

# Measuring Community-University Partnerships across a Complex Research University: Lessons and Findings from a Pilot Enterprise Data Collection Mechanism

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## Abstract

*As universities institutionalize a public mission, they seek strategies and opportunities to more deeply involve external stakeholders in all aspects of their work: teaching, research, and service. These partnerships support universities in their efforts to generate new knowledge, educate the citizenry, and to improve the well-being of communities. This case study reviews the development and implementation of a pilot enterprise data collection process to identify and describe partnerships across a large, complex, urban research university. It highlights findings from the pilot, how the information has been used, and recommendations for systematic data collection efforts.*

Increasingly, colleges and universities are prioritizing a public mission that is grounded in the understanding that they are integrally connected to their community and are responsible to leverage their economic, cultural, human, and social capital to improve the overall health and well-being of individuals, families, and organizations within that community (Bacow, Kassim-Lakha, and Gill 2011; Dubb, McKinley, and Howard 2013; Dworkin and Curley 2011; Holland 2005; Weerts and Sandmann 2010). In pursuit of this mission, institutions of higher education are increasingly emphasizing partnerships with community members and organizations (Eddy 2010; Johnson Butterfield and Soska 2004). Mutually beneficial partnerships have the potential to enrich education opportunities for our citizenry and conduct and disseminate research that solves real-world problems while simultaneously enhancing the capacity of communities and community-based stakeholders to accomplish their goals (Bacow, Kassim-Lakha, and Gill 2011; Dubb, McKinley, and Howard 2013; Dworkin and Curley 2011; Weerts and Sandmann 2010).

As colleges and universities craft mission statements and strategic plans that highlight this commitment to working in partnership to achieve social good, they face a growing need to develop specific mechanisms to identify, track, and assess not only their involvement with their communities and partners but also their impact. Because most data collection processes focus mainly on instructional and academic aspects of the institution's mission and work, existing enterprise data systems are being altered and

new systems are being developed to capture this information (Furco and Miller 2009; Volkwein, Liu, and Woodell 2012). This article presents a case study of the development and implementation of a pilot process to identify and describe partnerships across a large, complex, urban, research university. Central to this effort was the use of a standardized definition of partnership. We also highlight findings from the pilot, describe how the findings and process have informed other initiatives, and offer recommendations for systematic data collection efforts.

## **Context of the Study**

This pilot project was undertaken at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), a large, public research university in a mid-sized, southern city. As a major research university with a broad array of professional and academic disciplines and an academic medical center located in an urban environment, VCU has prioritized its public mission. This mission reflects a commitment to enhancing the economic vitality and health of the entire region. It is among fifty-four institutions to receive “very high research activity” and “community-engaged” designations by the Carnegie Foundation. In building on its commitment, the university’s current strategic plan emphasizes community engagement as one of its top priorities and includes community engagement as a means to provide high quality learning experiences and advance excellence in research.

## **Role of Community-University Partnerships in the University**

Partnerships expand the university’s capacity to educate our citizenry, develop new knowledge, and have a positive impact in our communities (Boyer 1996). Specific strategies can leverage the power of partnerships in and across higher education’s joint mission of education, discovery, and service while also contributing to progress and innovation from the community’s perspective. This dynamic is at the heart of the principle that community-university partnerships should be mutually beneficial. A few examples serve as illustration. To foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills, faculty members are encouraged to use experiential learning as part of their approach to teaching (Berg-Weger et al. 2007; Buys and Bursnall 2007; Jarvis-Selinger et al. 2008). Many universities actively promote service-learning at the undergraduate and graduate levels and most professionally-oriented disciplines require students to complete supervised clinical placements or internships as a degree requirement. The provision of such experiential learning opportunities relies on sustained partnerships with community organizations. In addition to the benefits offered to the students, the partnering organizations can benefit through the partnerships. These benefits include enhanced organizational and community capacity, staff and organizational development, and improved client outcomes (Blouin and Perry 2009; Gazley, Littlepage, and Bennett 2012; Harris and Zhao 2004; Sandy and Holland 2006).

The involvement of stakeholders in the research process, broadly referred to as community-engaged research (CEnR), is an approach that advances knowledge

generation and local or regional development (Andrews et al. 2012; CTSA 2011; Ellison and Eatman 2008; Roche, Guta, and Flicker 2010; Stanton 2012). By partnering with community members throughout the research process – from project planning to dissemination – universities can better address community-identified needs and produce innovative research that has measurable, real-world applications and impacts (Berg-Weger et al. 2007). When done effectively, CEnR promotes an understanding of a community’s unique circumstances and experiences that create a framework for translating research into best practices that maximize impact (CTSA 2011; Barge and Shockley-Zalabak 2008). In light of this, some prominent federal research funders such as NSF and NIH now require engagement in their grant-making (Israel et al. 2005).

