
Funding Setbacks: Partnership Strategies for Success

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Abstract

Universities and communities are increasingly forming partnerships to fulfill a common mission. Nearly every partnership has faced the challenge of continuing in the face of a grant denial. While rejections are not uncommon in the academic setting, the implications of lack of funding are different for a community-academic partnership. By applying nine “Principles of Good Partnership,” two partnerships demonstrate how to transition beyond funding setbacks to programmatic implementation and partnership progress.

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Universities and communities throughout the country are increasingly forming partnerships to fulfill a common mission. In addition to the tangible aspects of a partnership, such as the sharing of resources and expertise, partnerships are also a source of motivation, encouragement, and support among partners.

Each community-academic partnership has a different profile: some address the needs of the homeless; some focus on literacy; some focus on increasing youth assets; while others address health related needs in underserved areas. One characteristic that nearly every community-academic partnership has in common is the quest for funding to support this new and innovative approach to address community concerns.

Every faculty and staff person in an academic setting who has ever applied for grant funding has likely received a letter stating, “We regret to inform you that your application was not accepted,” or “Due to limited funds, we are unable to support your proposal.” These “thanks, but no thanks” letters are very common, given the financial capacity of funding sources and the level of need in the country. For instance, the Center for Healthy Communities in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the Medical College of Wisconsin applies for many grants; these grants support the Center’s mission of forming community-academic partnerships to improve community health and enhance undergraduate and graduate medical education. At times, the Center’s grant writing efforts are successful, while at other times they are not. According to the notification letters received by the Center, national public funding agencies approve and support between fourteen and twenty-five percent of applications. The picture for grant applicants is even more competitive with national private funders: between three and eight percent of submitted proposals are funded.

When rejection letters are addressed to a community-academic partnership, the implications are often much different than for a single-organization proposal. In many instances, the lack of funding results in the dissolution of the partnership. There are a number of possible reasons for this. First, the academic structure is based on a promotion and tenure system that rewards

faculty who receive grant funding. Without financial support, many well-intentioned faculty are forced to limit their time devoted to community work and partnership endeavors or risk career repercussions. Second, community members may feel used and lose trust in academics who may decrease their time and commitment to the partnership and the community. If the academic partner's situation is not fully explained, community partners may not understand the reality of the academic partner's dilemma and subsequent withdrawal from some activities. Third, pursuing a grant to address a particular issue is often the rallying point of a partnership. Collaborators may think there is nothing left to do after notification of an unsuccessful grant application. When a group of people have been looking at the forest (the grant), it is sometimes difficult to recognize the individual trees (activities) that can be implemented on a smaller scale.

The key to sustained, productive partnerships is to agree up front that there is a need and a commitment on the part of both partners to address that need. Then, if initial funding is not secured, the partners can reassess the situation and determine their next steps, rather than simply end the partnership. The purpose of this paper is to describe the strategies discussed by the Center that has helped to maintain and strengthen community-academic partnerships when funding has been denied.

Background

The Center for Healthy Communities was formed in 1997 to build community-academic partnerships to improve health. The Center works with urban and rural communities to assess community and academic strengths, and form partnerships with organizations to help enhance community health and undergraduate and graduate medical student education. Grounded in the philosophy of “doing with” instead of “doing for” or “to,” the Center creates partnerships with communities using a guiding set of partnership-building principles.

The “Principles of Good Partnership,” adopted by the Center, evolved from a Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) national conference in Spring 1997. Out of a growing nationwide need for a consistently successful approach to partnership building, academic and community representatives, including Center faculty and staff, gathered to help develop a draft set of principles. Following the conference, feedback on the draft was obtained through a listserv used by wider CCPH membership, and later the refined principles were approved by the CCPH Board of Directors. These “Principles of Good Partnership,” which are listed below, now help guide an increasing number of community-academic partnerships throughout the country.

Principles of Good Partnership

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Trust, respect, genuineness 2. Commitment by all partners 3. Open communication 4. Flexibility, compromise,
and feedback 5. Shared mission and goals | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Attainable, measurable
objectives 7. Focus on strengths and assets 8. Shared resources 9. Shared credit |
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The Center's partnerships with a rural community and an urban community are rooted in these Principles. The following is a brief overview and funding history of each partnership.

