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A case study approach is used to describe a major partnership between an urban metropolitan university and a large urban school district. The author reviews lessons learned through the development of the partnership.

Building Partnerships to Prepare Students for the 21st Century

Approximately three years ago, three hundred university faculty, K–12 teachers, and university and school district administrators gathered together on the campus of California State University, Fresno, a major urban metropolitan university serving the Central California Valley. During this event, the university’s Satellite Student Union was the site of approximately fifty roundtable discussions organized around twenty critical themes. The themes were identified in advance by both university faculty and K–12 educators with the twofold goal of enhancing student learning in the public schools and improving teacher education at the university and district levels.

Because this represented an opportunity for school district teachers and university faculty to explore key issues affecting both constituencies, the atmosphere was expectant and enthusiastic. The event was held in the late afternoon and early evening to accommodate the schedules of teachers in the public schools. Following dinner and a few introductory speeches by the CEOs of both institutions—in order to pledge their support and commitment—the spirited roundtable discussions were underway.

The public forum was also established to promote a spirit of collaboration among the faculty and administration of California State University, Fresno and the teachers and administrators within the Fresno Unified School District. Prior to this event, the university’s School of Education and Human Development was working closely with the school district in the area of teacher education and several other initiatives. Both institutions had a desire, however, to examine their partnerships in a more systematic manner and to identify

key areas on which to focus their efforts. Another goal of this initiative was to broaden the relationship of the university faculty with the school district and to expand the university's partnerships beyond the School of Education. The public forum included university faculty from all schools and colleges of the university, including natural sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities, and health and human services. In addition, the assumption was that a focused, collective effort across disciplines and between institutions would lead to additional grant opportunities and other funding resources to support priorities that both institutions identified as critical to the state and region.

The public forum was launched following a six-month planning process that included faculty, teachers, and administrators from both the university and school district. The formal process was initiated when the superintendent of the Fresno Unified School District expressed an interest in having university faculty from across the disciplines engage in collaborative projects with area schools. He hoped that the full resources of the university might be made available to teachers and students in the district's schools. At the same time, the university's administration had been urging faculty to become more involved in the schools.

The Fresno Unified School District is the fourth largest school district in California and one of the most diverse in the country, with approximately ninety different languages spoken in its schools. In addition, the Central California Valley is the state's fastest growing region, with a population expected to double by the year 2020. The Central California Valley region, however, is one of the poorest in the state and has double-digit unemployment, in spite of the current economic boom throughout the rest of California and most of the nation.

The challenges to the school district and to the university had never been greater. This was an opportunity to identify common concerns and bring together the full resources of educators within the university and the school district to bear on problems that faced the region.

The first step in the process of formalizing the partnership was establishment of a joint steering committee that included members from both the university and the district. Representatives from the university included deans, associate deans, and faculty from each of the schools and colleges—a multidisciplinary campus team. From the beginning, the superintendent of the school district and the president of the university were both involved in the planning of this effort. It was important that the senior administration, to get buy-in from faculty, teachers, and administrators of both institutions, send a clear message that partnership was one of the leadership's top priorities.

The steering committee began to meet six months prior to the public forum. At the initial meetings, the history of the efforts to build partnerships between the school district and the university was discussed. In addition, research was undertaken to identify current and former partnerships between the two institutions to raise awareness of participation in existing partnerships and to identify the particularly successful ones.

The steering committee recommended that a large symposium be held—a public forum—to enhance collaboration between the district and the university, to build grassroots involvement in the identification of the needs of both institutions, and to develop concrete action plans to strengthen existing partnerships and lay the groundwork for new partnerships in key areas.

As a point of departure, the steering committee assembled a list of current partnerships between the two institutions—a partnership matrix—and distributed the information to all faculty and teachers within the university and district. All educators from both institutions were invited to review the list, identify priority areas, propose new areas for partnerships, attend the forum, and work with the partner institution toward the formulation of solutions.

Design of a University-School Forum

In planning the public forum and roundtable discussions, the steering committee developed a format that would ensure that two-thirds of the participants would be faculty and teachers. Plans also required that each of the university's schools and colleges, and every department or program, would be represented. In addition, the steering committee was committed to a format that would emphasize small group discussion and minimize the amount of time spent on presentations and remarks.

To convey the highest level of commitment and support for this effort, an invitation to participate in the public forum and roundtable discussions was sent out under the joint signatures of the two CEOs of the respective institutions. The mailing—an invitation statement, an introduction to the partnership initiative, and other materials—included a questionnaire in which the following questions were posed:

- In what ways do you see yourself or your school, department, or program interacting with and participating in this partnership?
- How could it benefit you, your program, and your students?
- What specific topics or potential partnerships would you like to see addressed at the symposium?
- Have you been involved in a partnership? If so, please comment on its effectiveness.

