**Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice**

Volume 1 | Issue 1 Article 1

2017

# A Capacity Building Framework for Community-University Partnerships

Katherine S. Hogan
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*, kpstrate@uncc.edu

Jacqueline M. Tynan
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*, jtynan2@uncc.edu

Virginia J. Covill
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*, vjohns27@uncc.edu

Ryan P. Kilmer
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*, rpkilmer@uncc.edu

James R. Cook
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*, jcook@uncc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/collaborations

Part of the Community Psychology Commons, Higher Education Commons, Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons, and the Organization Development Commons

Recommended Citation

Hogan, K. S., Tynan, J. M., Covill, V. J., Kilmer, R. P., & Cook, J. R. (2017). A Capacity Building Framework for Community-University Partnerships. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice, 1* (1). Retrieved from http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/collaborations/vol1/iss1/1

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

# A Capacity Building Framework for Community-University Partnerships

**Abstract**
With a focus on organizational capacity building, community-university (CU) partnerships have the potential to yield valuable resources for community nonprofits, which increasingly have to accomplish more with fewer resources. Although a growing body of literature documents the success of such arrangements, both community agencies and universities often face challenges in managing such partnerships. With a focus on student involvement, this paper describes a framework for conceptualizing CU partnerships around capacity building, with efforts designed to address particular program needs as related to the organization's capacity goals. These needs can be viewed as involving five levels of capacity building: 1) monitoring and documenting program outcomes or processes, 2) enhancing staff skills, 3) modifying program processes, 4) supporting adaptation, and 5) developing infrastructure. Conceptualizing partnerships along these levels helps frame communication about the agency's capacity building agenda, focuses efforts on addressing organizational needs, and establishes expectations for the scope of student work. Efforts to address these levels can take the form of internal or external models of partnership, varying in their degrees of student involvement and faculty supervision, and can leverage various mechanisms to compensate students for their work. Over time, opportunities for student involvement transform as the needs, goals, and resources of the agency evolve, and the potential of the university to influence the agency grows. Simultaneously, the opportunities open to students for professional development, competency building, and career networking continue to develop as they implement higher-level capacity building within an organization.

**Keywords**
community-university partnerships, capacity building, nonprofits, organization development, service learning

**Cover Page Footnote**
The authors would like to thank their colleagues at Teen Health Connection, Thompson Child and Family Focus, and the Bright Beginnings early childhood education program.

This article is available in Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice:
http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/collaborations/vol1/iss1/1

Over the past decade, community organizations and nonprofits have experienced increasing demands for service delivery and program accountability from management, boards of directors, funders, and the general public (Ebrahim, 2010). At the same time, these organizations are increasingly being asked to "do more with less" (Carman & Fredericks, 2010; Crutchfield & Grant, 2012, pp. 3-4) by providing high quality direct programming, and simultaneously investing in substantial evaluation, expansion, and replication efforts, all while competing for finite available resources. One way for community and nonprofit agencies to respond to these increasing demands and reduced opportunities for resources is through partnerships with local academic institutions, often with strong involvement of faculty and students, commonly termed community-university (CU) partnerships.

With a focus on developing or enhancing the capacity of community organizations, CU partnerships have the potential to yield valuable resources for community agencies and meaningful applied learning experiences for students (Gazley, Bennett, & Littlepage, 2013; Suarez-Balcazar, Mirza, & Hansen, 2015). Although a growing body of literature documents the success of such partnership-oriented approaches (Cook & Kilmer, 2012; Soska, Sullivan-Cosetti, & Pasupuleti, 2010), both community agencies and universities often face challenges to establishing meaningful reciprocal relationships (e.g., Arrazattee, Lima, & Lundy, 2013). This paper describes (a) a model for conceptualizing long-term, often multi-year CU partnerships that address the mutual goals of organizational capacity building and student development, and (b) a set of strategies employed to address these goals.

## Community-University Partnerships: Definitions and Potential Benefits

University administrators and faculty have long recognized the importance of "service learning" and applied student experiences and, in more recent years, leaders of community organizations have realized the potential benefits of student-led work within their programs. The incorporation of

service learning into required coursework, research, and curricular milestones has become common among training programs in areas that have emphasized practice and macro-level competencies, including social work (Nandan & Scott, 2011), community psychology (Scott & Wolfe, 2015), and program evaluation (Trevisan, 2004). Applied learning contexts allow students to refine their skills and learn about real-world community or agency processes, experiences not readily available within classroom settings (Ostrander, 2004). More recent definitions of applied learning have evolved beyond application and reflection of content to incorporate elements of community development and organizational learning (Swords & Kiely, 2010).

In this article, CU partnerships refer to "collaboration[s] between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Tandon & Hall, 2015, p. 3). These partnerships have emphasized "achieving an identified social change goal… that ensures mutual benefit for the community organization and participating students" (Curwood et al., 2011). The mutual benefits to the student, faculty, and the community organization (with potential benefits to the university and the broader community; see Cook & Kilmer, 2012; 2016) provide a key distinction between traditional "service learning" relationships and more contemporary conceptualizations of CU partnerships. These collaborative partnerships not only contribute positively to students' professional development and applied skills, they enhance the services, capacity, visibility, and resources of the community organization, and provide the university and faculty with opportunities for ongoing applied research, a community setting in which to explore critical issues, and material for scholarly publications (Gazley et al., 2013).

