

The Ecosystem of Partnerships: A Case Study of a Long-Term University-Community Partnership

*Gary Daynes, Scott L. Howell
Nathan K. Lindsay*

Abstract

This article presents a case study describing a robust forty-eight-year partnership between the Boy Scouts of America, Brigham Young University, Utah Valley State College, and others in an annual merit badge Powwow¹ for Boy Scouts. Service-learning occurs as five hundred university students and faculty prepare for and teach merit badge classes to five thousand Boy Scouts as part of this Powwow. The article presents the history and operation of the Powwow, describes benefits to participants, and identifies some of the factors that contribute to the enduring nature of the partnership. The case study suggests that partnerships are similar to ecosystems, in which context and ideology and participant and organizational goals overlap to ensure partnership adaptation and survival. This particular partnership has demonstrated that a service-learning program with all its complexity and propensity to dissolution is more than self-perpetuating; it is actually partnership-perpetuating.

Introduction

Boy Scouts pledge “to help other people at all times.” They fulfill this oath through community service as part of their scouting rank advancement and merit badge fulfillment program and by adopting the Boy Scout slogan, “do a good turn daily.” Scouts receive training on ways to serve others in their weekly meetings and in the work they do to earn merit badges. Volunteer leaders mentor and serve the Scouts themselves by teaching and counseling them at weekly meetings, monthly Scout camps, and other merit badge seminars throughout the year. The largest and longest lasting merit badge seminar of its kind in the United States has been held for forty-eight years at Brigham Young University (BYU), and in more recent decades with Utah Valley State College (UVSC), in an event that partners the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) with these higher education institutions and other local community and government agencies. This merit badge seminar

is called a Powwow, and five hundred college students and faculty volunteer their time and expertise to counsel and teach five thousand Scouts on merit badge topics ranging from archaeology to weather.

Looking briefly at the history and organization of the Powwow over many decades gives insight into the practices that facilitate its partnership-perpetuating nature. Comments from Scouts, university students, and university employees not only reveal the value of the Powwow to them individually, but also describe how the Powwow continues to endure. We suggest that this partnership has endured because of its interrelated personal, ideological, and organizational characteristics. In this, the BYU-UVSC-BSA partnership mirrors the characteristics of an ecosystem, in which the interrelationships of living things allow the system to both adapt and endure in the face of change. Service-learning practitioners and people building campus-community partnerships would do well to think of the sustainability of partnerships in ecosystemic terms. Rubin (2000) noted that “an important theme of the self-studies [partnerships evaluating themselves] is that through the process of building partnerships, universities have had to rethink many of their motives, practices, and assumptions about what kinds of activities and products would be of value” (221–22).

Partnerships in the Literature on Service-Learning

The service-learning field long ago determined partnerships to be the preferred practice in maintaining service-learning efforts. Partnerships between campuses and community organizations, in theory, allow service-learning to continue for more than a single semester and ensure that service-learning activities meet the actual needs of higher education and the community. But while partnerships do often reach both of these goals, usually in the short term, they do not solve the problems of endurance and reciprocity in campus-community relationships. As a result, partnerships are themselves now an object of study, and researchers are beginning to ask what ensures the durability and reciprocity of partnerships.

The scholarship on partnerships contains two approaches to the questions of endurance and reciprocity. The first, exemplified by Community-Campus Partnerships for Health’s (CCPH) Principles of Good Practice, locates the well-being of a partnership in its ability to adopt certain commitments at an organizational level. Thus, CCPH urges partnerships to agree upon “mission, values, goals, and measurable outcomes,” to “balance power

among partners,” and to establish “roles, means, and processes” through the agreement of all partners. This portion of the literature also focuses heavily on the relationships between organizations. By this we mean that the literature reveals a model of partnerships that sets up universities and community-based organizations as separate institutions and locates the partnership in the space between them (Bell-Elkins 2002).

The second branch of the literature is largely case-based, and is typically written by partnership participants. It tends to suggest that the well-being of partnerships depends on the quality of the relationships between the individuals who are involved in the partnership. Many of the chapters in Jacoby’s (2003) recent work, *Building Partnerships for Service-Learning*, are rich with descriptions of the personal relationships at the heart of partnerships. Such

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case studies have their merits, both as ways to personalize principles of good practice, and as examples of ways individuals have used partnerships to meet their service-learning goals.

