

Bringing Broad-Based International Engagement to Scale: Lessons from the Buffalo Tanzania Education Project

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Abstract

The Buffalo-Tanzania Education Project (BTEP), a multifaceted partnership between the University at Buffalo (UB) community and a developing school campus in the Mara Region of Northern Tanzania, is offered as a model for broad-based higher education engagement. Designed to leverage growing interest in high-impact pedagogies and outreach while addressing limitations associated with traditional engagement approaches, BTEP is explored through the lenses of community impacts, scalability, and return on institutional investment.

As the challenges facing the world's most impoverished communities continue to expand in scale and complexity, our need for engagement has moved well beyond traditional models of service and support. In order to help communities benefit from the private investments, grants, and stimulus opportunities that can catalyze growth, fundamental improvements to social systems, policies, and human capital must first be achieved. Without such infrastructure, the most vulnerable populations and the communities in which they live will continue to struggle and lag behind.

When viewed through this lens of broad-based community development, colleges and universities are uniquely poised to partner and contribute. As veritable cornucopias of resources and specialized expertise, universities offer research, outreach, faculty and staff, and a long-term commitment to inquiry and innovation that extends across all domains of study. Perhaps most importantly, higher education offers an ever-replenishing cadre of students who will become future change agents, philanthropists, and leaders. And increasingly, these students are looking for meaningful opportunities to explore the world and add value through their respective talents and resources.

Not surprisingly, colleges are responding to these changing student interests, developing opportunities to link service, travel, and engagement with academic learning, while expanding their institutional commitments to include experiential pedagogies and offerings. But despite these exciting developments, most opportunities for international engagement remain fundamentally limited in scope and scale. Even the most innovative programs tend to be offered as discreet opportunities for study, internships, or other forms of engagement, coordinated through localized offices and focused on specific groups of students toward clearly defined programmatic goals.

While somewhat ubiquitous within higher education, this siloed approach presents considerable limitations with regard to coordination and scale. Since each international offering represents extensive investments in staff time and resources, programs can be expensive to run and difficult to maintain and are, therefore, inherently vulnerable. As institutional resources and priorities shift, these programs can be viewed as luxuries or add-ons, a precarious status in the world of higher education.

Yet despite this state of fragility, there is clearly more to be had with regard to international engagement. Given the breadth of student interest and the complexity and pervasiveness of need within communities around the world, there is ample room to go deeper. But rather than simply adding more discreet programs of study and engagement, we could instead respond simultaneously to student interests for travel, service, and learning while supporting faculty and the broader university community. And in doing so, we could, in theory, leverage our collective impact toward maximized community growth, thus actualizing the full potential of higher education as institutional agents of change.

Lest we appear naïve, we certainly recognize that universities are not in the business of saving the world. In fact, in many ways, higher education has become increasingly risk-adverse. As resources dwindle and institutions are scrutinized regarding the cost and quality of their respective programs, anything perceived to be outside the core mission is inherently suspect. Accordingly, any proposed expansion or enhancements in programs supporting student or community engagement would need to be closely aligned with key institutional priorities and goals, with an eye on sustainability and ultimately the enrollments and funding dollars that are becoming increasingly precious.

Program Design

It is within this context that the Buffalo-Tanzania Education Project (BTEP) was created in 2009 as a model for broad-based university engagement. Our approach, which was incubated in the University of Buffalo (UB) Center for Educational Collaboration (CEC) (an entity that no longer exists), was designed on a clear and powerful premise, that by bringing individuals and their respective engagement efforts together toward a shared vision, we could expand and deepen impact across multiple measures. Unlike traditional approaches that support clearly defined projects and outcomes, BTEP was designed to be generative, expanding the space for engagement while tethering specific projects to key priorities and areas of focus. In this way, BTEP would function much like a prism, focusing and amplifying individual beams of engagement toward a more compelling and holistic effect.

As suggested by the name of the project, our efforts focused on Tanzania, a fairly new democratic country in East Africa, and more specifically on a developing school campus in the Kitenga Village of the Northern Mara Region. The area is characterized by dirt roads, distant markets, the lack of running water and electricity, limited healthcare services, malnutrition and mortality, few educational opportunities, female genital cutting (FGM), and arranged marriages. Although seldom in the news for famine, war, or genocide, Tanzania is clearly a developing country with challenges that

are all too familiar and daunting, making it worthy of seeking partnerships and support. The school was being constructed under the leadership of the Immaculate Heart Sisters of Africa (IHSA), an order of Catholic nuns who successfully managed education and humanitarian projects throughout the country. The IHSA had secured one thousand acres of land in Kitenga and were championing all aspects of the ambitious project including fundraising, construction, and management of the school, which in its full capacity would serve fifteen hundred girls from surrounding regions. To be clear, the school was the sisters' project. They owned the land, the vision, and the capacity to lead and manage, but were looking for partners who could help them realize their goals.

