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Making School-University Partnerships Work

This essay is not about noblesse oblige—higher education providing services to lower education. Rather, it is about equal partnership between schools and universities. It is about partnership that is institutionalized to the extent that significant work on tough, common problems can proceed—work that could not be accomplished by either schools or universities working alone. The question is whether this is one of those good ideas in theory that fails in practice. The answer is no; the idea works in both theory and practice, but it is hard work and there are lessons to be learned. Examples of success and some important lessons are discussed.

One of the most difficult hurdles in making school-university partnerships work is helping people to realize that it is not just a bag of tricks, a list of "how-to-do-its." Rather, it is an amalgam of principles and concepts, beliefs and values, conditions and processes, people and programs, and hard work—work that is not neatly packaged for implementation elsewhere, but that originates and develops and improves in context. This work can be informed by the experience of others—hence, the purpose of this essay.

In the introduction to a book on school-university partnerships, John Goodlad and I noted that the concept of schools and universities joining together in partnerships—particularly the type of partnership we envision—is a rather deviant idea. We concluded the book with the statement that school-university partnerships is an idea whose time has come. It has been about three years since those statements were written. It has been over ten years since I began working closely with school-university partnerships. Two years ago, as part of the Study of the Education of Educators, I visited twenty-nine universities and colleges in eight states around the nation and focused on the schools, colleges, or departments of education in these institutions of higher education. As I reflect on all these experiences, I am convinced more than ever that both of our statements about school-university partnership are true: it is a deviant idea and it is an idea whose time has come.

Some Context

There has been a veritable flood of collaborative language lately on the educational landscape: coalitions, consortiums, cooperatives, collaboratives, partnerships, networks.... When people use these terms to describe some form of interorganizational arrangement, are they describing the same thing? Not at all. At least in theory, only the term network can be reasonably well-distinguished from the others. A network is an informal communication system among entities that think they have something in common. Sharing information, planning forums, conducting seminars and conferences, and exchanging newsletters tend to characterize such efforts.

Collaboratives, consortiums, cooperatives, coalitions, and partnerships, on the other hand, have been invoked at will to describe a range of interrelationships, from the most superficial to the most complex. These can range from symbolic, on-paper arrangements, to one-sided service agreements (like consultants have with schools), to patronage arrangements (like a business adopting a school). These associations can be quite useful if done well for clear purposes.

The kind of school-university partnership being discussed in this essay is on the more complex end of the continuum, and there are many reasons why it is a deviant idea. It is based on the concept of common ground—that is, common dilemmas, concerns, issues, values, and commitments. It is based on real cooperation and equitable decision making by equal partners. For example, a school-university partnership involving one university (through its college of education) and ten school districts has eleven equal partners and a decision-making structure that reflects that kind of parity.

The antidote to turf battles is collaboration...people working with one another.

But it is more than common ground and equal partnership. It is being able to meet self-interests as well. In many ways, schools and school districts, on the one hand, and universities and colleges of education, on the other, are worlds apart as organizations and organizational cultures. Yet there would seem to be some obvious connections between grades K–12 and grades 13 and beyond. Certainly there is a connection in terms of students. And certainly there is a connection in terms of teacher education. Improving schools and the preparation of educators, for example, would seem to be territory of both common ground and self-interest.

However, with territory comes territoriality. The antidote to turf battles is collaboration—another deviant idea. I am thinking here about collaboration as a process: people working with one another. I am not thinking about the other meaning of collaboration usually found in the dictionary: consorting with the enemy (although at times, one gets to feeling that way). Rather, it is the first meaning—people working *with*, not *on* one another. It is not one

party coming in with answers to another party's problems. It is people coming together, realizing that they are dealing with tough issues, and working toward mutually satisfying solutions. Can such deviant ideas work?

Deviant Ideas Can Work

Progress sometimes comes in the form of establishing and sustaining forums for dialogue. Many people and groups are not ordinarily accustomed to having extended and significant conversations with one another, e.g., teachers with one another, university professors with one another, university professors with classroom teachers. Collegial isolation is just as rampant in universities as it is in the public schools. It is remarkable how hungry people are—school principals and other administrators, for example—for intellectual conversation, sharing of ideas and experiences, and discovering how much they have in common.

