodies or other authorities were never mentioned by informants as a factor in decisions to join LEAD, but the general business community's support clearly functioned as an indirect and unambiguous form of mandate.

In short, diversity was deemed to be of central interest to the twelve universities and to their networks of stakeholders, and it was held to be consistent with other institutional priorities (such as infusing the learning experience with diverse perspectives and preparing students for the realities of the modern global marketplace). Framing the problem of underrepresentation as a threat to the larger focus on diversity helped direct attention to a collaborative solution.

Fitting

Confronted with the issue of minority underrepresentation in business education and careers in business, institutions still have a variety of response options at their disposal. If they choose to proactively engage the problem, a natural next question is how to organize to address it. Do they pursue an independent course or an interdependent one? What are the particular advantages and disadvantages of a collaborative approach? This line of questioning is

fundamentally oriented toward the matter of fit, or *fitting*, between the problem and the constellation of parts brought to bear in its solution. The reference to *fitting* is taken from Boulding (1981) and denotes the relational patterns (i.e., partnerships) that are established to accomplish programmatic objectives. This notion of fitting was relevant to the program of education, the role differentiation observed by collaborating entities, and the manner in which LEAD complemented other diversity-related activities at the schools of interest.

Education. Informants indicated that the problem of underrepresentation was defined or deconstructed in ways that were suggestive of a collaborative solution. In other words, there was correspondence between the problem and the organizing model selected to address it; the complex and multidimensional nature of the problem lent itself to a similarly complex and multidimensional solution in the form of an intersectoral, interorganizational collaborative. This is a form of contingent organizing (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967), wherein an organization's structural elements match the level of complexity found in the external environment. In this case, informants understood the problem of underrepresentation to be a composite of several related factors, including lack of access to critical information, lack of exposure to the world of business, lack of role models, lack of networks and networking skills, and competition from other professions such as law and medicine.

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Several informants expressed the idea that “it takes a village” to devise and execute a comprehensive program of education and exposure that addresses these deficits. The education problem to be solved could not be the responsibility of conventional educators alone. Informants indicated that partnership was crucial to the problem, not superfluous or peripheral or undertaken simply for its own sake. The structure of the problem necessitated a collaborative, holistic, and systemic response.

One informant explained that “the programs that are put together, I think, are greater because of that partnership.” More specifically, informants indicated that the supreme advantage of corporate

partners was that they provided a “real-world, authentic perspective.” An informant described this as a “marriage between the classroom and applied learning.” It was uniformly conveyed that a strictly academic program would be a vastly diminished offering; the connection between theory and practice “makes it real” for students and maximizes their exposure to business.

Role differentiation. One hundred percent of the informants believed that the partnership model was a key ingredient in solving the problem of minority underrepresentation in business careers, although not everyone was satisfied with all aspects of partnership as practiced in LEAD. A collaborative approach was also uniformly presented as logistically necessary in order to deliver a quality program, one that no institution could manage on its own. The LEAD philosophy of distributing segments of the whole enterprise to role players with specialized resources and expertise was one that appealed to member organizations. The assemblage of academic institutions, corporations, a federal government agency, and a non-profit organization was deemed to offer the requisite distinctive capabilities for solving the problem.

Characterizing the sentiments of participants across the twelve sites, an informant asserted, “I don’t think any one of the different partners in it could successfully accomplish what they accomplish without each other.” There were several references to the fact that each of the partners has a distinctive role to play within the collectivist framework: universities are responsible for the overall education experience, corporations and the federal government agency provide an applied component, and LEAD Program in Business controls the student application process, marketing, the placement of students into each of the Summer Business Institutes, alumni outreach, and centralized fund raising. According to one informant, “Everybody plays a role.” Importantly, partners are expected to play to their strengths, and “No one’s really asked to stretch too far outside of what they normally do.”