As a comprehensive research university with a vast network of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and partners, we believed that there would be ample interest in supporting the build-out of the campus within the UB community. Together with two members of the IHSA who were studying at a nearby college, we were able to jointly identify four key areas of focus that represented major categories of need and also areas of capacity and interest within the university community. These included education, health, economics, and infrastructure. Although we knew these areas to be inherently interconnected, they would serve as lenses through which we could build out and reflect upon our work, allowing us to connect with faculty, students, and partners who might contribute their respective resources and expertise.

In this spirit of expansiveness, BTEP would welcome all participants, while encouraging meaningful engagement through personal connections with Tanzania and the Kitenga project. To support this end, BTEP leaders would facilitate frequent trips to the partner site customized to meet the needs and interests of the respective participants. Upon return, members would share their experiences with the BTEP group and help to galvanize the next round of projects and fundraisers, thus fueling an ever-expanding engagement community that would nurture and sustain itself while helping to support the broader Kitenga campus and surrounding region.

While BTEP was designed to be collaborative, individual projects would be led and championed by specific BTEP members. We hoped that this policy of clear project ownership would prevent the model from becoming top-heavy and minimize the need for centralized support and oversight, while at the same time encouraging deep connections with existing organizational units and their respective goals. To keep the model "clean" and prevent any conflicts of interest associated with a public university engaging with a religious organization around humanitarian work, we committed to utilizing no institutional funds to support our efforts. This policy allowed us to test the widely held assumption that funding is a necessary ingredient for programmatic innovation and community impact.

With regard to coordination, BTEP co-founders would provide loose facilitation, convening regular meetings and maintaining communication with BTEP members through e-mails, a website, and occasional newsletters. It should be noted that the CEC, at that time, was focused on local models of educational collaboration, overseeing UB's

institutional partnership with the nearby Buffalo School District. As BTEP evolved, it would be framed as an international example of the CEC engagement model. In many ways the institutional objectives were the same, developing meaningful opportunities for university members to engage while leveraging significant impacts for the schools, and the students and families they serve.

Needs Assessment

Understanding the importance of visiting Tanzania and establishing a strong foundation for collaboration, BTEP co-founders traveled with a team of academic leaders and community partners to the Mara Region of Northern Tanzania in the summer of 2009 to assess the needs. The team visited various schools and programs administered by the IHSA, met with local officials and church leaders to discuss their intentions, and visited Kitenga to better understand the vision for the school. In addition to ensuring a strong foundation for the project, BTEP leaders sought to galvanize interest and participation upon their return. Accordingly, they commissioned the creation of a video to introduce potential members to the project and to the broader region and country and invite their participation within the developing BTEP community. By attracting individuals with aligned interests and expertise, the team hoped to quickly seed the model and begin to actualize its potential.

Resonance with the university community was strong. Unlike other special initiatives that were developed “on high” and pushed down through mandates or centralized incentives, BTEP enjoyed an ambiguous yet in some ways enviable position. Incubated within the CEC, which was a centralized infrastructure outside any particular school or department, leaders were free to engage across the university and beyond. And since the director of CEC, and co-founder of BTEP, reported to the president, the project was allowed to move forward without the usual political challenges or roadblocks. Admittedly, if directly approached, most university leaders would indicate doubts about the viability or appropriateness of the project, but it was nonetheless permitted to percolate and grow in a way that was largely under the radar but at the same time excitingly bold.

While the video and communications efforts quickly generated support through membership, it took the emergence of key university and community leaders ready to champion specific BTEP projects to bring the model to life. These individuals would have an amplifying effect, parlaying their own engagement and resources into broader participation and impacts. Thanks largely to their efforts, within a relatively short period of time (less than two years) a dynamic BTEP community emerged with active participation from faculty members, students (both graduate and undergraduate), staff, community and nonprofit organizations.

