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Rural educators point to the need for increased inter-institutional collaboration – partly in response to scarce resources but also in response to the complex problems faced in many rural areas. This article examines some of the experience gleaned from ten years' work in inter-institutional collaboration directed by the Partnership for Rural Improvement.

# The Partnership for Rural Improvement: An Approach to Inter-Institutional Outreach

by Robert H. McDaniel and  
Ralph A. Loomis

There is a growing recognition within the ranks of rural adult educators of the need for institutional collaboration in meeting rural problems. At the same time an examination of successful programs in meeting rural needs has brought to light certain generalizations. These programs are most often characterized by:

- Community members having an active role in program development and management;
- Recognition of and respect for rural values and lifestyle;
- The belief that community members have the capacity to identify and solve their own problems – if they can tap the proper resources (Spears, 1985:4-5).

This paper examines a model for collaboration among educational institutions, public agencies and rural citizens manifested in the Partnership for Rural Improvement (PRI) program in the state of Washington. PRI is a consortium for community development which incorporates the characteristics identified above and which successfully undertook more than 150 community projects in 1985.

## Impetus for the Partnership for Rural Improvement

A vast array of nonprofit and public agencies are responsible for providing goods and services to rural people.

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These organizations have introduced numerous programs aimed at producing community betterment. For the most part these same programs have tended to be limited in focus, intent on solving a single problem or a narrow range of problems.

Often professionals and local leaders associated with these programs have had difficulty perceiving rural problems in a holistic sense and have failed to understand how their program is related to the activities of other individuals, agencies, or communities. The end result is that delivery of services has been piecemeal and uncoordinated, suggesting the need for new or adapted professional roles to strengthen or create linkages between communities and institutions, and to fill the gap in the knowledge application process (Williams, Youmans, Sorenson, 1975:5-8; Moe and Tamblyn, 1974:13-14).

The Partnership for Rural Improvement, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, was initiated in 1976 to address these problems. Specifically, PRI was created to implement and evaluate alternative rural development models and to seek to improve the range, quality and coordination of services available to rural people. PRI has especially concentrated on increasing the ability of educational institutions to provide a broader range of assistance to rural areas within the state.

## Organizational Structure

Structurally, PRI consists of eight higher education institutions—the land-grant university and its cooperative extension service, two regional universities, the state's liberal arts college, and four community colleges. The relationship is formalized by memoranda of agreements and shared governance.

Each of the universities and the state college have designated community service units. These units have two major functions. They act as an access point for citizens in obtaining faculty expertise needed for community projects and they provide project planning consultation. The land-grant university's designated unit additionally provides program development leadership, coordination, and management functions for the Partnership.

The community colleges participate in the Partnership through a shared staffing arrangement with the land-grant university. A PRI program associate is jointly hired by the two institutions and is housed in the participating community college. Each community college program has a district-wide PRI advisory committee made up of community-based public agency representatives and interested citizens.

PRI staff, then, consists of the four program associates from the community colleges and individuals assigned from the affiliated universities. A policy board, which sets program direction, consists of a representative (at the dean's level or above) from each of the higher educational institutions and two community representatives from each of the community college advisory boards.

## The PRI Approach

An underlying premise of the PRI program has been that public organizations and agencies with mandates to provide public services to rural areas can enhance the effectiveness of their delivery systems through collaboration.

This premise is based on the fact that while development problems and change in rural areas are multifaceted, service organizations are functionally specialized. Usually no single organization possesses all the necessary re-

sources, knowledge, and skills to address all the dimensions of a problem. Provider organizations are normally limited to supplying only a specific service or input, for example, financial assistance or a technical engineering skill. However, in completing a community project, the users of these services generally require inputs from more than one organization. Problem resolution, then, is dependent upon a means for coordinating the unique inputs of specialized service providers. Recognizing this, one focus of PRI efforts has been to foster working relationships between organizations and to test means of strengthening cooperation between service providers and the users of public service.

In choosing this approach to rural development, PRI draws upon the work of Moe and Tamblyn (1974), Moe (1975), and Mulford et al. (1975). Moe and Tamblyn's (1974) approach to rural development emphasizes increasing local problem-solving capacity, the strengthening of linkages among local, state and federal organizations and the development of organizational arrangements that make increased use of the capabilities of educational institutions.

Mulford et al. (1975) have outlined a process for creating interorganizational coordination. A 10-step strategy begins with problem definition and proceeds through the identification of key organizations to securing organizational commitments for resolution of the problem. The process then moves to achieving agreement to coordinate organizational activities, securing consensus on the appropriate approach, reallocating resources from the coordinated agencies toward the achievement of the approach, developing an organizational or coordination structure. Finally the process initiates a set of interorganizational objectives which lead to a specific plan of work.

In establishing partnerships among higher education entities, PRI has concentrated on implementing new organizational arrangements and linkage mechanisms which make it possible for institutions with overlapping goals to work together in goal achievement (Moe 1975). In PRI's case, the goal has been to meet higher education's responsibility for public service.

As part of this conceptualization of an approach to rural development activities, PRI incorporated certain core elements into a model for public service provision by educational institutions. These core elements are: collaboration among institutions, organizational neutrality, and the development of staff roles to actualize the approach.

#### **Collaboration within the Partnership**

Much has been written on the realities of interorganizational cooperation and collaboration (e.g., Klonglan and Yep, 1972; Aram and Stratton 1974; Davidson, 1976; Warren, Mulford and Yetley, 1976; Hougland and Sutton, 1978; and Rogers, et al. 1982). From the 10-year experience of PRI, we have identified seven levels of collaborative interactions. The following list is arranged by increasing degree of formality and integration of activities.

