Penn State York Collaborative Partnerships: Involving, Listening and Responding to Our Community

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Abstract

Penn State York has a history of collaboration with the York community. The campus became involved in two university-community collaborative efforts to identify and take action to resolve living and learning needs of children and teachers in York County. The two stories of these initiatives are told here, and the lessons that emerged from reflection upon the process are reported.

Over the 130-year history of land-grant universities, service and outreach have been integral to the institutional mission. Universities have been encouraged to perceive their involvement in community dialogue as scholarship of engagement and to engage as intensely active partners "in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems" *(Boyer 1996, 11)*.

Listening to community needs in order to serve the community has helped the Penn State University campus in York, Pennsylvania, further its land-grant mission. In 1987, Penn State York had an outreach and continuing education director with a strong collaborative mindset. He saw education as a way to address many community needs and set the stage for numerous collaborations within the York County area. In the early 1990s, Penn State York became involved in two separate university-community collaborative efforts to improve the lives of children and their teachers. The collaborations resulted in two innovations within existing degree programs. As the authors recorded the stories of these collaborations, they extrapolated six lessons common to the stories. These were: (1) involve stakeholders from the beginning; (2) take time to establish relationships of trust; (3) listen for the full message; (4) keep the focus on the vision throughout; (5) use conflict; and (6) be sensitive to the right time for change. The stories of the collaborations follow.

Story 1: Outreach to the Public School System

In the early 1990s, K–12 public education in Pennsylvania experienced significant philosophical, curricular, and policy changes. Teachers were asked to make major changes in their instruction, assessment, and curricular practices without certainty as to the rationale and research behind such changes. In October 1993, the teacher advisory group, established a few years earlier to provide teacher voice to Penn State York's Continuing Education offerings, asked the university to provide them with an understanding of theory and research related to the required changes. Further, they asked the university to provide them a master's degree program (not selected continuing education offerings) to be offered at the York campus.

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Within weeks, a joint meeting was held with university administrators at the nearest graduate center, Penn State Harrisburg. The administrators were intrigued, recognizing that the ideas generated by the teacher advisory group pertained to recent research on pedagogy, reflective educators, and teacher action research. They made the decision to move forward in collaborative discussion with York County public school teachers and administrators. After hearing their recommendations, the university provided elective courses in the master's degree program that met the strategic planning needs of the school districts and the professional development needs of the teachers. The program focused on engaging teachers in teacher research. The newly focused master's degree became known locally as "the Focused Master's," and the new joint group of school administrators and teachers became known as "the Collaborative Group."

The Focused Master's Degree Program in Education with a major in teaching and curriculum began in fall 1994 with sixty teachers. Today, 469 teachers are enrolled in the program. More than three hundred teachers have graduated from the program. The university continues to seek input from the teacher advisory group and the assistant superintendents of school districts. One of the first graduates recently said,

Everything changed because of those courses—philosophy, instruction, assessment, behavior management . . . but the biggest change is the kids; that's the biggest change, "You mean, if I do this, I can move on?" Now they are motivated, they just want to go. "We're talking independent!" *(Keat 2004, 115)*

Story 2: Outreach to the Child Care Community

In 1992, Penn State York responded to the first state mandate for six clock hours of required training for all child care personnel. In the next few years, the program of workshops expanded to serve hundreds of early care and education professionals in four counties. As the program of workshops expanded, relationships strengthened between the university and early childhood care and education providers. Through these relationships, the university partners became more and more aware of the realities of child care in York County. The harsh contrast between the public school system, supported by public tax dollars, and the child care system, supported by few or no public dollars, became very clear.

In 1994, Penn State York entered into a partnership with the York Foundation and the United Way of York County to explore a small grant proposal, "Focus on Our Future." The grant was offered through the Heinz and Pew Foundations to identify an important issue whose resolution would improve the lives of children, up to five years old. A further purpose was to strengthen the local community foundation's ability to act as a catalyst in community change as a way of resolving a complex issue. The issue selected was child care, in part because of previous conversations with local child care personnel and in part because of the research literature pertaining to early childhood care and education.

