

Connecting Art with Science and the University with the Community: The Prodigy Experience

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Abstract

Prodigy is an example of a program that is successful due to its being a program that is community engaged. Prodigy is a community arts program, crime prevention and diversion program, serving ten thousand people in seven counties. This article discusses the roles, challenges, and successes of the partnerships with the School of Social Work at the University of South Florida and over fifteen community agencies.

Since its inception in 1899 the Juvenile Justice system has approached juveniles in either a rehabilitative or a retributive manner depending on crime statistics, public opinion, and political agendas. The 1990s proved to be one of the harshest eras for youth in the Juvenile Justice (JJ) system, as many youth were transferred to the adult system, sentences were lengthened, and boot camps were at the height of popularity (Hemmens, Fritsch, and Caeti 1997; Hinton et al. 2007; Mears 2001; Rowe et al. 2007.)

Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s juvenile crime and violence and arrests have declined. These statistics, in combination with lack of empirical support for boot camps, publicized deaths of juveniles under the care of the JJ system, and the realization that two-thirds of the juvenile justice population has some type of mental health diagnosis, have forced the JJ system to make some changes. The Juvenile Justice system has begun to look for alternative preventive interventions for juveniles. Prior research had demonstrated the potential for effectiveness in the use of arts programming as a strategy to reduce negative behaviors, including recidivism and crime.

Most of the previous research about the effectiveness of the use of arts programming as an intervention have been anecdotal or been rudimentary program evaluations (Rapp-Paglicci, Ersing, and Rowe 2006; Stone et al. 1998; Wright et al. 2006). One study, however, used a more substantial methodology and developed and evaluated programs across five diverse sites—four in Canada and one in the United States (Wright et al. 2006). Those results showed a consistent pattern of improvement in skill sets among the youth. As these programs were not tied to the juvenile justice system, there was no research on the impact of these programs on recidivism rates. A recent presentation by the authors at the first Arts in Justice conference provided additional anecdotal evidence about the need for a rigorous evaluation.

The School of Social Work at the University of South Florida (USF) is helping fill this research void by managing Prodigy, a youth arts program for youth referred by the Juvenile Justice system. This program, which serves nearly ten thousand people across west central Florida, is designed as both a diversion program for youth who have been arrested and a prevention program for community youth. As part of the programming, the School is conducting extensive evaluative and theoretical research about the program and specific programmatic aspects.

This program not only breaks ground in the field of the use of arts in juvenile justice rehabilitation programming—it is the largest known program of its type in the country—it is also an example of a particularly intensive form of community engagement by a metropolitan university. The School, located in Tampa, works very closely with community agencies and people throughout seven counties in west central Florida. In addition to serving as an example of one type of engagement, it also exemplifies the productivity of such partnerships. The program would not have been able to expand as quickly or effectively without partnerships in the community. These relationships will be more fully described after the program description.

The Program

Prodigy is a product of prior research and has gone through formative stages over five years to become a replicable program that is demonstrating similar outcomes across sites. It operates through a multidisciplinary team based in the School of Social Work. The team includes, besides the social work faculty and chair, an industrial-organizational psychologist, several anthropologists, criminal justice and education specialists, skilled program leadership, and artists. Now serving nearly ten thousand people (four thousand enrolled youth and six thousand family and friends), the program has become one of the largest juvenile justice diversion and prevention programs in Florida.

The program operates as a diversion program for first-time juvenile offenders. Instead of being remanded to court after an arrest, the youth are given the opportunity to attend the arts diversion program. The youth also receive case management through a partnership with an agency that has expertise in juvenile justice programming.

Referred youth attend the arts program for a minimum of eight weeks (twenty-four hours) and are encouraged to stay beyond the required time. Some do stay, but it appears most of the referred students do not.

The program is also open to anyone who wants to participate between the ages of seven and seventeen. The majority of the participants in Prodigy are in this category. Prodigy, as part of its intervention strategy, only differentiates youth by age, not by referral source. That is, diversion youth are mixed with community youth. This is believed to create a positive peer environment for the diversion youth.