How should we think about the relationship between these two tendencies in the literature? One way would be to locate personal relationships and organizational commitments as part of a process whereby partnerships that begin with personal relationships mature into formal organizations (Campus Compact 1998). Another would be to locate personal relationships and formal organization on ends of a continuum along which one could locate particular partnerships. We suggest a third model, one which recognizes that organizational and personal relationships are simultaneously important, and that they in fact form the basis of an ecosystem of service.

The ideas of ecosystems and ecology are relatively recent additions to our understanding of the world, having come into wide use in biology only in the 1960s. These same notions were quickly applied to education, most notably by Lawrence Cremin, a historian of education (Cremin 1976). Cremin argued that some scholars had traditionally thought of education only in a formal

sense; that is, education was that set of things that purposefully happened at school. Others had focused exclusively on individuals, giving attention to the ways in which a particular person had come to be educated. Cremin proposed instead an “ecological approach to education, one that views educational institutions and configurations in relation to one another and to the larger society that sustains them and is in turn affected by them” (36). Among these institutions Cremin included schools, local businesses, non-profits, political organizations, and the media, as well as the set of beliefs that link them together in a particular place and through particular people.

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Cremin’s work, and that of the biologists that preceded him, have since been adopted by scholars of organizational behavior, who see the metaphor of ecosystem as a valuable way to understand how successful businesses adapt to changing times. Researchers like Lessem and Palsule (1999) note that by considering the full range of personal and business interactions, organizations can create a situation of “bounded instability” wherein businesses endure in the face of employee

turnover and economic change. Taken together, the work of Cremin and Lessem and Palsule suggests that efforts like campus-community partnerships ought to be understood as ecosystems (since they include individuals, organizations, and beliefs), and that by so doing we might understand the ways in which partnerships endure in the face of change.

This article attempts to do just that by pointing out how the Powwow helps mentor Scouts who grow up and later assume the leadership and voluntary support of the partnership and other Scouting initiatives. This support and leadership by the next generation is attributed in large part to participants’ individual connections with the Scouting credos of service and volunteerism and the university/organizational mission to improve learning by service, often accomplished through partnerships. As Bailis

(2000) points out, “service-learning and partnerships are two sides of the same coin” (5). It is this relationship between the goals of the partnering organizations and the service goals of its individual partnership members that has fostered the longevity of this particular partnership. One of the former Scouts, Sean Georgi, who attended the Powwow each year for the years 1993–1995, joined the freshman class of 2000 as a new BYU student and later that year volunteered to become a Powwow merit badge counselor, wrote the following:

Many new college students experience anxiety their first day on campus—especially getting lost among the crowds as they try to find their classes in diverse buildings, with strange code names, such as the SWKT and the MARB. I had that same feeling too, when I first came to campus—but it wasn’t when I was an 18 year-old freshman, it was when I was a 12 year-old Boy Scout. Strangely, my classes were similar both times. Among the merit badges I earned during the three years that I attended the BYU powwow (from 1993 to 1995) were Veterinary Science, Chemistry, and Atomic Energy. Among the subjects that I studied my freshman year (2000) were Molecular Biology, Organic Chemistry, and Atomic Physics. Some were even taken in the very same classrooms that I had sat in years before. . . . In 2000 I had the opportunity to volunteer as a counselor for the First Aid merit badge, which brought back wonderful memories of when I was a Scout, working towards my Eagle.

The most significant component of the success for the BYU/UVSC Powwow partnership has been its rich, overlapping connections not only between organizations and institutional partners, but more importantly between the goals and values of its individual members and the shared ideology of its partnering institutions and participants. When efforts to reconcile competing institutional voices and accommodate environmental changes over the years appeared unsuccessful, the collective individual connections prevailed and carried the program beyond the momentary institutional crisis.

BYU’s partnership with the Powwow has lasted almost half a century, in part because the partnering organizations and the individuals who rotate in and out of leadership enjoy shared and

interrelated personal, ideological, and organizational characteristics. We turn now to a detailed examination of the Powwow to better illustrate this connection.

