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Equitable, Not Equal: Perspectives of Community-University Partnerships through the Voices of Community Stakeholders

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Background

Adult and community development practitioners and scholars are frequently involved in community-university partnerships. A core premise of these partnerships is that university engagement in communities is best done via collaborative, mutually respectful, mutually beneficial partnerships (HUD, 2002). Effective partnerships take time and effort and they require mobilizing resources from diverse parties with overlapping and sometimes conflicting interests. Sustaining them requires that the parties strike a balance between the interest of communities and of higher education institutions.

Factors that influence institutional commitment to engagement are becoming well documented: institutional history and culture, leadership, organizational structure, faculty, staff and student involvement, and campus communications (Holland, 1997). This is echoed in the literature on popular education and community-based research in other fields.

However, much of the discussion of engagement has been internal. The missing perspective is of stakeholders outside the university. What do community stakeholders see as the purpose and outcomes of partnerships? How do community stakeholders perceive higher education's commitment to civic and public engagement? Are these perceptions important to the academy's future?

Study of Community Partners Perspectives

Community stakeholder perspectives and factors that these partners believe in are key to demonstrating a university's commitment to outreach and engagement. They were part of a multi-case stakeholder study of partnerships with public urban universities and large public research institutions. Forty-one stakeholders affiliated with major partnerships with six different higher education institutions were interviewed as part of a larger study to understand how public research universities might better align their leadership, organizational structures, practices, and policies to be more responsive to societal needs (Sandmann & Weerts, 2004).

Five themes emerged from the study of community stakeholders' voices. These themes challenge some conventional understandings and confirm others. Their expressions and the implications they raised are briefly explored.

- **Reciprocity** *"Being equitable, not equal is important."* Stakeholders want partnerships to be fair; they don't expect that each partner will contribute equal resources. Stakeholders were clear about what they could bring to the partnership and what they wanted or needed in return. They clearly differentiate among different types of expertise: university as broker/ linker/ convener/ process-project manager, and supplier of contracted expertise in faculty and students. In contrast, the community provided local knowledge and experience, on-the-ground problem solving, and policy making. Does this perspective challenge conventional understanding of reciprocal, mutually beneficial partnerships? How is fairness defined?

- **Respect** *"It's all about the relationship!"* The relationship between the partners transcends any one project, is most valued and perceived as beneficial, and is sustainable over time.

The relationship is not between institutions, but is manifest as a relationship between *individuals* that can and like to work together and that have established a trusting association where there is easy, frank, and frequent communication. What relationships do community stakeholders see as important in partnerships? How do community partners learn to negotiate the university and working with faculty and students? How do faculty members become part of these relationships?

- **Reason** *"Give me the data!" "I would not consider this a business relationship. It is truly a community partnership, its purpose is to shape the community."* Community stakeholders enter into partnerships for a variety of outcomes running the spectrum from data for policy making and problem solving, to certifying personnel for a critical workforce need, to neighborhood transformation. Are these outcomes similar or dissimilar to the university?

- **Resources and Funding** *"Serve the public good—if the public pays; it's always about the money." "We care and are committed but in a state of a constantly ambiguous future."* It is perceived that most partnerships are "soft funded" with university investment only with external sources; funding is thought of as tenuous. How can stable funding streams be developed to support engagement?

- **Roles** *"The university does not listen well."* Responsiveness and collaboration exist between community partners and certain university personnel and do not extend to the broader university. Such "connecting" personnel are perceived as atypical from the higher education organization. Without such brokers, linkers, or gatekeepers with "collaborative personalities," community partners speak about difficulty navigating or accessing the university, even though most are alumni. Perceptions of the university are localized to a particular project or partnership and not generalized to other administrators, faculty, students. How do institutional leadership and key organizational factors influence how stakeholders outside the university perceive an institution's commitment and capacity for engagement?

Importance and Implications
Initial discussion of community perspectives is significant because it will help higher education leaders, adult education scholars, faculty-community collaborators, and policy makers understand a) how stakeholders outside the university view their relationship with the university and form opinions about an institution's commitment to engagement, and b) how these perceptions are linked to leadership practices and organizational contexts. These findings assist in developing understanding and strategies for partners to become more effectively "engaged."

References
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