An Interactive and Contextual Model of Community-University Collaborations for Research and Action

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Community-university partnerships for research and action are at the heart of many fields in the social sciences including public health, urban planning, education, and community psychology. These partnerships involve individuals from different backgrounds and disciplines working together to address social issues of importance to the community. This article proposes an interactive and contextual model for developing and sustaining community-university partnerships. The phases in the model include gaining entry into the community, developing and sustaining a mutual collaboration (developing trust and mutual respect, establishing adequate communication, respecting human diversity, establishing a culture of learning, respecting the culture of the setting and the community, and developing an action agenda), and recognizing the benefits and outcomes of partnership work. The model also includes the potential challenges that might threaten the partnership, such as resource inequality and time commitment.

Keywords: *partnerships; participatory research; community collaborations*

A collaborative relationship between researchers and community members within settings such as community-based organizations (CBOs) for conducting research and action has become a commonly used strategy in various fields. These include health and public health (Greenberg, Howard, & Desmond, 2003; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000; Sullivan & Kelly, 2001), community psychology (Nelson, Prilleltensky, & MacGillivary, 2001), sociology (Park & Lee, 1999), education (see partnerships with schools, e.g., Gibson & Oberg, 1998; Lewis, 1998), community development (e.g., Panet-Raymond, 1992), and urban planning (e.g., Gills, Butler, Rose, & Bivens, 2001), among others.

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Researchers have proposed collaborative partnership models that varied from those that describe critical phases involved in research, primarily focusing on the broad categories of collaborative research (e.g, Harper & Salina, 2000; Ostrom, Lerner, & Freel, 1995; Small, 1996) to descriptions of vital characteristics of successful partnerships (Amuwo & Jenkins, 2001; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Riger, 2001; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004; Weiss, Anderson, & Lasker, 2002). These previous models and frameworks have provided useful guidelines for researchers and practitioners who conduct collaborative work. In general, these models have not focused on the processes in developing community-university partnerships along with a detailed description of the guiding principles that are needed to sustain the relationship. In addition, prior models often have not included specific components based on contextual factors that may influence the nature and course of the collaborative relationship. Although they have listed important characteristics of partnerships, they have not provided a visual model. Because CBOs and university researchers conduct their work within systems that have shared and unique demands and influences that can affect the nature and course of the collaborative relationship, future models will benefit from addressing the multidimensional complexity of developing and sustaining community-university partnerships.

This article contributes to the literature by proposing an interactive contextual model that articulates a range of issues and factors to address in the process of developing and sustaining community-university collaborations. In an attempt to address the complex interaction of factors that come into play during partnership work, we elaborate on specific principles and values that influence the process of the relationship trajectory (gaining entry into the community, developing and sustaining a mutual collaboration, and recognizing benefits and outcomes), while also addressing the potential challenges and threats to the collaboration. In describing the model, we focus on the contextual factors, such as the goals and motivations of each partner, and use examples from our combined community collaboration work to illustrate the model. Within the proposed model, we define university-community partnerships as an explicit written or verbal agreement between a community setting (community-based organization [CBO] in this case) and an academic unit to engage in a common project or common goal, which is mutually beneficial for an extended period. Although we refer to CBOs as the community, the model can be used and applied to any community setting including schools and grassroots groups. In this context, CBOs mean not-for-profit community-based organizations that provide a variety of services for people in need and/or people who share a common predicament.

A CONTEXTUAL AND INTERACTIVE MODEL

Figure 1 depicts a model that includes three main phases in the development and sustainability of partnerships: the *gaining entry into the community* phase, the *developing and sustaining the collaboration* phase, and the *recognizing outcomes and benefits* phase. The various components involved in developing and sustaining the mutual collaboration (the central portion of the model) are reciprocally interrelated and interactive, with each factor influencing all other factors. Thus, the placement of an item in the model does not indicate a proposed directional influence on a particular factor, and working on one component is likely to have an impact on other components.

