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Exploring the Growth of a College-Community Partnership

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The conditions that supported the development of a highly successful collaborative partnership between a college literacy program and a nonprofit center for refugee children are discussed. This three year partnership produced three inquiry-based projects, grant opportunities and increased collaboration among graduate literacy students, center teachers, and staff in the areas of instruction, assessment and material collection. It is argued that these collaborations are necessary for institutions of higher learning in general and teacher preparation programs in particular.

Keywords: community-university partnerships, graduate internships, reciprocal partnerships, diversity education

Pursuing Partnerships

Higher education's role in combining opportunities for students to acquire knowledge while performing service to their communities is not a new idea. In founding the University of Pennsylvania in 1749, Benjamin Franklin's vision was to guide students to develop an "Inclination join'd with an Ability to serve Mankind, one's Country, Friends and Family" (Harkavy, Hartley, & Weeks, 2011, p. 59). Within the past two decades, more and more colleges and universities have embraced the idea of community engagement as central to the way teaching, learning, and research are conducted within the academy. There are many reasons for this.

As the cost of higher education increases and the public somewhat begrudges the relevance and value of college attendance, the model of higher education as an insular knowledge-generating enterprise is less attractive to families considering a major financial investment in a child's future. A more collaborative model through which students are guided to learn and then apply their learning in authentic contexts within the community (Fitzgerald et.al, 2012) seems like a much more practical investment. It is seen as a way to provide a student with more of a supervised transition to his or her place in society and the workforce. Building the public's perception of colleges focused on real world issues and engaged in exploring real world solutions might very well be the shift that will contribute to higher education's continued well-being.

This shift is generating much analysis of the changes in college infrastructure that will be needed to support it (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; DeLugan, Roussos, & Skram, 2014) and a healthy body of research projecting the next steps in developing, assessing and reflecting on outcomes for faculty, students and community partners (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Harkavy & Puckett, 1994; O'Meara & Rice, 2005; Percy, Zimpher, & Brukhard, 2006). The following article is much less ambitious in scope. This article describes the somewhat natural and organic development of a college community partnership that in three years grew from a student placement site to a mutual inquiry project. The partnership grew

in ways that were not always planned but suggested after a review of each completed project by the faculty member and the agency administrator. Eventually, college students and agency personnel engaged in true collaborations where both were contributing to exploring solutions to identified problems. Although the faculty member (this author) evaluated every aspect of graduate students' participation in these projects, this was not set up as a formal study of the nature of the partnership. Indeed, one of the reasons for sharing the following project description is that it seemed to evolve in ways I could not anticipate from semester to semester based on the input from the partnering agency. The only research that took place was an attempt to capture the dynamics between all the stakeholders with systematic and detailed notes (Morse & Richards, 2005).

A History of Community Service at the College

It is important to state that this partnership was conceived in a college environment that is, by tradition, dedicated to community involvement. The College of St. Rose has been named to the President's Honor Roll for Community Service three times. Last year it was awarded the Honor Roll with Distinction Award. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, "Honor Roll with Distinction goes to colleges and universities that display strong levels of institutional commitment, provide a compelling case for partnerships that produce measurable impact in the community, and have a Federal Work-Study community service percentage of 15 percent or above" (College of St. Rose, 2014).

The last sentence of the college's mission statement reads, "Our engagement with the urban environment expands the setting for educational opportunities and encourages the Saint Rose community's energetic involvement and effective leadership in society"(College of St. Rose, 2011-2013, p. 7). Although community service has always been part of the rhetoric of this school located in the middle of the city of Albany, NY, it is now in the process of moving toward a more rigorous conception of community engagement. Part of the school's tradition has always been an emphasis on "giving back." This tradition is perhaps best represented by the annual event, Reach Out St. Rose Day. By 2014, over 750 students (12% of undergraduates), faculty and staff volunteered in fifty locations around the city on this single day of service.

