

THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

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The word partnership is frequently used to describe a wide range of relationships. A partnership can describe a legally formed business relationship or an informal group of individuals that have come together to work toward a common goal. The relationships of partners are most often “characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility” and include such synonyms as “cooperation, association, alliance, sharing” (Free Dictionary, 2009). The word partnerships, then, can encompass the transactional aspects of a business agreement and/or the relational aspects of interactions between human beings.

The programs of the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity are grounded in the principles of partnership, particularly in relationships that have developed between the faculty leading McMaster learning communities and the community representatives who provide applied learning and research opportunities. Our partners’ motivations for working with Defiance College include the opportunity to share life experiences across cultures, as well the transactional opportunity to gain tangibly from the relationship. The tangible benefits have included new equipment and funds intended to improve people’s lives and new knowledge from our students and faculty intended to build the community’s capacity to advance itself. At the same time, those of us privileged to witness have watched as our students’ world views have expanded far beyond our small campus in rural northwest Ohio. While some McMaster School learning communities may not use the term service-learning to describe the undergraduate, community-based projects and research in which they engage, the principles of high-quality campus-community partnerships that have emerged as a result of service-learning research are useful in examining McMaster School partnerships.

We know that good partnerships are founded on trust, respect, mutual benefit, good communication mechanisms, and governance structures that allow for democratic decision-making, process improvement, and sharing of resources (Benson & Harkavy, 2001; CCPH, 1999; Campus Compact,

2000; Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2002; Schumaker, Reed & Woods, 2000). More structured partnerships also include mutually agreed upon vision, mission, goals, and evaluation mechanisms (Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2002; Points of Light, 2001; Royer, 2000) and a long-term commitment, particularly on the part of the higher education institution (HEI) (Maurasse, 2001; Mayfield & Lucas, 2000). Long-term, healthy, sustained partnerships are grounded in personal relationships. They develop from the relationships between people and are usually sustained by those same individuals (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Holland, 2003; Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2004; Schumaker, Reed & Woods, 2000). In fact, service-learning partnerships can be seen as analogous to personal friendships or romantic relationships, in terms of the forms they take and their patterns of evolution. The closer and more committed the relationship, the stronger the notion that each partner is a member of a single community (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

Sandra Enos and Keith Morton (2003) provide a rubric for considering partnerships as evolving, in which the organizational relationships evolve from transactional (e.g., instrumental, task-oriented, project-based commitments) to transformative (e.g., deeper and sustained commitment between partners in which there is an expectation of change). The progression of the partnership moves along two axes: over time partnerships can evolve from one-time events and projects to the joint creation of work and knowledge. These evolving relationships often require several years to establish (Dugery & Knowles, 2003; Maurasse, 2001). In their discussion of principles of good service-learning practice, Suzanne Mintz and Garry Hesser (1996) suggest the three lenses of collaboration, reciprocity, and diversity through which a partnership's quality and integrity can be examined. Ideally, a partnership is grounded on all three.

Recent studies have attempted to flesh out the community perspectives of service-learning partnerships. Community representatives have said that they initially value service-learning partnerships because they bring additional resources to the organizations and provide the opportunity to educate future professionals and community citizens (Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Gelmon et al., 1998a, 1998b; Leiderman et al., 2003; Seifer & Vaughn, 2004). Marie Sandy and Barbara Holland (2006) found that the opportunity to participate in the education of college students was a primary motivating factor in community partners' initial involvement in a service-learning partnership. Community partners want to be involved in process development, including student recruitment and orientation, reflection, faculty development, curriculum development, assessment, and process improvement (Gelmon et al., 1998a, 1998b; Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2002; Sandy & Holland, 2006). In addition, community organizations that are

