© Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, Volume 24, Number 1, p. 1, (2020)

Georgia LEADS: Exploring a Statewide Leadership Engagement Effort

Lori Tiller and Erik C. Ness

Abstract

In this qualitative study, we focused on a two-way model of engagement, utilizing observational and individual interview data to examine community members' perceptions of their participation in a statewide initiative to increase leadership capacity at the community level. We review barriers to engagement recognized in the literature. Our study builds upon evolving definitions and models of community engagement, and furthers our understanding of community members' own perceptions of the definition and process involved in successful two-way community engagement. Our findings suggest three emergent themes for community participants: (1) trust, (2) relationships, and (3) priceless value of the engagement. Involving the community members in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the initiative was a unique approach to scaling up a statewide leadership development engagement effort, and the inclusive nature of this process enabled us to examine perceptions of engagement efforts in a single initiative across communities throughout the state of Georgia.

Keywords: two-way community engagement, leadership, Georgia, community engagement

Community engagement has faced extreme growth in scale and scope in many institutions over the past two decades. Although the concept has been supported for many years, the implementation still varies greatly between campus, local community, and statewide efforts. However, many of the studies in the engagement literature are confined to the perspectives of faculty and student participants. Few studies have examined community member perceptions or how community members perceive the concept and impacts of community engagement as they have experienced it. Another gap in the literature is a view of engagement from a statewide level and not a solely "town and gown" perspective.

Our research study evolved while examining a statewide university–community engagement initiative titled "Georgia LEADS." "LEADS" is not an acronym; capital letters are used to emphasize the concept of leadership embedded throughout the programming. This study utilized observational data and individual interviews with community members to understand their perspectives of the impact of community engagement through their participation in this statewide initiative. Community engagement in higher education ties the service mission of the university to both teaching and research in a meaningful way not only for students and university scholars, but also for community members and stakeholders. A first step in this process is reaching out to those community members and organizations that have played a role in institutional community engagement and asking for their feedback on the concept and process. Community engagement is increasingly important, as campuses are responsible to the communities in which they reside and to the students who are graduating and becoming members of their own communities. These students represent the next generation of engagement opportunities for higher education.

This study examines community perceptions within a statewide initiative to increase leadership capacity at the community level utilizing a two-way model of engagement. Georgia LEADS was a pilot initiative between the University of Georgia's J. W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development (Fanning) and the Georgia Chamber of Commerce to increase leadership capacity at both the county and regional level across the state of Georgia. Fanning works to increase leadership capacity in three areas of development: community leadership, nonprofit leadership, and youth leadership. Fanning focuses on individual leadership development and on two-way organizational and relational leadership development to expand the ability to interact with both campus and community leaders statewide. Thus, Fanning's efforts align with Weerts and Sandmann's (2008) two-way community engagement model, which includes the following suggestions: a centralized office, increased administrative support for promotion and tenure changes, intentional involvement of community members, and an ability to measure the success of engagement efforts. Georgia LEADS enables the community members to play as large a role in the design of the program as the research team. According to Hickey et al. (2015), true community engagement comes when the community takes ownership of the process. Community ownership was defined as taking an active and sustained role in the implementation process. A two-way model of engagement allows institutions of higher education to bring the community into the process as researchers and experts in their community with needs and priorities, not just subjects of a study aimed to improve their community.

This study on perceptions of Georgia LEADS community members was guided by two research questions. First, utilizing Weerts and Sandmann's (2008) two-way model of community engagement, how do community members experience the process of a statewide engagement initiative? Second, how do community members define and perceive the concept of community engagement?

Georgia LEADS Concept

The Georgia Chamber of Commerce and the J. W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development at the University of Georgia partnered to develop the Georgia LEADS initiative. Grounded in Fanning's mission to "strengthen communities and organizations through leadership development, training, and education" (J. W. Fanning Institute, n.d.) and the Georgia Chamber's focus on "competitiveness to attract new investment and create opportunity and prosperity for all Georgians" (para., 4). Georgia LEADS provided the seed resources for communities to grow their leadership development efforts. This partnership holds two underlying principles: (1) that leadership is important to the economic and social vitality of the state and (2) that communities that embrace leadership development have a competitive advantage in economic and community leadership development. The Georgia LEADS initiative did not presume to know the priorities of the community's leadership needs, but rather provided resources from the University to meet the community needs.

Leadership Development Planning and Implementation Process

Each pilot community engaged in a one-year leadership planning and design process facilitated by faculty from Fanning to assess, design, implement, and evaluate leadership programming. In this way, and to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, leadership trainings and programming were tailored and adapted to individual, local leadership needs and priorities. To maximize participation by key leaders, each community selected to participate in Georgia LEADS was required to create a working group. In addition, each community designated a leadership program coordinator as a primary point of contact to coordinate interaction with Fanning. Given their important role in community leadership programming, as well as their ability to help identify local leadership needs and priorities, local chambers of commerce are the likely organizations to designate working groups and points of contact and were key to the Georgia LEADS process. Many communities operating youth and adult leadership programs do not have the necessary resources to engage the appropriate expertise to update their programming and sustain their efforts. The program design of Georgia LEADS encouraged growing, enhancing, and reinvigorating existing programming as well as developing new programming focused on underserved populations and age groups.