CU partnerships have been conceptualized in the current literature along a variety of frameworks that provide guidance regarding characteristics and principles for maintaining strong partnerships, steps for engaging in these partnerships, and strategies for reducing barriers between academic institutions and community partners that can inhibit sustainable, long-term, mutually beneficial relationships. Perhaps the most well known framework is provided by the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH; 2013), which outlines ten key principles for maintaining strong, effective partnerships between universities and community settings. These

principles emphasize the importance of mutual trust, organizational and university commitment, balancing of power, strengths-based approaches, and shared accomplishments, among other key features. While these principles outline key characteristics of sound partnerships, they provide less guidance on the strategies for establishing and carrying out the core work of such partnerships. The "Partnership Model" outlined by Flinders, Nicholson, Carlascio, and Gilb (2013) provides additional guidance in this area, distinguishing these partnerships from "project-based" learning and describing five key steps to guide learning and service. The steps outlined using this framework emphasize involving students as partners, expanding target populations through collective impact, establishing reciprocal learning and feedback agendas, and planning for scholarly achievements around the impact of the partnership on the target population, community partner, and university students. Still other models of CU partnerships attempt to redefine the contributions that academic institutions can provide to community partners such as the "catalyst process" outlined by Milofsky (2006), which views the academic partner as a "catalyst" for changes that might not occur without a neutral, outside presence with the time, technical knowledge and, most importantly, resources to move forward a particular project or aim of the partner. CU partnerships have also been conceptualized as settings for participatory action and university-led community based research (Allen, Culhane-Pera, Pergament, & Call, 2011; Kearney, Wood, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Rosing & Hofman, 2010), providing opportunities for innovative research that can be readily used by community partners while contributing meaningfully to the available scientific literature on a particular topic.

These conceptualizations provide useful guides for creating strong CU partnerships, but many fall short in providing practical guidance on the "what" and "how" of initiating and maintaining mutually beneficial partnerships over time. The model outlined in this paper extends beyond these conceptualizations by providing a framework for designing the scope of work of the partnership and setting expectations regarding the nature of student involvement and the potential for tangible impact on the community partner and its work. This model conceptualizes CU partnerships in terms of capacity building. Capacity in this sense refers to the organization's ability to engage in or implement key activities such as building cross sector relationships, expanding leadership roles, adhering to organizational mission, drafting strategic plans, establishing governance

structures and practices, and evaluating programs and organizational functions (e.g., Kapucu, Augustin, & Krause, 2007).

There has been growing emphasis around evaluation-based capacity in the recent literature (e.g., Garcia-Iriarte, Suarez-Balcazar, Taylor-Ritzler, & Luna, 2011). Evaluation-based capacity can be defined as the process of improving an organization's ability to use data and learn from its activities through collecting, analyzing and interpreting data in order to improve results (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2011). While some of the evaluation-based capacity literature focuses specifically on building data infrastructure in the context of community research partnerships (e.g., data collection protocols, surveys, technology training), the current model of capacity building adopts a broader notion of the focus of the partnership (including developing infrastructure for ongoing feedback and fostering a culture of learning and discovery within the organization), with the recognition that the organization's capacity to use evaluation and research facilitates its ability to meet its goals, and is dependent on a broader set of programmatic, infrastructure-related capacities. In this sense, the capacity building discussed in the present article, and the role of the university, is centered around supporting the community organization, including its staff, processes, and infrastructure, in areas other than just data management, in order to enhance its own abilities to accomplish a variety of goals and objectives critical to its survival.

CU partnerships focused on organizations' broader capacities have particular salience in the current nonprofit environment, helping organizations expand or improve programming and mobilize resources otherwise not available (Gazley et al., 2013; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2015). Moreover, these partnerships can be used to plan and implement program evaluations, adapt agency strategies and protocols, support the adoption of best practices, bring additional stakeholders and content experts to the table, and support the agency's credibility and pursuit of additional funding (Suarez-Balcazar, et al., 2015). For these partnerships to reach their full potential for expanding organizational capacity, the relationships between the university and organizational partners often span multiple years and extend beyond specific projects or the involvement of individual students.

Realizing the potential of CU partnerships is not always a straightforward

process. For example, universities struggle to recognize the reciprocal benefits and transformative nature of these partnerships or, in some cases, university personnel may neglect to honor the knowledge and capacity of all partners (Arrazattee, Lima, & Lundy, 2013). Such issues have compromised relationships and led to "insider-outsider" tensions (Martinez, Russell, Rubin, Leslie, & Brugge, 2012, p. 331) between universities and community organizations. In practice, successfully integrating agency goals and student learning objectives within partnerships can be challenging for skilled faculty and community practitioners alike. Unfortunately, few practical models describe how to initiate and maintain mutually beneficial CU partnerships around capacity building, or how to develop these partnerships over time in purposeful, strategic ways.

