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University Extension and Urban Planning Programs: An Efficient Partnership

Abstract

Community-university partnerships have taken many forms as higher educational institutions assess their "engagement" while at the same time communities attempt to tap academia for needed resources. This article describes and evaluates the partnership developed between Extension and Urban and Regional Planning Program at Michigan State University, Urban Planning Partnerships. It is a model that provides an opportunity for a university to strengthen its links to communities throughout its state. It is a partnership that facilitates the experiential learning needs of urban planning students while assisting urban Extension staff with capacity-building resources.

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Introduction

Community-university partnerships have taken many forms as higher educational institutions assess their "engagement" while at the same time communities attempt to tap academia for needed resources. Michigan State University (MSU) has developed a partnership model that fulfills both of these needs. It is built on a partnership between an academic unit, Urban and Regional Planning Program, and an outreach unit, Extension.

Urban Planning Programs inherently have an outreach- and practice-oriented component in their curriculum. Experiential learning is an important aspect of these programs. Having an established relationship in urban areas would enhance the student experience. Furthermore, land grant universities in the United States have a legacy of strong Extension functions. MSU Extension is addressing urban concerns through a program that supports staff in six Michigan cities:

- Detroit,
- Grand Rapids,
- Flint,
- Lansing,
- Pontiac, and
- Saginaw.

The Extension staff in these cities are focused on community and economic development issues in their cities' neighborhoods. Because much of their work is done with community-based organizations, obtaining needed resources is a primary task. A university can provide needed technical assistance to communities by partnering its students with University extension agents. Partnerships between urban Extension agents and planning programs have great merit. With the intent of formalizing this relationship, we developed a partnership model called Urban Planning Partnerships (UPP).

This article describes this partnership that has been developed between Extension and Urban and Regional Planning Programs at Michigan State University--Urban Planning Partnerships. It is a model that provides an opportunity for a university to strengthen its links to communities throughout its state. It is a partnership that facilitates the experiential learning needs of urban planning students while assisting urban Extension staff with capacity-building resources.

Underlying Learning Theories and Principles

Many scholars have written and promoted active learning theories and the importance of experience and reflection in learning and practice. From the importance of experience and the social/cultural context in the creation of knowledge (Bruner, 1966, 1996), to the importance of individualized learning of value of personal experiences (Cross, 1992; Rogers & Feiburg 1994), to Schon's (1987) use of reflection in the development of professionals, scholars have espoused a more reflective, experience based and active pedagogy.

University-Community Partnerships have been recognized as a valuable contribution to both the academic community and our cities and towns. In the words of Henry Cisneros, former HUD secretary, "The long-term futures of both the city and the university in this country are so intertwined that one cannot--or perhaps will not--survive without the other." Increasingly, colleges and university are bringing their time, energy, and resources to bear on local problems. They are using their other physical, financial, and intellectual capital to facilitate economic development, provide social services and technical assistance, and create opportunities for applied research.

Despite this movement, service learning or experiential learning is seen as a departure from traditional lecture-based courses. Not all disciplines understand, accept, or acknowledge the importance and significance of this pedagogical alternative. One of the most common criticisms of service-learning courses is the lack of faculty experience in structuring a service-learning course. Professional organizations and scholars in liberal-arts-based education are beginning to illustrate best practices and principles in an effort to help design and develop courses that better link theory and practice. For example, the National Society for Experimental Education (1997) offers principles in experiential education. Fundamentals include:

- Intention,
- Authenticity,
- Planning,
- Clarity,
- Orientation,
- Training and mentoring,
- Monitoring and assessment,
- Continuous improvement,
- Reflection, and
- Evaluation of acknowledgement.

One widely published study (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) sponsored by the American Association of Higher Education, the Education Commission of the States of the Johnson Foundation offers seven principles for creating service-learning courses. These principles focus on:

- Encouraging student faculty contact
- Encouraging cooperation among students
- Encouraging active learning
- Giving prompt feedback
- Emphasizing time on task
- Communicating expectations
- Respecting diverse talents and ways of learning

Kolb's (1984), experiential learning cycle requires four different learning abilities:

- Concrete experience--emotional and sensory experience in some activity
- Reflective observation--watching, listening, discussing, understanding experiences
- Abstract conceptualization--integrating theories and concepts into the overall learning process. This is the in-depth thinking phase of the cycle.
- Active experimentation--the doing phase. Engage in an experimental process to suggest and evaluate solutions.

Four learning roles are assigned to the four learning abilities:

- Reflector,
- Theorist,
- Pragmatist, and
- Activist.