Rounding out a portfolio. Fitting also referred to the ability of the rationale to cover contiguously related organizational priorities. Membership in LEAD was often described as helping organizations to address other values and interests (an indication of its *versatility*). Informants commonly placed LEAD against a wider backdrop of diversity-related activities and commitments—minority student recruitment, for example, or outreach to minority communities—designed to improve the education experience for all students. One individual explained that participation in LEAD was a way of “serving a mission of outreach” promoted by her institution.

Informants related LEAD to larger organizational purposes and categorized it in various ways—as a diversity project, as outreach, as volunteerism, as a laboratory—that tended to give the initiative maximum utility and legitimacy.

Several informants described the consistency between LEAD's purpose and their institutions' missions. One noted that his university is committed to

Contributing to the strengthening of communities that have been behind the curve in one way or another. So, that's part of the university's mission, that's part of the business school's mission. I should say, the business school specifically within the university also shares that concern to be a change agent and contribute to well being in the nation, and the world for that matter, and the neighborhoods in [the area] . . . that can benefit from our extending ourselves in various ways.

Use of Stories of Entry

Stories perform a number of functions in organizational life: they reflect and project organizational culture, act as a form of social control over organizational participants, generate commitment to a mission or vision, and develop or renew a sense of purpose held by members (*Boyce, 1996*). Accounts of founding or establishment, in particular, enable institutions to present or reinforce a sense of themselves as heroic, progressive, proactive, visionary, responsive, altruistic, and community minded. Both the content and the telling of stories become important cultural stock. Informants in the present study used stories to describe their institutions' entry into the LEAD network.

LEAD has a policy of strategically contained expansion, so not every school that wishes to become a member of LEAD is suited to join. Prospective member institutions must be able to compete with the existing stable of schools for the interest and attention of students. This keeps the LEAD network an exclusive group of elite institutions possessing similar reputation and rank. The attractiveness of this exclusivity was articulated by a dean, who noted, "You judge a school a little by the partners—the company—it keeps, and being part of these affiliations can be an important thing." Others talked about the enticements of participating in a common cause with organizations of the caliber represented in LEAD, most notably the idea that it "lifts your game."

Schools entered the network in various ways: they were recruited by LEAD, asked to join by influential corporate partners, were solicited for involvement by peer deans or peer faculty members, were prompted by LEAD alumni in the student body or on the faculty, or approached LEAD themselves. Stories tended to highlight the influence of relational ties, rather than initiative by universities. Three institutions were asked by corporate partners to join LEAD, for example. These narratives of corporate initiative tended to portray firms as enlightened, out in front of the issue, and in pursuit of a private-public solution (rather than a government remedy).

The stories shared by informants also served as a device for conveying the altruistic and other-directed considerations that played into entry decisions. In the present study, stories of entry were used to reinforce the notion of social obligation and responsiveness to a problem that simultaneously affected several sectors.

The idea that entry conditions took on a storylike quality was noticeable in the way informants who had not been involved at the time of entry almost invariably started off by saying, "Well, the story I hear is that. . ." Tilly (2006) has suggested that rationales are often delivered in story format and that these do the relational work of binding social actors. In the case of LEAD, the stories of involvement became cultural capital shared throughout the whole network. All of the informants could relate details of LEAD's founding at Wharton, for example. Stories also functioned as a kind of glue whenever there was a transition within the schools from one director to another: by explaining how and why the school joined LEAD, stories contributed to the intergenerational socialization process.

In some schools, there were at least two different accounts of entry. These discrepancies reinforced the idea that rationale construction is an interpretive matter subject to alternate renderings.

Rationales

Consistent with Austin et al. (2004), two broad categories of rationale emerged from the interviews. These were self-interest and altruism.