The suggested model is contextual because it is guided by the needs of the organization, the type of organization or community setting, as well as the needs and style of the partners. The level and type of relationship building is a function of the interaction

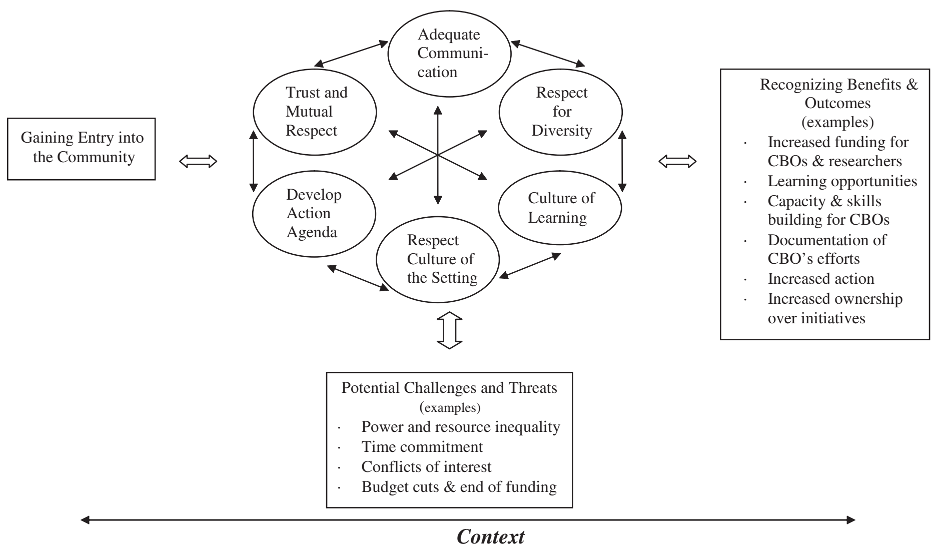

Figure 1. Interactive and contextual model of collaboration: Process of developing and sustaining community-university partnerships.

NOTE: The various components involved in developing and sustaining the mutual collaboration are reciprocally interrelated and interactive, with each factor influencing all other factors, while also being influenced by the other factors. Thus, the placement of an item in the model does not indicate a proposed directional influence on a particular factor. CBO = community-based organization.

between the researchers and community partners (e.g., communication style, respect, and trust). Issues affecting relationship building are in turn influenced by the actions of individual partners. The relationship building may vary on a continuum of strength and intensity—from frequent communications and meetings to seldom contact depending on the project, the needs of the partners, and phases of the research. For example, at the beginning of the relationship, the individuals involved in the partnership might hold weekly meetings, while during the data analysis phase partners might meet less frequently.

Although we do detail three primary phases in developing and sustaining a collaborative relationship, the interactional nature of the central portion of the model highlights the fluidity of such relationships and emphasizes the need to simultaneously attend to multiple systemic factors. As such, building trust and mutual respect is facilitated by the communication style adopted by partners, respect for diversity, and the culture of the organization, among other processes relevant to building the relationship. Similarly, as one gains entry into the setting, the communication style, respect and trust, and respect for diversity, among other processes, will affect sustaining the relationship. Therefore, each factor might be a facilitator or an obstacle for other factors. For instance, having problems in communicating with CBO staff may negatively influence building trust and respect or perceived understanding of the culture of the setting. In addition, a person or group and environmental factors may interact to influence the relationship. As such, there might be individual differences on how partners relate to one another. A partner may develop a very strong and positive relationship with a partner from the other setting but have a hard time communicating and developing a relationship with a second partner from the same setting. Contextual factors occurring at either setting (academia or community) might also affect the relationship, for example, staff or student turnover. The type of factors that influence the relationship depend on a number of circumstances surrounding the academic and community setting. Within the proposed model, we describe the process of building the relationship and provide examples that illustrate the dynamic and interactive characteristics of the model.

GAINING ENTRY INTO THE COMMUNITY

Entry into the community "is the stage in which the basis for the research relationship is formed" (Serrano-Garcia, 1990, p. 176). The entry process of one or more individuals from one system to another will affect the relationships formed, the work that can be done, and the understanding of the system (Kelly, Ryan, Altman, & Stelzner, 2000). Developing entry involves a process at which we have to work to achieve. It is not necessarily guaranteed by carrying the university name or holding an advanced degree. Developing entry into the community organization involves getting to know the community of interest by spending time learning about the organization's culture, history in the community, and vision for the future (Harper et al., 2004).

Strategies that facilitate entry into the community include touring the community, visiting and volunteering at the setting, conducting informal interviews, reviewing agency publications and annual reports, joining in community events, and adopting research strategies such as participant observation (Harper et al., 2004; Harper & Salina, 2000; Suarez-Balcazar & Orellana-Damacela, 1999). Taking the time to develop entry facilitates establishing trust and respect. This involves articulating early in the project the mission, goals, roles, and expectations of the partnership and a common vision (Fawcett, 1990; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Wolff, 2001). The attributions that partners hold about partnerships and their previous personal experience with partnerships may interact in either facilitating or hindering the entry phase.

DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING A MUTUAL COLLABORATION

Community-university partnerships are based on the principle that both individuals from community settings and researchers can work together toward a common goal resulting in mutual benefits for all those involved (Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000). Developing and sustaining a mutual relationship is influenced by the interaction of components such as developing trust, developing adequate communication, respecting diversity, developing a culture of learning, respecting the culture of the setting, and developing a collaborative action agenda. This process is likely to result in the following benefits and outcomes: increased funding for CBOs and researchers, learning opportunities, capacity and skills building, and documentation of CBOs' efforts. However, partnerships are not free of potential challenges and threats, many of which have been discussed elsewhere including issues of power and control, resource inequality, time commitment, conflicts of interest, and budget cuts/end of funding (Riger, 2001; Sullivan et al., 2001).

What follows is a discussion of key factors in developing and maintaining collaborations. Working on these components early is critical to the success of the partnership. Obstacles in one area affect other areas. For instance, having a hard time communicating with partners and possible misunderstandings are likely to threaten the building of trust and respect.

Developing Trust and Mutual Respect

Developing and establishing trust and mutual respect involves taking time to get to know the setting and the different stakeholders (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004; Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Sharma, & Lanum, 2003), as well as holding a positive attitude about the collaborative partnership (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Nyden et al., 1997). Unfortunately, some community settings have a history of being overused by academic institutions and therefore, community personnel are often cautious and suspicious about doing research with academicians (Perkins & Wandersman, 1990; Sullivan et al., 2001).

The process of building a partnership takes time and patience (Amuwo & Jenkins, 2001), as the CBO "checks out" the university researchers to assess whether or not they are willing to open the doors of their CBO "home" to this new member. It is important to be honest with community members about how the university works and what the researchers plan to do with the knowledge gained in terms of publications and dissemination. The building of trust is often facilitated when the community organization is the one approaching the university. Projects that begin in the community—community partners guide the process and develop ownership—are more likely to result in greater investment than projects that are initiated by researchers (Evans, Rey, Hemphill, & Perkins, 2001). However, most often researchers are the ones approaching the community. In any case, partners need to acknowledge and recognize the other party's particular areas of strength, needs, goals, and desired outcomes of the collaboration.

Community partners vary in their backgrounds and areas of expertise (Riger, 2001). Some partners not only bring vast experience working with communities but also bring experience in designing programs and evaluating their initiatives. Partners we have worked with, in particular CBO directors and staff, have a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. In addition, community leaders, advocates, and participants possess years of personal experience with the problems/issues at hand as they deal with them on a daily basis, often advocating for their rights to agency staff and local politicians, as well as organizing community events. This knowledge needs to be recognized. Thus, building a reciprocal relationship involves being open to working in an interdisciplinary fashion and appreciating and respecting the knowledge, skills, capacities, and experiences that our partners bring to the collaboration (Bond & Keys, 1993; Nyden et al., 1997). Developing trust is also facilitated by other aspects of the model such as the communication style, respect for diversity, and the culture of the organization.

Example. Once we were approached by the executive director of a CBO serving the housing needs of low-income families who was seeking assistance with an evaluation project. At our first meeting with the coordinator of the tenants program, we were somewhat surprised to see the hostility with which we were received. After a month of weekly meetings with the coordinator, developing agreed-upon project goals, clarifying expectations, and visiting informally, the coordinator confessed that he felt exploited by another group of researchers from a well-known university in the area (see Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2001). Researchers had promised to meet often and deliver many products to the setting, but after obtaining the data they needed, they never came back to the organization. After this confession, the coordinator started greeting us with big bear hugs customary in the culture of the organization.

Establishing Adequate Communication

Establishing adequate communication patterns from the onset stage of gaining entry involves clearly articulating the interest in the project and potential benefits for all involved. Finding common ground, agreeing on the principles and the goals for the project (e.g., equal participation), and articulating both community and academic expectations (Gills et al., 2001) are critical to building a sustainable partnership as well as developing trust and respect. This process takes time, respect for diversity, an understanding of the culture of the organization, effective listening skills, and commitment to the partnership (Riger, 2001; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004).