More importantly, however, school-university partnerships have made significant progress in other ways—steady, collaborative work between educators in both universities and schools working on common problems and improving programs in both places. Many examples exist; I will share only two from my recent experiences in the Puget Sound Educational Consortium—a partnership among thirteen organizations: twelve school districts in the greater Puget Sound area and the College of Education at the University of Washington. These examples are particularly significant, as they deal with perhaps the most common of common ground possible between schools and colleges of education—the education of educators.

Middle school education has become a topic of increasing concern in the state of Washington. Many of Washington's junior high schools have been changed (at least in name and grade structures) to middle schools. Teacher certification in the state of Washington is either K through 8th grade generalist, or 4th through 12th grade subject-specific. And there is talk about eliminating the 6th through 8th grade on the generalist certificate. Clearly, given the nature of the true, middle school concept—interdisciplinary teams and blocks of instructional time (versus the period-by-period, subject-by-subject junior high approach)—eliminating generalist credentialing at middle school levels threatens the middle school concept. However, some signs favor a specific credentialing process for middle school teachers, as there is in a number of other states.

Now all this has fairly serious implications for schools and educator preparation programs, especially if people care about the middle school idea, as many do in the state of Washington. How does one mobilize a timely, proactive response to a situation of this kind? In my view, given the complexity of the problem and the multiple actors and institutions involved,

the work that is going on now probably would never have even begun without the Puget Sound Educational Consortium already in place.

Using a modest grant from a private foundation, several university faculty and research assistants, a principal and teacher from each of four selected middle schools, a teacher union representative, and a representative from the state department of education are now engaged in an ongoing effort to design the ideal features of middle schools that also would serve as professional development centers (i.e., pre- and in-service training sites). And in the process, of course, the ideal features of a preparation program for middle school educators are emerging as well. This was put together in a matter of weeks, not years. And it involves *educators* working *with* one another—educators from the university and educators from the schools—working on significant educational issues, and benefiting their own interests, to be sure, but also benefiting the educational interests of adolescent youths. (See Nathalie Gehrke's article in this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* for more details on the project.)

Another example concerns the education of school administrators—specifically, our programs for the initial certification of school principals. With the help of two small grants from the Danforth Foundation, the area of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education at the University of Washington has been able to design and conduct what we consider to be an innovative program for developing the leadership capabilities of selected classroom teachers.

Our regular program is a good, traditional program. But we were not satisfied. Neither were some of the superintendents and principals in our school-university partnership. We wanted to find ways to meet a number of quality criteria that go unmet in many educational administration programs:

- selecting teachers with strong leadership potential;
- selecting highly qualified mentor principals;
- releasing teachers at least half-time, Monday through Friday, for real internship experiences;
- building stronger connections between theory and practice;
- integrating the program's curriculum and creating something more than the usual lock-step sequence of one course after another;
- overcoming the usual fragmentation in professional socialization and collegial relationships among students who typically enter and finish their programs at different times; and
- developing strong ethical imperatives among students regarding implications of serious attention to the education of *all* children in a pluralistic and democratic society.

Even more deviant, we did not want just to package an innovative program and then try to sell it to the school people. Rather, we wanted to work

with educators in the schools to design, from the ground up, an innovative program that would overcome the usual problems in traditional programs. We wanted a program that the university could endorse; yet, true to the theory and spirit of equitable collaboration, program decisions would have to be made by a group having more school than university representation.

How do you even begin such a process? How do you work up interest on the part of faculty and get the support of the dean? How do you get key superintendents and other administrators from the surrounding community involved? How do you identify teachers who show great promise for leadership? How do you get into the schools to identify good mentor principals? How do you put together a decision-making body to design, monitor, and evaluate the whole process and reflect the interests of all involved?

Even *with* a school-university partnership, these are not trivial issues. But without a school-university partnership, any one of these issues, particularly the last one, could be enough to kill off the whole idea. Fortunately, through the Puget Sound Educational Consortium, we were able to secure the required commitments from both the College of Education and the participating districts in a matter of weeks. A Program Design Committee was formed consisting of eight faculty members from the university and thirteen educators from the schools—principals, central office administrators, and a superintendent. This committee has made or approved all program decisions and dealt in a timely and efficient manner with all the issues I have noted above, and more. I do not believe we could have developed this innovative program without the collaborative scaffolding already in place in our school-university partnership.

I could go on with more examples from this partnership and others around the nation. Nonetheless, let me simply summarize by saying: *school-university partnerships can work.*

Some Lessons Learned

But it is hard work! Especially if one wants to work with the kind of partnership concepts that I have outlined here. Each school-university partnership effort will be unique and will need to incorporate learning from participants' mistakes. Nonetheless, some generic lessons are worth consideration.