Learning is most effective when a student goes through all roles regardless of order.

There are many more examples of guiding principles, best practices that are emerging to help study and research service-learning alternatives. Believing in the merits and need for service-learning courses and responding to the trend of increasing collaboration between universities and community partners, we created Urban Planning Partnerships. The program draws on many of the guiding principles and reflects on creating a mutually beneficial association between the university (academic and Extension units) and the communities we serve.

Urban Planning Partnerships

Urban Planning Partnerships (UPP) is an outreach initiative located within the Urban and Regional Planning Program at Michigan State University, with primary funding provided by Extension. UPP seeks to facilitate timely research and outreach on urban policy and planning issues in Michigan communities and to build meaningful and lasting ties with these communities. In order to build these long-term commitments and facilitate shared learning, UPP focuses its agenda on the six urban areas where Extension staff are working: Grand Rapids, Detroit, Saginaw, Flint, Pontiac and Lansing.

UPP's working agenda is to:

- Improve local capacity to stimulate and enhance the quality of urban life.
- Assist communities in their efforts to leverage grant money from governmental, foundation, and other sources.
- Specifically focus upon building the capacities of urban communities to address critical issues by providing planning and design assistance.
- Provide pragmatic technical assistance to communities with particular needs.
- Expose communities to innovative international planning and design solutions.

Impacts of the Urban Planning Partnership (UPP)

Effectively Links Scholarship with Urban Outreach

Students apply their classroom learning to real community situations by testing theory in practice-oriented situations. The students gain real-life experience, and the community gains needed research and technical assistance.

Facilitates Linkages Among Teaching, Research, and Outreach

Urban Planning Partnerships has introduced urban outreach projects into classroom settings, provided a forum and support for applied research projects, and disseminated timely research on policy issues that affect Michigan communities.

Furthers the Mission of MSU-Extension

Urban Planning Partnerships has responded to urban issues identified by the six cities and conveyed by the Extension staff.

Provides Support for URP Students and Faculty

Urban Planning Partnerships has provided support for Urban and Regional Planning Program (URP) students and faculty through graduate assistantships, research funding and support, and matching resources for urban outreach projects. It will provide opportunities for students to gain experience while enhancing their education and promoting faculty outreach.

Facilitates Cross-Disciplinary Linkages

Although its primary home is Urban and Regional Planning Program, Urban Planning Partnerships is committed to making a conscious effort to seek expertise and help from Landscape Architecture, Geography, and other allied programs on campus to better serve the needs of Michigan communities and facilitate cross disciplinary applied research.

The Urban and Regional Planning Program and the Practicum Course

The most successful avenue, to date, for integrating teaching, research, and outreach involves the Urban Planning Practicum Course. This course lends itself to the UPP mission quite well.

The Urban and Regional Planning program at Michigan State University requires all graduating undergraduate and graduate students to enroll in the Planning Practicum, a capstone course. The faculty in Urban and Regional Planning are unanimous in their support of the Practicum as an important learning tool, integrating classroom work and pragmatic planning in actual community situations. They view the experience as being essential in the progression from student to trained practitioner.

It is a tremendous teaching vehicle, helping students to increase their knowledge and confidence while providing a needed service to our communities. Practicum provides a vehicle for substantive learning and the integration of techniques with theory, resulting in graduates who are more effective planners. Placed in the final semester, it is truly a capstone course. The students are asked to draw from their observations of planning history, explain where the project fits in terms of planning theory, use the tools and methods that they have learned, and apply their newly acquired research techniques. It is the responsibility of the Extension agent to identify potential projects that could utilize the expertise of the Urban Planning students.

An effective strategy has been for the agents to utilize the students to further a project with a community-based organization that they are working with on a neighborhood revitalization effort. The agent works with the organization to develop the student project and then takes the project idea to the Practicum instructor, who helps develop it further into a meaningful Practicum project. This is an important process--one that requires translating community issues into academic language so that the learning objectives of the course are met as well as the true needs of the community.

There are many advantages to utilizing the Practicum project. These include:

- Saving the instructor much time in searching for an appropriate project;
- Making the university more responsive to community needs and therefore engaged in a more relevant manner;
- Providing needed technical assistance to low income communities that could not otherwise afford it; and
- Providing Extension staff with a powerful resource that enhances their effectiveness in the community.

Extension agents in urban areas (and probably everywhere else, too) can always utilize students in their community and economic development work. Students lend credibility to the agents' work and provide needed research and other technical assistance that the agent alone cannot provide. Students need community experience to round out their resumes. The difficulty has always been in accessing these students. Urban Planning Partnerships has become the vehicle that has been able to match students with urban Extension work.