Each CBO has its own style of communication, both within the agency and between the agency and outside entities (Bond & Keys, 1993). These communication patterns are often affected by a range of ecological factors including ethnicity, age, technology, and geographic region. It is important for all partners to learn about each other's preferred style of communication. In fact, we have found that some staff and community residents prefer to have face-to-face contact or phone contact rather than mail or e-mail contact. This is especially the case early in the development of the collaborative relationship when personal contact is critical to developing a trusting relationship.

CBOs have different levels of stakeholders with whom we might need to communicate at different points and who may use different styles of communication. CBOs often face high staff turnover rates and work overload, making it difficult for the executive director to assign more than one or two individuals to the partnership (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). It is then the team's responsibility to ensure that others (e.g., gatekeepers, community members, and other staff members) receive monthly or periodic updates as well as opportunities to provide input.

Example. One agency we worked with used interoffice memorandums as their primary mode of conveying critical information to staff within the organization. Therefore, when critical information regarding the evaluation was agreed upon within the collaborative team, the information was then put in the form of a formal memorandum by the community partner and sent to all partners and the larger organization. In another project, researchers faxed information to community partners along with follow-up phone calls. Despite various ongoing efforts to facilitate communication when miscommunications or misunderstandings occurred, they were quickly clarified before threatening the relationship.

Respecting Human Diversity

Respect for human diversity is critical to the success of community-university partnerships. Diversity needs to be valued and celebrated as researchers enter into and attempt to maintain collaborative partnerships (Bond & Keys, 1993; Nelson et al., 2001). To understand and celebrate diversity, we spent time getting to know the CBO and its people, their behavioral practices and preferences (Nyden et al., 1997), as well as respect for their opinions and differences (Rappaport, 1977). Demonstrating respect for diversity and the culture of the setting facilitates the development of trust, mutual respect, and communication among partners.

Community-based organizations are usually staffed by diverse individuals who may represent a range of different genders, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, social classes, and religious beliefs (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004). In urban cities, CBOs are usually serving an ethnically diverse population and thus, the staff often mirrors the populations being served. Having a research group composed of diverse individuals may help at the beginning phase of the collaborative process, but it does not guarantee a successful entry into the community or the establishment of a successful relationship with the partners. We value recruiting students of color, people with disabilities, and members of other numerical minority groups such as gay/lesbian/bisexual individuals. In some instances, however, individuals who share an ethnic identification with the community may have a more difficult time within lower income communities if the researcher is perceived as being from a different social class or is seen as someone who has "sold out" to the mainstream establishment. Community residents and CBO staff often have experienced forms of oppression that make them leery of anyone coming from outside of the organization (Perkins & Wandersman, 1990; Serrano-Garcia, 1990). Thus, we have found that the most central concern is a shared commitment to improving the conditions for the people who live in their community, regardless of whether or not there is an exact cultural or ethnic match between the team and the community.

Example. The executive director of one agency was unclear as to the level of commitment of a European American student working on a project with an HIV/AIDS service organization (serving mostly Latino individuals). After hearing of this student's involvement in an AIDS Ride fund-raiser that involved cycling from Minnesota to Chicago to raise funds for HIV/AIDS services and observing her relating to agency clients, her image of this student changed. The student also worked very hard at building trust by volunteering at the agency and visiting informally with staff members and clients.

Establishing a Culture of Learning

Establishing a culture of learning and a two-way learning environment encompasses recognizing the strengths of the setting and the learning opportunities for all members of the partnership. It is important to approach the community setting as a learner who is open to new experiences and knowledge from the community (Nyden et al., 1997). Building a relationship based on trust and respect, being sensitive to diversity, and establishing adequate communication facilitates the development of a culture of learning.

Establishing a culture of learning also involves the exchange and cycling of resources and the process of reciprocity, defined as the give-and-take of a relationship (Kelly et al., 2000). Partners exchange resources from staff and students' time, technology, experience, supplies and space. Typically, faculty and students provide access to resources, knowledge of research literature, research methods, and access to technology. Community partners bring knowledge of the specific area or population of service, experiential knowledge of previous attempts at addressing the issues involved, as well as the cultural and contextual characteristics of the setting and community with which they work (Weiss et al., 2002). Community partners also provide access to key informants, community leaders, networks in the community, and access to program participants (Nyden et al., 1997). By acknowledging the resources coming from the community and learning from them, the inequalities between the community and the university might be balanced keeping power and control of the project redistributed.