Lesson 1: Dealing with Cultural Clash. School systems and universities are not cut from the same cultural cloth. The norms, roles, and expectations of educators in each of these educational realms could not be more different, e.g., the regimen of time and space in the schools vs. the relative freedom of these precious commodities in the university setting; an ethic of inquiry in the university vs. an ethic of action and meeting immediate needs in the schools; a merit system with promotion and tenure in the university vs. an egalitarian work ethic in the schools; and so forth.

I do not want to overstereotype the cultural differences. That kind of stereotyping already is done far too much and is part of what usually has to be overcome in working on relationships between universities and schools. My point, simply, is that these two cultures are quite different, and it is hard to fit them together in productive, long-term, useful ways. However, it is hard work that we must be doing, especially if we feel any moral obligations as educators to be improving schools as well as the education of educators for those schools. Being knowledgeable, sensitive, empathic, and communicative regarding these differences and potential conflicts in organizational cultures are first steps toward heading off (or at least minimizing) the "clash."

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Lesson 2: Dealing with Schools of Education. Although there are significant problems on both sides of the partnership "fence," my experience suggests that the university side, usually the school (college or department) of education, is the more intractable. And although the problem of "ed school" commitment and involvement is a complex one, the primary culprit is a misguided reward system that is an outgrowth of misplaced values, status deprivation, and identity crisis.

What is a professional unit in a university about—at least primarily about—if it is not about the profession and connections with the field? A school of agriculture would be in deep trouble if it were not for its connections with the field. Schools of education will have a particularly tough time defending their existence if the education of educators, and solid connections with the field, are not at least somewhere close to the heart of their institutional mission and rewarded appropriately. The publish or perish mentality is counterproductive in a professional school. Scholarship, of course, is crucial to a quality instructional program, and it is therefore an essential component of the promotion and tenure system; but scholarship can be appropriately interpreted in many ways. Service and teaching are essential for professional units; and service must include substantial work with educational constituencies in the field. The reward system, therefore, must be receptive to the work involved in the kind of partnerships envisioned between universities and the local schools.

Lesson 3: Sustaining Leadership and Commitment. One of the more consistent and enduring findings in the research on complex organizations has to do with the importance of leadership at the top, and the ability to clearly, authentically, and consistently communicate mission, vision, a sense of what the organization can and must be about. This appears to be essential to maintaining school-university partnerships of the type I have been describing. University presidents and deans, school superintendents,

executive directors—these leaders need to be visible and clearly supportive of the partnership concept and effort.

Lesson 4: Providing Adequate Resources. Much of leadership is symbolic. But symbols, ceremony, and celebration will not go far unless they are backed up by resources. In the Puget Sound Educational Consortium, for example, each district contributes $24,500 per year, plus ten cents times their average daily attendance. The university contributes in-kind resources (staff, faculty, space, support services, etc.) in addition to a dollar amount to bring its total contribution in line with the districts' fees. These resources produce a budget big enough to hire a full-time executive director and a small staff and include funds to support study groups and modest efforts to secure grants and contracts.

Lesson 5: Modeling Authentic Collaboration. An ethic of collaboration and collaborative inquiry and action, more than anything else, characterizes (or ought to characterize) the processes that go on in a school-university partnership. What it means to collaborate needs to be modeled every step of the way. Since building partnerships is mostly a two-steps-forward/ one-step-backward kind of activity, inappropriate, unilateral decisions can destroy the process. Telling people they are involved in genuine participative management and decision making, and then not paying attention to what they do or say, has severe consequences. University faculty hopping into the schools with answers to other people's problems usually does not work out too well in collaborative partnerships. Unless participants make deliberate efforts to work in new and collaborative ways with one another, the partnership most likely will be headed for divorce.

Lesson 6: Living with Goal-Free Planning, Action, and Evaluation. I have used the term "goal-free" to get attention and make a point. And it is the point, not the terminology, that is important. Certainly, we have goals, aims, purposes—human action is never without them. Everything I have been discussing so far has been based on implicit and explicit aims and purposes. Yet, these kinds of broad goals do not necessarily lead to the kind of specific, objective-based or outcome-based models of activity that seems to capture the imagination of so many who need to proceed in very linear and rational modes of operation. Often, in fact, it is precisely *as a result* of activity that we become clearer about what we are doing and why we are doing it. Consequently, the world of human activity in and between educational organizations does not lend itself well to concrete, sequential models of planning and evaluation.

