Sustaining University-Community Partnerships in Providing Relationship Education

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Abstract

Several relationship education (RE) programs have been implemented and funded through state and federal initiatives. Forming and sustaining university-community partnerships have been proposed as one way of maintaining these programs at the community level. Using a qualitative descriptive approach five Cooperative Extension faculty members articulated their experiences with university-community partnerships in providing RE programs in their counties for three years. Faculty members explained their purpose for developing partnerships, their leadership and roles within their partnerships, and how they maintain and evaluate their partnerships.

Disseminating research-based information from a university to rural communities and urban neighborhoods has been described as one of the "critical challenges for higher education" and the "true test and value of our research and outreach programs" (Richardson, 1996, p. 2). The Cooperative Extension System (CES) strives to meet this challenge by extending university research, resources, and programming into every United States county (Goddard & Olsen, 2004; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2011). As a literal extension of land-grant universities, CES accomplishes its purpose of disseminating information at community level through the formation of university-community partnerships. These partnerships are not a new phenomenon and many evaluations of these partnerships are available (see Rubin, 2000). The current study is an evaluation of university-community partnerships in providing relationship education (RE) at a county level.

University-Community Partnerships in Relationship Education

RE has become widespread with federal financial support for strengthening relationships in the United States (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Evaluative efforts are emerging as to the effectiveness of RE. Two published meta-analytic studies indicate there are small to moderate effects in relationship quality and communication improvement for middle-class couples (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008) and for low-income couples (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010) who participate in RE. Fed-eral support for RE programming has targeted low-income couples (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Historically, the majority of RE programs have been for Caucasian middle-class participants, and recruiting low-income couples for educational purposes traditionally has been difficult (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Research on providing RE for low-income couples is indicating the university-community partnerships are essential in reaching these low-income audiences (Hawkins & Ooms, 2010; Vaterlaus, Bradford, Skogrand, & Higginbotham, 2012). CES faculty members (also referred to as agents in some states) have the opportunity to form new and cultivate existing community partnerships as they strive to provide RE at a county level (Vaterlaus et al., 2012). Additional evaluative research is needed on how university-community partnerships are sustained.

Sustainability of University-Community Partnerships

Evaluation of university-community partnerships in providing RE education is just beginning to emerge (Carlton, Whiting, Bradford, Dyk, & Vail, 2009). They interviewed members (n = 9) of a university-community partnership formed to provide RE within a state healthy relationship initiative. Ethnographic case studies elucidated individual perspectives of the challenges in forming university-community partnerships (i.e. people, relationships, vision, and structure) and the refining factors (e.g., communication, conflict resolution, commitment, and teamwork) that determined if the partnership would be successful. Their model suggested that successful

university-community partnerships occur when there are strong interpersonal skills within the people in the collaboration.

University-community partnership scholars have compared the formation and sustainability (maintenance) of these collaborations to interpersonal relationships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). Like the formation of a romantic relationship, Stewart and Alrutz (2012) stated that there is a relationship initiation process between the university and community partner that involves both organizations identifying the potential rewards, costs, and abilities in meeting each others' expectations. Further, before formation is finalized compatibility must be assessed through common goals, values, and objectives. Extending on the metaphor of interpersonal relationships, the sustainability of the university-community relationship requires that partnering organizations recognize that relationships are not linear (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). Maintenance occurs when there is structure to the partnership and a defined way of gaining regular feedback from the community partner concerning the partnership. Also, the university should find ways to affirm the value of their community partnership, e.g., public presentations that acknowledge partnership, public awards recognizing partner, celebrating successes together (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012).

The Lewin Group's (2003) model for forming successful partnerships in providing RE includes a maintenance plan and is consistent with the aforementioned recommendations. They suggest that the partnerships should have a guiding vision and goals, structure and leadership, and make their collaborative efforts visible to the broader community. Building on these recommendations, Futris (2007) and Holland and Glemon (1998) recommended including an evaluation component for university-community partnerships. Evaluation includes identifying the outcomes of the partnership in providing the actual RE programs. Futris (2007) also suggested that evaluation of the collaboration itself should be achieved by asking questions about whether the right people are in the partnership, the level of involvement of the partnering organizations, the accomplishment of common goals, partner satisfaction, and how to sustain the partnership.