The classes are generally taught by artists and not by teachers. Prior research has demonstrated that the relationship with artists tends, in this type of program, to provide more benefits for the youth. Prodigy research is currently looking more closely at this relationship to determine what factors may be responsible for improved youth outcomes. Data are, or will be, collected that relate to mentoring and attachment models.

The funder specifies several programmatic outcomes: the number of youth who need to enroll during the fiscal year (currently three thousand); program completion outcomes (75 percent); and non-recidivism rates (80 percent). Prodigy has consistently exceeded these requirements.

Funding Relationship

The project, which is now about ten times larger than its original size, began as a project that was implemented at a neighborhood-based community development corporation (CDC) called University Area Community Development Corporation (UACDC). At the time there was a partnership with a local community college. The School of Social Work at the University was brought in to replace the community college based on their experience with previous art programming, the capacity to undertake research, and the experience in managing such programs. This partnership helped to insure Prodigy was a research-based program. The shift to the University was initiated and made by the CDC. One aspect of the engagement process, then, was that significant funding was brought to the University by the community partner.

Due to the inherent difficulties of managing a large project such as this within the bureaucratic constraints of a large university, the role of the CDC partner kept getting expanded. They developed the flexibility and decision-making apparatus to manage a program effectively. As a result, nearly 80 percent of the funding is currently subcontracted to the CDC. The University retains accountability and responsibility for the program and provides direct services in research, training, database development, and communications, while the CDC manages the implementation of the program across all the sites. This split of responsibilities emerged, after several re-organizations, as the most effective structure. This organizational structure became especially effective as the program increased dramatically in size, necessitating a more rapid management process. Speedy decision-making and implementation processes appear to be generally beyond the capacity of a large university.

Structure

The current structure has the flow of dollars to USF, which, in turn, subcontracts most of the money to the CDC, which in turn, subcontracts to about fifteen agencies that provide the programming to the youth. These agencies include small neighborhood-based organizations to church-based CDC's to large agencies. About one-half of the partners are considered small—fewer than twenty-five employees. Some agencies manage multiple sites.

This arrangement has the advantage of bringing in organizations that are tied to the community and offer other activities that serve the community. This is part of a planned, although as yet un-researched, strategy to build community assets, which are seen as important to the overall health of the neighborhood (Pratt, Turner, and Paquero 2004; White 2003). Church-based operations, for example, offer other programming to reach families; large agencies, such as a YMCA, likewise have many activities that involve family. This approach also has the built-in advantage of streamlining initial recruitment since the pre-existing relationships and programs in the community provide an immediate source of enrollees.

This diffuse structure does create a need for intensive monitoring to insure compliance, a critical issue for the University as it wants reassurances (continuously) that the program is operating within fiscal guidelines. The primary subcontractor has one staff member monitor for every four subcontracted sites. Currently there is the equivalent of 4.5 monitors on staff. This is a much more intensive monitoring process than the funder itself undertakes. The subcontracted sites are visited one to two times a month by the monitors who have extensive checklists and monitoring protocols to follow. This assures adherence to fiscal, administrative, and programming policies and procedures. USF, in turn, is responsible for monitoring the CDC's monitoring.

Management and Staffing

An executive committee makes primary program policy and procedure decisions. This committee consists of the Principal Investigator (PI), the Program Director from USF, and the Executive Director and Director of Grants and Contracts at the CDC. This group meets as a team only occasionally as most decisions are made in other forums.

Bi-weekly "Prodigy Central" meetings are held with core staff from the two institutions. This is the forum where most policy changes are discussed and managed. There is also an on-going series of small group meetings held by area of specialty, such as the research team, USF executive team, and the Quality Assurance Team.

