

# **A Synthesis of Cross-sector Collaboration Case Studies**

In response to a wide range of issues, universities are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively with other sectors in society, including government, business and industry, education, religious organizations, and health and human services. The potential of this cross-sector collaboration is enormous and may be one of the primary means through which our nation can hope to successfully address the seemingly insurmountable problems of poverty, dysfunctional families, inadequate health care, rising crime rates, global economic competition, and other complex issues. The notion of addressing these problems through an interdisciplinary cross-sector examination and problem-solving approach is highly appealing to many.

However, cross-sector collaboration is easier said than done, because of differing value systems, operating principles, and reward structures. Communication and decision-making can be difficult under the best of circumstances, and nearly impossible when people are speaking different languages, holding different assumptions, and looking toward different goals.

Difficulties notwithstanding, metropolitan universities have made a commitment, through the Declaration of Metropolitan Universities, to “be responsive to the needs of [their] communities,” to develop “creative partnerships with public and private enterprises,” and to create “interdisciplinary partnerships for attacking complex metropolitan problems.” Consequently, metropolitan university faculty and administration must be committed to, and skilled in, working across sectors. The purpose of this theme issue is to feature examples of cross-sector collaboration and to explore the range of factors pertinent to successful collaboration.

The issue began with an idea of describing successful cross-sector collaboration ventures. Our intent was to ask authors to detail their undertakings and offer conclusions about what worked, and what didn't work quite so well. As we (the co-editors) set out to locate the successful examples, the process began to resemble a qualitative research study.

First we surveyed the presidents and chancellors of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, who were asked to nominate efforts, initiatives, and projects from their institutions that exemplified the notion of a university working collaboratively with multiple sectors in the community to address community needs and problems. More than 115 nominations were received. An initial review identified those projects and efforts that seemed representative of various disciplines, geographic areas, and structural models. We made contacts and collected further information about the projects.

The next step was to ask those individuals representing likely projects for inclusion if they were willing to write a paper about their efforts. We provided guidelines on topics to be addressed, and the "on-the-front-line" cross-sector collaborators prepared their descriptions. When the case studies came in, we looked for themes, unique characteristics, and patterns. The result was a mix of similarities blended with distinctive approaches. The conclusion is that there is no one right way to develop an effective cross-sector collaboration; there are many right ways.

### **Structural Variations and Themes**

Purposely, we chose a variety of types of cross-sector projects that fit our theme. Included are descriptions that focus on:

- automotive engineering and manufacturing
- business development and environmental cleanup
- worker reentry
- regional community planning
- delinquent youth intervention
- education
- neighborhood development
- inner-city health care
- information science and technology

The range of organizational structures and themes is evident across this group of cross-sector collaborative initiatives. Some emanate from subunits within a college. Some are directed out of a dean's office. Still others are housed at the chancellor's or president's level. Themes that emerged included "catalyst/convener," "consultative," "grass roots," "student-as-worker," and others. The diversity is encouraging and exciting.

Ziona Austrian and Donald Iannone share information with us about the Great Lakes Environmental Finance Center of the Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University. This cross-sector collaboration effort represents a consultative approach in which the center is invited to assist a community with a specific environmental problem, typically redevelopment of "brownfield" sites and prevention of industrial pollution. It brings together appropriate expertise and entities, and the various individuals enter into a cross-sector consultation group to provide advice and solve problems.

Georgia State University's College of Health Sciences takes the stance that academic-community partnerships must be a part of the college's overall strategic initiative. Sherry Gaines, dean of the college, Susan Kelley, director of the office of research, and Lorine Spencer, assistant professor, report that alliances are selected carefully, and collaborative efforts that blend teaching, service, and research receive priority for support. Health-related projects that serve the community are supportive of student growth through experiences, and they facilitate faculty involvement in research. Programs for grandparents raising their grandchildren, for migrant families, and for children in inner-city child care centers are described.

Robert Kittredge tells the story of the Stone Soup Partnership connected with California State University, Fresno. This partnership is a grassroots model of collaboration in neighborhood development. It evidences very broad participation and involvement of student and adult volunteers from both the university and the larger metropolitan community. The outcome has been a myriad of services for the Southeast Asian residents of El Dorado Park, and the resulting presidential designation as one of America's "Points of Light."

Ana Leon of the School of Social Work at the University of Central Florida tells us about the Juvenile Assessment Center operated in conjunction with several Florida state departments and local providers. This effort involves the university's students by asking them to assist in the assessment of juvenile offenders as a part of the juvenile justice service delivery system. Students serve as interns on site, working

with professionals from various disciplines, as well as with youth and families. The students significantly expand the capacity of the agencies to provide services—thus, the “student-as-worker” metaphor.