Example. As a way to establish a culture of reciprocal learning, we have used several strategies including forming partnership teams that meet regularly in the community setting. All interested stakeholders are included in an open process of feedback and regular input. Each member's contribution to the process is recognized and celebrated. We have also invited community leaders and CBO's executive directors to speak to a class of students on specific issues of expertise such as homelessness and housing development in the urban setting. This interactive process capitalizes on the strengths of both the university and the community.

Respecting the Culture of the Setting and the Community

Community organizations are complex social systems. From an ecological perspective, understanding a social system such as a CBO suggests a focus on the system itself as a whole, the relationships and interactions between individuals in the system, the relationships of the organization with other organizations and the community, structures, and processes of the setting (Kelly et al., 2000).

One important aspect of partnerships with CBOs is respecting and celebrating the culture of the organization (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004). We find expressions of subjective and objective culture (see Marin, 1993) within the member's individual background as well as the established norms and traditions of the organization or setting. Each community organization has its own culture and idiosyncratic features particular to the setting, the staff, the people they serve, and the geographic community in which they are located. The culture of the setting informs data collection strategies that might work best in a particular community. Engaging in a process of understanding the community and organization's language, norms, and physical environment, as well as each staff member's roles, responsibilities, and agency priorities facilitates the building of the relationship (Harper et al., 2004). When possible, we suggest volunteering at the setting and taking the time to truly understand the complexity and multiple functions of the agency, its participants, and staff, and their behavioral practices (Harper & Salina, 2000; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004; Thompson, Story, & Butler, 2003).

Community culture also includes social class. It is important for partners not to impose their own class and cultural values on the partnership team (Balcazar, Keys, & Suarez-Balcazar, 2001; Jordan, Bogat, & Smith, 2001; Panet-Raymond, 1992; Perkins & Wandersman, 1990). One way to gain an understanding of these is to participate in the cultural practices and "rituals" of the organization and to engage in conversations about culturally related topics that may or may not have a direct impact on the research or evaluation project. Although this is often a time-consuming task, it offers opportunities for both parties to share in the values, beliefs, and attitudes of their individual and collective cultures, and often serves to strengthen the relationship, to develop sensitivity toward diversity, and to decrease cultural and social class barriers that are typically present (Harper et al., 2004).

There are also dimensions of time that have different meaning for the community and for academic institutions. For instance, time frames for academics are based on semesters or quarters, concepts that for community organizations are meaningless. Important time frames for many organizations include funding cycles, annual report deadlines, fundraising events, and the local school calendar. The commitment to the organization should be for the duration of the project, which may vary depending on its complexity and funding.

Example. We have found that community meetings in some African American urban neighborhoods may begin and end with an uplifting prayer. Participants appreciate it when we also take part in the prayer. We found that when working with a predominately African American community agency, conversations with a group of program directors about philosophical issues and shared experiences relating to spirituality and prayer assisted in moving the work relationship to a more trusting and collaborative level. Meetings in Mexican American communities may be more successful when participants have time to mingle, talk about their families, and have food available before and after the meeting. Although these types of cultural preferences are essential in community research, one must be careful not to make stereotypical assumptions.

Developing an Action Agenda

Developing a collaborative action agenda is consistent with a participatory action research (PAR) approach. In PAR, the research agenda is decided in collaboration with, and guided by, the needs of the community, not the needs of the researcher (Taylor et al., 2004). Often the needs of the researcher are guided by theoretical research questions, whereas the needs for the community agency are practical and action oriented. In PAR, partners become an integral part of the team and influence the research agenda from the beginning of the collaborative process (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Democratic strategies are used to identify goals and objectives, to establish the research methodology, to collect and analyze knowledge, and to disseminate and use findings (Park & Lee, 1999). This approach is also consistent with the concept of empowerment. Empowerment has been referred to as an ongoing process of mutual respect, critical reflection, and group participation by which people, organizations, or communities gain access, control, and mastery over their resources and affairs (Fawcett et al., 1994; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). Establishing and maintaining collaborative partnerships with CBOs is essential to an empowerment agenda (Minkler, Thompson, Bell, & Rose, 2001).