actively involved in university-community partnerships (UCP) report that these partnerships are most effective when they meet both short- and long-term goals, include frequent and candid communication between partners, explicitly value the community partner's expertise and contributions, and build the community organization's capacity to function. UCPs also are most beneficial when there is sufficient support from the university and when clear expectations for the partnership and its activities are established (Gelmon et al., 1998a, 1998b; Leiderman et al., 2003). Community organizations take risks in these partnerships, especially when they divert time away from core, funded activities. The risks are exacerbated if UCPs require a community partner to stake its reputation (with peers, clients, funders) on promises made by the higher education institution (HEI) and/or when the HEI's commitment to a project is short-term and may be unsustainable (Leiderman et al., 2003). Bushouse's study (2006) found that the economic risk of allocating scarce staff resources to student supervision predisposed community organizations to prefer transactional relationships with defined time frames.

Communication is important for a variety of reasons, including understanding partners' perspectives, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and establishing personal connections between community partners and the HEI (Sandy & Holland, 2006). In fact, Devi Miron and Barbara Moely (2006) found that community partners' perception of benefit and positive view of the HEI was linked to the extent of their involvement in program planning and implementation, frequent and sustained communication being implied. Community partners value their roles in the educational process (Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Gelmon et al., 1998b; Sandy & Holland, 2006), as well as their increased access to needed resources for program delivery (Bushouse, 2005; Miron & Moely, 2006; Vernon & Ward, 1999). Perceived benefits to their organizations accrue to their clients, as well as the organization itself (Sandy & Holland, 2006). The challenges to working with higher education institutions include the time constraints of the academic calendar, students' lack of preparation, students' schedules, and inadequate faculty involvement (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Vernon & Ward, 1999). Community evaluations of student performance in their organizations reported that the student volunteers were reliable and valuable in providing the services of the organization, were respectful to staff and clients, were prompt, dressed and acted appropriately, and showed interest in the work of the organization. Organizations have also reported that the contributions made by student volunteers outweigh any costs associated with their training and supervision (Edwards et al., 2001; Ferrari & Worrall, 2000).

While much of the literature emerges from the examination of local

partnerships between HEIs and their surrounding communities, the fundamental principles of communication, respect, and mutual benefit are the bedrock of the most enduring McMaster School programs. The Belize and Cambodia programs are successful because they are grounded in a fundamental understanding that the quality of the program is dependent upon the depth of the relationships between the lead faculty and the community partner representatives. The relationships have evolved beyond the merely transactional to include personal friendships between people who care for one another. The richness of the learning environments and the possibility for transformational learning rests solidly on the mutual respect and care between Professor Jo Ann Burkhardt and Sophal Stagg of Southeast Asia Children's Mercy Fund, Professor Jeffrey Weaner and Chantal Oung of the Cambodia Women's Crisis Center, and Professor Mary Ann Studer and Ivan Gillett of Programme for Belize. The New Orleans learning community is developing in the same way.

Enos and Morton's (2003) rubric of evolution from transactional to transformative and Mintz and Hesser's framework of the three lenses of collaboration, reciprocity and diversity provide a meaningful structure for considering McMaster School learning community partnerships. The chronology of the development of the Belize and Cambodia learning communities, as documented in previous McMaster Journals, provide evidence that each partnership is certainly evolving as Enos and Morton (2003) describe. While different aspects of the partnerships may be at different points in their evolution (i.e., the newly launched initiative of teaching basic English phrases to potential hospitality workers in Cambodia is in its nascent stage), taken as a whole and over time, both partnerships show clear evidence of transformation for both sides of the relationship, as well as an evolving sense of the partnerships from strictly transactional to transformational for both the community and the college.