BTEP Impacts

To assess the efficacy of BTEP, we were guided by our initial observations and hypotheses regarding international engagement. We had predicted that unlike traditional

models, BTEP would be generative in nature, cultivating new opportunities for engagement while ensuring close alignment with institutional and academic priorities. By opening up the model to community members and their affiliated organizations, we anticipated complimentary relationships and leveraged resources that would further enhance and deepen the university's ability to contribute to the school project. And ultimately, we hypothesized that the collective focus on a shared vision would promote a culture of collaboration and support beyond what was traditionally experienced, while adding value to the host community in meaningful and demonstrable ways.

Accordingly, the following metrics emerged through which to evaluate the efficacy of our model: (1) meaningful engagement as reflected in course development, travel, faculty, and student research, and other key academic priorities; (2) meaningful engagement of community organizations and partners that further enhance engagement impacts; (3) formation of a collaborative community that supports meaningful engagement while generating new opportunities for growth and expansion; and (4) significant benefits for the target community with regard to improved opportunities and quality of life. Because we had established BTEP as an engagement model, we also developed hypotheses related to implementation and coordination of the framework. Specifically, we believed that BTEP could be implemented without the investment of central funds or extensive administrative support, and that once established, it could sustain itself across changing university priorities and leadership. Although interconnected, each of these predicted outcomes is discussed respectively in the following sections.

Engagement Impacts

Our hopes for broad and meaningful academic engagement were strongly supported through the early involvement of university faculty members. Although professors comprised a small segment of our total BTEP membership (less than 10 percent), their contributions were significant, yielding additional engagement of their associated students and networks, thus playing a critical amplifying role within the BTEP model.

A particularly illustrative example involved a UB professor who was an internationally renowned scholar of early childhood education. He had previously been involved with projects in Ethiopia and was eager to reconnect with East Africa, embracing BTEP as an opportunity to leverage his connections and resources for the children of Kitenga. After traveling to Tanzania and visiting the emerging school campus, he committed to raising funds for the Early Childhood Center, which although part of the sisters' initial master plan, had not previously been deemed a priority. By leveraging his upcoming presidency of an international professional organization, he would raise funds for the construction of the school while engaging his colleagues and students in the process. The BTEP community rallied around his efforts, helping to raise bridging funds through an informal fundraiser with additional efforts led by area school children who were drawn to the vision for the campus. After necessary funds were secured and the classrooms successfully constructed, the professor spearheaded a playground project, returning to Tanzania with students, architects, and BTEP members who contributed

their time and resources to present the children of Kitenga with a well-designed and constructed playscape. It should be noted that in addition to these programmatic efforts, the professor was also able to bring an early childhood education professional from Tanzania to study at UB. This student would become an integral part of the BTEP community and after completing his PhD would return to Tanzania to assume an academic position at a local university, establishing himself as an important resource for the BTEP network. Before leaving this example, it also should be noted that while the professor's impacts were profound, his initial travel was supported by his academic dean, who had participated in our first Tanzania trip. This vertical matrix of support including academic leadership, faculty, and students represents an important connective structure that has contributed heavily to BTEP's successes, and warrants further exploration as a driver for broad-based institutional and community engagement.

A second noteworthy example of academic impacts is associated with a participating professor who was serving as associate dean at the time of our initial trip. With a personal connection to Africa, she was interested in pursuing her own research interests related to the project, but was ultimately focused on establishing a Tanzania-based practicum site for social work students interested in community development. Over the course of several trips to Tanzania, she established relationships with the IHSA both in Kitenga and other regional sites, as well as a national social work education program, understanding that these institutional connections would be critical for establishing support and legitimacy within her own academic unit. To accomplish these goals, she leveraged a sabbatical as well as an internal travel grant to get the necessary infrastructure in place, and eventually led a travel-based course along with extended practicum opportunities for social work students. Although she has since left her role as associate dean and returned to a full-time faculty status, she has been able to navigate these changes to continue her involvement and the creation of opportunities for UB social work students. Eventually extending these placements beyond the Kitenga site to focus on other IHSA projects, she has created an educational pipeline that promises to influence the trajectories of future social work professionals.