Following years of engaging in CU partnerships, the Community Psychology Training Program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) developed a framework for structuring these partnerships and conceptualizing evolving organizational goals and student learning needs around capacity building. This framework will be illustrated via three case examples of capacity-building partnerships involving students within UNCC's training program and community organizations in Charlotte, NC. The first case study explores Teen Health Connection (Appendix A), a comprehensive adolescent healthcare practice that, through the CU partnership, has established program evaluation across its programs and services. The second case study, Thompson Child and Family Focus (Appendix B), examines a large provider of mental health and residential services for children which, through partnership with UNCC, has participated in a federally-funded evaluation and developed enhanced evaluation and strategic planning across multiple locations. The final case study explores a partnership with Bright Beginnings (Appendix C), an early childhood education program for at risk children, in which an extensive evaluation was conducted but meaningful capacity building was limited due to program constraints. Ultimately, this work is designed to inform the development of effective partnerships between university training programs and community organizations.

## Conceptualizing Agency Capacity

Successful partnerships between community and university stakeholders

begin with mutually agreed upon goals reflecting the immediate needs of the agency, clear expectations around the roles for students and the scope of their work, and guidelines for how work will be carried out and supervised (Kindred & Petrescu, 2015; Lang et al., 2012). For CU partnerships to be of value to organizations, the work must be guided by meaningful, capacity-related goals, informed by the organization's mission and strategic plan, and focused on improving programmatic impact and efficiency, expanding service lines to new populations, and increasing organizational visibility. While the overall partnership may achieve broader capacity goals, student-led projects can be designed to develop capacity around more specific organizational needs. Essential to the partnership is maintaining a balance and connection between the broader, longer-term capacity development of the organization, and the more immediate and specific objectives that a student project (or a time-limited student role and position) might address.

Effectively conceptualizing and communicating how the university can address agency needs is an important task for university partners. Agency needs can be viewed as involving five levels of capacity building: 1) monitoring and documenting program outcomes or processes, 2) enhancing staff skills, 3) modifying program processes, 4) supporting adaptation, and 5) developing infrastructure (see Figure 1). These levels, described in-depth below, provide a useful structure for defining the nature and scope of the university partnership as well as the parameters of the work to be conducted. These capacity areas are not mutually exclusive, and partnerships may involve work at any or all levels. While not hierarchical, these levels represent a progression of the potential long-term impact that can be accomplished with the community partner and within the partner organization. All levels represented in this model reflect necessary phases of successful organizational growth, and yet vary in their ability to create long-lasting change within a program or agency. These levels of capacity provide a useful structure and set of boundaries to focus student experiences, guide their scope of work, and frame communication about the agency's capacity building agenda. In this way, these levels help to "match" students to projects that align with their capabilities and learning goals, while the overarching partnership with university faculty provides the level of trust and continuity necessary for students to engage in meaningful work at different capacity levels within organizations. Examples of these capacity levels are explored in additional

detail within the organizational case studies.

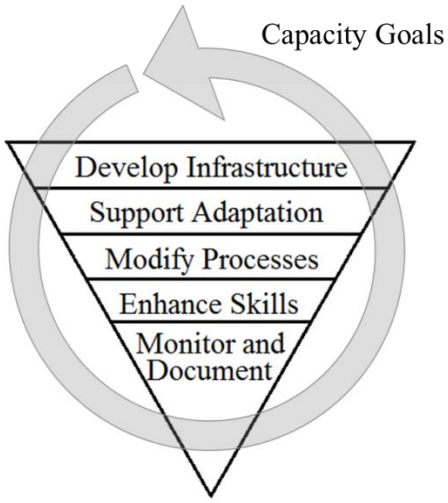


Figure 1. Capacity-building levels for community-university partnerships.

## Levels of Capacity Building in CU Partnerships

### *Level 1: Monitor and Document*

At the first level of capacity building, the partnership's primary objectives revolve around evaluation: monitoring and documenting program activities and understanding the success, or lack thereof, of the program in meeting its stated goals. Projects within this level are often guided by specific impact-related questions such as "*Does the intervention work?*" or "*Who are we serving?"* or process related questions such as "*Are we adhering to particular models, or meeting recommended standards?"* Addressing such questions requires exploration of the program's objectives and theory of change, which can shed light on the practices, processes, and outcomes that need to be measured and evaluated. This initial capacity building level provides a reflection of the current program and sheds light on functioning, effectiveness, and impact.

Monitoring and documenting requires an objective assessment of ongoing program-related activities and is often a requirement of funders, boards of directors and, in some cases, accrediting institutions. University partners, equipped with content expertise and student support, can be a valuable

resource to community agencies in this area. Products of these partnerships, often consisting of formal reports and presentations, can be used to apply for additional funding or inform modifications to programs as necessary. Students, on the other hand, benefit from these partnerships by developing varying skills in evaluation and research methodologies. This includes the design and implementation of an evaluation protocol within a community setting, management and analysis of complex data, and the dissemination of findings, including positive results and constructive criticism, to multiple and varied stakeholders. Student projects may resemble traditional approaches to program evaluation, or involve opportunities for participatory processes, ethnography, and intervention implementation.

Partnerships focused on monitoring and documenting typically reflect a more preliminary level of capacity building. By their very nature, projects with these goals may be limited to helping the agency understand, rather than directly increasing their ability to act, and are thus less likely to have a far-reaching impact on long-term capacity. In the end, it is up to the organization to respond to, integrate, and apply the products of these types of projects, unless the overall partnership can be expanded to provide additional access to university resources and support.