Direct involvement of people affected by the problem under study facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of their social reality. By directly involving those affected and those serving the affected, experiential knowledge is brought to the research process (Balcazar, Keys, Kaplan, & Suarez-Balcazar, 1999; Harper & Carver, 1999; Selener, 1997). During partnership work, participants are invited to articulate their issues and concerns, assist in the development of materials, and provide access to difficult-to-reach segments of the community. When the development of a research agenda is initiated by the community and/or designed to assist the agency in a specific need, this facilitates shared accountability of the project results, ownership from part of the agency, and sustainability of the project over time (Selener, 1997; Suarez-Balcazar, Balcazar, & Fawcett, 1992). When the project is initiated by the researchers, early involvement of the community in setting research priorities and goals is critical for partnership success (Sullivan et al., 2001).

Example. Saul Alinsky, one of American's best-known community organizers, said, "The word academic is synonymous for irrelevant" (as cited by Nyden et al., 1997). Not to our surprise, we have often heard the same from practitioners: "How is what academics do relevant to my daily work with low-income children?" This question was articulated by a day care teacher at the beginning of a program evaluation project. The evaluation agenda, at this site, was then developed in collaboration with the staff that played a key role in selecting the project for evaluation, outcome indicators, conducting assessments, and interpreting and using the results to improve the day care program.

RECOGNIZING BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES OF COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

By working in close collaboration with CBOs and the communities they represent, we might be in a better position to affect and shape social policies, social services/programs, and practices. Successful partnerships produce benefits to both the community and the university. Such benefits include, but are not limited to, funding for both CBOs and researchers, learning opportunities for all partners, and increased capacity and transfer of skills.

Increased Funding Opportunities for Both CBOs and Researchers

Private foundations that allocate money to the community to address social problems are now supporting more partnerships with academic units. In the area of evaluation of community initiatives and prevention programs, for instance, funders are asking for data and documentation of impact (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). CBOs we have worked with mentioned the positive reception they have received from their board of directors and funders when they described an evaluation project conducted in collaboration with researchers.

Learning Opportunities for Partners

These partnerships offer research and service-learning opportunities for students and researchers. Students have commented on how their experience in working with CBOs has enriched their lives personally and professionally. Researchers (students and faculty) have also identified the altruistic value of doing research that is of relevance to the CBO and the community, as well as the benefits of applying what they have learned to real-world situations (Greenberg et al., 2003).

The benefits for researchers include establishing relationships with community settings where they can conduct research, creating new connections with other settings (CBOs), and finding support for engaged community research that some academic institutions are beginning to reinforce. Current research has documented the benefits of scholarship of engagement with communities (see Jackson & Reddick, 1999; Sanstad, Stall, Goldstein, Everett, & Brousseau, 1999; Sullivan et al., 2001; Weiss et al., 2002) and the benefits of service learning for students in applied fields (Anderson, 2003; Greenberg et al., 2003; Stadtlander, 2002).

Capacity and Skills Building for CBOs

Partners working together can increase their skills and enhance their capacity for designing evaluation and documentation tools, protocols, and databases. By building on a collaborative process and focusing on the transfer of skills, CBO staff can do their own documentation of programs and expand their use to other programs in which researchers are not directly involved. In this way, the agency will experience both short-term and long-term benefits from the collaborative relationship. In one community organization, staff members were not comfortable using a database program. We provided training on how to use the database and on how to conduct simple data analysis. However, when transferring skills, we need to be aware of the fact that staff turnover is often high (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). To ensure that the skills are kept in the organization, multiple staff members need to be trained, or trained staff members should be asked to train other staff. The transfer of skills is a crucial aspect of community-university partnerships and is part of our responsibility as researchers to leave something behind.

One of the benefits of partnerships is the opportunity to document the impact of social programs and use the data to improve programs based on empirically grounded knowledge. Community organizations experience work overload, placing limitations and barriers to conducting evaluations, documentation, and research. Partnerships allow community settings to pursue these endeavors. CBOs benefit by legitimizing what they know works with research findings. A staff member of a CBO once said to us, "We are always so busy serving and implementing programs, that for us to even think about evaluation or documentation of what we do is a luxury." However, documenting the impact and implementation of community initiatives may increase funding opportunities.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND THREATS TO COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

These partnerships are not without their challenges such as issues of power and resource inequality, time commitments, conflicts of interest, and budget cuts or end of funding. Other authors have also discussed challenges such as the complexity of partnership work, the defining and redefining of roles in partnerships, and the entrenched conservatism of discipline-defined research (see Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004). This section details several potential challenges and threats to successful community-university partnerships and offers strategies for addressing the barriers.