The key design element of the format for the symposium was to include focus groups—or roundtable discussion groups—to provide qualitative information leading to an action agenda for the critical areas identified. Each group would include a trained facilitator and a recorder to capture key concerns and recommendations raised. A mix of university faculty and public school teachers from a variety of disciplines, assigned in advance to encourage dialogue between faculty and teachers and to encourage cross-disciplinary perspectives, was chosen. Administrators also participated in the roundtable discussions, but each table was composed of two-thirds faculty and teachers.

The steering committee received an overwhelming response to the mailing sent out to both the university and the public schools. From the responses and the deliberations of the committee, twenty major themes were identified. These were intended to capture critical areas of need, within the district and university, to which both institutions were committed. Some of the topics included:

- Meeting the needs of limited English proficient (lep) students
- Increased high school graduation requirements
- Integrating technology with teaching and learning
- Mathematics and science reform

- The future of magnet and thematic schools
- A professional development school model
- Issues related to reading and literacy
- Formation of content-based discipline alliances
- Issues related to students with special needs
- Improvement of teacher preparation, and
- Assessment of college readiness

The public forum and roundtable discussions were well-attended and a wellspring of ideas and suggestions was generated. Faculty and teachers volunteered to serve as team leaders for ongoing discussion groups to further define priorities and implement action plans. The university's provost volunteered to assist in this effort by hosting breakfast sessions with team leaders on a monthly basis. A new momentum had been established.

A Framework for Collaboration

In order to maintain the momentum and move forward with the implementation of action plans, it was necessary to institutionalize the collaboration. Four months after the public forum event, a joint school development research center was established, a center coordinator was hired, and an advisory council was put in place. The new partnership had found itself a permanent home.

The Advisory Council for the School Development Research Center (SDRC) includes six to eight individuals, selected from both institutions, who work closely with the center's coordinator to set and approve the SDRC research agenda and evaluate overall progress. Both the university and the school district provide funds and in-kind contributions to maintain the center and its programs, as well as to pay the coordinator's salary. Initially the university provided space, staff support, and release time for a faculty member to coordinate the center's activities. In more recent years, however, the university has moved from in-kind contributions to cash support, matching the funds provided by the district. The annual budget of the center is approximately \$90,000.

Key Initiatives of the Partnership

With the partnership infrastructure firmly established, the university and district have continued to work closely together to achieve their goals. The first major program to be developed from the new partnership was the Minority Opportunities for Science Teaching Program (MOST). This major program, funded by the National Science Foundation (\$1.5 million over five years), has faculty from the College of Natural Science and the School of Education working with public school teachers in the district, recruiting, educating, and training minorities to become secondary science teachers to work in underserved schools in the region.

As a result of this formal partnership, the university and district also received a \$600,000 grant over three years from the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) to develop content curriculum in mathematics and science to strengthen the liberal studies major taken by most K-6 teachers. This joint mathematics and science preservice partnership program involves all elementary schools in the Fresno

Unified School District and recently led to another major award: a \$3.9 million grant from the National Science Foundation to extend preservice training in mathematics and science to grades 7 to 12. Faculty who serve as principal investigators of these projects indicate that the existence of a formal collaboration between the university and school district—supported at the highest level of the administration of both institutions—has been a critical factor in the securing of these grants. For funding agencies, the institutionalization of these partnerships, often considered in addition to the merits of the project proposed, is viewed as “value added.”

Several other major programs that developed from the early stages of the partnership include the development of plans for a university high school—a charter school—that will provide an accelerated college preparatory education with a special focus on music. This charter school is planned to open on the campus of California State University, Fresno, in the fall of 2001. In addition, a new teacher’s professional development institute opened on the university’s campus this past year. And last summer, for the first time ever, the School of Education and Human Development offered year-round teacher education.

These are a few examples of the key initiatives fostered by the partnership. Other tangible results include a standing invitation to the coordinator of the School Development Research Center to attend regular administrative meetings of the Fresno Unified School District. The coordinator serves as an important liaison between the district and the university, connecting faculty and program resources of the university with the needs identified by the district. The coordinator is frequently called upon to provide presentations to the School Board as well, and teachers, administrators, and Board members alike are now comfortable enough to pick up the phone and call the center when the resources of the university are required. The center is also beginning to receive requests for assistance (data or research) from area legislators referred to the center by the school board or other administrators within the district.

Recently established by the center is a joint literacy team that is beginning to meet on a monthly basis with the help of the center. Plans are also underway for collaborations in the areas of remedial education and language arts.

Lessons Learned

Among the most important lessons learned from this partnership initiative are the following:

Give each stakeholder a place at the table. Planning and oversight should include all constituents whose cooperation and insights are essential to the project’s success. A shared vision is vital to a strong school-university partnership, but it requires communication, negotiation, and compromise among all key stakeholders, including educators, administrators, and project staff. From the beginning, the university wanted to develop a collaborative relationship with the district that would be based on a true partnership, with both sides bringing experience and expertise to the initiative.