A commitment to the "scholarship of engagement" (Boyer, 1997, p. 11) only became actualized in April 2012, when the college began a conscious effort to integrate public service with student learning in more meaningful, sustained and measurable ways. A Community Advisory Board was formed to broaden the communication between nonprofit agencies and college faculty and administrators so that students could be more consistently involved in service-learning as well as community service. The goal was to increase faculty awareness that working with community partners can provide support for classroom learning by offering opportunities that involve students in exploring solutions to the needs of participating agencies. The Community Advisory Board now functions as a review board where agencies can present proposals to partner with faculty on projects that will not only provide them with students as volunteers, but also with students as learning partners. The process by which these projects are approved and implemented provides a forum to plan and assess so that outcomes are

examined and evaluated by all stakeholders. This process of enabling collaboration through a central board charged with supervising and supporting this work has led to many new partnerships and initiatives. As an example, in the fall of 2014, a marketing management class collaborated with the St. Anne's Institute to formulate a campaign for marketing and public relations. Graduate social work students are developing activities to support a police effort to connect with inner city youth in recreational activities. Active partnerships are maintained with Capital District Habitat for Humanity; The Trinity Alliance; A Village, Inc.; The Underground Railroad Project; the RISSE Center; and St. Anne's Institute, to name a few.

Partnership with the Refugee and Immigrant Support Services at Emmaus (RISSE) Center

As the coordinator of the graduate Literacy Program in the School of Education, I am no stranger to arranging field placement and internship opportunities for students in area schools. Not only is it sound pedagogical practice to have teacher candidates practice their craft in authentic settings under the supervision of experienced mentors, it is also required by accrediting institutions. In his article on the future of teacher education, Zeichner (2014) maintains that universities are being threatened by those who would take the responsibility of teacher preparation away from them and put it in the hands of local schools who would then train people to follow the particular teaching practices favored by their own institutions. The response to this must be more emphasis on university-school partnerships and increased collaboration between researchers, practitioners and learners. Of course, a number of placement parameters must be observed in establishing these partnerships, since local schools are gripped by ever-tightening curriculum restrictions imposed by the specter of meeting state standards. Teachers whose evaluations depend on student scores are apt to be much more engaged in test prep and less receptive to welcoming graduate student interns. This was one factor in deciding to place students in an alternative educational organization that is also a member of the Community Advisory Committee, the RISSE Center**.**

The RISSE Center is an agency that provides, among other things, an afterschool program for approximately 75 refugee children in grades K-8 every year. Although it was specifically founded in 2007 to assist refugees fleeing from the Congo, by 2012 it had grown into a 501(c)(3) tax exempt nonprofit organization with an operating budget of almost $235,000. It provides English language classes along with job and housing support for adults, and afterschool services for children, where they receive homework help, structured activities and a hot meal. From the beginning, the Community Service Office at St. Rose has coordinated the placement of sixty undergraduate student volunteers every semester to help out in the K-8 classrooms at the center. Social work and counseling students have helped RISSE students build essential life skills in areas such as tolerance, diversity and conflict resolution. A public relations class in the School of Business provided RISSE with a complete public relations campaign including website development, logo development and PR materials.

In January, 2012, meetings between the education director at RISSE and

the program coordinator of the Literacy graduate program at St. Rose resulted in adding intensive support to language, reading and writing in the afterschool program. Graduate students in the literacy program who are already certified teachers started completing a thirty-five hour supervised specialized practicum at the center. This practicum involved diagnosing children in terms of speaking, reading and writing skills, and then working with them in small groups towards measurable objectives. This practicum had formerly taken place in area classrooms and afterschool programs. Placing the practicum at RISSE provided our graduate students with some unique advantages. First of all, although there is a range of student abilities at the center, everyone there qualifies as a struggling learner. Because all of the children are recent refugees, it also provides graduate students with a real-life laboratory where they can study and discuss the best practices for teaching English language learners (ELLs), the influence of culture on learning, and the importance of providing inclusive instructional practices. After reading course-required research articles regarding these issues, graduate students have experiences with individual children that either support or challenge the reported findings. One requirement of the practicum is to post a weekly blog analyzing the assigned research and how it relates to that week's lessons. The connection students make between the two can be seen in the following excerpt from a student's blog:

> The research says that drawing upon and building upon their bank of prior knowledge will help bridge the gap for my students. I would like to turn this into a lesson where I would work on learning some words and phrases in my students' first languages as they are learning the same English words and phrases.