Self-interest. Self-interested rationales were those involving an estimation of the direct or immediate benefits that participation in LEAD would deliver to the sample institutions. Recruitment advantages were primary among these. Three of the schools in the network identified themselves as "geographically challenged" in trying to recruit minority students, according to informants at those schools, and LEAD was prized for its role in generating exposure

for the campuses. The public relations value of LEAD—the chance to create and manage favorable impressions of the campuses—was noted by informants but was presented as more of an afterthought than an initial rationale; moreover, precise measurement of this value was never undertaken by participating schools. LEAD was viewed as a vehicle for communicating seriousness of interest and commitment, either to the LEAD students themselves, to corporate partners, or to the central administration on the various campuses. As one informant noted, the “best billboard is the student that had a good experience” and goes back to his or her high school and speaks positively about the campus so that a form of viral marketing might ensue.

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Still, informants hastened to add that they did not promote their own school to the exclusion of others in the network. Summer Business Institute directors indicated that they willingly write letters of recommendation on behalf of students applying to other schools, and it is considered “a win” if LEAD alumni matriculate at one of the twelve member campuses. An informant indicated that at his institution “We sell, ‘We want you to come [here]. If not, we really want you to go to one of these other LEAD schools.’ We consider that success.” My own

direct observations of five of the Summer Business Institutes confirmed that these occasions were treated not as “sales pitch” opportunities, but as an exploration and examination of possibilities, with no overt pressure to apply to or attend the hosting school.

Since the issue or problem of underrepresentation itself was seen as having an indeterminate timeline for solution, any benefit or value to be captured by member organizations was understood by informants to be long-term; in the meantime, various indirect measures of success or benefit were utilized. This philosophy of long-term return on investment was manifested in a general reluctance on the part of informants to even mention self-interested benefits. While the schools naturally hoped to gain applicants and matriculants from their SBIs, informants described realistic expectations of that likelihood. The return on investment was viewed as a long-term proposition, and this lack of immediacy of benefits was recognized and accepted by all informants. Indeed, institutions

operated with an expectation of delayed gratification, mainly because student participants were rising high school seniors; it was clearly understood that the schools would not be able to capitalize on their investment for at least one year in the case of undergraduate programs and roughly 10 years in the case of the graduate schools of business. (Seven of the programs in LEAD are graduate-only business programs.) Even then, of course, there was no guarantee that the organizations would succeed in their efforts to attract students.

Altruism. Although all informants indicated that the LEAD partnership was pursued out of some degree of institutional self-interest, this rationale was uniformly presented as subordinate to the broader aim of social progress. The single most consistently cited motivation for involvement in LEAD was that it was “the right thing to do” (or necessary “for the greater good” or “socially responsible”)—a classic altruistic imperative. Expressing a sentiment that was shared by all of the informants, a graduate business dean emphasized, “Ours was a public interest in the sense that we thought this was an important thing to do.” A former graduate business dean explained that the original and ongoing motivation was “the social altruistic fact that we think this is the best thing to do, even though we don’t have any tangible right now sort of evidence that it’s going to benefit *us*.”

All of the universities viewed their participation as contributing to the larger social project of diversity, so that involvement in LEAD took on the mantle of citizenship in a cause. Representative of the quotes from university informants was one from a dean, who noted that his school recognized “our need to commit to this as part of the larger community to create a larger pool that we all would then benefit from.” The social obligation to broaden and deepen the pool of talented underrepresented minorities choosing careers in business was noted explicitly by numerous informants, and it was intimated by others. A dean summed up the prevailing feeling by saying, “We’re driven more by doing something that is for the common good than just our short-term selfish interests on this.” Another informant explained that promoting business in the minority community is “something we have a responsibility to do as a school.” This idea of responsibility permeated the accounts of informants; involvement was justified on the grounds that schools had a social responsibility to “actively intrude into the environment” (*Daft & Weick, 1984, p. 288*) in order to enact more favorable conditions over the long term for minorities and for universities.