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The conditions of the grant guided movement through the classic phases of community initiative building. The initiative moved through (1) the initial partnership; (2) a convening committee; (3) convened community forums to gather community input; (4) task forces to translate forum comments into specific goals; and (5) a steering committee with members representing

various community segments to set goals, objectives, and benchmarks to direct the change process. In the sixth phase, the Focus on Our Future Commission was composed of stakeholders from different segments of the county, each of whom had significant influence over budget, decision-making, and so on. The group of community leaders gathered nearly $200,000 to be used to accomplish three-year objectives, and to hire an executive director for Focus on Our Future. Since that time, the initiative has grown, receiving attention at both the state and national levels.

> *"Two campuses of the university were willing to discuss a new program because they were committed to the learning needs of children and their teachers."*

With monies from Focus, Penn State York developed and in 1997 began to offer a year-long series of classroom and mentoring sessions to prepare child care providers to apply for the national Child Development Associate Credential. Since then, the CDA program has prepared fifteen to twenty-five candidates per year to take the credentialing test, with a 95 percent success rate.

In 1998, Pennsylvania began to offer Project T.E.A.C.H. scholarships to help child care providers earn associate degrees, but there were no local educational opportunities. Penn State York developed courses incorporating the newly published core body of knowledge for Pennsylvania's early childhood care and education providers. The courses fit within the two-year Human Development and Family Studies program, forming a new option to the degree. Although Project T.E.A.C.H. scholarships paid only a portion of the cost, Focus On Our Future and campus leaders found ways for York County child care professionals to enroll in the courses with little cost to themselves. The campus has served between thirty-five and sixty child care providers per year since 1999.

After several years of seeing their staff take advantage of educational opportunities, center directors asked the university to provide them with a master's degree program at York's campus. Again, Penn State York went to the Harrisburg campus, the

nearest graduate center, requesting existing courses leading to an early childhood emphasis in the master's degree in teaching and curriculum. The first courses were offered to twenty-five students in 2002. There are currently thirty-seven students enrolled in the program.

Outreach Lessons

While the authors were aware of the principles of collaboration during university-community dialogues, they recognize now, as they record these narratives, that many of their decisions and actions resulted from intuitive thoughts and feelings at the time. Only with hindsight do they realize how often they moved through researched steps and used recommended strategies.

Involve stakeholders from the beginning: In the first story, the spark came from teachers. The university recognized the importance of making decisions after hearing from all stakeholders in this opportunity to provide services appropriate to its land-grant mission. In the collaborative discussions that followed, teachers continued to be equally represented, along with county school administrators. In the second story, the university spoke the child care message in the original partner phase, but by the second phase, the child care directors and teachers were deeply involved in the conversation. The involvement of all stakeholders kept the collaborative effort focused appropriately and realistically.

Ann Lieberman addressed this issue when she wrote, "We have come through a period in which the failure of many reforms driven from the top has eroded the public's confidence in schools and undermined the morale of those who work in them. In the current era of reform . . . perhaps school/university collaborations can narrow the gap between those who make policy at the top and those who do the work in schools" *(Lieberman 1992, 154)* and, the authors would add, in child care settings.

Take time to establish relationships of trust: In the first story, university personnel had nurtured relationships of trust during annual visits to ask advice from each assistant superintendent in our county and also in twice-a-year meetings with teachers representing their school districts. In the second story, trust had been established among the first four partners over many years as the individuals worked with one another on various projects. However, as the community initiative moved through multiple phases with new players, trusting relationships were not in place at the

beginning of their work together. Lack of trust was felt as personal discomfort.

Sandmann and colleagues discussed tensions inherent in university-community partnerships: "the fact remains that developing effective collaborative relationships with community partners and a sophisticated understanding of the community itself requires spending extensive time in that setting" *(2000, 49)*. They came to believe that the success of their initiative depended upon their willingness to invest extensive amounts of time "to develop a strong personal relationship with as many people as possible" *(50)*.

Listen for the full message: In the first story, university personnel listened carefully one evening while teachers moved through several phases of discussion. Teachers envisioned their ideal graduate program only after vigorous descriptions of their own problems and concerns. The Penn State York team has often wondered together what would have happened that evening if it had required the teachers to adhere to the agenda. Team members believe that the group would not have imagined an ideal master's degree program of study if they had not first expressed their emotions concerning new professional realities.

In the second story, university personnel had listened carefully to child care personnel for many years and thoroughly understood the realities of child care. In turn, university and child care professionals listened carefully to community leaders to assess their understanding the complexities involved in the child care issue.