## **Enterprise Data Collection Regarding Community-University Partnerships**

As the size, mission, and complexity of the modern university has grown, so has the need for information to support its decision-making and to describe its efforts and impact. This dynamic store of information is commonly referred to as “enterprise data” (Chirikov 2013; Volkwein 1999). This pilot, described in detail below, was seen as an initial examination of how the university defined, tracked, and assessed partnerships, and to explore what, if any, additional resources were needed for future data collection efforts. At the time of the pilot there was a new strategic plan which created significant demand across the university for data. Consequently, while the pilot gathered data across the university, it focused on exploring a limited number of significant partnerships within each unit as a way to both test a novel approach to data collection within the university as well as to explore whether there were existing enterprise data systems that could be altered to include partnership information or to determine if a new system needed to be developed or purchased (Furco and Miller 2009; Holton, Jettner, Early and Shaw 2015). Furthermore, the pilot sought to explore how we could incorporate community partner perspectives into the assessment of partnerships.

Enterprise data on community-university partnerships can serve a variety of aims (Church et al. 2003; Scott and Jackson 2005; Volkwein, Liu, and Woodell 2012). The following were integral considerations to this pilot effort and are used later to frame how the findings have informed related efforts:

- Assessing the enactment of the university’s engagement or public mission
- Studying and analyzing the institution and its policies as they relate to partnerships (e.g., risk management, resource allocation)
- Presenting a positive image of the university
- Creating and managing information repositories to encourage networking and collaboration
- Quality management of partnerships
- Applying for national awards and recognitions (e.g., Carnegie Foundation’s Community Engagement Elective Classification)

# Considerations for Operationalizing Community-University Partnerships

As with the development of any enterprise data mechanism, key concepts must be defined. In their review of benchmarks and measurements for institution-wide assessment of community engagement, Hart and Northmore (2011) assert that the diversity of partnerships and the “lack of precise definitions of important concepts” (p. 37) represent two significant barriers to systematic evaluation. We next highlight extant literature related to definitional issues considered in the development of this pilot project, including how these dimensions were operationalized in this pilot. The dimensions of purpose, process, and outcome, adapted from Stanton’s (2012) consideration of community-engaged research, are used as the framework for the pilot.

The *purpose* of a partnership refers to its intention and focus (Stanton 2012). The intention of community-university partnerships can be considered both in terms of the specific aims of the work as well as the potential impact on larger-scale dynamics and issues in the community – that is, the partnership’s public purpose. For this pilot, VCU was mainly interested in how partnerships across the university supported elements of the mission (research, teaching, service, patient care), aligned with focus areas of the strategic plan (education, access to health, economic development, sustainability), and targeted geographic areas (local, state-wide, nationwide, international).

An early suggestion was to restrict the focus of the pilot to include only partnerships that explicitly sought to achieve a larger public purpose. This proved to be a challenging criterion to define clearly because of the different ways each discipline views diverse research activities. For example, the distinction between basic and applied or translational activity often gives rise to the question of whether developing knowledge for its own sake or the sake of the discipline is sufficient to qualify as public purpose, or must the research also directly advance an additional aim such as improving social conditions. Questions regarding public purpose emerge, too, when research is conducted on behalf of or in collaboration with a corporate partner (e.g., a pharmaceutical company) where immediate, direct benefit to the community may be ancillary to profit creation. Similarly, some disciplines may elect to count only research partnerships that are conducted with and on behalf of struggling communities, schools, and nonprofits, while others include corporate-sponsored research as long as the overall intention is for the public good (e.g., life saving drugs) (Stanton 2012). We resolved this core tension by counting research partnerships as long as the research process involved community (non-academic) partners (Holton 2013b). More generally, therefore, we determined that inclusion of community partners in an activity advances a public purpose independent of the nature of the activity and its specific aims or impact.

*Process* refers to the type and extent of engagement between the partners (Stanton 2012). Some argue that the more collaborative and sustainable a partnership, the more effective the resulting scholarship and the benefits to society (Holland 2005; Minkler and Wallerstein 2008), and others assert that differences in collaboration may reflect

the various needs of the partnering organizations (Himmelman 2002). Several measures of the engagement process have been developed. For instance, Himmelman (2002) provides a framework to describe the degree of involvement between the partners that includes networking (exchanging information for mutual benefit), coordinating (altering activities for a common purpose), cooperating (sharing resources for mutual benefit and a common purpose), and collaborating (willingness to enhance the capacity of another for mutual benefit and a common purpose). Mattessich, Murray-Close, and Monsey (2001) offer a rigorous and comprehensive attempt at consolidating the empirical community collaboration literature. Through a review of the literature and a meta-analysis, they developed the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory, which includes forty items in six categories: environment, resources, memberships, purpose, communication, and process and structure. Each of these, however, require a depth of analysis that was beyond the scope of the pilot. Consequently, in this pilot we used the presence of a Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) or Agreement (MOA) as indicator of the formalization of the partnership. MOUs/MOAs are often encouraged in partnerships as a way to outline many of the aspects related to process described above (Norris et al. 2007; Ross et al. 2010; Thomas et al. 2009).