Futris (2007) stated that partners should evaluate how they can sustain their efforts in providing RE and, in some circumstances, funding sources. In many instances it is the university that has challenges in maintaining the relationships. This statement was included in a recent symposium on university-community partnerships:

> One of the principal challenges of building successful partnerships between academic programs and community organizations is to maintain an ongoing and sustained engagement of the university partners.… The community experience with academic initiatives has all too often been one of dropping in and dropping out, where faculty research agendas and course-related pedagogical objectives dominate both the nature of collaborative relations and the partnership structure (Allahwala, Bunce, Beagrie, Brail, Hathorne, Levesque, von Mahs, & Visan, 2013, p. 54).

This challenge is exacerbated by the nature of external funding mechanisms. Many of the current efforts to implement RE are being funded by federal and state initiatives (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Due to uncertainty of future funding, established partnerships may be the method of maintaining RE at a community level. The current study used a descriptive qualitative approach to evaluate factors of university-partnership sustainability among Extension faculty members who have been partnering with community organizations to provide RE for three years.

Method

As part of a larger statewide Healthy Relationship Initiative, CES faculty members (also referred to as Extension agents) in Utah completed proposals for funding diverse RE activities in their counties. In their proposals, county CES faculty explained ways they would reach low-income participants and indicated potential community partners. The data for this particular study was gathered during the faculty members' third annual funding cycle. In this third year, 21 faculty members received funding and were required to complete reports throughout their grant year, indicating successes, challenges, and requests for technical assistance. They also voluntarily participated in interviews for evaluative purposes. Five faculty members who were finding success and discussing their university-community partnerships were

identified to participate in a specific evaluative component of the grant. These same faculty members participated in a 3-year longitudinal case study investigating the evolution of university-community partnerships (see Vaterlaus, Skogrand, Bradford, & Higginbotham, 2015). In their third year, they were asked specific open-ended questions to identify how they sustained their university-community partnerships, which was not discussed in the case studies. Responses to these open-ended questions are the focus of this study.

Sample

Five Extension faculty were invited to participate in the IRB approved evaluation of their university-community partnerships. All five Extension faculty members consented. The faculty members were all female, Caucasian, and married. Two of the participants lived and worked in urban counties and three lived and worked in rural counties. Extension faculty members offered a variety of RE courses in their counties, including one-time RE events and series of classes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Extension faculty members were provided an emailed interview protocol at the conclusion of their third year of providing RE in their county with grant funding. This allowed faculty members to reflect on three years of experience with university-community partnerships. An emailed interview method was used in an attempt to avoid interviewer bias, to collect experiences unobtrusively, and to collect data from the five faculty members around the state in a timely manner. The portion of the emailed interview relevant to this study included four open-ended questions/prompts: (a) what was your purpose for developing relationships with the specific organizations or groups you worked with?; (b) talk about the structure of your community relationships; (c) what factors have sustained your community relationships?; and (d) how do you evaluate your relationship with different partnerships?

Due to the relative newness of university-community partnerships in RE a qualitative descriptive design was utilized (Sandelowski, 2000). A qualitative descriptive design requires researchers to stay close to the data, and "the description in qualitative descriptive studies entails the presentation of the facts of the case in everyday language" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). Responses

from each of the Extension faculty were compiled into one data file. Responses were organized under each open-ended question/prompt. One researcher read through the responses several times to gain a sense of the totality of the data (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007). Common descriptive themes were found to be directly related to the topics of each question/prompt. A second researcher validated these themes by consulting the data independently of the first researcher.

A second data set was constructed through qualitative content analysis (Sandelowski, 2000). Responses (line-by-line) were coded/placed together under relevant descriptive themes within each question/prompt. Prior to constructing this data set codes were given to each faculty member in order to determine how many faculty members provided information on each descriptive theme. This data set was used to construct the results section focusing on the faculty members' words and the "facts of the case" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). A second researcher again reviewed the results section in conjunction with the original data set. When there were discrepancies in theme identification and coding between the two researchers both researchers returned to the data to develop consensus about the participants' lived experience.