History of the BYU/UVSC Merit Badge Powwow

This section focuses on the overlapping individual and organizational commitments to the partnership that began in 1956 under the leadership of the new BYU department chair of Scouting, Dr. Royal Stone, in the College of Physical Education. Dr. Stone had worked as a professional Scouter for BSA the previous year and then in 1956 joined the university as a faculty member who then facilitated the original partnership between BYU, the Utah National Parks BSA Council, local Scout leaders, and the Scouts themselves. Dr. Stone personifies this confluence of relationships between the individual and the organization as he fused his individual vision with the shared visions of Scouting and his new employer, Brigham Young University.

In the fall of 1969, the Powwow Partnership experienced an organizational shakeup when administrative responsibility for the Powwow transferred from the academic department to the Division of Special Conferences and Workshops, a department within the university's Division of Continuing Education. Financial responsibility also shifted from the Utah National Parks Council to this BYU department the same year. In 1970 a broader Powwow committee was formed, and further changes took place in the years to come, most notably the addition of a new partner, Utah Valley State College (UVSC). Over the years, the number of merit badges offered and classes scheduled for those merit badges have greatly expanded.

Other significant changes experienced by the Powwow include the modernization of registration methods, the relocation of the UVSC campus five miles more distant, and an experiment with changing the Powwow to a twice-a-year event and then reverting to an annual event. Early in the partnership, members of the community (another partner) taught alongside BYU students, but college students and faculty now carry the heaviest counseling and teaching load—yet another significant shift. (The Powwow has served 119,058 Boy Scouts from 1970 to 2003—enrollment numbers are not available from 1956 to 1970.) However, the one thing that has helped the Powwow through its organizational changes and tempestuous moments is the steady individual connections of participants that have always transcended any differences.

Brian Peterson, the current university administrator for the Powwow, has quipped that “the university couldn’t eliminate the Powwow, even if it wanted to, because it has a life of its own bigger than any one group or person involved in putting it together.”

Powwow Operations

Last year (2002), a record 5,066 Scouts attended both campuses and enrolled in fourteen thousand merit badge classes (each Scout can enroll in no more than three merit badge classes of fifty minutes each over the period of three Saturdays). Forty different merit badges (out of 119 total merit badges created by BSA) were offered between both campuses, and five hundred university students and faculty (52% male; 48% female) from both BYU and UVSC provided the merit badge instruction. Each merit badge counselor and volunteer is required to complete a BSA registration application and attend online orientation and training at the Powwow level (<http://powwow.byu.edu>). At the merit badge level a faculty advisor and/or merit badge supervisor is assigned to help mentor and train the merit badge counselors and instructors, with many of the faculty also facilitating a reflective experience at the conclusion of the Powwow experience. Students usually teach merit badge classes aligned with their own major or as part of an assignment in a current class at BYU or UVSC that corresponds with the subject matter of the merit badge. For example, the Citizenship in the Nation merit badge is taught by students enrolled in an American government course called American Heritage (AHer100); the Communications merit badge is taught by Mass Communications (Comms 101) students; Personal Management, a personal finance-type merit badge, is taught by Business Management (BusM 200) students, and so on. The continued academic support for the Powwow and individual merit badge classes taught by university students enrolled in courses or majors belonging to these departments is exemplified by the Department of Computer Science, which makes the Powwow a three-year departmental assignment to one of the computer science professors; the College of Biology and Agriculture Science, where the associate dean personally supervises the Powwow recruitment of his college faculty, who then recruit university students as instructors and engage some of the college student clubs (e.g., Agronomy and Horticulture Club, Landscape Architecture Club), and also authorizes the use of university equipment and labs to teach the Animal Science, Landscape Architecture, Plant Life, and Veterinary

Science merit badges; the Chemistry Department, where the former department chair collaborates with two of his retired colleagues and university departments to teach the Chemistry merit badge in their sophisticated laboratories; and the Anthropology Department, where the department chair and a local Uinta National Forest Officer work together with university students to teach the Archaeology merit badge.