It also provides faces for the statistics they need to confront as they enter the educational system. The students they tutor are truly the most vulnerable learners in the system. According to the last New York State Report Card, 86% of students with limited English proficiency in the Albany City Schools scored at the lowest possible level (1) on the 2013 English Language Arts (ELA) exams in grades 3-8. In 2014, 83% of these students were still scoring at the lowest possible level (New York State Education Department, 2014).

It is perhaps ironic that one of the elements of this partnership that most contributed to its success, especially at this initial stage, was the incredible similarity between the educational philosophy and perspectives on student learning between the Literacy graduate program at the college and the Principal of the refugee center, whose prior experience had been running a high school for girls in rural Pakistan. It was at the refugee center that we discovered this administrator whose opinions about child development, language and literacy learning, and effective instruction, were more similar to those of the graduate faculty in Literacy than many of the local school principals.

Formalizing and Expanding the Partnership

The rapport between the stakeholders, the enormity of the challenges refugee children face, and the positive experiences that graduate students were having in the

practicum, led to a specific partnership agreement between the College of St. Rose Literacy program and the RISSE Center that was formalized in March 2014. With the approval of the school's provost, a letter was sent to the education director of the RISSE Center outlining some of the services that literacy students had been providing, with the open proposal to continue collaboration in the future.

This collaboration developed in several different directions. As a 30-credit program that leads to a master's degree in either Literacy–Birth to Grade 6, or Literacy–Grades 5-12, the Literacy program prepares students to teach a diverse population of children with literacy needs. They are also prepared to act as literacy leaders and coaches. They are required to meet the standards set by the International Reading Association (IRA) to not only assess, instruct, select materials and create educational environments for diverse students, but also guide other educational professionals to do the same (International Reading Association, 2010). Projects were developed in a variety of courses to put graduate students in the position of being consultants to the teachers at the center. For example, the capstone course in the program requires students to produce videos and PowerPoint presentations for the professional development of RISSE teachers on specific topics that will inform their practices. This is used to demonstrate to the IRA that we are meeting Standard 2.2 for accreditation which states in part, that our students must "provide guidance to teachers and support personnel in implementing appropriate instructional strategies" (IRA, 2010, p. 51).

Graduate Literacy students have also collaborated with the education director and teachers at RISSE to identify needs and apply for grants to meet these needs. The process by which grants are pursued involves graduate students investigating the availability of grants, and then collaborating with the staff at RISSE to determine which ones would be most relevant to their classrooms. This has resulted in three successful projects where graduate students have been involved in securing and implementing grants. These grants are small and local. We are incredibly fortunate that there is a local funding network, Community Foundation for the Greater Capital District, which helps channel grant requests to local donors with interests in the refugee population.

In September 2012, a grant was received to establish a reading incentive program for the children at the center. The children who chose to participate in this program read books and reported on them in order to earn weekly prizes. The grant was used to purchase the prizes and stage an award ceremony at its conclusion. This reading incentive program was designed to foster motivation and interest in reading. By increasing the number of books that these students read and were exposed to, the RISSE Center hoped to increase their fluency and comfort level with the English language, as well as with the structure and format of stories. By reporting on their reading, it was hoped that students would improve their ability to understand each story they read. The prizes were used as an external motivator for students. The use of external motivators has been shown to be of limited value when it was studied in classroom situations (Cameron & Peiece, 1994; Eisenberger & Cameron, 1996; Gambrell & Maranek, 1997; Oldfather & Dahl, 1995), but the fact that many of the children at the RISSE Center did not own anything that could be categorized as a toy, literally nothing that belonged specifically to them, made earning a prize much more appealing. The project was enormously successful and resulted in a voluntary participation

rate of 64%. Beginning readers tallied 270 books as part of the four-month program, while more advanced readers tallied 4,446 pages. Since older readers were completing longer books, the number of pages were tracked instead of the number of books. This allowed older readers to be rewarded more frequently than if rewarded for completing a whole book. A very gratifying aspect of the final event was how enthusiastically each student who received a certificate was applauded by his/her peers. It was like going to an end-of-season sporting event where every player was being honored. Both the education director and the teachers commented that the social cohesion of the group (78 students) in the center's cafeteria would be noted and discussed at future staff meetings so that additional community building activities could be planned.