Following the write up of the results a variation of member checking was employed (Vaterlaus & Higginbotham, 2011). Two Extension faculty members (one from a rural and one from an urban county) were emailed the completed results section. They were asked three structured questions to identify the accuracy of the descriptive themes from a personal, general, and professional perspective. Minor suggestions and changes were incorporated into the final results.

Results

The major themes represent the open-ended questions/prompts from the interview. These themes were selected because the purpose of the descriptive study was to describe participants' experiences in their words about sustaining university-community partnerships. The faculty members talked about (a) the purpose of forming their partnerships; (b) the structure of their partnerships; (c) how they maintain partnerships; and (d) how they evaluate their partnerships.

Purpose for Forming University-Community Partnerships

When Extension faculty members were asked about their purpose for developing university-community partnerships, they specifically addressed university needs that could be met through partnership formation. University needs included existing audiences, locations to hold events, and contributions of other resources. They also talked about what they looked for in a purposeful partnership—avoiding the duplication of services, common goals, and reputability.

All five Extension faculty members specifically spoke about obtaining access to participants. They used words like "existing," "to reach audiences," "already in place," and "access" to talk about having an audience for which to provide RE. A faculty member from a rural county explained:

> Our target audience for this grant is young adults from 18–30 years old, people we can teach healthy relationship skills that they can use in strengthening their relationships. So we look for groups, entities, and individuals that serve this population and also have common goals where we can work in tandem to provide relationship education while they provide other information/services.

A faculty member from an urban county said, "I have developed many relationships in order to be able to reach audiences that can benefit from the material."

Three of the faculty members explained that resources such as "food", "venues", and "locations" were made available through their collaborations. Three more spoke specifically about the increased attention for their programs that could come through formation of a partnership. For example, one faculty member from an urban county said, "I form partnerships to gain more visibility for advertising programs in the community."

Additionally, two faculty members' responses resonated with this statement, "I think avoiding duplication of services and not re-inventing the wheel are other great reasons we develop relationships with other groups." Another two stated that they looked for organizations that had "common goals." Finally, two faculty members specifically talked about finding "reputable" organizations. A rural faculty member explained, "We look for groups and stakeholder individuals who have strong credibility, good reputations, existing infrastructure, and positive ties with the communities in the county."

Structure of University-Community Partnerships

The faculty members reported, in general, that they did not have a formal leadership structure for their university-community partnerships. The majority, however, did state that there was formality in structure in terms of meetings, but less formality in maintaining consistent contact. Faculty members also explained that community partners did take on specific roles in the implementation of RE.

All five faculty members spoke specifically about the frequency of meeting with and contacting their partners. A faculty member from a rural county explained, "Initially the [partnership] met quarterly, but in the past year, membership voted to meet monthly." Another faculty member (rural county) discussed a variety of meeting schedules with different partners. She said, "We meet with some groups once a year, some groups twice a year, some groups quarterly, and other groups monthly." Email was the preferred method of keeping in contact between meetings and with people from partnerships who couldn't attend the meetings. A faculty member from an urban county stated:

> While some do not attend the meetings in person, I make an effort to get them involved via email so they can be a part of the decision-making process [Partnership] members often help me get ideas for upcoming events or speakers via email.

Two of the agents specifically stated that there was not a formal structure to their university-community partnerships. Three faculty members stated that they took the role as leader of the partnership. For example, one faculty member in an urban county said, "Generally I'm in charge of the group, but they provide me with feedback and ideas for the grant and upcoming activities." Three faculty members explained that roles, although informal, were in place. Community partners' roles were said to be to "share ideas," "advertise," "provide feedback," "attend RE events," and "teach" at RE events.

Factors That Have Sustained University-Community Partnerships

All five faculty members talked about "common goals" as being the key to sustaining their university-community partnerships. Three faculty members talked about the common qualities of "passion" and "diligence" in their partnerships as sustaining features in their common goals. A faculty member from an urban county stated:

> Having a common passion to help members of the community to improve their relationships has sustained the relationships of the partnership. I think it's that passion that keeps people involved when they don't "need" to be because their internship is over or their job position in the community changes—and not everyone has that same passion. I've had interns that finished their "required" hours and they didn't want to help any more unless they were going to get paid—kind of sad. For those involved for a long time, getting paid seems to be more of the "icing on the cake" rather than the reason they do it.