The LEADS process differed slightly from previous statewide efforts on leadership development because of the community focus and localized technical assistance from Fanning around community-identified leadership strategies. The community identified the priorities and then together with Fanning crafted the strategies and programs under those priorities. Each community worked through a three-meeting process to establish the top three leadership priorities to focus on for the length of their participation. Working groups consisted of between 10 and 30 community members and were designed to be representative of the community demographics for inclusion of a variety of races, ages, socioeconomic levels, and workforce areas. One Fanning faculty member was assigned as the principal investigator (PI) for the LEADS project, and the PI had a team of six additional faculty members and one staff member who supported the LEADS initiative as a whole. Each member of this team was trained to facilitate any of the communities and any of the working group meetings. At the conclusion of the Year 1 pilot effort, seven of the 10 initially identified communities began their implementation phase. This study examined those seven communities through the use of observational data obtained during the priority-setting phase and through interviews with key community members.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Creating an engaged two-way model of institutional involvement with the community can be a challenge for institutions of higher education (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Sandmann, 2008; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). As the practice of community engagement increases, many researchers argue that institutions need to remain mindful of the capacity for community members and organizations to support this practice (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, 2002; Littlepage et al., 2012; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). For example, Trudeau and Kruse (2014) examined how daunting it is not only to create successful community engagement opportunities for students, but also to build trust and buy-in between the administration of the university and the community partners. Other studies have suggested that institutions remain mindful of thoughtfully preparing and supporting their faculty in the exploration and adoption of community engagement practices and activities (Antonio et al., 2000; Nyden, 2003; Wade & Demb, 2009). Community engagement is a signature sector of higher education, but very few studies examine how the community and research team work together for implementation efforts (Bernardo et al., 2014).

This literature review section first provides a brief history of community engagement and the shift from the traditional service delivery model to a two-way exchange of knowledge between the community member and university. Next, the section outlines the key actors involved in university–community engagement and the barriers and strengths that are part of the process. The section concludes with an overview of models used to discuss and evaluate community engagement, including the Weerts and Sandmann (2008) two-way engagement model that serves as the conceptual framework for our study.

History of Community Engagement

When did a definition of community engagement become necessary within higher education institutions? The Morrill Act of 1862 was an economic development plan that made land-grant institutions possible with a goal of increasing agricultural education and an outcome of stimulating the economy (Roper & Hirth, 2005). With the passing of this act began the conversation of higher education and public service. The Morrill Act was amended in 1890 to give a small amount of funding to each of the established land-grant institutions (initiating federal funding within the public higher education systems) and to establish additional land-grant institutions for African American students (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Roper & Hirth, 2005). The Hatch Act of 1887 that created experiment station services, or one-way service delivery, came between the initial Morrill Act and the amendment. One-way delivery implies the institution creates and provides the research on the knowledge needed by communities of practice, in this case agriculture, to move the economy forward (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Sandmann, 2008; Trudeau & Kruse, 2014; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). According to Fitzgerald et al. (2012), the Hatch Act served to bring research and agriculture together for the first time in support of growing the economy through a lens of higher education engagement. The next iteration of engagement came with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, which provided permanent funding for extension services at all land-grant institutions to distribute research results to the community (Roper & Hirth, 2005). Roper and Hirth (2005) suggested that each of these acts was brought about to address the changing function of higher education and how it relates to the surrounding community, thus initiating a community-engaged institution.

The one-way service delivery model remained consistent until the 1980s, when several new acts and initiatives emerged with a focus on economic renewal, service, and engagement. The first of those was the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, which allowed for partnerships with higher education institutions around patents (Roper & Hirth, 2005). Campus Compact originated in 1985, focusing institutions on civic purposes in addition to economic prosperity and knowledge (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Roper & Hirth, 2005). Finally, Boyer's (1990) Scholarship Reconsidered merged the ideas of service, extension, and outreach into the "scholarship of application," which is similar to two-way communication models and the holistic concept of engagement. Moreover, Boyer's (1990) concept of the engaged campus suggested that focusing on the idea of scholarship as purely research would not lead to a well-rounded and engaged faculty, students, or community. As this idea gained traction throughout the next two decades, definitions emerged and supplementary concepts were introduced to faculty, students, and community members in the application of scholarship outside the traditional models of academic teaching and research.

Defining Community Engagement

Although many scholars have expanded the definition of community engagement since Boyer first began writing on the topic, in the Carnegie Classification community engagement is described as

> collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.
>
> The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good (paras. 1-2).

Additional definitions also articulate a shift from a service delivery model to a more reciprocal relationship (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Roper & Hirth, 2005; Sandmann, 2008). Slaughter and Leslie (1997) maintained that this transition began with the Bayh-Dole Act, but others have reasoned that it was more of a shift toward sharing knowledge production with business and communities being framed in terms of service and sharing discoveries (Roper & Hirth, 2005; Sandmann 2008). A reciprocal relationship model of engagement enables knowledge created within institutions of higher education to diffuse to the broader community for utilization, in contrast to the one-way model, with its implications that all of the knowledge stays within the institution. Fitzgerald et al. (2012) reminded us that not all knowledge is found within the walls of an institution, and that community members have knowledge they can bring to the table as well. Fitzgerald et al. thus concluded that the exchange must include both or true engagement is not occurring.