*Outcomes* refers to the range of products and impacts resulting from the partnership (Stanton 2012). Outcomes can include the development and dissemination of new knowledge or creative expression, increased capacity and influence, enhanced performance in pursuing the mission, and increased satisfaction of stakeholders (Brinkerhoff 2002; Stanton 2012). Outcome measures may also capture the resources leveraged through partnerships (e.g., people, physical space, equipment, funding), increased awareness and interest, or effects on project scope, efficiencies, cost-effectiveness, and sustainability (Partnerships for Environmental Public Health 2012). The larger social impact can also be considered; however, existing literature about assessing the impact of community partnerships typically focuses on one specific partnership rather than the aggregate effects of diverse partnerships involving an institution, reflecting the challenges of assessing large-scale and collective impact through diverse partnerships across complex institutions and communities. King and others (2010) present one of the few standardized measures for the impact of community-university partnerships – the Community Impacts of Research-Oriented Partnerships (CIROP) measure – designed to assess five community-university partnerships at a single institution. This tool represents one of the few attempts at a standardized measure of the impact of partnerships, although it treats individual partnerships as the unit of analysis. In this pilot, we used the resources exchanged as an indicator of outcome, as well as included questions to explore how outcomes might be assessed in other ways.

## **Pilot Study Development**

In support of VCU's commitment to sustained, mutually-beneficial engagement with the community, the Pilot Inventory of Community Partnerships (PICP) was envisioned as a first step determining how to systematically identify and document partnerships

across the entire institution. Central to this pilot was the first university-wide application of the definition of partnership as “a sustained collaboration between institutions of higher education and communities for the mutually beneficial exchange, exploration, and application of knowledge, information, and resources. Examples are research, capacity building, or economic development.” This term was defined by the university’s Council on Community Engagement (CCE) which includes representatives from all academic and major support units and is charged with supporting and advancing community engagement across the university. The CCE undertook a year-long process to identify and define terms related to community engagement. These were completed and adopted by the university as official terms and definition, and subsequently used in this pilot (Holton, Jettner, Early, and Shaw 2015 for more details).

Several key units within the office of the provost and across the university collaborated to develop this pilot. This diverse project team brought a variety of perspectives on community-university partnerships and data collection to the planning and helped to increase the visibility of the effort as well as to garner the support of university leadership. The team had collaborated on prior data infrastructure-related efforts and included representatives from the Office for Planning and Decision Support (OPDS), Center on Society and Health (a research center housed in the School of Medicine with deep engagement with the community), Division of Community Engagement (DCE), and the Center on Clinical and Translational Research (CCTR) (funded by NIH’s Clinical and Translational Science Award). It was determined that the Division of Community Engagement would assume leadership of the project with the support of OPDS. This decision was in close alignment with DCE’s mission and staff responsibilities and capacities.

## **Methodology**

At a meeting of the deans and university senior leadership, representatives from the DCE and OPDS reviewed and discussed parameters for the pilot effort. Following the meeting, the provost sent an email to the deans and university research center and institute directors asking them to identify one person to respond to the pilot data collection on behalf their unit (n=54). An online survey was then sent to the point of contact for all academic units and research centers and institutes using REDCap (a secure, web-based survey application designed to support data capture for research studies), and follow-up semi-structured interviews were scheduled with all academic units and selected centers and institutes known to have a strong engagement focus. The purpose of the survey was to establish an estimate of the number of existing partnerships, describe strategic partnerships, and determine what processes units had in place, if any, for establishing and monitoring their partnerships. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to elicit unit perspectives on their capacity to monitor their partnerships (e.g., challenges, successes) and to obtain recommendations for evaluating the impact of their partnerships. Thirty-three unit representatives responded (61 percent) to the survey, which included all the academic units. Twenty follow-up interviews were conducted with academic units and research centers and institutes.



# The Survey

The questions were developed by the project team based upon the key data and information needs of the university related to its strategic plan. An effort was made to minimize respondent burden while also capturing sufficient detail to guide future decision-making. To that end, the survey consisted of two brief sections with closed- and open-ended questions.