The subtitle of this lesson is "living with ambiguity," and our mentor is the organizational theorist, James March. For March, ambiguity is not a dirty word. Not only does he tolerate it, he embraces it. Closure *is* a dirty word. Rarely is it ever achieved. In fact, if it is achieved, it is a good sign that either the issues are trivial or people are jumping to conclusions too quickly. March

advocates being "playful" in organizations. By this he does not mean being irresponsible, but rather he means getting going on things, taking action, taking educated risks—in other words, getting to work and involved in activity without having to hyperrationalize every effort to change and improve the organization.

Lesson 7: Avoiding the Quick-Fix Syndrome. The "quick-fix" syndrome and its kissing cousin, the "let's get something up on the scoreboard" syndrome, are extremely hazardous to the health of school-university partnerships, especially early in their formative stages. As a society, we seem to be growing less and less tolerant of study and inquiry, of reflecting on what we do and how we might do it better.

In school-university partnerships, and especially among the superintendents and deans, there often is a perceived press to get something up on the scoreboard so that various publics believe something actually is going on. This can be a difficult problem, particularly in the early phases—say, the first three years of a school-university partnership. Yet, if it is a serious partnership effort, a lot *is* going on: structures are being built, lines of communication are being established, working relationships and collaborative processes are being nurtured, and some activities are being explored by pockets of work groups here and there. Unfortunately, structures and processes do not happen overnight, and they cannot be hung on the evaluative hooks the public has grown accustomed to for education and schooling—standardized test score averages, for example.

Lesson 8: Winning the Process/Substance Debate. This leads naturally to the ubiquitous process/substance debate, which, in the current era of the fast-food vernacular, often culminates in the ringing indictment of "Where's the beef?" The debate apparently revolves around this question: What work is of most value—making things happen or the happening of things? "The beef" is usually a referent for something noticeably different going on in the classroom (school or university) plus the student outcomes to "prove" it.

The only way to win this debate is to render it a nonissue; it is, indeed, a false dichotomy to be put up alongside a number of other classic problematical dualities (qualitative/quantitative; theory/practice; talk/action; etc.). There is great substance in process and great process in substance. Developing new ways for educators to communicate with one another and engage in work to solve problems of common concern is highly substantive. Developing and evaluating new programs (e.g., for the education of educators) demands much attention to process. The "beef," ultimately, is in concerted, sustained, and evaluated *action*.

Both over- and understructuring can interfere with the work most important to partnership efforts.

Lesson 9: Avoiding Over- and Understructuring. Organizing and governance structures are important for developing and sustaining school-university partnerships, but they take different forms depending upon local contexts. The Puget Sound Educational Consortium is highly structured, with a formal governing board (twelve superintendents and the Dean of the College of Education—thirteen equal decision makers), an executive director, two intermediate coordinating committees, and a number of task forces, work groups, and so forth. On the east coast, however, the Southern Maine Partnership is organized very informally. Decisions seem to be made at the levels they need to anyway, and teachers, principals, central office staff, and faculty are involved in activities in a more grass-roots way.

Both of these partnerships appear to be working well. But watch out for both over- and understructuring; either may interfere with the work most important to partnership efforts. Ultimately, the crucial points of coordination are at the levels where real work is taking place, with the rest of the coordination and structure being in place to *support* that work.

Lesson 10: Translating Leadership as Empowerment and Shared Responsibility. The partnership ethic must be enculturated at all individual and organizational levels. The power to lead cannot reside in just one or several charismatic figures. The more leadership is spread around, the better off the partnership will be.

This should not be seen as contradictory to Lesson 3 and the importance of leadership at the top, of communicating and sustaining vision and mission, and of backing it all up with resources. Power, however, is not a finite concept. The more it is shared, the more there seems to be. And with power comes responsibility; responsible leadership entails creating the opportunities for responsible leadership in others. A viable, school-university partnership cannot depend on the presence or absence of one or several human beings. Certainly, being an "idea champion" is important for leadership, but charisma is not the foundation of partnership.

These deviant and timely efforts—school-university partnerships—will survive and function to the extent that deliberate efforts are made to ingrain the culture of partnership into the woodwork of the participating institutions. Such efforts must promote and sustain the norms, roles, and expectations of partnership in people and organizations as they go about their work and as they develop ways to do their work even better.

Suggested Readings

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