*Level 2: Enhance Skills*

To carry out critical functions of the organization, agency staff, partners, or volunteers often require additional skills and knowledge. Partnerships focused on building capacity in this area often utilize education, training, and coaching strategies in group or individual settings, but may also include experiential learning, development of manuals, or creation of resource guides. Common areas of skill training revolve around techniques for data collection, entry, management, and interpretation; technical instruction in the use of particular technology or software (e.g., Microsoft Excel, centralized databases); coaching in adherence to a particular protocol, policy, or model of service delivery; or sharing expertise and resources in specific subject areas. University partners can often provide the instruction and technical assistance needed by community agencies to support such skill building.

Students benefit from this level of involvement with an organization by

learning how to translate complex concepts into useful and accessible formats for community partners and to teach or train staff effectively. This level of capacity building support provides an opportunity for the agency to experience students' skills and knowledge, increasing their appreciation for the students' abilities and the potential contribution of the university. In turn, projects reflecting this level may not only contribute to perceptions of the student as a valuable resource within the agency, they may lead to subsequent opportunities for engagement.

*Level 3: Modify Processes*

Even successful organizations may evidence program-related processes that have not adjusted successfully to changing circumstances, such as new staff, a change or increase in client base, or new regulations. These processes reflect program administration and implementation, as well as specific day-to-day functions, such as how client referrals are made, how data are collected and reported, or how information is shared. Organizations can often benefit from examining and modifying their existing processes to facilitate implementation of new knowledge, promote adherence to protocols, and support optimal program functioning.

University partners can address organizations' needs in this area by assessing program processes, interviewing staff, examining administrative data, or reviewing relevant literature. In addition, more substantial monitoring and documenting efforts may be necessary before relevant process changes can be achieved. Students and faculty can help translate data into recommendations for changes to existing processes and ways these changes can be implemented, monitored, and sustained. Students involved in this kind of capacity building can learn valuable skills about how to translate data collection efforts into tangible actions and recommendations. In contrast to their activities within lower levels of capacity building, students at this stage frequently learn to implement wider-scale changes within programs or agencies, as well as how to integrate new processes into larger organizational functioning.

*Level 4: Support Adaptation*

Organizations may operate efficient program processes and achieve

positive program outcomes; however, even successful organizations must adapt to evolving external circumstances in order to survive. Such external factors or conditions include changes in best practices; public policy; local, regional, and national priorities; and complementary or competing agencies' activities. Community organizations may lack the resources to stay up-to-date on current information, or to engage in strategies that would enable the organization to adapt to a changing environment. Even when agency staff and leadership have knowledge of larger community dynamics, and are aware of changes enacted by critical entities such as government funders, local system leaders, and regulatory bodies, they may have difficulty interpreting the implications for their own organization or program operations.

This level of capacity building can be distinguished from the levels that precede it by its emphasis on assisting the program or agency to position itself in line with growing best practices, local and national trends, or community needs and perceptions, rather than on changing specific processes in response to demands on particular programs. Typical questions at this stage include *"How well-matched are the organization's services to anticipated community needs?"* or "*How can our organization adapt to changing policies and regulations?"*

University students and faculty can provide critical information about the evolving environment, how changes will influence the organization, and strategies for responding to demands. Access to the most recent research on best practices, public policy, government priorities, and current trends is a valuable asset at this level of capacity building. Through their connections to local community stakeholders and experts, students and faculty mentors can serve as a link to networks or resources to which organizations frequently need access, including those in complementary fields, those conducting relevant research or involved in systems leadership, or those responsible for advocacy or policy-making. Organizations may require information about how they fit within a broader context of community needs and related programs (i.e., funders, competing agencies) designed to address those needs. University personnel may be better able to examine effectively those multiple competing interests and help organizations develop plans to adapt to those changing environments. Students can help meaningfully connect data from different sources so that programs, as they currently exist, can

be re-considered and adapted to increase the likelihood of organizational success. Students also gain beneficial experience working with an agency's external stakeholders and learning about relevant political dynamics and public policy locally and nationally. Organizations, in turn, benefit from the information that students synthesize and their recommendations for program adaptations.

*Level 5: Develop Infrastructure*

Successful capacity building at each of the initial four levels requires an organizational commitment to apply findings, utilize new skills, and fully adopt changes to programs and infrastructure. The development of supportive infrastructure around sustainable changes within the organization is often needed to maintain and expand those capacities over time. This final level often necessitates a more extensive CU partnership to ensure that the capacities gained can be sustained without direct involvement of university partners. Whereas lower levels of capacity building may entail changes around particular program processes or the completion of specific procedural tasks, this level emphasizes larger organizational systems spanning across these programs. Sustainable infrastructure development can include such processes as developing plans for continuous quality improvement, creating organization-wide data use and reporting strategies, and developing advisory boards to oversee ongoing organizational changes or evaluation activities. Critically, partnerships focused on helping organizations internalize capacity building processes and develop the infrastructure necessary to carry on this work independently reduces the organization's reliance on external consultation.