Barriers to Community Engagement

The literature suggests common barriers that institutions experience when entering into two-way models of engagement with community members. This section highlights both the institutional and community barriers to engagement, then reports various models and theories of engagement.

Administrative Leadership. Creating an engaged institution that intentionally values and respects a two-way model of communication begins with administrative buy-in, according to Weerts and Sandmann (2010). Scholars agree that faculty, staff, and students are important to an engaged campus. Trudeau and Kruse (2014) contended that the ability to connect in meaningful engagement cannot rest solely on faculty and asserted that buy-in from administration is critical as well. If the effort is not supported at all levels, a truly engaged institution is difficult to achieve (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Equally, Weerts and Sandmann (2010) suggested that the university administration express the value of engagement activities to the external stakeholders of the institution for promotion of an engaged campus environment. According to Trudeau and Kruse (2014), the governance structure outside the institution perceives these efforts supported by administration: This applies to local town and gown relationships, regional support initiatives, and statewide efforts. Furthermore, Fitzgerald et al. (2012) suggested that institutions and administrations also need to make engagement a central vehicle on outcomes for both the internal and external partners. One possible implication of these barriers, for example, is a need for administration to support changes to the promotion and tenure guidelines to reward active community engagement practices.

Faculty. Antonio et al. (2000) identified two significant barriers for faculty-community engagement: (1) promotion and tenure guidelines and (2) faculty training in community engagement practices. According to Antonio et al. (2000), research is historically the most valued component of promotion and tenure, making it difficult to encourage faculty to engage in civic development. Weerts and Sandmann (2008) discussed how even when engagement activities are rewarded at one institution, the guidelines across institutions are so different it remains difficult to work across campuses and fields. Traditionally service activities are located in the social sciences and less often in the hard sciences, but to create a uniquely engaged campus for all faculty and all disciplines the reward structure may need to shift from a research-only focus to one that also rewards authentic community engagement. Trudeau and Kruse (2014) examine the second faculty barrier as an unintended consequence of requiring faculty to participate in engagement activities without instruction on best practices. They argue that without training or administrative buy-in, faculty may require time-intensive professional development opportunities.

Institutional Structure. As administrative leaders and faculty work to shift their thinking in engagement activities, the literature suggests that several structural differences account for these changes. Weerts and Sandmann (2008) expounded upon the idea of a centralized versus a decentralized system of engaging with the community. They first suggested a centralized office as a one-stop shop for community members and organizations who want to connect with campus resources. However, they also pointed out that a decentralized engagement effort allows more flexibility as faculty, staff, and departments engage with the local community, although it is not as accessible for community members. Both have merits and are dependent on how the institution chooses to interact with the surrounding community. The Weerts and Sandmann (2008) study also suggested that the institution determines how engagement practices are assessed and evaluated for long- and short-term impact on the community. One method suggested by Nyden (2003) begins the assessment process with the creation of an institutional network of supportive faculty, staff, and students who are organized, have an ability to influence institutional practices, and are interested in institutionalizing community-based research and service. Examples of what may come out of this type of network include changes to institutional review board (IRB) practices for research purposes to more easily involve community members. Fitzgerald et al. (2012) supported the involvement of faculty governance, traditional outreach units, and professional development at all levels to support an understanding of the differences between outreach efforts and a truly engaged campus and proposed that these entities should work together to assess those efforts.

Community. The literature on barriers to engagement from the community perspective is sparse. Few studies have examined the perspective of the community member, and even fewer have considered community members as coinvestigators in the research or engagement process. Bringle and Hatcher (2002) used the term "labs for experimentation" to describe how community members are treated during the engagement process. Incidentally, the Bringle and Hatcher (2002) study indicated that community members are traditionally passive recipients of the engagement efforts. Weerts and Sandmann (2008) collected data from community members over several years on the members' perceived barriers to community engagement and suggested that community members were interested in high quality relationships and that longer term engagements increase those efforts.

Community partners and organizations want high quality, mutually beneficial relationships with their local and state higher education institutions, according to Weerts and Sandmann (2008). According to Holland (1997), trust in a truly mutually beneficial relationship is a central issue within the literature for why engagement efforts succeed and why some may not gain traction in a community. Two-way community engagement is based on reciprocal relationships; absent trust in the beginning of those relationships, the community members and organizations may never be truly engaged (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, 2002; Littlepage et al., 2012; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). The literature suggests that community members may feel overprocessed, which means they feel more like the subjects of the research rather than equal participants respected for what they bring to the table (Littlepage et al., 2012; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Littlepage et al. (2012) recommended that institutions consider how the engagement relationship relates to the capacity of the organizations being served and that the students and faculty remain mindful of expectations and resources of the community members. Much of the literature looks at student outcomes from practicing engagement, but comparatively little attention is given to how engagement relationships influence community members in the long term. Thus, in an effort to fill this void, our study examines responses by community members around the concepts of trust, value of the engagement, and relationship between both sides of the engagement initiative.