While faculty members have played a pivotal role in the development of BTEP, we found students to be especially receptive to opportunities for study, research, and travel-based service. Although travel was always viewed as a critical vehicle for meaningful engagement, our early trips were loosely coordinated with minimal university support or facilitation. While we recognized the potential of leveraging UB's extensive international education programs through an official study abroad course, university leadership had been skeptical about the viability of such offerings. However, over time, as our travel experience and in-country connections grew in depth and scope, the university was eventually able to embrace the idea, with the first study abroad trip launched in January 2014 to the Mara Region. Framed within an interdisciplinary focus on community development, the course attracted undergraduate and graduate students from diverse disciplines and backgrounds. Co-led by BTEP co-founder and a professor from a nearby SUNY affiliated Buffalo college who hailed from the Mara Region of Tanzania (co-author of this article), students were given an inside glimpse into village life along with opportunities to meet leaders from various

community sectors. They returned enthusiastic about their experiences, many yearning to continue and deepen their engagement through programs of study and associated service. It should be noted that the study abroad course was made possible largely by contextual variables related to the timing of our initiative. First, a provostial commitment to travel-based experiences with a focus on the newly created winter session helped establish support for innovative offerings such as the BTEP trip, and also the recent transfer of BTEP co-founders to respective offices within the academic affairs unit allowed the course to take root within an expanding experiential learning focus. But while these institutional developments helped to support the formation of the trip, it was ultimately student interest that made it a reality, with subsequent trips being planned for upcoming years. The success of the course sent a clear message to UB leadership that students were, in fact, ready for these types of experiences, and the deep engagement they afford.

Also noteworthy was the extensive body of research catalyzed by the BTEP initiative.

In total, three UB students conducted dissertation studies focusing on issues of development in Tanzania, connecting BTEP travel with data collection and furthering of research goals. In addition, several faculty members linked their engagement efforts with research, writing papers and manuscripts, and presenting at various local and international conferences and meetings. This strong focus on inquiry and research provided a unifying thread among the various BTEP members who were more academically focused, leaving them eager for more direct engagement with the Kitenga community and opportunities to assess the project's impacts.

Engagement of Community Organizations

By inviting nonacademic partners and their associated organizations into BTEP, we envisioned a broadening and deepening of resources and impacts for Kitenga. Since we were unable to leverage institutional funds, we hoped that community organizations could extend our reach while establishing mutually beneficial relationships around shared goals and mission.

This hypothesis was largely supported through an early relationship around BTEP's "infrastructure" focus area, and more specifically, the community's need for clean water. During our initial trip to Tanzania, one of our team members, who served as videographer, happened to have a deep personal connection with Rotary, an international service organization with projects and networks all around the world. Upon returning from the trip, he shared the concept of BTEP with his Buffalo-based Rotary club, and invited their participation via a well project. While in Tanzania, we had all come to recognize the pervasive dryness of the region and the importance of clean water with regard to health and wellness, and also the ultimate success of the school campus. Since construction utilized hand-made bricks, the lack of a reliable water source in close proximity to the site was threatening the reality of completion. Noting the importance of water and recognizing the exciting synergy with Rotary International's own focus on water, the local club got to work raising funds and

awareness. Through speaking to other clubs and writing a small matching grant, the fundraising goal for the first well was quickly realized, and a deep bore well was dug and followed by a solar-powered submersible pump system that would support the health clinic and surrounding community. Rotary would go on to be a critical partner in BTEP and the Kitenga school campus with a number of local clubs and Rotarians contributing in meaningful and impactful ways.

In an effort to deepen the fundraising capacity and broaden the commitment to girls' education, several BTEP members developed a formalized nonprofit organization. While staying connected with the larger BTEP community, they pursued and met ambitious fundraising goals, helping to expedite the construction and opening of the school. While the formation of this entity added some complexities with regard to communication with the sisters and internal dynamics of BTEP, its impacts were undeniable.

Other nonprofit partners included a local foundation that contributed solar cookers and panels for the Kitenga community, and in-kind support from local stores and service providers for individual fundraisers and projects. When viewed collectively, our nonprofit partners made major contributions to the construction of the school and provided valuable resources for the Kitenga community well beyond what academic members could have provided alone.

BTEP as a Collaborative Engagement Community

Although never formalized through any official process or entity, BTEP quickly evoked a strong sense of affiliation, with members connecting to the project in deep and personal ways. When convened, BTEP meetings had a sense of warmth and collegiality that was infectious, attracting an ever-expanding array of new members and partners. And in the spirit of expansiveness, all were welcomed and embraced, with new threads and possibilities quickly revealing themselves, weaving a dynamic and ever-changing tapestry of engagement.

Also unique to BTEP was the informal interplay between faculty, students, staff, and community members who all came together to discuss, collaborate, and travel. The relationships extended beyond specific projects, allowing BTEP to function like a professional network, with individuals contacting one another for support, guidance, and shared expertise. In the case of graduate students traveling from Tanzania to study at UB, BTEP members were able to provide assistantships and mentoring that in turn further supported the build-out of the BTEP model. These connections were further strengthened and cultivated during organized fundraisers and gatherings that sought to build capacity for projects by inviting colleagues and acquaintances and sharing the stories of BTEP.

