

Turning University/Community Partnerships into Action Through Collaboration and Communication

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Rebecca J. Dumlao (2018). *A Guide to Collaborative Communication for Service-Learning and Community Engagement Partners*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, LLC. 181 pages. ISBN: 978-1-62036-108-5

Rebecca J. Dumlao's fresh investigation of the various facets of communication and partnerships in community engagement and service-learning contexts could not be more timely, especially given the present political and sociocultural climate of the United States. At a time when higher education institutions are increasingly conscious of power dynamics that exist between themselves and community partners, Dumlao dives deep into the most integral component that determines the success of any ongoing partnership or relationship: communication. Departing from traditional approaches to collaborative efforts that rely on an identifiable leader that carries the majority of the onus, community engagement can and should frame collaborations as true partnerships that level the playing field and engage community members, as well as campus representatives as co-creators that harmoniously work together as equals from start to finish. By tapping into collaborative communication strategies to community-engaged work, hegemonic dynamics can be avoided and community needs can be appropriately addressed with local voices being represented and driving efforts from inception.

In *A Guide to Collaborative Communication for Service-Learning and Community Engagement Partners*, Dumlao extends theory of university/community partnerships into action by outlining a practical framework of collaborative communication principles and practices that can be applied to a variety of community engagement endeavors. By breaking down the elements of the framework into easy-to-understand terms, along with highlighting real-world examples and community stories of the framework being applied in practice, the author provides readers with a guide for novices on developing community/campus collaborations. Dumlao directs much attention to the importance of flexibility and adaptability required of all partners involved in community-engaged work, and hones in on the need for mutual trust, respect, and understanding in collaborative communication efforts, all the while

remaining culturally conscious and mindful. In eight chapters, the author covers some of the basic principles associated with pursuing community-engaged work before diving into the components of the collaborative communication framework. The book sheds light on a myriad of the intricacies involved in university/community partner dynamics that require careful navigation throughout any collaboration, especially highlighting the various communication modes in which community engagement partnerships should be shaped and sustained.

The book opens by highlighting the need for personal reflection by all parties before attempting to successfully forge a new collaborative partnership. Building off of the importance of recognizing one's own core values before acknowledging and working to understand the personal worldviews of partners, Dumlao leaves room for a more thorough exploration of the time and efforts that should be dedicated to developing deeper mutual understandings and relationships between partners with their unique roles, backgrounds, and multidimensional identities. As well, building on the initial intra- and interpersonal considerations involved with developing new community partnerships, the author introduces some of the nuances surrounding university/community partnerships, and opens by encouraging readers to ask themselves to reflect on community issues that the partnership will address. Dumlao briefly explains how any partnership or collaboration will involve both transactional and relational forms of communication, which include various dynamics of communication that are developed throughout the course of a partnership to best suit those involved, as well as the tasks or goals of the particular collaboration.

The most notable feature of the book, Dumlao's collaborative communication framework, is described as an avenue of openness that values all partners' views and contributions, which are used to create opportunities within their partnerships. Among the framework's chief strengths seems to be the fact

that Dumlao acknowledges that a “one size fits all” communication model would be inappropriate in any community engagement context, and the collaborative communication framework is rooted in the notion that partners will make communication choices that best suit their relationships and community engagement endeavors. Highlighting the fluid nature of the interactions between the framework’s elements, connect, converse, envision, commit, and partner patterns, Dumlao focuses on the book’s core message on collaborative partnerships, which emphasizes that partnerships are unique entities that are fostered by the different ways in which the partners openly approach reciprocally understanding the circumstances of their relationships. By investing in the overall needs identified, partners will utilize the collaborative communication framework in different ways and at different times in order to find their stride of what works best for their circumstances.

Following the detailed overview of the framework, Dumlao connects leadership practices to the framework. The book argues that the collaborative communication framework aims to promote unity rather than division in community engagement with a goal of building cohesive partnerships between communities that champion each other. Discussions about management of power dynamics present the claim that diffusing the distribution of power among all partners can strengthen relational communication and the overall collaboration process. Dumlao tackles some extremely important concepts linked to cultural differences and a dialectic approach to communicating with diverse community partners. She frames this approach to cultural contrasts as moving away from a “my way” versus “your way” of doing things, but rather forging an “our way” that serves as an intercultural compromise, respectfully considering contributions of all partners and their backgrounds. Emphasis is placed on partners making efforts to understand the core values of others, and maintaining a commitment to practicing cultural mindfulness that will aid in the building of their intercultural communication skills. Chapter 6 appears to cover some of the book’s most important topics linked to collaborative communication, though readers may have benefited from a deeper probing of strategies surrounding cultural differences and intercultural communication in a community engagement context. As opposed to condensing these topics to a lone chapter, highlighting cultural consciousness as a major theme could have been woven throughout the entire text as a critically vital and impactful consideration of community engagement partnership development.

However, the author offers some practical approaches for dealing with differences and conflicts that may arise between partners. Once again, Dumlao encourages readers to tackle contention respectfully and directly by drawing upon supportive communication techniques to defuse within-group differences or disagreements, and make efforts to manage emotions while keeping conversations productive with the focus on the good of the partnership and collaboration. Readers are provided with an overview of some creative, non-traditional modes of communication that will likely play a major role in the future of community engagement activities. Some examples presented include storytelling, artwork, webinars, short audio and video clips, and how these can each be linked to the collaborative communication framework as well as be used to help community-engaged work succeed and thrive in a digital, globalized society. Additionally, Dumlao provides an appendix of learning activities, which offers many detailed and easy-to-adapt examples of ways that readers can introduce, practice, or strengthen collaborative communication skills covered throughout the book.

Overall this versatile guide could serve as good reference for higher education and/or community partners that may be new to community-engaged work, and are interested in developing or coordinating service-learning collaborations between universities and communities. The book breaks down some of the most important elements surrounding the value of communication in building a collaborative partnership, and offers some great examples of practical application. This book seems best suited for an audience that is new to community engagement and seeking approaches to establishing sustainable relationships between campuses and communities. As our campuses, communities, and broader society find ourselves in a time of great need in terms of interventions aimed at bridging divides, an exploration of collaborative communication principles and approaches would be an excellent place to start on the path to progress.

About the Reviewer

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