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University-Community Partnerships as Learning Organizations: A Case Study

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Abstract

The goals of University-Community Partnerships (UCPs) are often not fully achieved due to limited financial or human resource commitments, a change in leadership, or different/changing priorities (Bortolin, 2011; Bushouse, 2005; Dempsey, 2010). Often, the differences in culture, decision-making and adaptation preferences of the participating organizations prevent the formation of a strong, productive working relationship (Callahan & Martin, 2007). This study sought to understand the different preferences partners have within a UCP. Data derived from this study evidenced that there are Organizational Learning (OL) preference tendencies among members of a particular segment (e.g., higher education institutions, or government entities) and among segments that share similar characteristics (e.g., size, structure, or mission). Overarching themes that impact the OL system model in a more holistic manner were also identified.

Aim

The aim of this study was to use OL theory to gain insights into the challenges experienced by UCPs between different types of organizations, with the goal to offer guidance as to how these partnerships can be more successfully developed and sustained. This study used the Organizational Learning System Model (OLSM) (Schwandt & Marquardt, 1999) to highlight the similarities and differences in learning preferences among organizations that potentially form UCPs. These insights could be used by stakeholders to engage more successfully in UCP development and management.

Problem

The lofty goals that UCPs set for themselves are often not fully achieved. There are many reasons for these shortfalls, whether it is the limited financial or human resources committed to the UCP, a change in leadership, or different/changing priorities (Bortolin, 2011; Bushouse, 2005; Dempsey, 2010). Other reasons include differences in the culture, decision-making and adaptation preferences of participating organizations, and the resulting challenges these differences create impede forging a strong, productive working relationship (Callahan & Martin, 2007).

Research Findings

An interpretive approach to describing and understanding the phenomenon, through semi-structured interviews were conducted among 25 experienced UCP participants from higher education, corporate, non-profit and public entities. Through thematic coding, pattern matching and explanation of the data, this study showed that there are OL preference tendencies among members of a particular segment (e.g. higher education or non-profits) and among segments that share similar characteristics (e.g. size, structure, mission). However, these tendencies are not universal across a segment due to the particular approaches to partnering taken by either the organization or the individual representing the organization. The research also identified overarching themes (culture, trust, collaboration and shared vision) that impact the OL system model in a more holistic manner. These themes were described as critical to the overall success of the partnership and the ability of the UCP to function as a learning organization.

Conclusion

This study showed that organizational learning theory can be used to understand the challenges organizations face when forming and managing UCPs. It also demonstrated that the typical segments (higher education, corporations and non-profits) that form UCPs do not share the same OL preferences. These preference differences are potential areas of conflict and disagreement within a UCP, potentially causing the UCP to fall short of expectations.

Research Implications

Findings of this study may inform the development of OLSM best practices for UCP participants that can be delivered in a conference or workshop setting. Future research and actions related to this study could include a more focused study on the impact that the overarching themes (culture, trust, collaboration and shared vision) have on the Organizational Learning System Model (Schwandt & Marquardt, 1999). Future related research could also compare the stated preferences of participants going into a UCP versus actual OL behaviors once the UCP is engaged.

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Author Biography

Bill Ryan is a doctoral candidate at Drexel University, pursuing his EdD in Educational Leadership and Management, with a specialization in Higher Education Administration. He is also a Marketing Instructor In-Residence at the UCONN School of Business and the Academic Director for the UCONN Professional Sales Leadership Program. His research interests include university-community partnerships, organizational learning, student development and teaching methods. He holds a Master's in Business Administration from Northeastern University and has over 20 years of marketing and sales experience with Fortune 500 companies, including The Gillette Company, Pepsi-Cola, Campbell Soup, CIGNA Health Care and The Travelers Companies.