In the first section, respondents were asked to estimate the total number of partnerships within their unit based on the university’s definition. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate in ‘yes/no’ questions whether their unit had formal processes for establishing and monitoring or evaluating their partnerships. Follow-up open-ended questions were used to elicit brief descriptions of these formal processes (Table 1).

**Table 1. PICP Survey Section One: Unit Partnerships & Overall Processes**

Questions	Response Items
1. Based on the definition above [VCU’s partnership definition], estimate how many partnerships your unit has.	Open-ended
2. Does your unit have a formal process for establishing partnerships?	Yes/No
3. Please provide a brief description of how partnerships are established across your unit.	Open-ended
4. Does your unit have a formal process for monitoring or evaluating partnerships?	Yes/No
5. Please provide a brief description for how partnerships are monitored or evaluated across your unit.	Open-ended

In the second section, respondents were then asked to identify and provide more detailed information about five “significant” partnerships of their choosing. Similar to the approach of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement in 2006, this was thought to provide enough information to inform future efforts while reducing response burden. Significant partnerships were defined as those that “enabled [their] unit to make significant contributions to strategic objectives that support the [university’s strategic plan].” Respondents were also instructed to select significant partnerships that serve to meet at least one of each of the university’s core missions: teaching, research, service, and – where applicable – patient care. When there was more than one community partner involved in the significant partnership, respondents were asked to provide the following details regarding the relationship with the “main” community partner.

Additional information was requested on the geographic focus of each significant partnership, connection to themes in the university’s strategic plan, degree of partnership formalization (i.e., presence of MOUs/MOAs), and types and levels of resources exchanged. Resources included physical space, financial, human capital, infrastructure or supplies, communications assistance, access to key stakeholder groups, access to data or research assistance, and other.

Table 2 provides details about the questions and response items for the various description domains in section two of the PICP survey. These questions were repeated for the five significant partnerships selected by unit representatives. Additionally, respondents were asked to provide contact information for the community partners and for the faculty or staff member most involved with the community partner(s) (not shown in Table 2). Participants were instructed that community partners could be organizations or individuals.

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**Table 2. PICP Survey Section Two:  
Unit Description Domain Items for their Significant Partnerships**  
**Partnership Questions for Specific Description Domains**

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*University Core Missions*

1. Which elements of the university’s mission does this partnership serve?  
(check all that apply)  
 Service    Research    Teaching    Patient Care
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*Partnership Focus & Alignment with Strategic University Goals*

1. What key words best describe the focus of the partnership?  
  

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  2. Which [university strategic plan] focus area best describes the focus of this partnership?  
 Education    Access to Health    Economic Development    Sustainability
  3. (If Education) What grade levels does your educational partnership serve?  
(check all that apply)  
 Pre-K    K–5th    6th–8th    9th–12th    Post High School
- 

*Geographic Area*

1. What geographic area does this partnership serve?  
 Metro Richmond    Statewide    Nationwide    International    Other
  2. (If Metro Richmond) What geographic area in Metro Richmond does this partnership serve? (check all that apply)  
 Downtown    East End    Far West    Near West    Northside  
 Southside
  3. Follow-up question to above asked respondents to identify specific neighborhoods in the geographic areas specified in Metro Richmond. Items not shown.
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*Partnership Formalization*

1. Is there a current MOU/MOA between this community partner and your unit?  
 Yes    No
- 

*Resources Exchanged*

1. Thinking about the past year, what types of resources did your unit provide/exchange with the main community partner? (check all that apply)  
 Space (meeting rooms, classrooms, etc.)  
 Financial (funds transferred from your unit to your partner)  
 Human Capital (faculty/staff time commitment)  
 Infrastructure/Supplies (office equipment, furniture, etc.)  
 Communications Assistance (bulletins, photo lab, posters, e-mail support, other)



- Access to Faculty/ Staff/ Students/ Alumni
  - Access to Data or other Research Resources
  - Other
2. Thinking about the past year, what resources did the main community partner share/exchange with your unit? (check all that apply)
- Space (meeting rooms, classrooms, etc.)
  - Financial (funds transferred from your unit to your partner)
  - Human Capital (faculty/staff time commitment)
  - Infrastructure/Supplies (office equipment, furniture, etc.)
  - Communications Assistance (bulletins, photo lab, posters, e-mail support, other)
  - Access to Community Members
  - Access to Data or other Research Resources
  - Other
- 

## Interview Questions

In order to obtain information that would inform future university-wide partnership data collection efforts, interview questions focused on unit-level infrastructure related to establishing and monitoring partnerships. In addition, unit representatives were asked to provide recommendations for evaluating the impact of partnerships at the university level.