Conceptual Framework for Community Engagement

Institutions, researchers, and practitioners continue to expand their knowledge and expertise in community engagement through the use of theories, studies, and conceptual models. Best practices are described throughout the literature, but how are those being applied as theories and models to measure the institutional engagement effort? The two-way model of engagement supported by Weerts and Sandmann (2008) suggests a centralized office, increased administrative support for promotion and tenure changes, intentional involvement of community members, and an ability to measure engagement efforts' success. Weerts and Sandmann (2008, 2010) and Sandmann (2008) described the two-way model of engagement through different conceptual frameworks. This study utilizes the two-way model as the conceptual framework for the Georgia LEADS initiative.

A select few additional studies that attempt to explore this two-way engagement concept offer some relevant literature ties for this study. For example, Bernardo et al. (2014) examined community engagement and the university–community partnership through a lens of leadership. Their study described engagement as spanning beyond boundaries of an academic unit, creating relational dynamics involving leadership from both university and community, and requiring a more socially and emotionally involved faculty community. Qualitative analysis by Bernardo et al. (2014) produced four conceptual themes for successful community engagement: (a) contextual conditions, (b) managerial roles for all partners, (c) attitude of all partners, and (d) spirituality. Although the study did not utilize engagement efforts by bringing community members to the table, it did expound on the best practice of meaningful roles and attitudes for all parties, including community members.

Bringle and Hatcher (2002) posit a four-stage method for engaging with community members in research and initiatives, encompassing (a) type of relationship and interest from community members, (b) implications for faculty academic practice, (c) development and maintenance of the relationship, and (d) assessment of need for dissolution of the relationship. These steps work best with a centralized office of engagement, which was discussed as a best practice in the 2008 study by Weerts and Sandmann.

Holland's (1997) model gives institutions an ability to evaluate their level and commitment of service on a Likert scale from low relevance to full integration. Institutions have a tendency to implement engagement and service in different levels of intentionality (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Holland, 1997; Sandmann 2008). Holland's approach contributes a tool for institutions as they begin this process of engagement.

In consideration of the varying models of community engagement, the idea of two-way engagement, with the university research and practice informing the community and the community member experience informing research and practice, best describes the Georgia LEADS process. Here, community members and UGA faculty members served as boundary spanners, "the bridge between an organization and its exchange partners" (Scott, 1992, p. 196). Weerts and Sandmann (2010) further explored the concept of boundary spanning in community engagement. They employed a qualitative multi-case study analysis that included six institutions, half land-grant and half urban institutions. The data were collected in three phases after completion of an initial document analysis and 80 interviews. Findings included four roles played within the engagement by the higher education boundary spanner: (a) community-based problem solver, (b) technical expert, (c) internal engagement advocate, and (d) engagement champion. Weerts and Sandmann (2010) noted that the roles are not static, may shift or adjust at any time, and work in concord across the different roles. Weerts and Sandmann (2008) suggested the need for additional research in testing this framework across additional research institutions, as well as reversing the concept to inquire how community members engage and span boundaries to higher education institutions. This second suggestion for future research prompted the current study, in which we inquired into and explored perceptions of community members in terms of higher education engagement efforts.

For our study, we chose to focus solely on the two-way model of communication, but through a statewide lens rather than local relationships. Fanning is housed within the University of Georgia (UGA) division of Public Service and Outreach. UGA is a land- and sea-grant institution with a public service mission. UGA is also classified by Carnegie as a very-high research university, which Weerts and Sandman (2010) contend are the most difficult to move from the one-way to the two-way model of engagement. However, Weerts and Sandmann (2008) argued that over the past several decades university–community engagement has shifted from a one-way model approach to a two-way approach. For this study, we used the two-way model of engagement as the conceptual framework to examine community engagement from the perspective of the community members who participated in the Georgia LEADS statewide pilot initiative. Historically, research participants have passively taken part in community engagement processes with university partners, but as universities are experiencing increasing demands to show economic impact, it is more important than ever to bring the communities to the table as research and initiatives are designed. As mentioned earlier, Hickey et al. (2015) noted that communities will engage or not engage depending on how effectively the research meets their needs. Taking the framework of a two-way model of engagement where equal weight is given to the community members and to the university partners allows this study to delve deeper into perceptions of community members following a year-long engagement effort across the state.

The Weerts and Sandmann (2008, 2010) two-way engagement framework spans the change in community engagement levels, particularly for research institutions, that has occurred over the past 150 years. Institutions have moved from a one-way model to a more robust approach of bringing community ideas and influence back to the university following the university's sharing of knowledge. As discussed in the literature review, this two-way knowledge transfer represents a change in thinking from the traditional public service model employed by most institutions over the past century. Traditional models presuppose that the answers to the community challenges are known to the university (Bernardo et al., 2014; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010); however, the Sandmann and Weerts (2008) two-way model allows for mutual learning and can bring about systemic change within the community and within the institution. This two-way exchange was an important focus of the Georgia LEADS pilot initiative and thus the emphasis of the examination.