University faculty and students can help organizations develop the internal, sustainable infrastructure that will facilitate ongoing capacity building, ranging from data use strategies and data dashboards to committee development and changes in leadership structures. Students in this role obtain relevant experience in project management and leadership within the organizational setting. For example, the creation of an advisory board to oversee and assist with research across different programs or service lines often requires additional capacity building work around recruitment of relevant members, efforts to develop the skills and understanding of group members, and the creation of processes to integrate the board's work into existing organizational structures. At this

level, students and faculty can also help develop continuous quality improvement and reporting procedures that allow for organizations to internally monitor capacity and identify when changes need to occur.

As university partners work with the organization to develop systems that can sustain organizational capacity, there is a "hand-off" of responsibility from the university to the agency, and proper preparation of leadership or advisory groups to oversee this infrastructure is often necessary. For many community organizations, this level of change necessitates the creation of additional staff roles to support ongoing work, and it is our experience that students are often ideal candidates for such positions.

## Defining the Roles of the University and Community Partner

Conceptualizing partnerships along levels of capacity focuses efforts on addressing immediate organizational needs and establishes expectations for the work to be conducted. In order for these partnerships to be successful, the roles and responsibilities of both university and community partners must be clearly defined at the onset.

A primary responsibility of both university and community partners is mutual commitment to and oversight of logistical considerations and student activities. For the community partner, both direct program staff and organizational leadership must be engaged in and support the overall goals of the partnership and the individual efforts required to achieve these goals. The community setting must be reflexive, able to facilitate student learning and adapt to change. Organizational staff who will be directly involved in the project must be committed to the time and effort required to collect needed information, learn new processes, or adapt to new structures. Leadership of the organization must help to ensure that critical resources (e.g., staff time and knowledge, access to proprietary information, materials and supplies) are available to the student and/or faculty, hold staff accountable for project-related activities, and troubleshoot issues when they arise. As the student provides new insights and feedback to the organization, organizational staff must also provide reciprocal feedback to the student. Ongoing, direct communication is critical and will maximize the likelihood that activities and projects are well suited to the organization and partnership goals are achieved.

Through these partnerships, university students typically devote considerable time to the project and build relationships with the organization at multiple levels. Students (and sometimes faculty) must spend time becoming content experts in not only the task or topic area within which they are working, but also acquire a great deal of organizational knowledge and build relationships with project stakeholders. Thus, community partners must make information and key staff available to students at appropriate times while allowing students to work as independently as possible, providing a structure that is conducive to learning.

Faculty who engage in community-based partnerships also face additional responsibilities compared to their university counterparts. Faculty must balance the practical arrangements of partnerships, including the policies and restrictions of the university and community partner, and connect student learning to training objectives and critical core competencies (McDonald & Dominguez, 2015). To assure that community partners do not perceive their responsibilities to the student as burdensome, faculty must additionally develop clear learning goals with the student, and contractual agreements with the partner around particular deliverables that will meet their needs. Matching students' skills, training, expertise, and working styles with the goals and expectations of the organizational partner is an important task for university faculty, as a poor match can introduce or contribute to frustration for both parties. Furthermore, within these partnerships, faculty are responsible to a variety of stakeholders within their own institution, the organizational partner, and the local community, and must balance the sometimes competing priorities and expectations that emerge.

The scope and complexity of the partnership, the level of capacity targeted, and the nature of expected deliverables will determine additional role responsibilities of the university and community partner, including the extent of student involvement and the needed level of student capacity (i.e., undergraduate, graduate, or advanced graduate student), responsibility for the supervision of student activities, and the mechanisms through which students receive credit or are otherwise compensated for their work. The mechanisms facilitating student involvement (e.g., undergraduate or graduate coursework, practica, research labs, undergraduate learning communities, graduate assistantships, and thesis

or dissertation milestones) can be successfully leveraged in ways that address agency goals within the constraints of available resources. In many cases, the opportunities for student involvement transform over time as the needs, goals, and resources of the agency evolve and the student's competencies grow. In this way, individual students can play a role in building and sustaining the long-term capacity of agencies through different mechanisms and strategies for involvement. Overall, the approaches for student involvement within community agencies typically reflect one of two primary forms, external and internal partnerships (see Figure 2).

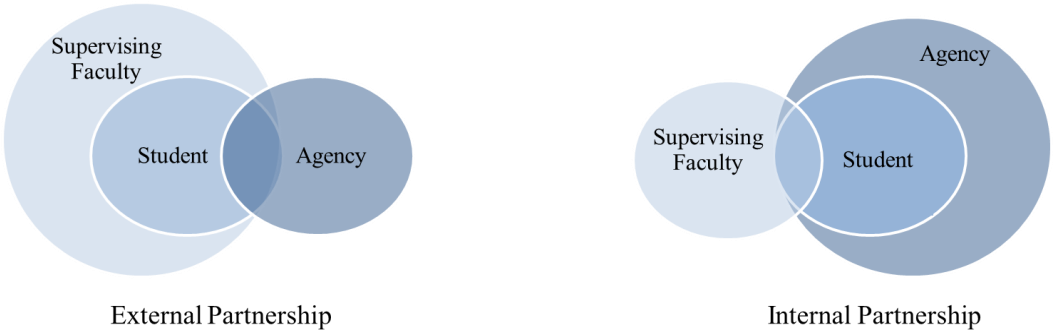


Figure 2. Approaches for student involvement in community-university partnerships.