In the first edition of the McMaster Journal (2006), Jo Ann Burkhardt discusses the initial stages of determining how to leverage the intellectual resources of Defiance College to meet the very real needs of schools in Cambodia. The teacher training workshops that were designed and offered by the College in December, 2004, emerged from efforts to understand what the most critical needs of their partner schools were (Burkhardt, 2006). The relationship could only be characterized as transactional at this point. As Burkhardt describes it, the process of obtaining information from Cambodia's Ministry of Education was frustrating at best. Yet working through a liaison, she was able to learn enough about the needs of a handful of schools to create a five-day teacher education institute that provided professional development for educators and applied research and service

opportunities for her and her students. As part of the training, she gathered enough feedback to help prepare the following year's learning community to be effective. As documented later in this volume, the range of student and faculty projects has grown over five years to include educational seminars for medical professionals as well as teachers. In Cambodia, McMaster School projects focus on helping to build our partners' capacity to help themselves by providing education on basic concepts about math, healthcare, and nutrition, to name just a few.

The first learning community to Belize was comprised of five faculty and students who focused on conducting a water quality analysis in the New River Lagoon watershed. From this initial trip that helped to establish baseline data about water quality, student and faculty research has provided analysis of soil samples that has helped subsistence level farmers reduce their debt and dependence upon multi-national exporters, local rangers document nesting sites of endangered bird species, and begin a catalog of medicinal plant species growing in the rain forest of northern Belize, to name just a handful of projects. While the language of the first McMaster Journal is clear about the research value of the Belize experience to the learning community, it is less clear about the intrinsic value of this research to the community in which they worked. What has emerged in subsequent years is a body of evidence and analysis that, when reported back to the partner community, provides beneficial intellectual resources that the community partner would otherwise not have access to. What is also clear is the level of trust and respect that has developed. The partnership has evolved from collecting single points of data to an on-going dialog about how Defiance College, Programme for Belize, and the Village of San Carlos can engage in mutually beneficial work together.

While at the micro level of student Scholar projects, there remains a transactional element to the partnerships, faculty Fellows bring the macro perspective of multiple years working with the same partners, showing up with students in tow to continue the work that was started years ago. The importance of showing up regularly and on schedule when an institution is working at the international and national level cannot be overstated – especially when the partners are struggling to meet human needs in a developing country or redeveloping region with too few resources and against seemingly insurmountable odds. It is worth noting here that the many projects that are undertaken by McMaster Faculty Fellows and Student Scholars are conducted with communities that have access to the most basic of infrastructures. Cambodia remains in a state of rebuilding, still recovering from the brutal regimes of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.



PHOTO BY MARY CATHERINE HARPER

Defiance College students working Tronn Moller, New Orleans community partner.

Belize still struggles to overcome a history grounded in colonial systems of oppression. New Orleans continues its efforts to rebuild long after the storms that paralyzed it and in the face of growing national apathy.

Mintz and Gesser's (1996) lenses of collaboration, reciprocity, and diversity complement Enos and Morton's (2003) more structural perspective of a partnership. While the structural evolution of our partnerships is apparent in the articles of previous McMaster Journals, collaboration and reciprocity are less explicit in the writing, but emerge richly in conversations with the faculty Fellows. What is clear from both the articles and conversations is that communication is the lynch pin to McMaster School collaborations. The language Fellows use clearly indicates that discussions and planning occur consistently throughout the year between the Belize Fellows and Programme for Belize, the Cambodia Fellows and the Cambodia Women's Crisis Center and Southeast Asia Mercy Fund, and the New Orleans Fellows and Churches Supporting Churches, the Amistad Research Center, and researchers working to repair damaged wetlands in and around the city. Integrated into these communications is a focus on authentically reciprocal partnerships, a focus that has emerged through the multi-year process of communication, negotiation, and collaboration.

Addressing the issues of diversity and crossing cultures is essential to the success that McMaster learning communities have experienced in Belize and Cambodia, and the success we are beginning to experience in New Orleans. It is particularly important to explicitly address issues of diversity given that many of our students have never left rural northwest Ohio for any length of time. McMaster School learning communities must strike a delicate balance. We are only “on the ground” for two to three weeks. Any feelings of becoming a part of the local community are illusory and, frankly, imaginary. However, given that our students are predominantly Caucasian and relatively inexperienced, it is critical that the Scholars understand issues of cultural appropriateness and respect in order to serve our partners and complete their projects. This is true whether our learning communities are working in another country, immersed in another language, or working in another region of the U.S. Are we always successful? Certainly not. However, after reviewing all previous editions of the McMaster Journal, there is no question that most McMaster Scholars develop empathy, if not outright understanding, of another culture that would not be possible without the focused context of a year-long learning community with an international or national community-based research experience integrated into it.