Project goals should be based on participants’ needs. Themes discussed at the initial symposium and roundtable event, as well as in follow-up groups with team leaders, were the twenty themes identified by all stakeholders in the planning process.

Topics identified were based on local conditions and needs, and roundtable discussions elicited participants' ideas and recommendations for change.

Partnerships should create learning opportunities among partners. Through dialogue and interaction, university faculty and public school teachers were provided with the opportunity to learn about each other's educational systems and environments. This clarified misconceptions, highlighted shared concerns, and identified expectations and needs. In addition, through the School Development Research Center, the liaison coordinator keeps university and school educators informed of each other's priorities and concerns, and at the same time links partners and goals.

Make sure key decision-makers and leaders are on board. It is critical to have the support of the highest level of administration of each institution involved in the partnership. In this case study, both the district superintendent and the university president were highly committed to and supportive of the planning effort and both had executive staff in place who demonstrated the same level of motivation. Both the provost and the assistant superintendent played key roles on the partnership steering committee.

It is critical that outreach efforts are made to every unit of the partner institutions—across disciplines in the university, and reaching every teacher in the public schools. It is essential that the university community understand that teacher education and K–12 partnerships are not the sole responsibility of the school of education. It is important to bridge the gap between faculties in education and the arts and sciences.

If possible, institutionalize the partnership so that it is not dependent on personalities. Institutionalization is critical to the long-term success of a partnership. At the early stages of a partnership, efforts are often led by institutional champions, individuals who are highly committed to the cause. Over the long haul, however, all aspects of the partnership must be formally institutionalized so that the partnership will continue as faculty and administrators come and go.

Recognize the value of the process. Another lesson learned was the enormous value in the process itself, apart from the action plans generated. Initially, feedback indicated that some of the public school constituents were skeptical about the project. They did not believe that faculty would show up in equal numbers at the table. Ultimately, they were surprised with the outcome: university faculty not only showed up in greater numbers at the symposium, but also demonstrated a strong interest in many of the same issues as their public school colleagues.

Conclusion

Many significant university-school partnerships probably would have been developed, and flourished, without this formal partnership initiative. But projects that had been nurtured for many years between the two institutions were enhanced through the formation of a systematic partnership, and many new partnerships were established from that beginning.

One of the critical lessons learned was that, although partnerships are relationships that evolve, they also require hard work. Like a marriage, a partnership is not sustained without effort. Deliberate steps must be taken to establish and nurture productive and focused relationships.

In the early days of the partnership effort, there were times when it appeared that it would be difficult to maintain the momentum. Six months after the symposium—and well into implementation planning—the superintendent retired and the district went through some major organizational changes, including reassignment of many of the key administrators involved in the partnership. Fortunately, the new superintendent shared the same commitment as his predecessor. It was inevitable, however, that a new administration would need some time to come on board. During this period of organizational change, many team leaders continued to meet, and even though some project teams did not survive, others flourished.

There has been some turnover in leadership of the School Development Research Center, but new joint project teams continue to emerge. This past year the leadership of the center, with the advisory council, established an annual symposium to be based on a theme identified as critical to the partnership. This year the focus will be on mathematics and science education, next year on language arts.

Finally, through the cultivation of relationships and the establishment of an infrastructure, a comprehensive partnership has been launched and is now beginning to show some positive results. A way of working together has been institutionalized and is demonstrating that strong school-university partnerships can foster significant improvements in educational opportunities that, in turn, contribute to greater student learning. This is, after all, our ultimate goal.

Call for Contributions

Metropolitan Universities continues to welcome the submission of unsolicited manuscripts on topics pertinent to our eponymous institutions. We seek contributions that analyze and discuss pertinent policy issues, innovative programs or projects, new organizational and procedural approaches, pedagogic developments, and other matters of importance to the mission of metropolitan universities.

Articles of approximately 3,500 words should be intellectually rigorous but need not be cast in the traditional scholarly format nor based on original research. They should be *useful* to their audience, providing better understanding as well as guidance for action. Descriptions of interesting innovations should point out the implications for other institutions and the pitfalls to be avoided. Discussions of broad issues should cite examples and suggest specific steps to be taken. We also welcome manuscripts that, in a reasoned and rigorous fashion, are *provocative*, challenging readers to re-examine traditional definitions, concepts, policies, and procedures.

We would also welcome letters to the editor, as well as opinion pieces for our forum pages. Individuals interested in contributing an article pertaining to the thematic portion of a forthcoming issue, or writing on any of the many other possible subjects, are encouraged to send a brief outline to either the appropriate guest editor (addresses available from the executive editor) or to the executive editor. Letters and opinion pieces should be sent directly to the latter:

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