In a community-engaged project such as this, there is always a danger that communication between the CDC and USF will break down due to different institutional demands, physical distance from each other, and internal relationships. A state university is a very different environment from that of a private organization providing community services. Administrative and staff performance expectations at the two institutions tend to be on divergent tracks. Therefore, beyond the formal meetings, efforts are made to insure informal contacts take place on an on-going basis. These contacts are across the functional hierarchy to help insure open flow and communication across levels and tasks. This strategy has proven to be essential to insuring good communication between the agencies. Informal lunch meetings have contributed significantly to developing good communication across the two agencies.

Functionally, staff may be responsible for delivering the program to youth, bringing infrastructure and resources to help with program implementation, or providing

administrative services to the project (management, administrative and fiscal support, monitoring and compliance). USF is primarily engaged in infrastructure development and administrative management. The prime subcontractor is engaged in all three categories, and the neighborhood organizations are primarily engaged in the program delivery. The research team at USF is the component with the most staff—about twenty persons, full- and part-time.

Training

Another direct engagement between the University and the community partners is through the training. USF coordinates, conducts, and assesses the training of the Artistic Instructors. As the instructors generally are unfamiliar with classroom management, learning styles, and adolescent development, these topics have become the focus of the training. The training content is also linked very closely to the research. USF is designing the training, developing the training manuals, and developing a classroom observation assessment system for the management of the training as well as for the research.

USF staff go to the program sites to do teacher observation. This helps to form direct relationships with site management, instructors, and with some of the youth attending the program. This creates a direct and independent flow of information about program status and also solidifies the understanding of the USF role among the partners. This latter is another critical component for successful community engagement. Trust can be developed much more readily in the context of positive personal relationships. A danger in such a large scale project is that without active involvement, the University's role and the perception of the University gets defined by others—sometimes not in a positive manner.

Program Results

The program has exceeded its contract goals. The non-recidivism rate has been consistently close to 90 percent as has the successful completion rate (see Table 1). The program served over three thousand enrolled youth in fiscal year 2006-2007 between the ages of seven and seventeen. All these numbers greatly exceeded the contractual goals.

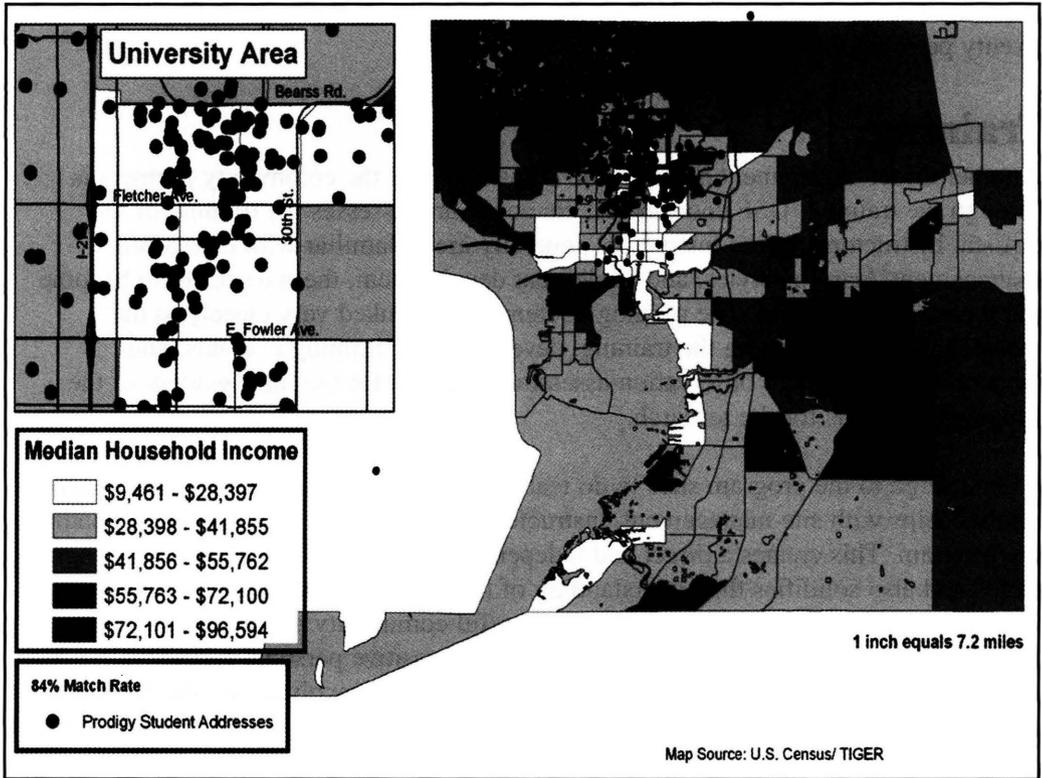
Table 1: Non-Recidivism and Completion Rates 2004-2005