In the best of examples, there is clear and tangible mutual benefit. For example, Kelsey Huff’s article, later in this volume, is the result of in-depth research that has helped her develop a sophisticated understanding of her subject area. Yet the information that she shared with Cambodian medical professionals has the potential to revolutionize the country’s understanding of how tuberculosis (TB) affects many Cambodians and eventually save many lives. The unique blend of democratic learning community practice, community-based and undergraduate research experiences, service-learning practice, and short-term off-campus study laid the groundwork for this native of rural northwest Ohio to travel to another country to present research findings that, if heeded, could radically change practices related to TB testing.

The worry, as with most distant partnership work, is that the short-term nature of the experiences will not be in-depth enough to transform every student’s thinking about people and cultures that are radically different than their own. While most of the articles that follow certainly convey a sense of growth and learning on the students’ parts, a sense of the importance of individual contributions to making communities healthy and whole is less pervasive. There is still much work to be done if U.S. higher education hopes to effect a transformation in our culture from an isolationist sense of self-satisfaction and noblesse oblige to a geographical place inhabited by global citizens who genuinely see themselves as such. The McMaster School

partnerships have begun to provide the opportunity for student Scholars to catch a glimpse of what global citizenship might look like. Robin Diers points this out in her reflection after studying the detrimental effects of various forest clearing techniques to create more agricultural land in Belize. Alyssa Shuherk's reflection indicates that her work in Belize has expanded her world view significantly. Katie Tinker and Jamie Wilmot describe the opportunity to address issues of home and community within the context of place, choice, and lack of choice in the context of New Orleans. Britney Huffman indicates a new encounter when she reflects on the dissonance between the Cambodian emphasis of peace and serenity and the de-valuing of female independence. These are just a few examples of the transformative learning that occurs when students and faculty engage in deep learning and combine traditional, classroom learning with community experience to the benefit of a community need.

As Msgr. Ivan Illich's address in 1968 (Illich, 1990) to a conference of international service volunteers starkly highlights, it is not enough to work with communities out of sense of service. Illich's 1968 critique of international service was that the mere act of providing service often reproduces the paternalistic attitudes that such programs profess to contradict. His comments strongly imply that if programs that provide experiences to middle class American students do not explicitly address issues of privilege, class, and the history of northern hemisphere domination of the world's societies, these programs threaten to perpetuate systems of domination and oppression. The McMaster School's programs begin to address the issues that Illich raises by insisting that the projects that Fellows and Scholars design meet a community-defined need and demonstrate a reciprocal measure of community and student benefit.

The measure of reciprocity and mutual benefit that McMaster learning communities achieve is due to the conscious commitment of Faculty Fellows to holding learning community meetings that span an entire academic year. It is clearly hard work for both Fellows and Student Scholars, and scholars produce some of the most rigorous academic work of their entire undergraduate experience at DC. While the international and national experiences are relatively brief, the preparation prior to the travel and the follow-up upon returning demand of the Scholars a level of deep learning that is difficult to replicate within the context of single academic term. Community benefit is virtually guaranteed with each project as Scholars are required to focus on this beginning with the proposals they submit for acceptance to the program.

Is the McMaster School learning community model time consuming and taxing? Absolutely. But then does deep learning about anything occur without a substantial commitment of time and energy? In my observation one result is that McMaster Scholars graduate from Defiance College with a deeper, more sophisticated understanding of the world, their own capabilities, and the power of partnerships. Our partners know one small Midwestern college that does what it says it will do.

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