Marion Area Partnership

Marion and the surrounding small communities that sit on the northeastern edge of Waupaca County in rural east central Wisconsin are in a federally designated Health Professions Shortage Area. Historically, the community has had concerns related to access to care, and health professional shortages due in part to the closing of the local hospital in 1993 and the more recent Marion clinic closing in 1999. In the mid-1990s, the Center was invited by the community to participate in monthly discussions that helped identify the strengths and assets of the community and prioritize the health needs of the community. Although several health concerns affecting different age groups were mentioned as a result of these discussions, substance abuse was ultimately found to be a common thread that crossed over many of the community's health concerns. Therefore, it was determined that the partnership would focus on addressing the root causes of substance abuse across the age groups, beginning with youth. The Marion Area Coalition for Healthy Communities later formed as a result of the partnership and includes representatives from local government, education, civic and service organizations, University of Wisconsin Extension, health care, local churches, a youth organization, and area businesses. The purpose of the Coalition is to develop and sustain communication and coordination among all organizations, groups, and individuals working to make the Marion area a healthier community.

Funding History: *Denials*—1996, submitted application to national foundation to address four major community health concerns, funding not awarded; 1997, resubmitted application to national foundation narrowing the focus of the proposal, again funding not awarded; 2000, submitted application to state agency for development of a Family Resource Center, funding not awarded. *Successes*—1997, submitted application for a lesser amount of funding to regional religious foundation for a youth leadership program, funding awarded for three years; 1998, submitted application to federal agency to address the root causes of substance abuse across the generations, funding awarded for up to five years; 2000, submitted application for a Governor's Wisconsin Fatherhood Initiative, funding awarded for sixteen months.

Partners For Progress

In 1997, the Center for Healthy Communities became involved in an urban partnership with the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, Milwaukee public housing residents, and S.E.T. Ministry, Inc., a non-profit, community-based health and social service agency that provides social workers and nurses for the public housing sites. The Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee manages thirteen high-rise developments for elderly and disabled individuals, and five family developments located throughout the city. The approximately 7000 public housing residents range in age from infant to 102 years, and over 88 percent are people of color. The goal of the partnership is to improve the quality of life of public housing residents with an emphasis on five areas of concern: economic development, health and wellness, community leadership and organizing, violence prevention, and home safety. Together the partners have developed and implemented health education and prevention programs, leadership and advocate training, and community organizing and building activities at many of the eighteen public housing sites in Milwaukee.

Funding History: *Denials*—1999, submitted proposal to federal agency for large initiative addressing a variety of needs in Milwaukee public housing, funding not awarded (reapplied in 2000, outcome pending); 1999, submitted proposal to local affiliate of national foundation for a community advocate program, funding not awarded; 1999, submitted application to local chapter of national organization for a community advocate program, funding not awarded. *Successes*—1999, submitted application to local foundation for a community advocate program, funding awarded.

Strategies for Applying Principles of Good Partnership

As indicated above, both partnerships have experienced the sting of grant application rejection; however, they have continued and have been strengthened in spite of funding limitations and, ultimately, both have obtained funding. The strategies that sustained the two collaborations through the “lean” times are rooted in the “Principles of Good Partnership.”

Principle 1: Trust, Respect, Genuineness; and

Principle 2: Commitment by All Partners

“You may be deceived if you trust too much, but you will live in torment if you do not trust enough,” according to Frank Crane. As the foundation of all successful relationships, trust develops over time, and is a positive outcome of consistent commitment. For example, with the Marion Area Partnership in 1996, the Center was invited to join the Marion Rural Health Advisory Network (RHAN), an organization dedicated to addressing access to health care issues in the community. At least two Center representatives attended all the RHAN meetings, in addition to attending special events in the community such as the dedication of a new community wellness center. The consistent presence of the Center at meetings and other events was critical to building a foundation of trust. This persistent “showing up” was especially important following the rejection of two proposals to address multiple health issues in the community. When Center staff showed up after the rejection in the same manner as before the rejection, the community’s trust level increased, as they saw a continuing commitment of the Center to the project.

In a similar fashion for the Partners for Progress, after the Director of the Center met with the Executive Director of the Housing Authority, the Center, Housing Authority, and S.E.T. began monthly meetings. Center staff also participated in special events, such as the groundbreaking for the remodeling of a public housing high-rise for the elderly. Partners jointly sponsored a prostate screening for Housing Authority residents, and the Center began the implementation of a health education and prevention program. When the partnership suffered its first grant denial, the partners not only continued to participate in monthly meetings, they also made plans to expand existing programs and implement new health promotion programs that required limited funding. In addition, plans were made to apply for other funding. With both partners consistently participating and contributing in spite of a lack of funding, they demonstrated their commitment, and the trust level between partners continued to increase.

Additionally, continuing a partnership despite funding setbacks will demonstrate to future funders the partnership’s commitment to the sustainability of the initiative, which is often one of the key rating criteria used by funders. In fact, many funders require that a partnership be well established for a designated period of time before being considered for funding. Continuing the partnership without funding therefore makes the partnership more attractive to future funders.

Principle 3: Open Communication

If trust is the foundation of partnerships, then open and honest communication is the process by which trust is built. Communication is the building block that creates trust and leads to effective partnerships. Through effective communication, knowledge is shared, feedback is obtained, views are discussed, revisions are made, and relationships are developed.