Issues of Power and Resource Inequalities

Power issues might become more evident in the process of determining the research agenda, designing the methodology, collecting data, analyzing data, and using the data. From the researcher's perspective, methodological issues are critical to documenting the impact of a program, whereas for community partners, previous experience and quick solutions to pressing social problems might be more important (Riger, 2001). It is then critical to recognize the knowledge coming from the community and to allow the community partners to have a voice in the methodology the partnership will pursue. In their efforts to try to protect a strong methodological approach to the issues under study, researchers need to welcome the views of the community partners and the experiential knowledge they bring to the partnership. For instance, community partners might know best what data collection strategies work in their communities (e.g., mail surveys vs. one-on-one interviews). Community partners can help us ground the methodology to the realities of the setting and the cultural values of the population. This process of compromising is facilitated by sustaining a strong trusted partnership, strong communication, and much negotiation. Gills et al. (2001) have urged researchers to avoid condescending and paternalistic attitudes toward the community to develop an even collaboration. Partners will be most successful at maintaining a strong relationship and open lines of communication when they attempt to create a nonhierarchical and bidirectional relationship with community members from the very beginning (Bond & Keys, 1993; Harper et al., 2004).

Partners need to be aware of the resource inequality that might influence the partnership relationship (Nelson et al., 2001), including both physical resources (e.g., computers, space, Internet access, office supplies) and human resources. Resources are perceived and valued differently in academia and the community. For instance, community-based organizations located in low-income neighborhoods do not necessarily have one computer per individual staff member. Resources that we take for granted, such as easy access to computer programs and the Internet, might be scarce in the CBO.

Strategies. Several strategies have been suggested in the literature to address issues of power and resource inequalities. First, acknowledging and tapping community resources and strengths reduces power differentials (Nelson et al., 2001; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Riger, 2001). Using community resources and strengths helps balance the relationship. Second, listening to our partners about strategies and methods that have worked in their community/service area fosters strong relationships. For instance, they can inform us about best ways to reach out to consumers (e.g., mail surveys, door-to-door canvassing, or focus groups). This learning process also involves researchers sharing with partners their knowledge, which will help protect the research methodology (e.g., explaining to partners why it is important to select participants using randomization). Listening carefully to community partners' ideas opens the door for partners to listen to the researchers. Third, developing a continuous process for stakeholders to be part of the decision-making process and providing ongoing feedback and input facilitate a truly collaborative project. This might involve altering interactional patterns that are commonplace in the university setting, including going to the community agency's physical space instead of meeting with them in the researcher's office (Nyden et al., 1997), not using power-related titles such as doctor and professor, and avoiding the use of research jargon (Solarz, 2001). As verbalized by a community organizer in a midwestern city, "University people like to use jargon to demonstrate their superiority over us." Unfortunately, community members often feel exploited or oppressed by academicians, resulting in negative attitudes toward academics and researchers in general and increased suspicions about the viability of a potential partnership (Jordan et al., 2001; Perkins & Wandersman, 1990; Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994).

Another strategy that has worked for us in addressing the power differential is the use of monetary resources to cover project expenses. When our projects are funded by grants, we take on the financial responsibility to cover most, if not all, research expenses related to the partnership and research project. In addition, we provide a monetary incentive for the agency and include a percentage of staff members' time, expenses for meetings, and other expenses as needed. Many organizations in urban areas are fighting for resources and see their involvement in the partnerships depending on "How much is it going to cost me?" in terms of resources and staff time and, of course, "What am I getting out of it?" Due to these concerns, it is important to keep in mind issues of power and control as resources are exchanged (Serrano-Garcia, 1990; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). The strategies highlighted above are designed to facilitate the development of a more even relationship.

Time Commitment

Collaborative partnerships demand a long-term commitment and effort (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Perkins & Wandersman, 1990; Riger, 2001; Suarez-Balcazar & Orellana-Damacela, 1999; Wolff, 2001). Most of our partnerships have been from 14 months to 5 years in duration. During this time, we have seen student turnover as well as staff turnover. If researchers and evaluators are not able to make a time commitment to the agency, they should seriously consider whether it is in the best interest of the agency to form such a relationship.

Strategies. It is important then to work with multiple staff members (not just one contact) and several students and to make a commitment to the partnership for its duration (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). Also, it is helpful to build research and evaluation plans that have multiple end points where products are produced for the benefit of the agency in the event that the entire project is not completed by the anticipated date. Some professors may be able to build involvement in the agency's work into their courses such as in the form of community-based service learning courses to ensure a continual stream of volunteers.