In these ways, our goals for establishing a vibrant engagement community were strongly supported and even surpassed. Although meetings eventually decreased in frequency when the CEC and its institutional supports dissolved, members continued to identify with the project, continuing to rally enthusiastically around activities or

requests for support. This long-standing and deeply held affiliation with the project reflects a meaningful resonance with its core engagement tenets and community focus. Clearly, BTEP suggests an appetite for collaborative engagement which connects to fundamental needs beyond those that are strictly academic or individually based.

Community Impacts

Although BTEP was designed as an engagement model, the group maintained a clear commitment to supporting the school campus and ultimately improving the lives of the children and families of the Mara Region. While this commitment was clear, our ability to assess our associated impacts proved more challenging than we had anticipated.

As indirect measures, we could point to our respective contributions to the construction of the school campus. Through the efforts of our members and their associated organizations, we had raised funds for the first block of classrooms for the secondary school, had contributed to the construction of the dormitory, and had completed fundraising for the early childhood school and playground. We had also contributed a well and pump system, solar panels, and supplies for the clinic and related projects.

While the BTEP community took pride in these contributions and believed them to be beneficial for the girls and families of Kitenga, many members, especially those with an academic focus, wanted to better understand the associated effects and perceptions. Since the school campus was being developed to address urgent needs and challenges within the Mara Region and the broader realities of community development within Tanzania and sub-Saharan Africa, many felt a need to more deeply assess our impacts in relation to related expectations and goals. By gaining this critical data, our academic members hoped to better leverage their respective resources and networks to ultimately deepen and expand their engagement, while ensuring ongoing alignment with the priorities of their respective units and the broader university community.

Despite this desire, however, the group's direct access to the Kitenga community was limited and controlled by the IHSA who were overseeing the project. Under considerable pressure to complete the school construction and provide the promised education to the girls of Kitenga, they requested that BTEP engagement be temporarily limited to projects that would directly benefit the opening of the campus. As a result, faculty members interested in pursuing research or other forms of more participatory engagement found themselves expanding their efforts to other projects and sites within the Mara Region. However, it should be noted that despite this development, many members of the group, especially those associated with the work of nonprofit community organizations, continued to engage directly with Kitenga, with significant contributions that continue to support the impending opening of the school campus.

Implementation Outcomes

While we were confident that BTEP could yield deeper and broader impacts than more traditional engagement approaches, we were sensitive to concerns about the scale of

institutional investment necessary to make them viable. Accordingly, in addition to evaluating the impacts of engagement, we were interested in studying the implementation and coordination of the model itself, with an eye on sustainability within the realities of changing institutional priorities, resources, and leadership.

When viewed through these lenses, the early incubation of BTEP within a formalized university structure under the protection of the president was critical to its ultimate success. Through the development of CEC newsletters, a website, and communications, we were able to build momentum and capacity for our ongoing efforts. But interestingly, within two years of the formation of BTEP, the president left the university with the CEC dissolving shortly after along with its associated channels of communication and support. With these early mechanisms in place, however, BTEP was able to sustain itself even in the face of dwindling institutional support and coordination. This continued affiliation with BTEP illustrates the strong resonance of the engagement project and the sense of community it engendered. It also supports our original hypothesis, indicating the viability of such models to withstand inherent levels of flux that accompany higher education leadership.

Also noteworthy with regard to the viability of the BTEP model, were its conceptual linkages to changing institutional frames and priorities. Understanding the somewhat volatile nature of higher education, we had anchored the model in core university priorities that would remain strong even in the face of changing leadership. At the time of its inception, BTEP's parent organization, the CEC, was focused primarily on Pre-K-16 collaboration, based on the expectation that higher education should work with its public school partners to ensure a strongly aligned pipeline for preparation. Subsequently, with the departure of the president and the sense of urgency related to Pre-K-16 education, new priorities for engagement eventually emerged, including an evolving focus on experiential learning and international travel as critical components of undergraduate education.

Although this new focus took almost three years to develop, it has allowed BTEP to re-emerge as an exciting model. The fact that it is now situated within academic affairs rather than the president's office, allows for a more connected relationship with the academic units, and other key institutional offices including those focused on recruitment and retention, development, and other deep priorities. Also, with a recent roll-out of a state-level applied learning initiative, new opportunities to share BTEP and engage students and partners from other campuses and institutions are in development. In these ways, not only has BTEP withstood the challenges of changing leadership and organizational structures, but also it has increased in viability as more powerful frames and engagement constructs have developed and been embraced by various levels of leadership. Collectively, these developments further support the promise of BTEP as a broad-based model for international engagement.