The semi-structured interview included the following questions:

1. In the inventory, it was noted that your unit [does/does not] have a formal process for establishing partnerships, and that it [does/does not] have a formal process for monitoring or evaluating partnerships. Please tell us more about that.
2. Based on what we asked you to provide, did you have some of this information readily available? What did you have to do to collect this information?
3. The [university strategic plan] states that [the university] will “[c]ontribute to the economic, cultural and civic vitality of the region and the world through collaborative efforts ...” How do you, and how might we, consider measuring impact of partnerships?
4. Does your unit have the infrastructure necessary to systematically identify and describe community-university partnerships? If yes, please describe. If no, what resources would you need? What steps would need to be taken?
5. As we make recommendations for how to systematically identify community-university partnerships, and ultimately tell the story of [the university]’s involvement with the community, what further thoughts or recommendations do you have?

The interviews were conducted by two members of the project team: the project team leader and another who took notes. Soon after the interviews were conducted, the notes were expanded or clarified as needed. The notes were then e-mailed to the respondents to check for accuracy. Because this was an effort to develop a data collection system and not intended to produce generalizable knowledge, IRB approval was not necessary.

## Findings and Implications

**Partnerships.** In total, respondents estimated having more than 1,100 active partnerships with community organizations. Interviews revealed that this was a gross and generally conservative estimate of the number of partnerships. This was generally due to two factors: a lack of data infrastructure and diverse assumptions about the definition. Most of the academic units did not have a centralized warehouse of data regarding partnerships; consequently, some used the number of internship locations as a proxy for the number of partnerships held within the unit. Others sought to estimate the number of partnerships through an internal survey of faculty. Interviews also revealed that respondents interpreted the definition of partnership differently. Some units assumed that partnerships were restricted only to those with a specific focus on improving social conditions (e.g., partnerships with nonprofits, schools, etc.), while others were more inclusive of various types of organizations and purposes.

**Establishment and monitoring of partnerships.** Of the thirty-three survey respondents, 36 percent indicated that their unit had a formal process for establishing partnerships, and 39 percent reported they had a formal process for monitoring or evaluating partnerships. Formal processes for establishing partnerships varied. One unit described a steering committee that made decisions about partnerships, but for others, the formalization of the partnership process was largely dependent on the individual project. For units whose partnerships included service-learning or internships/clinical placements, the process was formalized in order to ensure both student and community member safety (e.g., background checks and liability waivers) as well as that student learning needs and requirements for professional licensure after graduation are met.

None of the units reported that they had existing infrastructure to systematically collect and store information about all their partnerships. Several reported tracking internship sites using spreadsheets or databases. Furthermore, while most units included “service” as a part of their review of faculty, none of the units reported asking questions specific to partnerships in a way that would allow that information to be aggregated at the unit level. Similarly, none of the units reported having a unit-wide process for systematically evaluating their partnerships. It should be noted, however, that the interviews also revealed a desire for data infrastructure that could be used to support the establishment, monitoring, and evaluation of partnership activities.

**Description of “significant” partnerships.** Significant partnerships were defined as those that “enabled [their] unit to make significant contributions to strategic objectives that support the [university’s strategic plan].” The data on significant partnerships provided insight into how units defined and worked in partnerships. As discussed above, the definition of partnerships can be understood by using Stanton’s (2012) framework of purpose, process, and outcome. In total, 180 partnerships were identified as significant partnerships and were described by respondents as follows.

*University Core Missions (purpose).* Respondents were asked to select which elements of the university's core mission (service, teaching, research, or patient care) the partnership addressed or served. Respondents could select more than one of these elements. Most of the significant partnerships focused on more than one element: 29% of partnerships focused on one element, 39% focused on two elements, 21% on three elements, and 11% on four elements.

*Partnership Focus & Alignment with University Strategic Goals (purpose).* Respondents were asked to identify the area in the university's strategic plan that best described the focus of the partnership (education, access to health, economic development, and sustainability). Approximately three-quarters (66%) of significant partnerships fell into a specified strategic plan area. Of the partnerships that aligned with strategic focus areas (n=119), education was the focus of the largest number of the partnerships (56%), followed by access to health (34%), economic development (6%), and sustainability (4%).

*Geographic Area (purpose).* Respondents were asked to identify the geographic focus of the partnership. The largest percentage of the significant partnerships focused on the metropolitan area in which the university is located (46%), followed by 29% that were statewide, 5% that were nationwide, and 8% international.