Conflicts of Interest

When working in collaboration with multiple partners, conflicts of interest might be unavoidable. All stakeholders and partners might not necessarily share agreement on goals and objectives for the partnership, and finding common ground might be a challenge (Nelson et al., 2001; Fawcett et al., 1996). Furthermore, the fact that different perspectives, coming from a variety of stakeholders, are involved in the process might yield a complex process along with challenges in finding common ground (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004).

Strategies. One strategy that has been effective in addressing and preventing conflicts is to have regular meetings with various stakeholders in the agency and being aware of how people are reacting to the various research/evaluation activities. When it appears that there may be an upcoming difficulty or issue, the researchers can then be proactive and spend time talking with various individuals within the setting to attempt to find a way to thwart conflict and organizational distress.

Budget Cuts and End of Funding

CBOs often find themselves fighting for funds and spending much time and effort conducting fund-raising activities. If the organization finds itself in a state of fiscal distress, they may need to suspend or reduce programs in order to focus more efforts on fund-raising or finding new resources. In addition, partners need to prepare for the end of the project when funded by external grants.

Strategies. Sharing early findings from outcome-related studies or evaluations helps particularly with programs that are in danger of being cut, as this information may illustrate to the funders the impact the program is having in the community. Furthermore, assistance with grant-writing activities is usually appreciated by the CBO. Some academic partners may use their technology resources to assist CBOs in conducting Internet searches for new funding. The university partner may have connections and resources at the university setting that can assist the organization in their fund-raising efforts. This may include free use of university facilities for fund-raising events; access to volunteers through student service organizations; and inexpensive advertisement of events through university channels such as radio stations, newspapers, and other university-affiliated publications. To facilitate the end of the project, we suggest holding a few wrap-up sessions and celebrating accomplishments.

CONCLUSIONS

Community action researchers can become agents of social change when the research is within a truly collaborative partnership framework. Community-university partnerships are not without their challenges, although the many reinforcers maintain researchers' and practitioners' involvement. Taken together, partnerships between CBOs and university-affiliated researchers have tremendous potential for growth and can lead to exciting new venues for all involved as well as improved services for members of the community. The model presented in this article provides a framework for practitioners and researchers working together. The model focuses on developing a strong and truly collaborative relationship yielding benefits to all involved.

Challenges of doing this work are well known. Researchers must balance professional advancement with the goals of the CBO as well as the larger community. Community partners are savvy, understand the constraints of academicians, and do not necessarily need us to be successful in their communities. Therefore, it is important to discuss differential goals and expectations when initially developing partnerships so both parties will enter the collaboration with a clear sense of the eventual outcomes of the project.

Equal nonhierarchical partnerships are possible but do require effort and commitment. All partners bring knowledge and resources to the partnership. To accomplish partnership goals, partners need to develop open lines of communication, respect for human diversity, a trustful and respectful relationship, and understand the culture of the setting, among other things. Resources and knowledge coming from both set of partners are important in advancing a community action research agenda. Given this, each partner can learn from the other in a reciprocal and beneficial manner. The opportunity to learn about the science of action research and community change is provided by community-university partnership work.

Community-university partnerships for community research and action will likely continue to increase in the future, but their construction must be guided by principles that create mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships. There is immense potential for social change and improvements in the health of communities by combining the skills, knowledge, and expertise of both practitioners and academic researchers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Building community-university partnerships is important for practitioners in applied health-related fields; as such, relationships can lead to the improvement and expansion of community-based prevention and health promotion programs. By developing, implementing, and evaluating health-related programs in a collaborative manner, both practitioners and researchers are able to bring their unique talents to the table and combine them in a synergistic fashion. Practitioners bring into the partnership specific experiential knowledge, community resources, and connections, whereas researchers are more likely to contribute with scientific knowledge. It is the coming together of these different types of knowledge that can influence and advance scholarship and practice. This article was based on prior writings on partnerships as well as applied experiences of university researchers involved in an array of partnerships in the Midwest. The interactive and contextual model presented provides a guiding framework for practitioners, who wish to create strong community-university partnerships. The model may help practitioners who are interested in developing community-university collaborations either for practice and/or scholarship work to avoid pitfalls and potential problems in developing successful partnerships and to increase the benefits associated with collaborations.

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