Lessons Learned

With BTEP poised for resurgence some six years after its inception, we have many important lessons to ponder and share. And while we are tempted to linger primarily

on our successes, we know that failures can be especially rich opportunities for growth and learning. Accordingly, we include both types of reflection within the following sections, offering recommendations for implementing aspects of BTEP within international and more localized community contexts. And lastly, we offer suggestions for the development of a broader engagement community that can support our efforts as we incorporate more comprehensive and large-scale engagement models into our collective work.

Noteworthy Successes Worth Modeling

In response to perceived limitations of traditional efforts, we sought to broaden our approach by starting with a strong relationship with our target community and designing engagement around four key areas of focus. For our purposes, we selected education, health, economics, and infrastructure, viewing each as integrally related to the success of the school project, while also aligning with key areas of capacity and interest within the UB community. By framing our engagement in this way, we created ample space to support a wide breadth of possible projects while at the same time ensuring internal consistency and focus on our vision. When compared with more traditional project-based initiatives that are often limited to discreet engagement opportunities, our broad-based approach proved more stable and robust in the face of significant change. Even when individual projects failed to develop or took longer than anticipated, the broader model was able to grow and flourish, allowing for new opportunities and relationships to emerge without jeopardizing our core commitment. This type of sustained community commitment is often rare, as institutions of higher education struggle to maintain focus within shifting priorities and political landscapes. And yet, if achieved, such initiatives can engender the positive support and connectivity that is critical to long-term advocacy and sustainability.

However, in order for commitments to be made and honored, initiatives must be grounded on strong relationships built on trust, respect, and understanding. This is true not only for the partnering community, but also for the participants who are invited to engage. At the very core of BTEP was the premise that virtually every person has something of value to contribute, and that the closer individuals get to the project and partner community, the more meaningful their contributions will be. While many of our most active BTEP members had prior experience related to Africa or Tanzania, others became engaged after traveling through BTEP trips, making personal connections with individual projects or people, and returning inspired to contribute and/or lead new initiatives. Admittedly, this intimate notion of facilitated engagement might make higher education leaders somewhat uncomfortable. However, it should be noted, that as long as the engagement model and associated rules are clearly defined, the institution can remain focused on its core goals and priorities, while at the same time supporting deep and meaningful engagement. Accordingly, by fully developing rules for engagement, institutions can deepen their outreach and associated community commitments, while remaining safely within the zone of appropriate engagement.

One such rule that worked well for BTEP was the notion of individual project ownership. Largely in an effort to mitigate the need for extensive administration or central investments, all BTEP projects would be led and championed by specific members or member organizations. BTEP leaders would maintain communication with the sisters to ensure alignment with their interests, while the BTEP community would rally around fundraising and other engagement needs. Upon reflection, this notion of clear project ownership accomplished many important outcomes. It ensured buy-in and follow-through even in the face of unanticipated complexities and challenges, and leveraged the involvement of members' associated offices and organizations, utilizing their infrastructures and tying efforts to their respective goals. This was true for the water project, which involved local Rotary clubs and their connections to the broader systems of Rotary International, as well as courses led by university faculty members and administrators. In addition to leveraging in-kind support, this rule forced a high level of discipline, preventing us from becoming top-heavy, with leadership assuming increasing responsibilities and associated infrastructure costs. Since we had committed to expending no direct support other than staff time and administrative activities normally associated with our efforts, such as communication and convening meetings, we kept BTEP lean and nimble, able to adapt to changing opportunities and contexts. And since it is much easier to gain support, or rather more difficult for leaders to say no, when one offers meaningful outputs with no request for investment, this decision proved highly advantageous and represents an important design element to be considered.

Before leaving this section, we would be remiss if we didn't reflect briefly on the character of our partners, the IHSA, and the importance of selecting collaborators who have the capacity and credibility to uphold their end of the model. The IHSA are highly competent women who share our commitment to education and to opening opportunities for the women and girls of their country. However, while we would like to take credit for our foresight, the truth is that we did not actually select them as our partners. It was through a chance (or fated) meeting between the two IHSA nuns from Mara who were studying in Buffalo, and the director of CEC, also named Mara (co-author of this article), that began the BTEP project. While our experiences illustrate that great initiatives often begin through personal connections and stories, the importance of solid partners cannot be denied. And although some may be uncomfortable with the notion of a public university partnering with a faith-based community, we learned that in developing countries like Tanzania, religious communities may be uniquely positioned for this role. With a strong commitment, capacity, and connections within the most challenged regions, and the integrity to guarantee follow-through and ownership, such partnerships allow higher education to focus on what they do best, leveraging programmatic resources and expertise toward innovation and economic growth.