Non-recidivism rates	88%
Completion rates	90%

The research team also provides data that impact other management decisions. One example is the identification of the neighborhoods where the participating youth reside. The map, Figure 1, is one of a series that visually look at indicators of at-risk communities. This map shows the program is located in one of the lowest income neighborhoods in the county. This confirms that this site is a good location for a

diversion and prevention program. The mapping is also useful for more theoretical research concerning the role of community in youth behavior.

Figure 1. Map showing Prodigy site in context of income.



Map and research by Robin Ersing, School of Social Work, University of South Florida, 2007.

More in-depth analyses have begun looking at the intra-personal impact on the youth. One analysis (see Table 2) showed a positive relationship between improvement in mental health scores for the diversion youth and participation in the program. This suggests that program attendance may be related to lessened anger, decreased depression and fewer somatic complaints.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for MAYSI Scales and Tests of Pre/Post Differences with Effect Size

<i>MAYSI Scale</i>	<i>Pre-Test M</i>	<i>Post-test M</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>D</i>
Angry/Irritable	3.38	2.73	2.92	.004*	.36
Depressed/Anxious	1.48	1.03	3.14	.002*	.38
Somatic Complaints	2.05	1.68	2.53	.012*	.49
Suicidal Ideations	.36	.18	1.92	.057	
Substance Use	.44	.48	-.59	.559	
*: p<.05					

(Rapp-Paglicci, Stewart, and Rowe 2007)

Community Engagement Issues

Over the years key issues have appeared that have impacted the community engagement model of Prodigy. These are both positive and negative.

On the positive side, USF could not have implemented the expanded version of the program without the community partnerships and indeed may not even have had the program without the partnership. The CDC partner has the management expertise, the capacity, and the staff to manage the implementation of the program. They have the ability to negotiate contracts in a timely manner, provide quick turnaround of invoices, can purchase items without waiting weeks for approvals, can make personnel decisions quickly, and have similar structures in place to allow for quick adaptation.

The University on the other hand has the research and training expertise to effectively deliver those tasks in a highly professional and competent manner. This work provides an empirical base to the program and increases the credibility of the work. The University also has tremendous intellectual and knowledge capital that provides insight into management and programming. The knowledge has been used in the development of communications, MIS systems, orientation packages, and tool kits that are essential for replication. The University also has the ability to attract resources and attention for the program. In general, when a phone call comes from the University, it gets returned, other agencies are willing to discuss the program, and other organizations are willing to put resources into the program.

Difficulties arose when USF tried to manage the implementation from within. As the program kept expanding, many USF personnel were off-site while supervisors were on campus. This created frequent administrative and supervisory issues. While the university employees were used to a slow purchasing system, the community was less patient in waiting for items. In addition, since the primary CDC managed the subcontracts, issues of authority and chain of command were also common. The CDC had the legal relationship with the programming subcontractors, but USF had the program relationship. This created confusion for all parties.

The fuzziness of the roles allowed for gaps in administrative systems resulting in broken communications, misunderstandings and power struggles. After the reorganization and clearly defined roles were developed—roles that were based on function and expertise—these issues began to be reduced significantly. In addition, the encouragement of informal and cross-channel communications also significantly increased accuracy of information flow and better coordination of working relationships. All this resulted in a smoother functioning program that is making expansion achievable in a manner that maintains program fidelity across sites.