Methods

Our study focused on the perceptions of community members who were engaged in the Georgia LEADS statewide initiative. We crafted two research questions to focus this qualitative study; first, utilizing Weerts and Sandmann's (2008) two-way model of community engagement, how do community members experience the process of a statewide engagement initiative and second, how do community members define and perceive the concept of community engagement? Creswell (2009) defined a qualitative study as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting details of respondents, and piloted within a natural setting. Due to the scarce literature available on the topic of community engagement from the community perspective, a qualitative design affords a perspective from inside the communities and people working on this initiative. Indeed, a recent dissertation by Adams (2013) framed the link between qualitative research and the two-way model of communication as research that "pursues what and how questions to get a deeper understanding of an observed phenomenon in a natural setting" (p.56).

The observational data was collected from five of the communities that participated in the pilot. We decided to utilize these five communities because each community was past the priority-setting stage of the Georgia LEADS process when the observations occurred. All permissions were granted from the Institutional Review Board for our study. We selected interview participants based on their positions as the leadership program coordinators for their respective communities. Because the Georgia LEADS initiative used geographical boundaries for the communities, this study followed those county lines as defining community and including all cities within those borders. These communities are situated throughout the state and cover both urban and rural areas.

We relied on two primary data sources for this study: observation data and interview data. The LEADS process began with the formation of a community working group and assignment of the leadership program coordinator. Each working group held three meetings before establishing their community priorities for the remainder of their Georgia LEADS initiative. A total of 15 meetings across the communities occurred from November 2014 through April 2015. The emergent themes from these observations built the basis for the semistructured interview process.

Interviews consisted of 17 semistructured open-ended questions. According to Merriam (2009), semistructured interview questions are often used when specific information is anticipated from the respondent, but overall the order and wording of the question does not need to be prescriptive. As described by Merriam, benefits of this type of process include more freedom for the interviewee to express answers and ability for the interviewer to explore unanticipated perceptions. Our interview participants were located in six of the communities that reached the implementation phase of their priority setting during the Georgia LEADS process. One of the communities had two co-leadership program coordinators for a total of seven interviews. We organized the interview questions in four sections: (a) general knowledge and community-wide experience of the LEADS process, (b) personal role in the process, (c) community engagement definition and barrier questions, and (d) additional information. These sections were identified as most crucial to evaluating the effectiveness of the program, while also utilizing the subject matter expertise of these community members to gain knowledge from their perception of engagement efforts and barriers to the process. Each of these sections referenced a theme from the original observational data.

We collected participant observational data by taking notes during the meetings and by reviewing meeting materials, including agendas, flip charts, and faculty notes. Working groups consisted of 10 to 30 community members who were representative of the community demographics. In addition to the notes from the meetings, observational information was gathered from the facilitators and added into the meeting notes. All written information gathered from the 15 meetings was discussed by the Georgia LEADS faculty team and transcribed by the first author. Following the transcriptions, the notes were coded for emergent themes, which led to the next phase: interview data analysis.

Interviews were scheduled through an email introduction and lasted no more than 45 minutes. The interview length was established to accommodate the participants, who were all community members agreeing to participate during their off time. We conducted seven interviews, two of which were from the same community due to shared responsibility of the leadership program coordinator in that particular community. The first author conducted the interviews by phone and took detailed handwritten notes. Following the interview, the notes were transcribed and expanded upon the same day to maximize retained content and context. Rubin and Rubin (2012) discussed the benefits and costs of handwritten notes versus recorded interviews and suggested that a level of familiarity and trust is established when not having a recorder. As community members had varying degrees of trust with the interviewer, handwritten notes provided the opportunity to build trust while also achieving the level of detail needed for the study.

The data analysis was pursued in two stages: initial observational data analysis and interview data analysis. The inductive approach to identifying emerging themes was utilized in both the observational and interview analysis (Merriam, 2009). Through emergent themes in the observational data, we gained an understanding of what topics might yield the most important additional information in the one-on-one interviews. We analyzed observational notes and meeting materials for emerging themes and to identify topics that we wanted to pursue through interviews. In the second phase of our analysis, we deductively coded interview data by organizing data elements into the aforementioned four areas within a cumulative spreadsheet. We then analyzed the data using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009) to identify additional emergent themes. The final round of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin,1998) produced three overarching themes: trust, relationships, and "priceless value."

As the first author of this article is a faculty member at Fanning and was one of the Georgia LEADS team members, we considered the possibility of positive bias toward the initiative and the outcomes. To counteract this possibility, we used three triangulation techniques (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014) first, working with multiple researchers (the second author is not affiliated with Fanning or Georgia LEADS); second, use of multiple data sources (observations and interview). Peer debriefing was the final technique, which was utilized (Merriam, 2009) by engaging research team members who participated in the observational data collection to review the study.