Challenges and Limitations

In addition to our successes and wisdom, we also consider our missteps to be important lessons through which we can deepen our learning and engagement. One such error that largely reflects the Zeitgeist of BTEP's incubation within the university

at that time was our initial focus on educational collaboration rather than engagement. Although this might seem like an issue of semantics, it represents an important distinction with associated implications for the direction of higher education commitments. As learned through broader CEC activities, the notion of collaboration can be problematic when bridging distinct entities with associated cultures, politics, and agendas. In its purest sense, collaboration is about shared decision-making and goals, and accordingly requires high levels of equity, which can be very difficult to achieve, especially in the context of international projects such as BTEP. As we struggled to uphold our notions of participatory research and community empowerment, many BTEP members grew increasingly eager to connect directly with the Kitenga community, which in turn created friction with the sisters who were working within their own constraints. However, over time, as we adopted the new lens of engagement, we were permitted to focus more inwardly on our own goals, assuming that continued alignment with the overall mission and spirit of the project could be achieved. Upon reflection, this notion of engagement offers a more appropriate and less risky investment for higher education, allowing us to go deeper into community development and international venues, while maintaining tight alignment with institutional priorities and strengths. Doing so bestows the same benefits to the partnering community, allowing it to preserve its respective autonomy while leveraging new opportunities for growth through engagement.

However, even with this distinction in mind, responsible international engagement calls for enhanced levels of clarity around intentions, and strong management of associated expectations. Especially when interacting with developing communities that are lacking in resources and power, requests for direct financial support can emerge, even when limitations of such engagement are made explicit. We experienced this directly through our own efforts. Although we tried to emphasize the types of engagement we could offer, the urgency of raising funds for the construction of the school when coupled with cultural communication issues, contributed to a degree of disappointment and frustration. Upon reflection, we should have formalized these expectations with both the IHSA and various community stakeholders. But doing so would have required a level of cultural competency that we lacked at that time. Eventually, our efforts attracted new members with deeper cultural ties to Tanzania, allowing us to better understand our partners and avoid additional missteps. Whether too much damage had been done to fully actualize the possibilities of BTEP within Kitenga is yet to be understood, but the importance of intercultural clarity and competencies has been duly appreciated.

And as we look internally, we have also come to recognize the importance of project alignment with institutional fit and support. While BTEP was permitted to percolate and grow within the CEC, it was never officially promoted or endorsed as a UB initiative. This was due largely to its lack of association with an academic entity or office, but also reflected the significant challenge of initiating interdisciplinary community-focused initiatives outside of existing institutional priorities. Although initially benefitting from the protection of the president's office, BTEP was inherently limited in its capacity to connect with core institutional priorities and structures.

Interestingly, since BTEP leaders have since been moved to the academic affairs unit within the university, and a study abroad program has been embraced by the Office of International Education, BTEP is now poised to reemerge in deeper and more connected forms. This distinction reflects the importance of organizational positioning with regard to community engagement. The closer such initiatives can be positioned with regard to key institutional goals and functions, the better chances for deep and sustained engagement.

As a final point of reflection, we continue to ponder the incubation of a nonprofit within the BTEP community and its implications for the greater model. From the standpoint of impact, the organization has contributed significantly to the Kitenga campus, successfully expediting fundraising for the school while elevating its profile within the broader girls' education movement. In doing so, it has admittedly moved BTEP well beyond what it could have achieved without such an ambitious fundraising capacity. However, in doing so, it changed the dynamics of BTEP and its ability to maintain communication and stewardship of the relationship with the IHSA. As the IHSA, with its own changing leadership, adapted to work with the new nonprofit toward the goal of realizing the construction and opening of their campus, comfort for academic and participatory engagement began to decrease. In turn, trying to understand and navigate these complexities introduced new challenges to the model along with tensions that would ultimately test the collaborative culture of the BTEP community. Although BTEP has persisted despite these challenges and currently enjoys continued participation from all members including those associated with the nonprofit, this development represents a point of fragility worth sharing. While higher education's inability to offer direct monetary support for community projects is a noted limitation, it is perhaps best to refrain from such attempts within large-scale engagement initiatives. Or conversely, such attempts should be well designed and thought through to ensure continued communication and stewardship of the overarching engagement model.