One Marion Area Partnership example highlights how easily communication can falter and how clarity of communication cannot be assumed. One Center staff person who is based in rural Marion arrived at a noon meeting to a chorus of “where were you?” from the meeting participants. After explanation, she realized that she was supposed to speak at a community breakfast that day. She told the group that she had not been asked to speak and had not been informed of the

meeting. Reflecting on why the invitation to the meeting had not been conveyed, one group member remarked, “Since she is always at other meetings, we somehow assumed that she knew about it.” Fortunately, the underlying relationship was solid, and this communication gap did not cause any lasting damage. However, had it happened earlier in the relationship, when trust had not been established, the consequences could have been more severe.

Collaborative grant writing is another example of the significance of communication. In a true partnership, all partners are involved to varying degrees in the grant writing process. Frequently, academic partners will take the lead in the actual writing of the proposal, given their resources and previous experience in writing grants. At the same time, the community partners are the individuals with the best perspective on what the content of the proposal should include. In order to assure community input and involvement, both partnerships have adopted and adhered to a circular process of grant development that includes: 1) soliciting important information from partners and community members; 2) writing specific sections related to their involvement; and, 3) having all partners review, comment, and approve the final version.

Continually connecting with partners on the progress of the proposal is essential for two reasons. First, partners come from different perspectives, and each contributes valuable insights to the proposal development process. With only one or two individuals providing input, the quality of the proposal is far less than is possible with full participation. Second, all partners must consider the possibility that the grant will be awarded and if so, must be prepared to fully implement the proposal. By involving all partners in the review and approval of the proposal, everyone is clear on his or her role and responsibility if funding is approved. In addition, if funding is denied, all partners can share the responsibility for not getting the grant.

This open communication loop that is established during the proposal writing process also encourages partners to continue meeting when funding has not been awarded. Through ongoing communication, partners are able to develop strategies to move the partnership forward with little or no funding.

Principle 4: Flexibility, Compromise, and Feedback

Effective communication in a partnership depends, to a large extent, on the capacity to compromise, be flexible, and provide constructive feedback. Without these skills, partners can become stuck on a specific issue, thus preventing the partnership from moving forward. These skills can also help create a more balanced partnership in which all partners participate in the decision-making process.

In the Marion Area Partnership, for example, Center staff recommended the use of Family and Community Town Suppers (FACTS) as a model to present sensitive information about local youth substance use to the community. This model, developed by the Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources, brings community members together over a meal to discuss important community issues in a safe environment. Although community partners liked the FACTS model, they did not feel it was the most appropriate method for sharing the youth information with the larger community, and instead recommended another approach. After discussing the two alternatives, consensus was reached that the information would be conveyed through a community forum, and a FACTS would be held at another time with a different topic.

Partners for Progress has also demonstrated their flexibility and willingness to compromise. There are eighteen public housing developments in the city. However, specific programs and activities developed by the partnership are not implemented at all eighteen sites. Instead, a variety of factors including site demographics, program goals, and available personnel and other resources are considered in an effort to make the best fit between site and program. At times, partners are not always in agreement as to the most appropriate site to implement a program. Discussion and negotiation then continues until partners can come to an agreement.

These skills of compromise, flexibility, and offering feedback become particularly important when funds are scarce. Without a wealth of resources, partners are forced to make tough decisions about what programs to proceed with, and what programs to put on hold. Tactful, constructive, honest interaction can help ensure that discussion on these issues is productive, rather than destructive, and move the partnership forward.

Principle 5: Shared Mission and Goals

In a society that sets standards by how financially successful an endeavor is, it is difficult not to get caught up in the pursuit of large grant dollars. However, academic institutions have some luxuries that non-profits and community-based organizations often do not, including some flexibility in use of time, reimbursement for travel, and access to top-of-the-line computer and Internet technology and equipment. Using these resources, as well as the wealth of community assets such as time, money, space, and volunteer energy, will often provide the needed momentum to continue pursuing the mission and goals of the partnership while also identifying other funding opportunities. When a partnership is driven by its mission and goals, a number of things become clear: 1) which funding opportunities to pursue, 2) how to allocate time and energy, and 3) which activities to pursue without the “strings” of grant or other monies. In addition, the Center’s partnerships demonstrate that, without a lot of money, time and energy is focused on building relationships rather than fulfilling funding requirements. This is particularly important in the early stages of a partnership.