The planning committee that began in 1970 has monthly meetings that begin each March after the previous Powwow has ended and continue until the following October; they then meet every other week or as frequently as needed. These committee members include university employees from BYU and UVSC and representatives from the Utah National Parks BSA Council and the local Order of the Arrow (OA) Organization—the service fraternity and honor society endorsed by BSA. These leaders, each selected based on different criteria by their respective organizations, make decisions on logistical issues such as which merit badges will be taught each year, the next year’s budget, registration deadlines, brochure and Scout patch layout and design, and instructor training and materials. After the Powwow ends this same committee evaluates the recent Powwow with the help of additional university students who volunteer their time and expertise and receive service-learning credit for participation from their professors. The final event each year for the Powwow committee, with representatives from each organization in attendance, is a celebration and debriefing at a local restaurant with eyes and attention already shifting to the next year’s Powwow.

Benefits to Scouts

The Scouts have received many benefits for their participation, including the immediate opportunity to earn merit badges. In a study on the Powwow conducted by Skinner (1971), data was collected for over 1,600 Scouts to evaluate how effective the Powwow was in helping Scouts earn merit badges. The study found that among boys from the same Scout troops, those attending the Powwow collectively earned almost twelve times as many merit badges as those not attending the Powwow during the three-month period following the event. Skinner’s findings concurred with what he found in the literature—that “merit badge completion would increase if merit badge opportunities were more readily at hand from the boy’s point of view” (25). Taylor Hansen, a Powwow attendee in 1998 and 1999 whose father also

attended many years earlier when he was a boy, described the benefits he received from attendance:

I became an Eagle Scout when I was 13. I was able to go to the BYU Powwows while I lived in Utah [Taylor wrote this note from his home in Pennsylvania]. They really helped me attain my goal of receiving my Eagle Scout award early. I took a variety of merit badge workshops and I think this really helped me experience a little of many different areas of interest. I enjoyed going with my friends from my ward [church group which sponsored the Boy Scout troop] and really liked the whole atmosphere of being at the college. They will always be great memories.

Scouts also profit from their visit to an institution of higher learning, which helps many feel more comfortable at a university as they make decisions about whether to attend college. They are also introduced to a variety of merit badges taught in an authentic context that may not be available locally, such as Chemistry and Atomic Energy taught in the laboratory, Law taught in the Law School, and Genealogy taught in the Family History Library on university computers. A counselor teaching the Art merit badge stated, "Teaching in actual art classrooms allowed a wonderful learning atmosphere to encourage our Scouts to create art and take it seriously." Scouts are exposed to university students whom many might relate to

"Scouts are exposed to university students whom many might relate to better than to the typical older adult merit badge counselors."

better than to the typical older adult merit badge counselors. (The average age of the university students who taught merit badge classes at the 2003 Powwow was 20.74 years of age.) Sean Georgi, former Scout and now a continuing student at BYU, also wrote: "Today I study to be a neuroscientist at the same university (too bad there wasn't a neuroscience merit badge), and I'm proud to say that I knew the difference between the HFAC and the HBLL, the TNRB and the TMCB [abbreviations for university buildings on the BYU campus] long before I was a student. The BYU merit badge Powwow had taught me the difference, *and even more importantly had directed me towards my current studies*" (italics added).

Such a socially welcoming environment helps Scouts develop individual connections to the Powwow, to Scouting's emphasis on service and volunteerism, and to the university mission of learning through service. A study by Rosenthal, Feiring, and Lewis (1998) found that "adolescents and young adults were most involved in volunteering if they belonged to organizations that encouraged or required pro-social activities" (491), and they named Boy Scouts as one of the foremost organizations for this development. The Scouts participating in the Powwow learn more than just the merit badge they study—they also learn from the examples of university students who volunteer as counselors, exemplifying the Boy Scout credo that emphasizes service to others.

The individual development that Scouts experience as part of the Powwow is also supported by the teachings and encouragement of parents in the home. A study by BSA (1998) found that 90 percent of Scouts' parents said that they wanted their boy in Scouting to become involved in community service (2). As Scouts interact with their leaders, counselors, and other boys and have opportunities for community service and civic involvement through service hour requirements for rank advancement (Star Scout to Life Scout, etc.), specific merit badge requirements, and the capstone Eagle Scout Leadership Service Project required for the rank of Eagle, they are more likely to participate in volunteer work and support Scouting and Powwow-like partnerships in the future.