Findings

Through the observational data analysis the Georgia LEADS initiative learned what communities across the state see as their struggles as they endeavor to improve their leadership capacity to serve their community. They also learned that building a statewide engagement process while the process unfolds has its challenges. The Georgia LEADS team examined the outcomes of the initiative; however, prior to the present study, the team had not examined how the community members perceived those outcomes. Utilizing the observational data from the working group meetings to create the interview questions gave this study an added layer of trust with the community members during the request for interviews. The community members valued that their priority setting was coded across communities, and that through that process additional information was produced for their communities. The observational data analysis yielded four main themes: (1) the general process of the pilot program, (2) the involvement of the leadership program coordinator, (3) knowledge of community-university engagement, and (4) trust for and value of this type of engagement. The interview responses yielded three emergent themes: (1) trust, (2) relationships, and (3) priceless value of the engagement. Our findings are discussed in three parts based on the emergent themes of the interviews, with a direct quote from participant interviews framing each section.

"Community members must trust for meaningful work to be done"

Trust was the first theme to emerge from our study. Of the seven respondents, all perceived trust as the most important part of any engagement process. Although the literature depicts this as a barrier, each of these respondents felt that trust had been established long before the Georgia LEADS process began in their community. When asked how their particular community was chosen for the process, not everyone knew the exact reason or process, but they did know it was due to the success of their community leadership in the past or the knowledge of a previous engagement that worked well. Two of the respondents went as far as to say that if Fanning calls them for any future engagement, the answer would be "Yes," due to their past successful initiatives together. One respondent stated, "I did not want to buy into the LEADS process in the beginning, but by the end I really saw the value for my community."

We also found evidence of alignment with Weerts and Sandmann's (2008) observation that community partners want high quality relationships. One respondent stated, "Fanning often helps in a non-threatening manner and always gives the community the ability to have honest conversations." Providing this kind of support may prove difficult if the community does not trust the university partners. The same respondent stated, "It is my job to protect the community." When probed to discuss protecting them from what, she responded with the following:

> Trust is huge and the community needs to know those doing the work understand the issues of confidentiality . . . [university partners] have to understand that certain issues require a high level of trust to enter into honest discussions . . . and trust that their [community members] issues will be handled in a confidential and professional manner.

The two-way model of community engagement allows the community member to trust the university team, and also gives equal weight to the community to trust their liaison is acting in their best interest. One respondent stated, "Trust is a big part and allowed folks to share more when they came to the table." This level of trust enabled the Georgia LEADS process to evolve along a more informed path than may have been possible for other statewide initiatives in the past. Five of the respondents mentioned that their trust was both in the institution and in an individual they had previously engaged with in other work. One respondent suggested that one person's leaving the project made it difficult to move forward with any form of implementation. "The community bought in [to Georgia LEADS] and trusted [the principal investigator] and once she was not involved it was difficult for me to manage community expectations." Trust is not considered a barrier for these respondents, but instead it is a given at the beginning of the initiative and they will not subject their community to a process they themselves do not trust will be successful.

"Ability to wrangle personalities"

The second emergent theme—relationships—included the interrelation surrounding logistics, process, and participation. Although only one respondent specifically stated the need to schedule meetings as far in advance as possible, each one alluded to the difficulty of bringing community members to the table on a consistent basis, maintaining enthusiasm, and implementing a product to showcase in a timely manner. One respondent indicated it was "very important for the community to do what it needs to do in between facilitated sessions." Another respondent specified, "Fanning visits and facilitation were great, but there was too much time in between meetings and I could not keep the momentum." Clarity of the end goal was confusing to five of the seven respondents, who each expressed that if they had known more at the beginning of the process they might have changed how they implemented it. One of those five mentioned, "I would often leave a meeting wondering if anything had been accomplished." All seven respondents spoke to both the difficulty in maintaining the community enthusiasm and interest in between the meetings, and being able to maintain a dedicated and consistent group of people within the community. Meetings often occurred more than 4 weeks apart, and this made scheduling and participation difficult for community members. Some respondents stated that it felt like each meeting was repetitive because of the need to review for all the new people in the room or the time between meetings, and that maintaining the balance of making sure the right people were in the room and making sure people were participating consistently was difficult. One respondent explained this with the following statement: "I felt like we were having several 'first meetings' with so many new people coming to the table for each time we met."

Another issue mentioned by all seven respondents was managing expectations of community and chamber members who did not feel the process was moving quickly enough. Additionally, some members were frustrated by not having a product to showcase to possible funders. One respondent saw this as a positive: "Fanning's ability to wrangle personalities and come to consensus on priorities was biggest strength." However, the respondent also identified a key challenge: "The chamber members saw a big Georgia LEADS rollout and then did not see results quick enough." Another respondent mentioned the structure of the Fanning team as a barrier to the relationship: "Not having one person solely focused on this project both at UGA and in [the community] was very difficult." Although Fanning did have what were called team leads, it was very possible that different team members went down for each meeting. Weerts and Sandmann (2008) suggested the idea of a centralized office for this work, which we think aligns with the need for a single point of contact during projects.

Managing expectations was a large part of many of the respondents' interviews, but this was their role within the community for this initiative. Respondents indicated that for the Georgia LEADS process to work, the community member needed to be involved as much as or more than the Fanning faculty. One respondent agreed that although Fanning was able to build consensus, the challenge for the leadership program coordinator was to bring everyone to the table. As a final observation in this thematic finding, one respondent commented on the challenge of maintaining momentum, "The community members have 'heard it all before' . . . I had to set this initiative apart from what has happened in the past and give everyone a fresh perspective on leadership."