Practicum undertakes three to six projects each year that have been developed by the urban Extension agents. Students rank the projects by their preference on the first day of class and are allocated their first or second preference as often as possible. Every project must have a community client who works with the Extension staff person. The Extension agent and community clients:

- Work with the student team in the development of the scope of services,
- Make themselves available to the students on an as-needed basis,
- Provide timely and constructive criticism and feedback on draft reports, and
- Attend the final presentation by the students.

They are also required to stay in weekly contact with the Practicum instructor to ensure that the students are working to expectation. This last point is crucial because both the client and the students must be working toward the same end.

For their grade, each Practicum group develops a PowerPoint presentation and a written report of the project. The PowerPoint is presented on campus to an audience of the community clients, Extension agents, and other invited guests. The presentation is also given at a community meeting organized by the community client, which gives the students practice in presenting and also gives the community client a chance to show off their work. The written report is given to the community client, Extension agent, and the Practicum instructor.

Implications and Lessons Learned

The use of practice-oriented courses in university curricula is not unusual. Building strong, sustainable partnerships between entities with different work cultures and expectations, however, could be a challenge. Our Partnership, like any new venture, has experienced successes and challenges. The following discussion is a retrospective view on what we did well and what aspects need more work. We hope the reader may learn from both our experiences.

Successes

A True Partnership

One of the critical reasons why UPP has been highly successful is the nature of the partnership. It is truly beneficial to both MSU Extension and the Urban and Regional Planning Program. Planning faculty have a keen understanding of student capabilities and academic timeframes, course objectives, and learning styles. Extension agents know the pulse of the community and have a keen understanding of problems and issues particular and relevant at a moment in time. A coordinated effort involving both faculty and agents in project planning most certainly yields a better-defined scope of work. Students benefit from the partnership because they have a mentor in school and an advocate and liaison in the community. The agent acts as a "teacher in the field" and often mediates between students and community organizations.

Stronger Relationship

Over time, faculty and Extension agents build a relationship, understanding, and trust, which benefits students and community alike. By building on the partnership structure, the agent is able to tap into a wide range of student and faculty interests and expertise. This enhances their knowledge base and lends credibility within the community. Extension agents can use the Partnership and commitment developed from the program to leverage grants and funds from foundations, nonprofit and state

agencies. Faculty and student time is usually considered an in-kind contribution that can leverage other funds. Partnership provides faculty and students with a constant stream of ideas and projects with community partners for practical projects or applied research. Opportunities for collaborative research on "real-time" problems are a win-win situation for faculty, students, Agents, community, university and the profession at large.

Challenges

The Partnership hasn't existed without challenges. Every year, these challenges are faced, learned from and a stronger relationship is ultimately built. Some of the more common challenges have been the following.

A Lack of Understanding of What Makes a Valuable Student Project

Requests for administering surveys or creating a database for properties are often received from agents. Although these are worthwhile tasks, they have limited learning objectives and don't make good semester-long projects.

Limited Expertise and Interest

Often there is a mismatch between the interests and needs of the Extension agent and the expertise and needs of program faculty and students. Some faculty have defined research agendas that have little room for compromise, or the needs of a community are better served by a discipline other than planning. Identifying and creating a project that meets the needs of the community, the agent, and the planning program is not always easy. Too often, the number and types of projects are limited by the number of faculty who wish to participate and agents who can make a commitment.

Limited Time Commitments from Faculty, Students, and Agent

The Partnership needs a significant commitment in terms of time and effort. Sometimes, the agent has too many other commitments and can't devote the time and ongoing guidance needed to sustain the project or research activity. Faculty have too many other courses or ongoing research projects, and students have several other courses and often a part time job to balance. Faculty don't always manage to balance our multiple tasks as efficiently and equitably as desired.

Unrealistic Expectation

Initially there might be unrealistic expectation on both sides. Faculty assumes that the agent knows how to scope a project, organize community support, mentor students, and have time to commit. Agents may assume that they're to bring possibilities to the attention of faculty and that there will be adequate follow through or that every project is a good project. More request are often received than faculty and students are capable of addressing. A concentrated effort is being made to have better communication between the campus and our field partners while learning from past experiences.

In Summary

A strong, sustainable partnership that brings the research and expertise of our academic unit to benefit communities with the help of our Extension agents has been created. Extension agents are the true link between campus and the community and play an integral role in furthering the mission of University Outreach. The benefits are worth the effort, and the limitations are not insurmountable. With greater recognition and visibility, Urban Planning Partnership will expand and enhance the collaborative venture.

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