In October 2014, we received a small grant to purchase 25 books specific to the cultures of the children attending the RISSE Center. Graduate students searched for appropriate books and then guided other staff members in analyzing what effect, if any, sharing these books had on the children. These books were used in eleven individual lessons with children from Thailand, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Myanmar. Children were generally overjoyed to see pictures of places that looked familiar to them. They had much information to share about names for things, foods, customs and experiences. This supported vocabulary instruction about many English words for the same things. One little boy from Iraq did not enjoy discussing the award-winning book, *The Librarian of Basra* (Winter, 2005), with his teacher. He said it reminded him of too many bad things. This reminded us that these materials must be shared with a great deal of sensitivity and respect for the children's experiences.

The teachers realized the value of using books that children could readily relate to. This is a quote from a reflection on a lesson taught to a 2nd and 3rd grader. The teacher used the book, *My Name Is Sangoel* (Williams, 2009). It is the story of a refugee from the Sudan. This teacher said:

> This was the perfect book for making connections! Flora was very excited to read the book when she found out it was about a family from her country. Both my students spoke about their own experiences moving here, taking the plane over and feeling like the character. The book was also similar to a book we read together in our first lesson, so the students were able to make text-to-text connections as well. They also had much more in-depth responses!

A read-aloud was conducted to see how these books could be used in more of a whole class setting. This was conducted as a professional development session for classroom teachers in using culturally relevant materials with the value of reading aloud. Graduate students afterwards discussed how students from two different classrooms (2nd and 3rd grades) related to the feelings of aloneness and being different experienced by the main character. They observed that children also shared many stories of the friendships they have since been able to form with their American classmates.

Currently, we are analyzing the effect of supplying tape recorders with headphones and read-along tapes to children in the 2nd and 3rd grades. These items were also purchased through a grant secured by graduate students. This time, graduate students will practice more rigorous research skills by carefully measuring student fluency before, during and after a three-month trial. It is hoped that this project

will also result in testing a fluency scale that can be used specifically with English language learners. This is the first time we will be involving students in a research project that will be submitted for publication.

Another area of focus for the graduate students in another course has been evaluating the classroom libraries at the center and offering suggestions for making literacy materials more accessible to the children. Originally, the entire collection of books at the RISSE Center consisted of donations made by congregants of a Methodist church. These donations were examined and sorted by graduate students. A very broad system for assessing the books, labeling them as either beginning, elementary or advanced, is an on-going project, as is distributing the books to the appropriate classrooms. Continued demonstrations of reading aloud at the classroom level are planned for the fall of 2015.

Outcomes for RISSE Students

The fact that the small-group remediation tutoring program has been on-going for several semesters has given graduate students the luxury of tracking student progress over time. During the past two years, 50% of students tutored improved at least one reading level, while 15% improved 4-6 reading levels. Student success is certainly a result of the fact that instruction is highly individualized. Students are assessed at the beginning and conclusion of every semester, and lessons are created to respond to their particular weaknesses and build on their particular strengths. We have found that the ELL students do not merely benefit from carefully constructed lessons; the program also encourages much conversation and story-sharing. It gives these students an extra dose of time and attention by empathetic and enthusiastic adult English speakers. We have not yet tried to measure the effect of these small group interactions on the attitudes and confidence of the learners. We do have some evidence that they enjoy the lessons since they come into class enthusiastically, even when they are interrupted on the playground or from classroom parties. Unfortunately, we cannot provide services to every child at the center, so we choose only the children with the most urgent needs. Many students are disappointed when they are not selected for "special time with a teacher."