*Partnership Formalization (process).* Respondents were asked whether MOUs/MOAs existed for their significant partnerships. Approximately a quarter (29%) reported having an MOU/MOA for their partnerships. Interviews revealed that the use of MOUs/MOAs or similar legal agreements is common for internships and clinical placements (particularly those in healthcare settings) and less common for partnerships initiated and managed at the faculty-level.

*Resources Exchanged (outcome).* Lastly, respondents were asked about the kinds of resources they had provided to their significant partners and about the kinds of resources they had received from their significant partners. Table 3 presents university members' perspectives of the various resources exchanged in their significant partnerships. Overall, it appeared that similar types of resources were exchanged between partners with human capital and access to university/community members being the most exchanged, followed by access to research resources, communications assistance, space, financial, infrastructure/supplies, and other. The findings suggest that university members perceived that resources exchanged were approximately equal for the categories provided. In addition, the most frequently exchanged resources – human capital and access to university members – align with the literature as key benefits community partners cite as being valuable resources they receive from their academic partnerships (Cronley, Madden, and Davis 2015; Sandy and Holland 2006; Worrall 2007).

**Table 3. University Perspectives on Resources Exchanged in Significant Partnerships (n=180)**

Resources	Units Provided to Partners n (%)	Units Received from Partners n (%)
Human Capital	101 (56%)	90 (50%)
Access to VCU/Community Members	91 (51%)	76 (42%)
Access to Research Resources	52 (29%)	61 (39%)
Communications Assistance	45 (25%)	47 (26%)
Space	37 (21%)	51 (28%)
Financial	36 (20%)	29 (16%)
Infrastructure/Supplies	23 (13%)	31 (17%)
Other	11 ( 6%)	7 ( 4%)

**Assessing partnership impact.** The interviews explored the existing means of assessing the impact of partnerships from the university’s perspective and recommendations for university-wide impact assessment. As is common in other universities, respondents indicated an overall lack of systematic processes to assess the impact of the partnerships on students, faculty, and community partners (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 2015). Many respondents noted that one of the main indicators of the success of a partnership is whether a community partner wants to continue the partnership, which has been suggested by Gelmon and others (2001). For those units whose partnerships are based around student learning as well as community engagement, it appeared that some evaluation of community impact occurs as part of student evaluations; however, these were primarily related to student learning goals and experiences.

A few common ideas and cautions emerged regarding how to assess the impact of partnerships at an enterprise level. The most frequent suggestion was to quantify the number of people served or the number of people who participated in or attended an event. However, it was frequently acknowledged that this would be a shallow impact measure and one that is difficult to interpret. Another suggestion was to use job placement after graduation as an indicator, especially in professions that currently have high vacancy rates, although, this would be a measure of the impact of workforce preparedness for students and not a measure of impact on the community or partnership. For partnerships where direct services are provided to community partners, many suggested accounting for the monetary value of the services rendered. For instance, several of the health-related disciplines assign a monetary value to each procedure completed by faculty and students. Similarly, a monetary value is often associated with volunteer hours (Corporation for National and Community Service 2014). However, it was thought some partners may resist requests for monetary value or value of hours because they see monetary value as a shallow measure that is of

greater value to the university than the community partner (Gelmon et al. 2001; Sandy and Holland 2006).

It was also noted that providing community partners with an opportunity to evaluate the partnership would yield valuable data about the partnership's impact. Respondents noted that disseminating research resulting from partnerships in venues other than academic journals – for instance, a local newspaper or on a centrally located webpage – could serve as a key measure of partnership impact. Finally, a few units suggested that providing community partners with an opportunity to evaluate the partnership would yield valuable data about the impact of partnerships.

Overall, there was a general concern about the challenges and difficulties of measuring the wider impact of community-university partnerships. Most respondents saw impact measurement at an agency or partner level as feasible and valuable, but had difficulty conceptualizing a way to measure impact across the university. Some of the respondents suggested that partnerships should be designed with impact assessment in mind so that a pre- and post-evaluation design could be used. One respondent suggested using community-level data such as census data or city or health department data, but noted the difficulty of that unless university efforts were targeted.

## **Discussion**

The pilot successfully tested the use of a standardized definition and instrumentation and enabled the university to develop a rough estimate of the total number of partnerships. It also provided a picture of how partnerships are defined across the university (i.e., their purpose, process, and outcome) and how units structure and engage in partnerships that support the university's strategic plan. The work revealed opportunities for the development of enterprise data collection mechanisms and increased an overall desire for this kind of information by senior leadership as well as leaders in the academic units and community-engaged centers and institutes.

An important consideration when reflecting on this pilot is whether its findings are useful to key constituencies. The pilot process and its findings have received attention and use within and beyond the university. An initial overview and report of findings were disseminated through a white paper that is publically available and was discussed at various university leadership meetings including the Council of Deans, VCU Board of Visitors, and the CCE (Holton 2013b). In addition, the pilot was presented at the annual meeting of the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) (Holton and Agnelli 2013). As described below, the pilot process and findings also have been useful to various related efforts.