*External Partnerships*

Within external partnerships, the university faculty and/or students work with the agency as an outside party contracted to execute clearly defined responsibilities and deliverables. In this approach, regardless of participatory practices and sound relationships, there is typically a distinction between the agency and the work of students and faculty. External partnerships are well suited to address lower levels of capacity building, including monitoring and documenting and enhancing skills, because strategies to address these needs (e.g., trainings, data management) often do not require extensive involvement within the agency.

This approach to partnership provides applied learning experiences for students with direct supervision by university faculty. Faculty are ultimately responsible for completion of project-related tasks and any

products or recommendations emerging from the work, providing additional benefits for both the students and the organization. Faculty supervision (including periodic joint meetings with students and representatives from the organization) advances student learning and competency development, ensures that students have appropriate and quality experiences, and enhances the work to meet partner needs and expectations.

External partnerships afford considerable flexibility in terms of how students are involved and how they are compensated. Much of the work in the context of external partnerships may occur at the university, allowing opportunities for more students with diverse skill levels to become involved in varying degrees and roles. Projects that involve more complex data or coordination across an organization will typically necessitate a team approach, possibly over the course of a year or longer, which may require paid graduate assistantships for more advanced students. These larger projects provide opportunities for team-based applied learning experiences and can build the supervisory skills of graduate students, who may oversee the work of undergraduate students who earn course credit as they complete less skill-intensive aspects of projects. The Bright Beginnings case study (Appendix C) provides an example of a large-scale evaluation that was compatible with an external, team-based approach, due to its focus on lower levels of capacity building and complicated data collection needs. Capstone and practicum courses that require student-led or applied experiences for course credit may be well suited for smaller or short-term external projects, as shown in the Teen Health Connection (Appendix A) and Thompson Child and Family Focus (Appendix B) case studies.

*Internal Partnerships*

In many cases, an agency's capacity goals or available resources do not align well with an external approach to partnership. Collaborations that address more complex capacity-building typically require more concentrated investments of effort and necessitate a greater level of student engagement in day-to-day agency operations and programs. For example, projects aimed at modifying processes, supporting adaptation, or developing infrastructure, often involve integrating change systemically throughout several areas of an organization. Doing so can require

significant access to agency staff, resources, and information, which may not be available within the structure of external partnerships. The in-depth level of student involvement necessary for internal partnerships lends itself to supporting students' graduation milestones (e.g., thesis, dissertation) or career interests, and, if resources are available, students can be compensated through paid graduate assistantships. Due to their inherent time constraints, semester-long, course-based student experiences are not optimal for internal partnerships because they limit students' abilities to become deeply involved within the organization, unless these experiences can be extended through multiple internships or practica. Because of these factors and the needed expertise, internal partnerships are often better suited for advanced graduate students.

Within this structure, agency partners are responsible for the majority of student supervision, as project feedback requires a level of organizational knowledge that staff can provide. Ideally, students within such applied settings have been closely supervised by faculty in prior external projects and have developed the practice competencies necessary to lead projects with, and within, the community agencies. Although students begin to assume more influence over projects in this approach, faculty continue to serve a critical advisory function, ensuring that the project continues to be mutually beneficial and aligned with the organization's capacity goals as well as student learning needs. Regular check-ins with faculty provide students with opportunities to reflect on their experiences and explore whether they are effectively responding to agency needs. At the same time, the reduction of direct faculty oversight supports student autonomy and allows students to take responsibility for project completion. The Teen Health Connection case study (Appendix A) provides an example of how external partnerships can transition to internal ones based on evolving organizational needs.

*Contextual factors and considerations*

The broader context, infrastructure, oversight, and primary funding sources of community organizations often determine the level of capacity addressed and possible approaches to partnerships. That is, while some organizational infrastructures might facilitate a particular project scope or mechanisms for student involvement, others can restrict the nature of CU partnerships. For example, obtaining commitment for systematic or large-

scale changes can be difficult among programs that exist within extensive accountability networks (e.g., large public school or hospital systems, county government) or those that operate under strict state, federal, or local mandates.

In a similar vein, sources of organizational funding play a critical role in the nature of CU partnerships. Organizations that operate with largely private, unrestricted support, such as private donations or endowments, often have more flexibility to engage in partnerships, and are better able to dedicate resources, respond to recommendations, or create internal positions for student researchers. Organizations that are more reliant on grant funding are subject to stipulations regarding how resources may be used as well as more significant and often varied reporting requirements. In many cases, while local, state, foundational, or federal grants can be used to support the work of the university for conducting evaluation and providing technical assistance, capacity building is often limited to creating measurement systems and data collection processes related to the funder's requirements. While this helps to develop the organization's capacity to meet reporting needs, what is gained through this information may not contribute meaningfully to organizational learning or improved programs (Carman, 2007; Ebrahim, 2005). In contrast, organizations that operate relatively autonomously in funding and accountability are better able to devote resources to capacity building and can pursue more meaningful goals and higher levels of capacity building. As such, they can often respond to and sustain the outcomes that emerge from particular projects; they have more flexibility in implementing recommendations that might influence budgets, processes, staff, or infrastructures. The three case studies provide an illustration of how varied organizational constraints can affect the success of CU partnerships.