Within the Marion Area Partnership and Partners for Progress, initial activities were accomplished without large amounts of money. The activities were time-intensive rather than cash-intensive and required a high level of commitment. At the same time, the activities served to continue relationship building, maintain momentum, and provide community-desired programs. Each program served to continue the mission of the partnership. In Milwaukee, a health education program, community dialogues, and prostate screenings were made possible by donations of material and time. And, a community health advocate program was sustained despite decreased funding. In Marion, students from the Medical College of Wisconsin visited the rural high school, and youth retreats were held on a limited budget. Through these and other activities following a grant rejection, the mission and goals remained in the forefront. The implementation of these various activities not only sustained the partnerships’ energy, but also provided a more solid foundation for future proposal submissions. As such, future applications have an increased likelihood of success.

Principle 6: Attainable, Measurable Objectives

As has been noted, the collective grant writing experience provides an opportunity for partners to communicate what is important to them concerning the grant. Clearly identified goals and objectives are the evidence of that communication. Not only does the identification of goals and objectives during the grant writing process provide a forum for discussion and clarification, it can supply a list of possible low-cost activities for the partners to implement if the grant is not funded. In addition, the goals and objectives in one proposal can often be used in another.

The first federal proposal that Partners for Progress submitted was rejected. Although this grant was not funded, the partners relied on the work plan identified in the original proposal to guide their activities throughout the next year. Lack of funding prevented the partners from implementing all the programs described in the grant; however, they were able to use the proposal to identify which programs to implement on a smaller scale.

The second Marion Area Partnership proposal was written to a national foundation in 1997 and rejected. Included in that proposal were goals and objectives related to multigenerational

substance abuse. When the partners decided to write a federal proposal 1998, they used a number of components for the 1997 proposal. The partnership received the federal grant. Once funding was received, the clearly identified goals and objectives became a blueprint for the partners as they began to develop and implement programs. Center staff continue to rely on objectives identified in grant proposals to guide their activities.

Principle 7: Focus on Strengths and Assets; and

Principle 8: Shared Resources

Through its work with communities, the Center has found that more is accomplished by taking a positive approach in emphasizing individual and organizational strengths and assets, and sharing resources, as opposed to focusing on partner or community deficits. While this can be a challenge given that most grant opportunities are constructed around needs, such an approach reinforces the internal existing capacity of the partnership.

In the Marion Area Partnership, pastors, representing the Catholic, Lutheran, and Methodist, are a tremendous community resource. They have a history of regularly meeting together and collaborating on community programs. Recently, they identified that young families in their congregations and in the larger community could benefit from more parenting and family support resources. They decided to create a parent focus group to clarify what might be developed to better support young parents. Each pastor invited one or two parents from their respective churches to join the focus group. They asked a Center staff person to facilitate and document input from the focus group. All invited community members attended, contributed valuable information, and volunteered to address some specific issues. This combination of strengths—the pastors' recruiting skills, the Center staff person's facilitation skills, and the expertise of the community members—led to a very productive and constructive outcome.

Similar to the Marion partnership, the Center relied on strengths within Partners for Progress. For example, the Center staff person writing the budget for a large federal agency worked with someone from the Housing Authority who had experience and expertise in developing agency budgets. This person's skills and willingness to assist with the project were invaluable to the timely completion of the budget.

In these two examples, it is clear that different resources can and should be used at different times. Without grant funding, this philosophy promotes the continuation of the partnership by acknowledging and using the resources that are already available. In situations where inherent strengths are not recognized or valued, the partnership's frame of reference offers little in the way of optimism or opportunities to continue in spite of funding shortfalls.

Principle 9: Shared Credit

In the grant seeking process, it is important that community and academic partners share credit for program successes and the disappointment that comes with a rejected denial requests of funding, as well as share credit for program successes.

In both the rural and urban partnerships, the community and the Center have shared credit for their respective successes in the following ways: 1) presenting information about the partnership together at local, state, and national conferences; 2) co-authoring articles on partnership activities; 3) nominating partners for awards based on their activities with the partnership; and 4) highlighting partner contributions in letters of support to funding sources. These activities continue to strengthen the partnership by helping each partner feel valued for its contribution to the partnership. They also indicate to funding agencies the level of commitment and support that partners have for each other, thus making the partnership more attractive to future funders.

Conclusion

As community-academic partnerships are initiated and evolve, at some point they are likely to be denied funding. How a partnership approaches funding setbacks has a make-or-break effect on its survival.

In the experience of the Center for Healthy Communities and its rural and urban community partners, applying the “Principles of Good Partnership” has been an effective strategy for sustaining and strengthening their collaborations regardless of fund raising success or failure. Each principle helps provide a foundation for partnerships to move forward with program development while continuing fundraising efforts.

Writing a successful proposal is more likely when partners are strength-based in how they approach the lack of funding. By equally sharing in the responsibility for identifying other funding sources and continuing to take steps toward accomplishing goals developed during the proposal writing, partners can overcome the initial disappointment that accompanies a rejection letter and continue with the mission, simply with smaller steps.

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