The pilot confirmed prior research showing that data infrastructure is an important prerequisite for effectively capturing, monitoring, and assessing partnerships. Respondents reported that information on partnership is considered valuable and could be used to enhance efforts to develop and support partnerships and to celebrate

the work that is being accomplished. It also confirmed that a critical next step is to collect information from community partners about the experience and impact of these partnerships. Although respondents expressed an interest in gathering and using information on partnerships, no units were already doing so and none reported having existing infrastructure that could be easily adapted to collect this information.

The pilot data are the best available on university-community partnerships at VCU, but this effort revealed a number of difficulties in collecting systematic data on partnerships across the university. A significant challenge was associated with the definition of partnerships. As noted above, despite efforts to clarify the definition of partnership, respondents reported holding different perceptions of the term that guided their responses. For example, some assumed that they should only report partnerships with a focus on social service missions and involving nonprofits (i.e., a larger public purpose beyond the involvement of a community partner). Consequently, most of the data collected through the online survey focused on partnerships that addressed human and social needs in the surrounding community, particularly related to healthcare and K-12 education, and underrepresented workforce and economic development issues. These areas relate well to key foci in the university's strategic plan; however, the findings suggest that partnerships without an explicit emphasis on public purpose may be underrepresented.

Additionally, the interviews revealed the lack of clarity around two key terms in the definition of partnerships: "mutually-beneficial" and "sustained." One partner (i.e., the university representative) cannot solely describe whether mutual benefit exists. In considering future data collection efforts, it will be essential to gather input from representatives from all partnership members. This is feasible when gathering data at the partnership level but more challenging when aggregating responses at the unit or university level. Since data collection mechanisms rely on individual faculty, staff, and administrators to respond, additional, separate, and distinctive data collection mechanisms would have to be created to solicit feedback from community partners and to ensure that the questions used to determine mutual benefit could be interpreted in the context of each partnership and also aggregated at higher levels.

Operationalizing the degree to which a partnership is "sustained" is similarly complicated. Here, too, the interviews highlighted several considerations. For instance, can a partnership be considered "sustained" if it relies on time-limited funding? Can a partnership between a faculty member and an employee of another organization that relies on their individual efforts, even if long-standing, be sustained, or must there be evidence that the partnership is formalized and adequately resourced to withstand personnel changes? Does the work of the partnership need to continue uninterrupted, and if not, is it sustained if the activities occur only once or perhaps occasionally over a period of time?

These and other definitional issues are important to consider and resolve in order to maximize the benefits of having enterprise data on community-engagement, such as partnerships. As illustrated below, we already have seen the power of having aggregate



information on partnerships – even with the limitations noted earlier. In addition to serving the intended purposes of the pilot, the information gathered has been folded into existing key institutional discussions and sparked others. The value of the data lies in the following: 1) they were collected university-wide, 2) they are the first available standardized data on partnerships, and 3) they were collected to meet the needs and interests of multiple university stakeholders.

*Applying for national awards and recognitions.* The data and the collection process were described in the recent re-classification application for the Carnegie Foundation’s Community Engagement Elective Classification both to illustrate partnerships across the university and also the efforts to develop enterprise data infrastructure. The data have also been used in a number of grants to illustrate the university’s engagement with our community, particularly in the strategic plan focus areas and geographic areas.

*Telling VCU’s Story.* The DCE has used existing resources and student interns to highlight the work being accomplished through specific partnerships identified in this pilot. These success stories have been shared through multiple outlets (e.g., the websites of the DCE and others; VCU publishing outlets). This has helped to elevate and celebrate engaged activities, illustrate high quality community-university partnerships, and tell VCU’s story as an engaged institution.

*Creating and managing information repositories to encourage networking and collaboration.* An impetus for the collection of information about the geographic and focus of the partnerships was so that coordination and collaboration could be encouraged, particularly among the partnerships that focus on particular geographic areas. To that end, the DCE has hosted opportunities for collaboration (e.g., interest groups, brown bags) for partnerships focused on selected neighborhoods in Metro Richmond. Of particular note has been the use of this information to inform conversations about VCU’s engagement with a local school system and a neighborhood in which VCU faculty and students have a significant presence.