"The value is priceless"

The third emergent theme, as stated above, is "priceless," which was one participant's response to our question: What is the value of community engagement? All seven community respondents cited access to university resources as one of the most valuable reasons to participate in engagement partnerships. They valued how the university took an interest in the growth and change in their community. Respondents from the more rural communities stated they would not be able to succeed in their efforts to increase the potential of their community if they did not have access to initiatives like Georgia LEADS. Respondents suggested that as trust is built over time with successful smaller projects, the value begins to increase and the community is receptive to more innovative initiatives.

Value was described in several different capacities. The first was making sure the right people are in the conversation. One respondent stated a very positive outcome of the value of engagement: "The process makes us hyper aware of collaboration and also who's missing." This sentiment was echoed by several of the respondents who, prior to this engagement, had difficulty bringing all voices to the table. Emergent themes from our observational analysis spoke to this type of value as communities began to think about how the process could include the "non-usual suspects": community members who do not participate on community or nonprofit boards, do not participate in community-wide events, and lack awareness of what is happening within their community. Additionally, one respondent discussed how the partnership will affect their community in the future through engagement of the non-usual suspects and authentic youth engagement—that is, making sure the voice of the youth is represented as programs are created. This respondent stated, "The process empowered different demographic groups to serve as leader . . . the impact of Georgia LEADS to community moving forward will have a huge impact."

The second value type was in increasing knowledge of new technology and strategies. One respondent argued the issue of technology: "As a chamber we need to recognize as technology increases the Chamber is becoming less and less relevant and we need to offer real value for members." Essentially, this participant expressed that technology and new strategies facilitate better connection among the business community. Chambers of commerce are uniquely positioned to lead intentional community-building efforts. Their contributions can include both providing professional development and training for current leaders and fostering these opportunities for young leaders. As indicated in the themes found in the observational data, involving the non-usual suspects was inherent across all communities. To the respondents this meant looking to community members who have historically not been involved and bringing them into the conversation and design phase of the initiative. This led another respondent to note that with the strategies and technology discussed in the working group meetings, new ideas could begin diffusing through different parts of the community.

Value is also seen in the connectivity and networking that comes from being a part of a statewide partnership. Value lies not only in the partnership with the university, but also in automatically being connected to a statewide group of professionals doing similar work. One respondent speculated, "The networking alone is endless and [she] could not put a price on that value." All seven respondents mentioned impressions around a big picture, "helping the community to see the big picture and to reflect on what we already have." The more urban respondents were very honest that their community has a plethora of resources, but that it is very easy to lose sight of how those resources can be harnessed to work toward a common goal for the community. The rural respondents were open and honest that without the university engagement opportunities, their community would not be able to design and implement initiatives at this high level. Respondents valued not only the faculty input into the engagement, but the use of students. Two of the communities utilize students at all levels of education from undergraduate to graduate, but they are clear with their community partners that the outcome of the work may differ depending on the students' level of commitment and ability.

All respondents spoke to valuing the outcome of their previous engagements, and how they are able to manage the expectations of their community when the outcome of the initiative might not be what was expected at the outset. Finally, when asked if anything was "missing" from these university–community engagements, all respondents stated emphatically, "No." They did not feel the need to elaborate. All respondents stated they got value out of the relationship, and if they needed anything throughout the engagement, they could ask for it.

Conclusions and Implications

Utilizing the Weerts and Sandmann (2008) two-way model of communication to examine the Georgia LEADS initiative through the eyes of the community member was insightful. Our study builds upon evolving definitions and models of community engagement and furthers our understanding of community members' own perceptions of the definition and process involved in successful two-way community engagement. Involving the community members as part of the design, implementation, and evaluation was a unique approach to scaling up a statewide leadership development initiative, and doing so allowed us to examine perceptions of engagement efforts across different communities participating in the same initiative.

In addition to the themes reported in the findings, we also asked respondents how they define the concept of community engagement. As stated in the literature review, the Carnegie Classification (paras. 1–2) has a definition, but we thought it might be an interesting twist to have community members give us their definition. All seven respondents laughed when asked, but they were able to articulate their definition in a succinct and understandable manner. Rather than offer up an alternative definition of university–community engagement, the interview participants gave responses that showed many similarities to the Carnegie definition.

Responses included the expressions "value-added," "high level of expertise," "economic impact," "partnership," "bringing people to the table," and "opens doors and resources otherwise unavailable." Each of these words or phrases is either mentioned or alluded to in the Carnegie Foundation definition (paras. 1–2). As Bringle and Hatcher (2002) noted, university and community partnerships are relational, and these responses speak to that relational need. We focused on barriers to community engagement in the literature review, but the interview responses suggest that these barriers did not factor in these university–community engagements. Georgia LEADS was designed to impact all of the concepts suggested by the respondents, but one respondent stated their concept of engagement succinctly as "having access to a university and having that university take an active and participatory role in Georgia's issues while continuing to be a resource to the community."