Another faculty member from a rural county explained, "I think common goals and purposes really do help sustain our community relationships."

Two of the faculty members specifically talked about the frequency of meeting with their partners as a sustaining factor, although their responses were conflicting in the frequency of meeting. However, both concluded that flexibility was the quality that sustained the partnership. For example, one faculty member from a rural county said:

> We seem to have a stronger working relationship, commitment, and productivity rate with groups we meet more frequently with. However, we need to stay flexible and meet with other groups that don't meet as frequently, as they also are key players and give valuable input and contributions.

A second urban county faculty member stated:

> I also think that NOT meeting frequently has been helpful. People are busy and it's hard to be a volunteer with so many things going on; having quarterly meetings and allowing people to give feedback via email keeps them involved. I think people want to be involved but they also like flexibility or they probably wouldn't keep helping.

Evaluating University-Community Partnerships

Faculty members reported that they do not formally evaluate their university-community partnerships. They did state that they informally evaluated partnerships through feedback from the community partner. Faculty also informally evaluated the partnership through assessing the partners' level of involvement.

All five faculty members stated that they did not formally evaluate their university-community partnerships. For example, one faculty member working in a rural county said, "I haven't done any formal evaluations." A faculty member from an urban county stated, "I don't have any formal evaluation process." However, all five faculty members also indicated that they informally evaluated their partnerships. A faculty member from a rural county stated, "We do not use a formal evaluation instrument or tool developed for each group, but utilize informal methods before, during, or after our meetings."

Three faculty members specifically used "feedback" from partners to informally evaluate their university-community partnerships. Three faculty members stated that they used the involvement of the partner to evaluate the partnership. One faculty member from an urban county asked herself several questions in the evaluation of partnership involvement. She said:

> We evaluate it by their involvement. Are they attending the meetings? Are they replying to emails? Are they getting the advertising out to their partners/ clientele? Are they attending the actual programs? We have found that this is a good indication of whether or not they are ACTIVELY partnering with us.

Another faculty member explained that she viewed it as a reciprocal evaluation of her involvement and the community partners' involvement. She explained:

> I'd say I look at the amount of effort they are willing to put into the partnership and if they aren't being very accommodating to help us with our efforts, I start

questioning if we are still having the same goals, and if things don't improve, I start looking at other partnerships to put my energy into. On the other hand, I try to give more energy to those that contact me often and look for new ways to partner or to expand etc. So, I guess I evaluate the partnerships based on the amount of effort put in on both sides of the partnership, and ultimately the outcomes of the events. If the cost is greater than the return, then I look at making efforts to either balance the relationship or move the energy I'm exerting to a new partnership that seems more engaged.

Discussion

The current study described the lived experiences of Extension faculty members who formed university-community partnerships to provide RE in their communities. Evaluations of university-community partnerships in providing RE are just beginning (Carlton et al., 2009). Researchers have suggested that the formation and sustainability of university-community partnerships is similar to the formation and sustainability of interpersonal relationships (Bringle & Hatch, 2002; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). The current study found some support for propositions within this metaphor. Also, Futris' (2007) propositions for university-community partnership sustainability imply that formal structure, leadership, and evaluation of partnerships may be essential for sustainability. Our findings found some elements of formality within partnerships, but most of the sustainability efforts occurred informally within the university-community partnership.

Consistent with the metaphor of interpersonal relationships (Bringle & Hatch, 2002; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012), Extension faculty identified the purpose and potential rewards of establishing university-community partnerships in providing RE. It is clear from these Extension faculty members that one of the most important purposes of forming partnerships was to more effectively reach their target populations. Extension faculty members sought to benefit in forming partnerships with those who already served this population and those who might help recruit class participants. It is unclear if the benefits were reciprocated because the community partners were not interviewed. However, faculty members informally evaluated their community partners' satisfaction by continuously monitoring their partners' level of involvement.