1. Informal communication among the personnel of the various member institutions.
2. Ad hoc exchange of information regarding the member institutions' project activities.
3. Planned provisions for sharing information.
4. Ad hoc exchange of personnel and resources for completion of member institution projects.
5. Planned participation on joint projects.
6. Joint development of program budgets and use of pooled resources.

7. Establishment of overlapping board and joint setting of program policies.

These levels of increasing collaboration are fairly generic to any cooperative arrangements between organizations. It is important, however, to recognize that one level of collaborative interaction is not "better" or "worse" than another. Rather, an appropriate collaborative relationship is a function of the shared objectives of the organizations and individuals involved. Typically though, high degrees of collaboration do not occur in the absence of lower collaborative interactions. Many collaborative arrangements start at the project level. As experience is gained in working together, the barriers to further collaboration are reduced.

Because most collaborative interactions are project specific and ad hoc, most collaborative arrangements do not develop to the level of formal integration of programming that exists in PRI. The external Kellogg funding provided the participating institutions the otherwise unavailable opportunity to develop an integrated outreach system. Developmental funding became the "carrot" for change. It allowed initial experimentation without direct cost. The other uncertainties and tensions that accompany change remained.

All of the institutions of higher education involved in PRI have experienced organizational change and redefinition of their outreach functions. This is not to say that such change has been easy. As has been well documented, change within organizations often meets resistance - higher education institutions have proven no different.

In achieving successful collaboration among higher education institutions four necessary conditions must exist. First, and possibly foremost, there must be a personal commitment to collaborative efforts by those involved. While this stems from a value set, there also must be evidence of the second condition - the probability that collaboration can contribute to the accomplishment of the goals of the institution.

Individuals involved in acting as catalysts for building relationships between and among organizational entities can be exposed to considerable professional risks, for they are playing non-traditional roles within their institutions. Therefore, the third essential condition is the existence of a base of support within the institution which can assure professional rewards for those involved and can provide needed institutional resources.

The fourth condition is the establishment of mechanisms for effective inter-institutional communications. Even within organizations, effective communication is a perpetual problem. Both the need for and the difficulty of communication is increased manyfold in an interorganizational collaborative setting. This is particularly true in a multiorganizational endeavor such as PRI. There is an enhanced need for effective communication both within and among the partners.

The necessary conditions for collaboration outlined above are by no means all-inclusive, but for PRI they have proven to be the most important. Of equal importance to the Partnership's success has been its ability to foster collaborative projects at the community level.

#### **Collaboration at the Point of Service Delivery**

A unique characteristic of PRI that enables its staff members to act as catalysts for interorganizational collaboration at the community project level is the earned credibility of the program in facilitating collaboration from a neutral

base. Through a non-aligned third party role, the staff can discourage and avoid concerns of turf protection on the part of the other actors. This carefully developed and guarded quality of PRI is one of the most highly valued and effective characteristics of the program.

PRI staff has relied on a facilitative and "resource linker" approach in community project consultations (Lippitt 1973). Working with community representatives to identify acceptable solutions and the resources needed for meeting a community problem, the staff members can call on any number of Partner institution faculty or agency professionals to furnish the expertise needed.

A mode of operation which has been closely associated with this nonadvocacy role is the maintenance of low public visibility for PRI. This strategy has been followed in an effort to boost the visibility of individual partner organizations. This operational style is carried over into strategies for project completion. When working with a community group, PRI staff makes certain that upon the successful completion of the community project, the good will and public visibility accrue to the group, not PRI.

The question of the proper level of visibility for the Partnership has been one of concern throughout its history. Because the individual institutions derive the public recognition from PRI efforts, the probability of their continued participation in the Partnership is strengthened. To that extent, low visibility has had a positive impact. However, low visibility has also contributed to a general lack of awareness of PRI, thus precluding the development of a public base of support for the program. To that extent, low visibility has had a negative impact. The balance of assuring recognition for the partner institutions and agencies, while assuring some visibility for PRI remains a constant program concern.

Aside from the visibility issue, there is no doubt that organizational neutrality has been a major building block of the program. The strength of this approach has been the ability of PRI to create an environment with minimal competitiveness in which agencies and institutions can jointly contribute personnel and other resources in response to the needs identified in rural areas. Sustained participation in the program would be highly unlikely if PRI were aligned with one specific member institution.

#### Concluding Remarks

As has been noted, a basic assumption undergirding the PRI endeavor has been that cooperation among public service providers would enhance their individual and collective effectiveness in addressing multifaceted rural development issues. In an era of ever-increasing specialization, the initial challenge for PRI was to provide a pragmatic demonstration that collaboration had something to offer. Interorganizational collaboration among PRI partners and its value is now a demonstrated fact. The PRI strategies contributing to this changed behavior have been:

1. Trust building through practicing joint ownership of the program, including budget allocation and program planning.
2. Development of interorganizational contractual

agreements to fit varying institutional requirements.

3. An organizationally neutral third party staff position which contributes to the organization, nurture, and maintenance of optimum levels of collaboration.
4. A developmental and flexible organizational design which allows linkage building between public service providers and users, with programming cues originating from the needs of users.
5. Working with individual partners to improve their service delivery capabilities.
6. Provision of communication mechanisms among partners and adoption of a consensus style of group decision making.

PRI's challenge for the future remains one of maintaining support for the Partnership while maintaining a low visibility cooperative approach to rural development.

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