Conclusions

While the value of such large-scale engagement models is hopefully evident, their inherent complexity and deviation from traditional paradigms calls for a strong network of support. Much like the BTEP community was designed to support and nurture specific engagement projects and impacts, a broader connective structure must be woven around individual campuses and their initiatives to guide, unify, and build upon our respective efforts. In New York, our state-level governing body, SUNY, has provided the bones for such a network through its evolving applied-learning initiative. By formalizing the importance of applied learning within the undergraduate experience, including travel and research-based engagement opportunities for students as well as formalized internships and co-ops, and providing forums for sharing and assessing best practices, centralized resources can be leveraged to build-out and study broad-based engagement models at our respective campuses. And ultimately, we can broaden our lens toward maximizing our individual and collective impacts toward the greatest good.

However, a point of caution is necessary. If we are serious about going in this direction, our efforts will call for new levels of openness and collaboration that extend well beyond what is traditionally experienced. Unlike conferences that focus on best practices and highlight successes while glossing over the complexities that challenge even the most impressive initiatives, we must have the courage to go much deeper. By sharing and learning from our limitations and assumptions, we can begin to identify gaps in our knowledge and approaches, testing out new ideas and possibilities, while developing new paradigms for support and professional development.

And to fully actualize the potential of broad-based international engagement, we must come to recognize the ultimate importance of supporting students beyond the offering of traditional travel-based experiences. We must recognize that our students are already finding ways to leverage their talents and resources, working with Internet-based models and programs to participate in group fundraising, entrepreneurial ventures and think tanks, and other innovative approaches to community development. If higher education wants to remain relevant, we need to offer more generative opportunities for students to customize their experiences and tie them back to their programs of study. And ultimately, we must help them leverage these experiences, weaving together compelling portfolios of knowledge and experiences that will distinguish them from their peers while supporting their long-term academic and career goals.

In this way, introducing vehicles to connect students with employers while tethering private investments back to community development and related higher education engagement represents an important frontier that is ripe for exploration and ownership. By embracing a systems-design approach for community engagement, both local and international, while emphasizing process-related competencies and support, we can fully commit to this new world ahead, and begin to reap the benefits that it stands to offer. What is ultimately at stake is ensuring our own institutional sustainability and supporting economic growth and community relations, while at the same time helping our most challenged communities to realize their latent potential. These outcomes along with the preparation of students who will assume roles as future leaders, philanthropists, and change agents represent the riches of higher education that are ready to be leveraged.

Author Information

Mara B. Huber, PhD, currently serves as associate dean for undergraduate education at the University at Buffalo, working to strengthen experiential learning and research opportunities for faculty and students. Past leadership roles have included founding director of the UB Center for Educational Collaboration, special assistant to the president for educational initiatives, and director of the UB – Buffalo Schools Partnership. Huber’s work has focused primarily on building strategic partnerships and models across diverse cultures and missions. Her signature projects have included the “Wiggle Your Power” book and summer camp for young children, the Buffalo – Tanzania Education Project (BTEP), and her MOVE approach to professional, organizational, and community growth. She has been recognized for her professional

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Dan Nyaronga, PhD, is an assistant professor of psychology at the State University of New York Empire State College. His professional and community effort has been dedicated to research on the multicultural context of risk and resources and individual, family, and community health outcomes. Previously as a development officer with Africare-Tanzania, he moderated community participatory appraisal and strategic engagement workshops. He also worked as an assistant to the director of multicultural programs at Valparaiso University, Indiana. As a post-doctoral research fellow at University of California, Berkeley School of Public Health, he focused on the epidemiology of alcohol use and HIV. In his current role as a faculty member and a director of the study abroad program for Tanzania through the University at Buffalo, he encourages his students to think outside the box and to seek strategic engagement for experiential learning, thus gaining an in-depth understanding of other cultures to equip themselves with cultural competency tools. His sample publications include the “Measurement of Self- and Proxy-Efficacy for Middle School Youth Physical Activity,” “Health Behavior, Childhood and Adolescence,” “Drinking Context and Consequences: 1984–2005 U.S. National Alcohol Survey,” “Understanding and Promoting Resilience in Military Families,” and “Socio-cultural Practices and Women’s Health in Tanzania.” Dr. Nyaronga is a member of Buffalo-Tanzania Education Project (BTEP) and a native of Tanzania.

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