As described in greater detail in Holton, Jettner, Early, and Shaw (2015), VCU’s approach to collecting engagement related data is to use existing systems and leverage internal collaborations. To that end, the DCE has partnered with the university’s federally-funded Center for Clinical and Translational Research (CCTR) to use VIVO to share information about the partnerships and partnering organizations in a publically searchable platform. VIVO is a publically searchable research-focused discovery tool that enables collaboration among researchers across disciplines. Through the collaboration with the DCE, VIVO includes information on partnerships (e.g., geographic focus areas, topic focus areas, VCU, and non-VCU contact information) and the partnering organizations (e.g., website, geographic location, contact information). Furthermore, the faculty profiles have been developed to allow researchers to indicate their interest in engaging stakeholders in their research. VIVO is populated with the significant partner organizations identified through the PICP and other efforts. The information included in VIVO regarding partnerships is visually displayed in the interactive partnership map (<http://communitynetwork.vcu.edu/partnerMap>).

The DCE, CCTR, and university relations have developed an interactive Google-based map that showcases community partnerships and service-learning sites in and around the region. Basic information on each organization and partnership is provided and visitors can search on key filters. The partnerships identified through this pilot are highlighted on the map, along with others that have been identified since then. Similarly, the data and the process for collecting it has informed an effort lead by the VCU Medical Center to collect information on partnerships and activities through the health system specifically.

*Studying and analyzing the institution and its policies as they relate to partnerships.*

Approximately one year after the completion of the pilot, a presidential Task Force on VCU Partnerships was formed to 1) review and propose definitions of partnerships to provide greater clarity with respect to the scope and authority of these relationships, including those that involve broader university investment or may warrant Board of Visitors (BOV) awareness, review, or approval; 2) propose and recommend policy and processes for establishing, monitoring, and reviewing partnerships and MOUs that support alignment with VCU's mission, reduce risks and opportunity costs, and identify strategic opportunities for greater investment; and 3) establish a dashboard and reporting mechanism that could be used with the BOV committee to review and monitor VCU partnerships. The task force reports to the Board of Visitor's Governance and Evaluation Committee and included membership from leadership in the DCE, Office of Development and Alumni Relations, Athletics, Office of Research, Global Education Office, University Council, Faculty Affairs, and Assurance Services. While the work of the task force is on-going, the PICP helped to start the conversation and provided crucial data in the early phases of its work.

The pilot project revealed the use of MOUs/MOAs was inconsistent for partnerships across the university. Given the potential for legal issues to arise, guidance documents were needed to clarify processes for review and approval as well as use of terms such as "partnership" that often have legal implications that may not be appreciated by faculty and community members. The DCE has been in consultation with the Office of University Counsel to develop these guidance documents. The aim is to create a partnership agreement template for use by individual faculty that supports community-university partnerships specifically. This will become part of a larger toolkit that includes guidance on the compensation of community partners in research and how to assess the quality of partnerships and its impact on students, faculty, and community (George, Holton, and Haley 2014).

*Assessing the enactment of the university's engagement or public mission.* While the pilot accomplished its stated goals, it was only a first step in the overall goal of assessing the enactment of VCU's public mission. Given the size and complexity of institution, this is difficult to do across the university. The DCE and the presidential Task Force on Partnerships continue to explore how best to focus our partnership work, thereby allowing for strategic application of resources and evaluation of the quality and impact of these collaborations. One possibility explored was to focus on identifying key partnerships, much like the process through which VCU's Global

Education Office (GEO) underwent. Housed in the provost office, GEO serves as the centralized support to coordinate the establishment, review, and reporting of all international academic partnerships. Based upon review of annual reports, major funding awards, and careful deliberation, three university strategic partners have been identified. These include relationships that involve multiple units on both campuses, support a variety of activities, and coincide with strategic directions of the university. Academic unit strategic partnerships are those partnerships that are largely involved in one or two academic units. While this remains as a consideration, the focus has shifted to selecting a few focus areas.

This year VCU has embarked on an intentional conversation about the possibility of identifying a few focus areas that would leverage strengths and existing resources within VCU while also meeting a community-identified need or opportunity (Holton and Jettner 2015; Holton, Jettner, and Shaw 2015). This conversation has begun with two convenings designed to engage members of the VCU and regional community in a shared conversation about benefits and costs of this approach as well as to start identifying potential areas of focus.

As a result of this pilot, the university has engaged in critical conversations about the role of partnerships in our efforts to generate new knowledge and educate our students as well as how we interact with and impact our communities. The process of and findings from the pilot have informed key conversations and sparked others. However, this conversation and the specific process to develop ways to identify and assess community-university partnerships must continue to develop to ensure consistency and inclusion of internal and external perspectives. This process is supported by several key factors within the university. Primarily, it aligns with and supports key institutional commitments to VCU's engaged mission. It also reflects the engaged teaching and research of faculty, staff, and students as well as their passions and interests.

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