Previous research on university-community partnerships has implied that sustainable partnerships have defined leadership structure and roles (Futris, 2007; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). It appears that among the faculty members that partnership leadership and roles were present, but not formally defined. Community partners took on a variety of roles and most of the faculty members served as the leaders of their partnerships.

Like the sustainability of interpersonal relationships, an established way of providing feedback and continued contact are thought to sustain university-community partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Stewart & Alrutz, 2007). The faculty members' experiences provide some validation for this proposition. Faculty members talked about structuring meeting times, making contacts (e.g., phone, email), and being flexible with meeting frequency. There was formality in the frequency of holding meetings. One faculty member specifically stated that through a formal process, discussion and voting, the university-community partnership changed their frequency of meeting.

Common goals among university-community partners were thought to be the main ingredient of partnership sustainability. Faculty members indicated that there was a common passion to provide RE education for their community—a finding that corroborates observations by Futris (2007) and Stewart and Alrutz (2012) that common goals are important in the formation and sustainability of university-community partnerships. Faculty members did not just select community partners who had existing audiences to teach, but found partners who also had the vision of the benefits of providing RE in their county.

None of the faculty members reported that they formally evaluated their university-community partnerships. However, university-community partnerships were informally evaluated. Despite the informal nature of the evaluation, faculty members implicitly followed Futris' (2007) recommendations to identify common goals, evaluate partners' level of involvement, identify if the right people are in the partnership, and partner satisfaction. Monitoring the level of involvement of the community partner was the primary measure for evaluation. Faculty members

gleaned evaluative information about a variety of areas of their partnership through this informal evaluative approach. Carlton and colleagues (2009) implied that strong interpersonal skills were essential in sustaining university-community partnerships. An informal approach to the evaluation of university-community partnerships may be more consistent with the strong interpersonal skills needed in partnerships—possibly decreasing the vulnerability or conflict that could arise in a formal evaluation of the partnership.

Conclusions and Implications

There are limitations to note in the design and sample of this study. The current study used a homogeneous sample and future research on university-community partnership sustainability should attempt to recruit faculty members from more diverse contexts. Additionally, faculty members discussed the reciprocal nature of partnerships. Evaluations in the future should attempt to include stakeholders from the community to better understand partners'perceptions of sustainability.

Evaluations of university-community partnerships in terms of RE are just beginning (Carlton et al., 2009), and much of the current literature on university-community partnership sustainability represents theoretical propositions and recommendations (e.g., Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Futris, 2007; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012; The Lewin Group, 2003). This study adds to the literature by identifying and validating previous propositions and recommendations for sustaining university-community partnerships. For example, identifying community organizations that can provide needed benefits and common goals were found to be important not only to the formation process but the sustainability of university-community partnerships among faculty members.

Findings in this study pose some questions concerning the implementation of formal versus informal mechanisms in university-community partnership sustainability. Some of the partnerships were sustained in formal ways as suggested by The Lewin Group (2003), Futris (2007), and Bringle and Hatcher (2002). For example, participants in this study indicated that one of the formal ways they sustained their relationships was by holding meetings. However, many of the ways they developed, maintained, and evaluated their university-community relationships were less formal. They indicated they looked for groups that served their target population, that could provide a venue for classes, and that could help recruit class participants. They sustained their partnerships by way of emails which were sent as needed. They also evaluated their partnerships informally by the extent of their involvement, the level of activity, and the amount of effort the partners put into the collaboration.

Given our study's findings, departure from existing literature on the suggested formal mechanisms for university-community partnership sustainability, there appears to be a need to conduct research about the less formal ways to sustain partnerships. For example, what do Extension faculty mean when they report looking for partners that have common goals and are reputable? Or, when a faculty member said they had to gauge how much meeting time was optimal to keep people involved, how did they assess this? One might speculate that much of what happens in understanding partnerships is informal, but with additional research we may be able to more clearly understand the dynamics of those informal strategies. Future research focused on the process of informal evaluation of university-community partnerships would create more specific recommendations for training Extension faculty in how to sustain university-community partnerships and, in turn, possibly increase the sustainability of community RE programs.

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