

Real Connections: A New Paradigm for Partnership Development

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Abstract

This article will explore the significance of PK-12 and Higher Education partnerships and their impact on student success. It will also stress the role partnerships play in providing the best learning experiences possible for students and how these equip them with the skills necessary to be able to compete in this contemporary and volatile job market. Additionally, the authors will establish the rationale for real connections through partnership development and authenticate the fact education is no longer PK-12 but PK-16. A COVID impacted education system requires both public school educators and higher education teacher education faculty to collaborate in identifying each other's role in the process and how that role can best be played to meet the new demands of a changing world. This article has for its principle audience the leadership of school districts and teacher education faculty in higher education and is drawn from the work that has been done in nearly two years in the area of partnership development within the college by the dean and assistant dean.

The impact of the global pandemic has left many school districts and institutes of higher education scrambling to find ways to secure enrollment and ensure quality education through remote online, virtual, and digital learning. Before COVID-19, schools were already dealing with challenges that involved technology, course design, curriculum alignment, differentiation, student engagement, student behavior, work overload, social-emotional learning, etc. As the world of public education moves through the complex and evolving stages of the global crisis, new challenges and obstacles to learning are coming to the forefront. These issues are even further exacerbated by social, cultural and regional uniqueness. If one can encapsulate what a collective lesson may be, it might safely be said that we must form effective, community, and inter-connected partnerships if we are to solve multi-dimensional challenges for contemporary education. Maxwell (2019) likened the mindset needed to base good partnerships to transitioning from soloists to conductors and recognizing that all of the partners are essential to success. Partnership development efforts in public school systems (pre-kindergarten through 12th grade) with institutes of higher education are now among the highest priorities for both parties.

Partnerships are a necessity. Gone are the days where educational institutions work in silos and/or isolation. Together both of these entities can make real connections which result in the success of all students.

Understanding What True Partnerships Are and Are Not!

What Partnerships Are Not

To fully understand the nature of partnerships, one must consider what partnerships are not. First, they are not a “one size fits all” union or plan for community engagement. The 2018 American Association of State Colleges and Universities report on partnerships stated: “Development and execution of successful partnerships require that each institution design unique relationships that reflect and address the institution’s own culture and the political landscape in which it exists” (Garcia & Rush, p. 6). El-Jardali et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of universities tailoring their partnership approach in order to understand what will and what won’t work. Second, partnerships are not an “in name only” exercise. The nature of partnerships tends to, and should, change and evolve throughout the university and PK-12 work. In fact, students themselves can be partners particularly once they arrive in higher education institutions (Healey et al., 2016). Third, partnerships are not just a photo-op of an MOU signing ceremony. Even the signed partnership document will need to be revisited as it is a living document. Biag et al. (2021) maintained the importance of social capital as a driving force in partnerships resulting in deeper and more meaningful relationships.

What Partnerships Are

Partnerships between public school districts and universities begin with a relationship. True partnerships are multi-year developmental processes requiring time, effort, and commitment. Partnerships connections may happen over a brief period of time, but partnership development in the purest sense is a determined and long journey. The goal in a true partnership is to create a continuous cycle some leadership experts call a “cycle of success.” True partnerships are also very unique to the district/organization, and the university. Each partner a university seeks to work with comes with different visions, goals, needs, personalities, and resources. Olabisi et al. (2022) warned that university representatives may not always have the skills to communicate and engage with potential partners and that can be problematic. Nelson (2021) identified the one overarching principle as considering “the unique social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental context, history, and power dynamics as factors in how each partnership is approached, designed, and sustained” (p. 7). They are also built upon shared goals with mutual benefits involving committed people. Olabisi et al. warns of the lack of time and support for partnership participants, especially by university administration. It is important to discuss the various sacrifice each partner’s personnel will be making.

The Importance of Partnerships to Universities and PK-12 Schools/Districts

When partnerships are strong between these two educational entities, there is a greater potential to create “high quality learning experiences for students” (Nelson, 2021, p. 19).

Universities can especially reap the benefits. Garcia and Rush (2018) stated: “The bottom line is that partnerships will be increasingly important for all aspects of university operations” (p. 5). One of the foundational principles of partnership has to do with the outcome of these quality educational experiences for all students. For teacher candidates, connections to practice is crucial to their development as future teachers. When university educator preparation programs partner up with school district to assign teacher mentors to teacher candidates in an effort to assist in the development of high-quality teachers, they (teachers of record) also gain opportunities to draw on external expertise from the university (Handscomb et al., 2014). In this type of partnership everyone wins – teacher candidate, teacher of record, students.

Another reason partnership development is so important is that institutional practices can be shared for best practices. These practices often call for administrative culture change (Olabisi et al., 2022). Another productive byproduct of partnerships is that long term, synergistic connections are made on multiple levels of partnership engagement (Biag et al., 2021). Opportunities to share new and recent educational research with practitioners in the field serves to improve not only student achievement but also teacher development, retention, and morale. Additionally, the opportunity to expand collaborative research exponentially increases and allows for school district educators to be research-informed.