The Boise Future Foundation affiliated with Boise State University truly acts as a foundation. Gary Lyman, of the Boise mayor’s office, and Charles Ruch, president of Boise State, indicate that a cross-sector board identifies issues of common concern about issues of regional quality of life, and raises funds to carry out studies on those specified. There is no permanent staff and there is no ongoing budget. The partners donate in-kind services and help with fundraising when needed. The Foundation has produced studies influencing air and water quality ordinance adoption.

Jill Russell and Richard Flynn, both associated with the University of Nebraska at Omaha, describe the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium serving in a “catalyst/convener” role. The Consortium brings together teachers and administrators from local schools with faculty, staff, and administration from the university. Discussions that include sharing and networking are a result, as well as projects with tangible results. Russell and Flynn also report that the university’s newly established College of Information Science and Technology was created and planned with extensive involvement from the business community and now represents a cross-sector collaborative design process.

Subrata Sengupta, dean of the School of Engineering of the University of Michigan-Dearborn, shares information about the Center for Engineering Education and Practice. The Center has allowed the university to consider new paradigms of engineering education, to create many new programs, to dramatically expand enrollment, and to explore new roles for faculty. The local corporations are supportive through active involvement and funding for projects.

Gary Widmar and Ray Mischon explain Project Refocus at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. This project, which emanates from the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, offers assessment, training, and placement services for laid-off workers. It places the university in the position of direct service provider. The university acts as an agency serving the wider metropolitan community with the backing of business, labor, government, and higher education.

Wim Wiewel and Ismael Guerrero provide information about the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Neighborhoods Initiative. Wiewel is the dean of the College of

Urban Planning and Public Affairs, and Guerrero is the associate director of a community agency, The Resurrection Project. Together they explain how the university made use of an umbrella structure in working with the Pilsen community to address critical needs. Outcomes include the Pilsen Rent Study and art education programs for the Guadalupano Cultural Institute.

### **Benefits**

University personnel involved in cross-sector collaborative efforts report a range of benefits. Opportunities for involvement in the community are frequently cited, with examples provided of the university becoming a player in local issues; building relations with power brokers in the community; coming to be viewed as neutral, helpful, and useful; and receiving recognition for its contributions. Other benefits frequently named included: (1) the opportunity for expanded research possibilities; (2) the fact that cross-sector collaboration projects can facilitate a creative blending of teaching, research, and service; (3) the chance to allow students to have hands-on experiences, including exposure to practitioners in the professions, leaders in the community, and clients/patients/youth/citizens who may be served by or otherwise involved with the collaborative effort; and (4) the opportunity for interdisciplinary integration and application of knowledge.

### **Effective Practices**

The authors offer a number of suggestions for effective practices within a cross-sector collaboration. Some relate to early planning and design steps; others come into play at the implementation stage. Still others are more on the order of mind-set issues needing ongoing attention.

An effective practice that can be helpful in the early stages is the careful initial selection of alliances, including identification of those who are willing and interested in working collaboratively, and an involvement of the appropriate sectors from the start. That is, if the joint effort will eventually need to involve five major sectors, that effort should include them all from the beginning rather than starting with three sectors and trying to expand later. Clarification of the mutual benefits of working together from the beginning is important so that the balance of give and take gets off to an even start, as is the early establishment of a common agenda. Both approaches can help sustain commitment through the difficult ground-breaking months. Similarly, delineation of expectations can prevent confusions and misunderstandings later on.

Implementation issues requiring attention include: (1) careful listening to each other; (2) open decision-making so that no one feels left out or uninformed; (3) flexible ways of working together, types of goals, and strategies to be used; (4) having an operational structure in place to assure follow-up; (5) being sure that either a core group or specific individuals are assigned those responsibilities that must be fulfilled; (6) providing administrative support from all participating organizations; (7) offering clear rewards for participation; (8) selecting projects with tangible outcomes so that all can see the benefits of the collaboration; and (9) recognizing that resource allocation may require creative financing. Mixing funds from various funding sources, which is typical of cross-sector collaboration, means close attention to funding constraints and limitations.

There are also those practices identified previously as mind-set issues. These require ongoing awareness and attention: (1) there must be equity and parity for all involved; (2) everything will take longer than expected; (3) trust cannot be overstated in importance; (4) there must be an awareness of differences in operating styles, norms, values, time perspective, and constraints and limitations; (5) an open acknowledgment of the political aspects of the collaboration is crucial; and (6) a long-term commitment is essential.

## **Conclusion**

As metropolitan universities begin to journey into their communities to work with practitioners, citizens, and leaders from multiple sectors, there will be successes and perhaps some false starts. Hopefully, the learning from the experience provided by the authors in this issue will enable and encourage others to take the plunge, to avoid some of the problems, and to experience success more readily.