## Conclusion

Successful CU partnerships in these contexts ultimately ensure that the collaborating organization develops additional capacity as a result of university involvement, that students gain valuable professional competencies through applied learning, and that organizational constituents benefit through enhanced programming, skill development, and improved infrastructure. Much of the difficulty in initiating and maintaining successful collaborations is in determining the appropriate

focus and structure of the partnership and the scope of student work, given an organization's goals and needs. The capacity building model described here extends current conceptualizations of CU partnerships by providing a practical framework for establishing and maintaining these critical relationships in ways that are mutually beneficial for the student, faculty, university, partner organization, and potentially the community at-large (Cook & Kilmer, 2016).

The current work posits that, over the course of a CU partnership, conceptualizing the purpose and aims of proposed projects using levels of capacity building described here can help to define organizational needs, focus partnerships on achievable goals and useful capacity building activities, and define the scope of applied learning experiences for students. Drawing on these capacity levels as a guide and resource can support long-term collaborations spanning years, as organizational, student, and faculty needs and opportunities change over time. In many instances, initial partnerships focused on lower-level capacity building (i.e., monitoring and documenting, enhancing skills, modifying process) gradually progress into more complex levels of capacity building (i.e., supporting adaptation, developing infrastructure). The reverse can happen as well, such that the creation of a research advisory committee within the organization can lead to identification of discrete projects that undergraduate students may be able to implement. As the partnership evolves, the potential of the university to meaningfully influence the agency grows. Simultaneously, the opportunities open to students for professional development, competency building, and career networking continue to develop as they implement higher-level capacity building within an organization. By structuring capacity building efforts in this way, and leveraging student efforts over time, CU partnerships are able to facilitate increasing levels of organizational development, provide increasing and evolving opportunities for student learning, and enhance the likelihood that projects are successful. The model also allows for the growth of partnerships and the evolution of capacity building work, for both community organizations and university students. Over time, the university partner (student or faculty) can serve as a "critical friend" to community organizations, called on when needed to conduct work or provide consultation through various strategies and on multiple levels. For this model of partnership to be successful, it is essential that the community partner or organization is focused on achieving internal

change and growth, rather than viewing the partnership simply as an opportunity to implement additional agency-sponsored activities towards its existing clientele. Of equal importance, the university students and faculty must consider the partnership as an opportunity to assist a community partner to achieve its larger organizational goals and contribute meaningfully to its development.

As the nonprofit sector continues to face mounting expectations around accountability and impact, CU partnerships can help agencies develop additional capacity to respond to these expectations while providing meaningful, applied learning experiences and supporting student training. Although CU partnerships, and their potential benefits, have garnered increasing attention in recent years, many potential partners – including faculty, students, and community practitioners – continue to encounter notable challenges in arriving at a focused, mutually beneficial scope of work and plan for implementation. The current work proposes a practical model for identifying the capacity-related needs of an organization as related to its strategic goals and, subsequently, defining the scope of individual projects and opportunities for student involvement and applied learning. We propose that this work can ultimately be used to make the task of initiating and maintaining CU partnerships more manageable for organizations and faculty, reduce barriers to CU partnerships and the bridging of community and university arenas, while also providing a framework that makes successful partnerships more likely.

## References

Allen, M. L., Culhane-Pera, K. A., Pergament, S., & Call, K. T. (2011). A capacity building program to promote CBPR partnerships between academic researchers and community members. *Clinical & Translational Science, 4,* 428-433.

Arrazattee, C.K., Lima, M., & Lundy, L. (2013). Do university communications about campus-community partnerships reflect core engagement principles? *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 20*, 41-52.

Carman, J. G. (2007). Evaluation practice among community-based agencies: Research into the reality. *American Journal of Evaluation, 28*, 60–75.

Carman, J. G., & Fredericks, K. A. (2010). Evaluation capacity and nonprofit organizations. *American Journal of Evaluation, 31,* 84-104.

CCPH Board of Directors. (2013). Postion Statement on Authentic Partnerships. Community-Campus Partnerships for Health. Retrieved from https://ccph.memberclicks.net/principles-of-partnership

Cook, J. R., & Kilmer, R. P. (2012). Creating successful partnerships using applied community psychology research. *Living Knowledge: International Journal of Community Based Research, 10,* 16-17.

Cook, J.R., & Kilmer, R.P. (June, 2016). Building capacity for collaborative research and practice among students and community partners. Presented at the 7th Living Knowledge Conference, Dublin Ireland.

Crutchfield, L. R., & Grant, H. M. L. (2012) *Forces for good: The six practices of high-impact nonprofits*. Revised and Updated Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Curwood, S. E., Munger, F., Mitchell, T., Mackegian, M., & Farrar, A. (2011). Building effective community-university partnerships: Are universities truly ready? *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 17,* 15-26.

Ebrahim, A. (2005). Accountability myopia: Losing sight of organizational learning. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 34*, 56-87.