The Diverse Nature of Partnerships

When it comes to partnerships, as with learning, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Each partnership should be uniquely designed based on the needs of both the school district and university and according to the particular makeup of the partnering entities. Not all school districts will be the same. Nonetheless, there will be similarities in the various levels within those partnerships. Biag et al. (2021) reviewed the diverse levels of partnerships within their Improve Leadership Education and Development (iLEAD) network and identified four “domains of work that get assessed as being at one of four levels: 1) exploring change ideas; 2) small change implementation; 3) integrating Improvement Science (IS)/NICs into core work; and 4) institutionalizing and sustaining the work” (p. 5). El-Jardali et al. (2018) concluded that university partnerships with cross sectors such as education, health, and environmental sustainability can provide knowledge, skills, and implementation that are, in themselves, levels of progressive partnership. Cullen (2018) summarized the progressive steps of partnerships for peer mentoring between K-12 and university colleges of education as reaching out, starting small, building trust, and managing the relationship. In this article, the authors believe partnerships are can be progressively defined as: Initiatory, Investigative, Interactive, and Interdependent.

Initiatory

In the work this college of education dean and assistant dean have done, we have always started from the premise that our college serves our communities. Therefore, it was incumbent upon us to make an initial visit and just say hello. At this stage, our purpose is not to “sell” them on a project, plan, or program, but to simply to discuss where they were, what they need, and how we might could help. We also find that discussing the formation of student pipelines to our college is important because it both serves them to have a higher education institution for their

students to go to and serves us as it feeds our enrollment numbers.

Investigative

Once we have established an initial connection with the school district, further investigation may occur during that meeting or subsequent visits with the superintendent or key principal. From there, more precise discussions can occur which identify the essential people from both the K-12 entity and the university. Sometimes it is necessary to include a wider representation from the university such as Financial Aid, Admissions, and the Foundation in order to fully articulate the type and level of partnership possible.

Interactive

At some point, the discussions must evolve into actual interaction. The “who” and “what” now turn into the “how” of the partnership. This is the key moment for trust-building. When commitments are made, they must be followed through. El-Jardali et al. (2018) emphasize “trust and transparency on motivations for collaboration among partners, clarity on mutual benefits, shared objectives and long-term commitments are key for effective partnership” (p. 3). Reischl et al. (2017) conclude that respect for each other, paying attention to culture, and building personal relationships are “interactions, which accumulate over time, [and] cultivate a sense of trust and mutual engagement in the work” (p. 5).

Interdependent

It is at this state that partnership began to take on a life of their own. Leiderman et al. (2003) summarized:

The first issue is on the importance of follow-through for building sustainable partnerships. The second issue is on how community partners weigh the costs and benefits of partnering with an institution of higher education. The third issue is the influence of parity on community members’ attitudes toward their campus partners. (p. 4)

When both the K-12 and Higher Education institutions recognize they have to work together in order to survive and thrive, this is the interdependence that is expected and sought after. Biag et al. (2021) stressed the importance of understanding that, even in trying times as the pandemic, interdependency must be appreciated between K-12 and higher education as no one organization has the answers on how to navigate in these tumultuous times. In other words, we have to depend on one another.

One South Texas Story

Over those two years, the College of Education and Human Performance at Texas A&M University Kingsville has created a strategic vision for the development of partnership development. The focus has been on developing partnerships among school district and community colleges in the region one and two of South Texas. During this time, the College has created a position designed solely for the implementation of partnerships. As a first for the

college, an Assistant Dean for Partnership Development position was created. The role of the Assistant Dean of Partnership Development sought to fashion deliberate efforts to ignite and rebuild a culture of partnership. In our case this has resulted personal visits and connections being made in over 50 school districts, five community colleges, six formal Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), and dozens of meaningful connections and collaborations on university wide initiatives with other university departments all of which potentially impact student and teacher quality and university enrollment.

We have discovered and learned partnerships are more than memoranda of understanding. They involve two entities connected to similar visions and missions guided by a working document (MOU). They are a multi-year developmental process that requires time and effort, unique to the school districts, built upon shared goals with mutual benefits and a committed faculty and staff. Ultimately it is most beneficial to students: “Partnerships between schools and universities are intended to allow teachers and university researchers to work together to bring cutting-edge developments into the classroom” (*School Partnerships*, 2020, para. 11). They are true partnerships designed to be meaningful, two-way, reciprocal, and worthwhile for both sides.

Conclusion

Successful partnerships involve sharing resources, representing community, addressing common problems, and enhancing collaborative research agendas. Koop (1995) avowed: “To believe in partnerships is one thing. To make them really happen takes time, great skill and above all great courage and generosity on the part of those who currently hold the power” (p. 9). In our world, they are vital to the success of universities across the country as they create high quality experiences, share instructional practices for best practices, and expand collaborative research. Real connections within partnerships form long term, relevant, and synergistic connections at multiple levels.

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