Internal University Issues

There are also issues that are internal to the university that have an impact on being engaged in community activities. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at USF is considered one of the better ones in the country. In general, they have been supportive and helpful. An IRB audit found the program to be operating within the defined parameters. The major issue experienced with the IRB is the difficulty in making even minor modifications. Social science research goes through a process that is relatively demanding in order to gain approvals to make even small changes. Field research that is tied to program implementation and that has to achieve certain goals should ideally adopt elements of Action Research in order to modify the protocols based on the data (Brydon-Miller 2006; Lederman 2006). However, the amount of work it takes to add site names, to change some items in a protocol, or to change a protocol, limits the flexibility and adaptability of the research. It also concerns the IRB to see many changes. They appear to be more accustomed to short-term research that has an established protocol with limited, if any variability—research that is more lab-based than tied to community programming. As IRBs were established primarily to address medical concerns they have not adapted well to field-based research (Lederman 2006).

A second internal issue, from the perspective of those who operate Prodigy, is the apparent focus of the administrative apparatus of the University on insuring compliance and maintaining a “no-embarrassment rule.” Both of which are important goals for an institution and are goals Prodigy has adopted on its own. However, these appear to be primary foci at the expense of insuring the program continues uninterrupted with no negative impact on the community, the participants and the partners. It has taken two to three months some years to obtain final University approval on the primary subcontract. This has resulted in an interruption of payments to the CDC partner placing them in a difficult financial situation. In one of the years, the program was seriously threatened with shut down due to this issue.

While several initiatives have been taken to address the concerns in a forward and early manner, large institutions have a way of surprising people. It has not always been clear who makes the decisions. One year the Prodigy staff thought it was keeping all the relevant partners fully informed only to find out very late in the contracting process the final arbiter had been left out of the process.

In the context of community engagement, these issues impact the reputation of the university as partner and create another barrier to effective partnership. In addition, it diverts internal resources to fully address these administrative issues, resulting in reduced focus on programmatic activities.

On a more positive note, as the program matures, the University's administrative apparatus is more active in addressing these issues earlier in the process and are developing an understanding of the program. The support within the University also has been growing, although there is a continuous need to address those who believe engagement means just researching the community and then walking away. That is, the definition of community engagement as applied on this program does not agree with other's understanding of research and community.

Recap and Recommendations

Community engagement as practiced by the Prodigy program is very comprehensive and intertwined with the community. This woven network of university and community involvement took several years to develop an organizational structure that met the needs of the program, the partners, the funder, and the community.

It is a fully community-engaged program as all the key components of managing the program are shared by the community and the university partner; this includes compliance, quality control, fiscal management, program development, communications, and even the research. The decision—making process fully incorporates the two major partners.

In order to maintain an engagement strategy that continues to be effective, the following management actions were taken and have been successful in creating a productive relationship with the partners.

1. Program tasks were fully differentiated and based on expertise and ability. Training and research are led by the University while program implantation is led by the CDC.
2. Informal communications between key personnel are maintained and encouraged. This keeps any one individual from being in the position of information-broker, improves communications across the layers in the program, resulting in improved decision-making.
3. Direct contacts are maintained with those partners providing services. While easier and tempting to stay within the walls of the university, this contact allows impressions and information about the university to be formed by others. Direct meetings are important in building trust and developing an information feedback flow that will lead to program improvements.

The willingness of the partners in this engaged program to work to resolve problems and to advance the program has resulted in what appear to be significant successes. Not only is the program meeting the contracted goals, it is developing new programmatic and research that may help shape the field of the use of arts as an intervention strategy. This program is an example of an engagement strategy that has resulted in an improved program, improved management, solid research, and an effective intervention—potentially positively impacting thousands of youth across the middle of Florida and beyond.

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