One of the unexpected findings in the data was the *expansiveness* with which the schools determined the beneficiaries of their work. According to one business school official, his school's assessment of the opportunity was that "this is something that sounds like it is going to be a real plus, we are doing a great service . . . it would be good for the school, it would be good for the students, it would be great for the benefit of American business." Similarly, a former dean recalled, "This seemed to us to be something that was not directly helpful to us but helpful to the issue." Another informant offered, "It's pretty simple . . . there is a clear lack of minority talent in business today. And the reason why the business school is involved in it is that we're trying to increase diverse people in the field of business." It was put emphatically by one curriculum director: "We need to expand a supply of people exposed to business from ethnic backgrounds, period. End of the discussion."

Self-interest and altruism were not mutually exclusive categories of rationale, and they were often presented as inextricably linked. A frequently cited instance in which self-interest and community interest were enmeshed was expressed as a "filtering down" dynamic in which the benefits from involvement in LEAD would become manifest indirectly over time. A dean commented, "If we don't contribute to building this pipeline, we can't expect to get out of it what we need to get out of it. So, wherever that needs to start, that is where we need to start."

Discussion and Implications

The main objective of this analysis has been to insert post-secondary institutions into the discourse on cross-sector social partnerships. Clearly, there is much room for future studies of this phenomenon. In this concluding section, I consider several implications for theory and practice in an effort to encourage more engagement with the topic by scholars and administrators.

First, an appropriate disclaimer needs to be made about generalizing from this single case. The only form of generalization appropriate in case study research is analytic generalization (*Yin, 2003*), in which empirical results are shown to support extant theory; this is fundamentally different in intent from statistical generalization, which permits inferences about a population based on characteristics of a sample. Lessons from LEAD may be applicable to other settings, but generalizing (in research terms) from this case example should occur only at the analytic level.

In terms of the transferability of observations from this case to other contexts, it bears emphasizing that organizational capacity is

likely to emerge as a significant constraint on decisions to collaborate with other entities. As noted earlier, academic units vary enormously in their capacity to collaborate, whether *capacity* is taken to mean the availability of resources or something more intangible, such as norms and dispositions. The institutions included in this study may be viewed as outliers in the sense of having uncommon ability and inclination to engage in collective action.

Implications for Theory

As an analytic tool, the integrative theoretical framework contributes to our understanding of why universities joined LEAD. In order of relevance, a domain focus, resource dependence, and limited legitimacy and leverage considerations were all in evidence. Naturally, other examples of partnership would invert this ordering or reflect varying concentrations and combinations of the theoretical constructs—efficiency, resource dependence, legitimacy, leverage, mutuality, and a domain focus—identified in this paper.

Of particular interest in social ventures is the domain level of conceptualization, which shifts the discussion of motives from organizational self-interest to social problem solving. Domain-based explanations are uniquely suited to social partnerships because of their orientation as social problem solving instruments; the same is not explicitly true of partnerships to deliver a new drug to the marketplace. The domain level of analysis offers a promising lens through which to view university participation in social causes, but it needs further explication in order to move it from an abstract to a more concrete formulation. Findings from this study, for example, suggest that future theorizing about the formation of cross-sector social partnerships involving universities needs to take into account the dynamic interaction of the *issue* and the mode of organizing to address the issue. While specific attributes of issues have been taken for granted in most theories of collaboration, they can play a determinative role in organizational decisions to join networks of other social actors. From this perspective, the issue acts as a lodestone, attracting stakeholders, interest groups, and organizations to it.

Issues can be understood as “events, developments, and trends that an organization’s members collectively recognize as having some consequence to the organization” (*Dutton and Dukerich, 1991, p. 518*). Based on evidence from the study of LEAD, several elements of an issue orientation are suggested: these include a shared conception of the problem or issue (its *content*), its relevance or importance (*centrality*) both within the focal organizations of interest and within the network of stakeholders connected to the focal organizations

(*connectedness*), the extent of its *consistency* with existing institutional priorities, and the degree to which the assemblage of social actors is deemed to offer the requisite distinctive capabilities for solving the problem (*complementarity*). The idea of the issue as an organizing principle is consistent with a domain conception of cross-sector social partnership, as explicated by Trist (1983).