The two-way model of communication is also expressed in each of the respondents' comments, but especially in the concepts of partnership, "bringing people to the table," and "access to otherwise unavailable resources." All seven respondents had worked with institutions of higher education prior to this study, which may have affected their responses to the barriers of trust and process. In fact, five of the seven respondents either currently work for or have in the past five years worked for colleges or universities, which may show a predisposition to participate in community engagement efforts. Because each of the interview respondents was already a self-identified champion of community engagement efforts, future studies might explore the two-way engagement model with less engaged community members.

In addition to opportunities for future study, this study begins to bridge the gap in the literature between the theoretical discussions of how community members engage in university–community partnerships and the return of the efforts of the community back to the university. Through the Georgia LEADS process, the J. W. Fanning Institute received additional understanding for and support in developing and supporting community leadership efforts, and several Georgia counties received additional support from the research base of UGA's Public Service and Outreach leadership faculty. Furthermore, the study provides a clearer understanding of community perspective and implications for working with community members as universities seek to further expand the support and work of faculty as they engage in community partnerships.

About the Authors

Lori Tiller *is a public service faculty member at the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development at the University of Georgia and a Ph.D. candidate in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. Her research interests focus on leadership capacity building for nonprofit, youth, and community organizations, leadership development for underrepresented populations, and technical skills in evaluation design and group facilitation. She received her M.A. in nonprofit management from the University of Georgia's Nonprofit Institute.*

Erik C. Ness *is associate professor and graduate coordinator in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. His research interests focus on the public policymaking process, specifically the political dynamics associated with state-level higher education governance and policy. He received his Ph.D. in education policy from Vanderbilt University.*

References

Adams, K. R. (2013). *The exploration of community boundary spanners in university–community partnerships* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Georgia.

Antonio, A. L., Astin, H. S., & Cress, C. M. (2000). Community service in higher education: A look at the nation's faculty. *The Review of Higher Education, 23*(4), 373–397.

Bernardo, M. A. C., Butcher, J., & Howard, P. (2014). The leadership of engagement between university and community: Conceptualizing leadership in community engagement in higher education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 17*(1), 103–122.

Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered*. Princeton University Press. The New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE).

Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1996). Implementing service learning in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education, 67*(2), 221–239.

Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (2002). Campus–community partnerships: The terms of engagement. *Journal of Social Issues, 58*(3), 503–516.

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. (2019, November 21). *Justice served: Case closed for over 40 dogfighting victims*.

CUEI: College & University Engagement Initiative at Brown University's Swearer Center. (2020, March 17). *Community Engagement: Defining Community Engagement*. https://www.brown.edu/swearer/carnegie/about

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE Publications.

Fitzgerald, H. E., Bruns, K., Sonka, S. T., Furco, A., & Swanson, L. (2012). The centrality of engagement in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 16*(3), 7–28.

Georgia Chamber. (2020, March 17). *About the Chamber*. https://www.gachamber.com/about-the-georgia-chamber/

Hickey, A., Reynolds, P., & McDonald, L. (2015). Understanding community to engage community: The use of qualitative research techniques in local government community engagement. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration, 37*(1), 4–17.

Holland, B. (1997). Analyzing institutional commitment to service: A model of key organizational factors. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 4*(1), 30–41.

J. W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development. (n.d.). *Advisory Board*. https://www.fanning.uga.edu/about/advisory-board/

Littlepage, L., Gazley, B., & Bennett, T. A. (2012). Service learning from the supply side: Community capacity to engage students. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 22*(3), 305–320.

Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.

Nyden, P. (2003). Academic incentives for faculty participation in community-based participatory research. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 18*(7), 576–585.

Roper, C., & Hirth, M. (2005). A history of change in the third mission of higher education: The evolution of one-way service to interactive engagement. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 10*(3), 3–21. https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/526

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. SAGE Publications.

Sandmann, L. (2008). Conceptualization of the scholarship of engagement in higher education: A strategic review, 1996–2006. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 12*(1), 91–104. https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/520

Sandmann, L. R., & Weerts, D. J. (2008). Reshaping institutional boundaries to accommodate an engagement agenda. *Innovative Higher Education, 33*(3), 181–196.

Scott, W. R. (1992). *Organizations: Rational, natural, and open systems* (4th ed.). Prentice Hall.

Slaughter, S., & Leslie, L. L. (1997). *Academic capitalism: Politics, policies, and the entrepreneurial university.*

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications.

Trudeau, D., & Kruse, T. P. (2014). Creating Significant Learning Experiences through Civic Engagement: Practical Strategies for Community-Engaged Pedagogy. *Journal of Public Scholarship in Higher Education, 4*, 12-30.

Wade, A., & Demb, A. (2009). A conceptual model to explore faculty community engagement. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning,15*(2), 5–16.

Weerts, D. J., & Sandmann, L. R. (2008). Building a two-way street: Challenges and opportunities for community engagement at research universities. *The Review of Higher Education, 32*(1), 73–106.

Weerts, D. J., & Sandmann, L. R. (2010). Community engagement and boundary-spanning roles at research universities. *The Journal of Higher Education, 81*(6), 702–727.

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.