Benefits to Instructors

University students receive credit in some of their BYU classes for participating in service-learning—a recent phenomenon with the increasing acceptance of service-learning opportunities in academe generally—but it is clear from decades of success that other factors also motivate their volunteerism. These students who serve as merit badge counselors have their first experience teaching the subject matter they study in the classroom, thereby learning the content better themselves. After participating in the Powwow, university students are also better able to determine whether they are interested in pursuing a teaching career. Charmaine Thompson, an archaeologist for the Uinta National Forest Service and long-time partner to the Powwow, described counselor benefits she has observed in this way: "New doors are also opened for the BYU students who teach the Archaeology merit badge. They have the chance to find their own voices."

Recent feedback on the Powwow from a survey of university merit badge counselors in 2003 (n = 134) showed that university students had many reasons for participating in this service-learning opportunity. Instructors were asked to check all of the reasons for volunteering that applied to their own situation. The results are as follows:

- Service Learning credit for one of my classes (65.7%)
- Like to volunteer whenever I can (41.8%)
- Love for scouting (31.3%)
- Resume purposes (10.4%)
- Other (3.5%)

By participating in service-learning, the students engage in a selfless activity that they say makes them feel better. Commenting on the Powwow, one of the university students exclaimed, “It was a wonderful experience! I think I gained more than the Scouts I taught. Thanks!” The Powwow also provides students an opportunity to render service in an organization in which many of them previously participated (73% of the male instructors previously received the rank of Eagle Scout—the highest award given to Boy Scouts). As one instructor said, “Thank you for the opportunity this Powwow gave me to give back to others what so many have given to me.” Elaine Witt, faculty coordinator for the Communications merit badge counselors, agreed with the students’ remarks, stating:

The students who agree to teach the communication merit badge course are bright, articulate, motivated and successful. They give the Scouts a great example in addition to teaching them the required material. The torch is being smoothly passed to the next generation of Eagle Scouts and the flame burns brightly!

Benefits to the University and University Professors

Many professors see service-learning as a powerful method to help teach traditional subjects in a more personal and relevant way. The service-learning approach is learner-centered and hands-on, allowing students to teach principles they are learning in class. Author Daynes, whose students in American Heritage have participated in the merit badge Powwow on a number of occasions, has found the Powwow to be an excellent setting for students to connect their coursework on civic life with an actual

civic experience—teaching young people about the political system of the United States.

For many faculty and staff, the educational benefit of the partnership is joined to a more personal one—to have the opportunity to pay back service they were previously rendered. Ted Hindmarsh, former BYU Merit Badge Powwow Counselors Committee chair, may have summarized the individual commitment and contribution of the faculty to the partnership best with these comments:

When I was asked by two old friends to serve on the Powwow staff as the chief recruiter of merit badge counselors . . . they brought to mind a solemn promise I once made at the Court of Honor where I received my own Eagle badge so many years before. I remembered raising my right arm to the square in the Scout sign and committing to give something back. . . . Sure it would be work and take some time; but there was no way I could say no to this marvelous opportunity to do so much good for so many boys and at the same time pay another installment on my Eagle promise.

The Powwow Partnership's Contribution to Partnership Theory

An analysis of the Powwow partnership sheds light on current theories of partnerships. Perhaps the most important insight gained is that this successful partnership is like an ecosystem in which many partners are linked to each other through a rich set of overlapping individual and organizational relationships and partnerships. These partnerships are woven together by explicit and implicit commitments by both individuals and partnering organizations to the Scouting credos of service and volunteerism and the university missions to improve learning, including service-learning, and to build character.