Kellett and Goldstein emphasized this lesson succinctly: "Recognize that communities are well-developed, complex entities that must be understood and accepted rather than required to adapt to the university culture" *(1999, 32)*.

Keep the focus on the vision throughout: In the first story, the collaborative group kept the learning needs of children at the center of each conversation. Two campuses of the university were willing to discuss a new program because they were committed to the learning needs of children and their teachers.

Nolan and Meister found that teachers' deepest professional commitment is to their students. Commitment to student learning motivates teachers to work diligently to enact district mandates. In their study, they found "the teachers were emotionally interconnected by their ethic of responsibility and caring for their stu-

dents" *(2000, 207)*. The teachers felt deep personal concern when they thought they might not be able serve the needs of their students because of decisions made by others.

In the second story, at each phase of collaborative work individuals would repeat, "When the adults in our county understand the realities of the child care system for kids, they will work together to find solutions."

In each story, it was often easy to become involved in a myriad of issues associated with teachers' and child care providers' day-to-day dilemmas. In those situations, it became necessary for the leadership to redirect attention to the original goal and vision. Collaborators from different segments of the community volunteered hours of time to work for the best interest of each child in both stories. It is important to know that vital decisions were made on the basis of the best interests of the student and the child, especially as competing realities and priorities pressed for time and dollars.

Use conflict: Though it was uncomfortable, group conflict achieved positive outcomes. In both stories, deliberate efforts were made to avoid rushing to a solution without consensus. Rather, meetings concluded without resolution to ensure time to ponder a divisive issue. Eventually, participants found consensus by moving away from original positions to address concerns of each group member. Creative solutions emerged in each instance of disagreement.

> *"Effective community problem-solving groups become places where topics of disagreement in the larger community emerge for discussion and resolution."*

Effective community problem-solving groups become places where topics of disagreement in the larger community emerge for discussion and resolution. Conflict transformation has been defined as "the process whereby the resolution of conflict builds the overall capacity of the coalition and actually makes it stronger" *(Chavis 2001, 311)*.

Lieberman described a similar movement within her collaborative group. At first, "Frustration, tension, and conflict were ubiquitous. . . . We tried to get the conflicts out in the open."

Later, "As new people came in who were used to working competitively and had to learn new ways of thinking and interacting, the people who had been there for some time realized that they had indeed become a different kind of group" *(1992, 150–51)*.

Be sensitive to the right time for change: In the first story, collaborating educators and university administrators were aware of an unusually large number of first-year teachers in the county in the planning year of the Focused Master's Degree Program. These teachers would be second-year teachers, ready for graduate study in the fall of 1994. This awareness lent a hint of urgency.

In the second story, sensitivity to the right time to make change caused members of Focus on Our Future to accelerate the pace in conversing with state government officials. One example was the altered use of findings of a subcommittee charged with designing an imaginary on-paper child care center with appropriate financial resources: with public school salaries and benefits, with sufficient equipment and supplies, with ongoing educational opportunities, and so on. The subcommittee performed a cost analysis comparing the financial picture of the model center with the financial picture of a typical county child care center. Shortly after *Time* and *Newsweek* published cover stories linking poor-quality child care with fiscal shortfalls, business leaders involved in Focus on Our Future took this cost analysis information to state government committees, state legislators, and federal legislators.

This sensitivity to timing provides one example of why resolution of local issues must be developed by local persons, as Peter Senge, systems thinking specialist, explains. He acknowledges that outside experts might be able to design a more efficient change process on paper, but actual change in complex community systems is more likely to occur when driven by knowledge, insights, and decisions of local stakeholders thinking collaboratively *(Senge 2001)*.

The Future

Penn State York's reputation as an active and genuine community partner and collaborator set the stage for the development of a new type of partnership with the community. In fall 2002, Penn State York initiated the Community and University Partnership (CUP), a collaboration between the university and York area human service, educational, and community organizations serving

local children, youth, and families. The focus of the partnership is to promote healthy children, youth, and family outcomes through basic and applied research, evaluation, and professional development programs.

To date, CUP has held three partnership meetings with community agencies and schools; launched an e-mail discussion list for community partners; and has become engaged in two research projects with local agencies and child care centers. The campus is on its way with new outreach and service efforts, and fully expects that more opportunities will come about through the new collaborations. The stories continue.

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