Future studies might explore several questions related to this emphasis on issues. For example, what are the interpretation systems utilized by the university to sense an issue, and how are these programmed to receive and process information from the environment? How dependent is the university on the successful resolution of a particular social problem? How dependent is the university on other organizations that are concerned about the issue, so that the institution must care about it by default or risk losing legitimacy? How much pressure—and from which interest groups and stakeholders—must universities detect in order to seek partnership to address an issue? What are the specific resource incentives (money, information, opportunities for organizational learning) that support a collaborative response?

Implications for Practice

Partners bring to an interorganizational relationship their cultural and operational differences (Kanter, 1994), including different rationales for involvement. Awareness of the motivations for entry into cross-sector alliances can contribute to the development of social trust among collaborators, increase organizational self-awareness, promote sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of partners, and ultimately steer the relationship toward mutually important objectives while helping to navigate areas of disagreement—all factors that are critical in the formation and development of partnerships (Austin et al., 2004; Gittell, 2003).

The theoretical framework presented in this study can be used by practitioners as a guide to asking questions of their partners in order to establish the relative importance of efficiency, leverage, and so on in decisions to work together. While asking about motivations may seem an obvious first step in partnering, it is less obvious that this needs to be done explicitly (partners often presume to know each other's motivations without asking) and continuously (important because motivations can change over the lifespan of a collaborative project).

In order to build capacity and competency for doing the work of cross-sector partnership more effectively, universities need to treat these arrangements as learning opportunities. The architecture or infrastructure for cross-sector collaboration may need to be developed

through experience and experimentation. This entails (1) putting partnerships under the microscope to scrutinize and understand their dynamics, (2) capturing key process-related information (the specifics of formation, implementation, and outcomes), (3) performing analyses of existing partnerships and doing these publicly (campuswide) so that others can see the possibilities and problems associated with cross-sector engagement, (4) assessing the performance of partnerships in various dimensions of interest, (5) determining success factors, and (6) considering the ways in which cross-sector collaboration can and does transform participating organizations through direct and indirect effects. In short, efforts to retain and disseminate information on this form of organizing can begin to develop a body of knowledge and a repertoire of competencies that elevate cross-sector partnerships, protect the integrity of participating organizations, and solve social problems. Since external relationships develop unevenly across campuses, with the sciences and professional schools tending to enjoy higher market share than their colleagues in areas such as the humanities, this method of sharing tales from the field may distribute the potential for partnership to develop across more units. There is a more equitable distribution of possibilities for such partnerships across disciplines than is the case with economic joint ventures or other strategic alliances.

Cross-sector social partnerships can also be understood as a contribution to the larger project of academic restructuring and institutional change. The restructuring of higher education organizations to better address contemporary challenges and opportunities may involve a “radical” reconfiguration in the form of interorganizational relationships that effectively *create* a new interstitial form. That is, as organizations collaborate, they reset the boundaries within which they perform their work, so that a new social space is defined by the overlaps of partnering entities. This process can be interpreted as an instance of restructuring.

Implications for the Issue of Underrepresentation

Finally, the case detailed in these pages is specifically focused on building the pipeline of underrepresented students. It does its part to plug the gap in student access and achievement. Other programs operate with a similar objective. An integrated program of pipeline development—one involving social actors across sectors to surround the problem of access and achievement—may offer a unique perspective and new gains. In other words, programs like these are models of organization to facilitate access and achievement. The better we can understand the dynamics of partnerships in this arena,

the more effective we may be in creating and delivering programs that address this particular challenge and the myriad other social challenges confronting postsecondary education. We can initiate, as well as join, these efforts. As organizations and sectors increasingly come to a collective appreciation of their correlated fates and fortunes (*Nathan and Mitroff, 1991*), efforts to address the problems they have in common will likely involve cross-sector partnering.

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Endnote

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