A review of the characteristics of those BYU students who volunteered as counselors revealed that they had a number of individual connections that would support the Powwow partnership and other similar organizations now and into the future. Some of those characteristics include previously having been a Scout, being a sister to a Scout brother, belonging to a religious institution that sponsored and promoted Scouting programs, having a desire to teach what they are learning at the university to someone else,

and just being students at a university that promotes learning, including service-learning. The highly connected nature of the participants means that the partnership will continue even when changes and challenges arise. These ties have become interlaced and connected by the shared ideological commitments to community service that the students have and that the organizations espouse. Our findings support Enos and Morton's (2003) observa-

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tion that "truly transformative partnerships would not only transform individuals involved in that relationship but also extend their influence into other parts of the organizations and the community at large" (30–31). Powwow participants are also trying to follow other principles of good practice (e.g., allowing for equal voices), and these actions are enhanced

in the context of rich, overlapping connections. The partnership becomes a dynamic ecosystem that adapts to an ever-changing environment and ensures it perpetuity.

Such an analysis suggests that other institutions can replicate the BYU experience as long as comparable elements of the ecosystem are in place—most especially the individual connections. BYU-Idaho (BYU-I), formerly known as Ricks College, adopted many of BYU's practices within its more rural environment in Rexburg, Idaho, but with similar kinds of individual and organizational connections in 1978. This Powwow partnership continues to benefit its local Scouts, university students, faculty, and partnering organizations (e.g., Grand Teton National BSA Council). The BYU-I Powwow serves about 1,600 Scouts each year.

Partnership builders should be attentive to the context of the partnership, its formal and informal characteristics, and the individual connections of partnership members to the partnering organizations. By doing this, institutions will collaborate with natural partners for service-learning, and partnership members will find both personal and institutional reasons for supporting the partnership. Most partnerships do something of the sort by encouraging students to volunteer at organizations that they have

personal interest in. The BYU example, however, suggests that partnerships last longest when their participants are part of multiple stakeholder groups and are connected to multiple partnering organizations all linked by their shared ideology and the interrelationship of individual and organizational characteristics. Such a model may limit the number of partnership participants (though BYU's partnership suggests otherwise), but it ensures that the partnership will perpetuate even in the face of challenges that all partnerships experience.

Conclusion

As the popularity of service-learning expands in the U.S., universities and community-based organizations face the ongoing challenge of forming and sustaining partnerships. This work is time-consuming and daunting, and will undoubtedly continue to be so. Certainly, partnership builders should seek to follow the principles of good practice for partnership building. Perhaps as significant as these principles, however, is the model that a particular partnership follows. The BYU partnership suggests that there are concrete ways to ensure that partnerships learn and endure. Primary among them is recognizing the importance of fostering and connecting individual and organizational reasons for partnering. Organization-based partnerships, by focusing on formal relationships between organizations, often fail to inspire the dedication necessary at the individual level to ensure longevity. Personal partnerships, based on the commitments of particular individuals to a goal, risk coming apart when those relationships change. But like an ecosystem, a model of partnership that encourages participants and leaders to build and maintain multiple connections at individual and organizational levels and encourages those receiving service to do the same perpetuates its membership, its culture, and its practices.

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Endnote

1. The term “Powwow” dates from early in the history of the Boy Scouts of America when many of its programs drew on a particular view of Native American lore. We have employed the term here since it is still a term in wide usage in the Boy Scouts. For a history of the Boy Scouts that describes its origins, see David I. MacCleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and their Forerunners, 1870–1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

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About the Authors

•Gary Daynes has a Ph.D. in history from the University of Delaware. He has taught service-learning classes at BYU for the past seven years. He has also served as the executive director of the Utah Campus Compact. He is currently the associate director of Freshman Academy, BYU's learning communities initiative for first-year students.

•Scott L. Howell is the assistant to the dean, Division of Continuing Education at BYU; former director of the Center for Instructional Design and Bachelor of General Studies Program; and is also adjunct faculty for the Department of Instructional Psychology and Technology. He earned his Ph.D. in instructional science and his master's degree in community education from BYU. His research interests include distance education, assessment and measurement, and service-learning.

•Nathan K. Lindsay received his master's degree in instructional systems technology from Indiana University, where he taught three courses and worked at the Center of Instructional Consulting. He is currently a doctoral student studying higher education at the University of Michigan, and is interested in faculty development and best practices in university teaching.