Outcomes for the RISSE Center

The RISSE Center's education director regularly features progress made by graduate students in the remediation program, and other contributions made by them, in her monthly reports to the RISSE Board of Directors. The fact that we keep statistics on student progress is very important to the center's fund raising efforts. This partnership required the education director to add several tasks to her already overwhelming work load (getting teacher recommendations together, getting permissions signed and understood by parents who had very limited English knowledge, and rescheduling instruction times). The partnership continues to be a work in progress. She and I meet every January and June to review areas of strength and areas of need in terms of the collaboration. We also co-plan on-going projects. She is working hard to increase the

number of opportunities center teachers have to take advantage of the professional development materials created by graduate students and to make classroom demonstrations more consistent. The RISSE Center operates on a shoe-string budget. Teachers do not make much more than minimum wage and their commitment to the children varies. Sometimes they are less than cooperative in supporting initiatives like the reading incentive program, which requires extra recordkeeping on their part. It is a challenge for the educational director to budget time for teachers to actually take full advantage of the services we could make available to them. Our goal for next year is to evolve in a new direction and involve graduate students in planning and implementing family activities at the center.

Outcomes for the Literacy Program

My observation notes, based on my three years of partnering with RISSE compared to fifteen years of working with graduate students in other contexts, reveal that there is a distinct elevation in the quality of the work the graduate students submit, and a pronounced effort to make lessons and assignments as effective and successful as possible in their work at the RISSE Center. The fact that they are working within an authentic context for children they see as incredibly deserving underwrites their efforts and increases the time and effort they spend on assignments. The following is taken from a blog written by a graduate student in the spring of 2014, "This experience has given me a whole new appreciation for what is going on for ELLs in the public education system. I have no doubt that the 1½ hours I spend with my students every week is the closest they come to appropriate instruction."

The partnership with RISSE allows us to meet some of the standards set by our accreditation body (IRA) in ways that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. One of these standards, that there must be "strong evidence of advocating for social justice and making it part of the literacy curriculum" (IRA, 2010, p. 53), is met through this literacy program partnership.

This does not mean that our work with the RISSE Center has been without challenges. Site conditions are minimally acceptable and we have had to cancel sessions when the furnace was broken. When we reflect on instruction in the quiet cafeteria after the children leave, we are invariably visited by several mice. As the coordinator of the graduate program, I have found that an attitude of tolerance and a sense of good-will has served me well. This means that I have needed to amend my expectations about children's availability, teachers' willingness to fully cooperate, and some unrealistic suggestions made by the RISSE Board of Directors.

Outcomes for Graduate Students

Although it may seem that what the graduate literacy students have given to the RISSE Center has far outweighed what they have received, nothing could be further from the truth. At every step of this evolving partnership, it has been mutually beneficial. Studying the research material developed through their participation in this program to improve the education of English language learners is not an end in itself,

it is only the beginning for our graduate students. It is applied and tested in a real life learning laboratory.

It is important to emphasize that this partnership with a refugee center is not just a way to reach out to the disadvantaged. First and foremost, expectations for the graduate students are exceedingly high in their interactions at RISSE. Every lesson that they teach is supervised by the college instructor, and substantial feedback via email is the normal procedure after every session. There is a sharp learning curve in this class, due to the Literacy Program's commitment to serve this population well. It is unusual for students to have grades below an A beyond their third or fourth actual lesson with the children. Some of the learning done by our graduate students relates to teaching practices; they also learn about working with very diverse children. Some behaviors, especially seen in children who are very recent arrivals, can be startling and surprising. Children who have limited experience with having electricity or indoor plumbing can be challenging. We finally realized that one little first grader who was taking too many bathroom breaks was doing so because he couldn't get over how the water swirled and flushed in the toilet. The cultural differences, which are so essential to take into account for any learning experience, can in reality be problematic and need to be studied and discussed. The same skills that allowed these children to survive in refugee camps in Myanmar do not always translate well into taking turns and learning cooperation in small group lessons in Albany, NY.

Conclusions

This narrative of what has been accomplished by this college-community partnership was not conducted as a formal study, so conclusions based on this kind of observational data are limited. It is simply written as an illustrative example of the ways a partnership can grow when there is a respectful willingness on the part of both the college and the partnering agency to adapt to the daily realities and needs of each. The most common mistake that faculty can make in integrating course curriculum with service-learning is to think of it as merely altruistic. An awareness of how each partner is contributing to and benefitting from the relationship is basic to the enterprise, and is fundamental to the critical reflection that distinguishes this work as academic, not philanthropic.

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