Ebrahim, A. (2010). The many faces of nonprofit accountability in Renz, D.O. & Herman, R.D. (Eds.). *The Jossey-Bass handbook of nonprofit leadership and management 3rd edition,* (pp. 101-122). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Flinders, B. A., Nicholson, L., Carlascio, A., & Gilb, K. (2013). The partnership model for service-learning programs: A step-by-step approach. *American Journal of Health Sciences, 4*, 67-78.

Garcia-Iriarte, E., Suarez-Balcazar, Y., Taylor-Ritzler, T., & Luna, M. (2011). A catalyst-for-change approach to evaluation capacity building. *American Journal of Evaluation, 32,* 168-182.

Gazley, B., Bennett, T. A., & Littlepage, L. (2013). Achieving the partnership principle in experiential learning: The nonprofit perspective. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 19*, 559-579.

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO). (2011). Expanding the impact of grantees: How do we build the capacity of nonprofits to evaluate, learn and improve? (Brief No. 7) Retrieved from: http://www.socialimpactexchange.org/sites/www.socialimpactexchange.org/files/GEO_SWW_BuildCapacityToEvaluateLearnImprove.pdf

Kapucu, N., Augustin, M.E., & Krause, M. (2007). Capacity building for community-based small nonprofit minority health agencies in central Florida. *International Journal of Volunteer Administration 24,*10-17.

Kearney, J., Wood, L., & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2013). Community-university partnerships: Using participatory action learning and action research (PALAR). *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement, 6*, 113-130.

Kindred, J., & Petrescu, C. (2015). Expectations versus reality in a university-community partnership: A case study. *Voluntas, 26,* 823-845.

Lang, C., Stillman, L., Linger, H., Dalvean, J., McNamara, B., McGrath, J., & Collins, R. (2012). Collaborative research partnerships in the community. *Information, Communication, & Society, 15*, 1081-1105.

Nandan, M., & Scott, P. (2011). Service learning and community-based partnerships: A model for teaching macro practice social work. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning, 8*, 25-37.

Martinez, L. S., Russell, B., Rubin, C. L., Leslie, L. K., & Brugge, D. (2012). Clinical and translational research and community engagement: Implications for researcher capacity building. *Clinical and Translational Science, 5,* 329-332.

McDonald, J., & Dominguez, L.A. (2015). Developing university and community partnerships: A critical piece of successful service learning. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 44(3), 52-56. doi: 10.2505/4/jcst15_044_03_52

Milofsky, C. (2006). The catalyst process: What academics provide to practitioners. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership, 16*, 467-480.

Ostrander, S.A. (2004). Democracy, civic participation, and the university: A comparative study of civic engagement on five campuses. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly 33*, 1, 74-93.

Rosing, H., & Hofman, N. G. (2010). Notes from the field: Service learning and the development of multidisciplinary community-based research initiatives. *Journal of Community Practice, 18*, 213-232.

Scott, V. C., & Wolfe, S. M. (Eds.). (2015). *Community psychology: Foundations for practice.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Soska, T., Sullivan-Cosetti, M., Pasupuleti, S. (2010). Service learning: Community engagement and partnership for integrating teaching, research, and service*. Journal of Community Practice*, *18,* 2-3.

Suarez-Balcazar, Y., Mirza, M. P., & Hansen, A.M.W. (2015). Unpacking university-community partnerships to advance scholarship of practice. *Occupational Therapy in Health Care, 29,* 370-382.

Swords, A. C. S., & Kiely, R. (2010). Beyond pedagogy: Service learning as movement building in higher education. *Journal of Community Practice, 18,* 148-170.

Tandon, R. & Hall, B. (2015). *Institutionalizing community university research partnerships.* Victoria: University of Victoria, PRIA, UNESCO.

Trevisan, M. S. (2004). Practical training in evaluation: A review of the literature. *American Journal of Evaluation, 25*, 255-272.

Appendix A

## Case Study: Teen Health Connection

*Organizational Context:* Teen Health Connection is a 501(c)(3) healthcare organization providing comprehensive medical, mental health, health education, parenting, and prevention programs for adolescents and their families, many of whom are deemed at risk based on involvement with public child-serving systems. Teen Health is affiliated with one of the largest hospital systems in the U.S. and collaborates regularly with local child-serving systems and human service agencies to provide programs for adolescents.

*Description of partnership:* In the spring of 2013, university faculty contacted the executive director of Teen Health to identify program needs that might be addressed by an advanced graduate student in a five-month capstone course. The director and faculty had collaborated for many years via local community initiatives and prior student-led involvement. The scope of the student's work was framed as monitoring and documenting (Level 1) the impact of comprehensive independent psychological assessments (IPAs) conducted by Teen Health for youth entering the custody of child protective services. This work, including data collection around processes, indicated several procedural barriers preventing the program from meeting the need for assessments. Recommendations focused on modifying referral processes, improving strategies for record gathering (i.e., medical, legal, and education records), and enhancing communication with child welfare partners (Level 3). This initial course project was extended into an external practicum in which the student was supervised by faculty and expanded her work with the IPA program. Adoption of recommendations led to significant improvements in turnaround time for IPA completion, enhanced the agency's ability to meet community demand, and increased satisfaction with the program among partners and stakeholders (Level 3). The IPAs are now considered a valuable resource by the district court judges and case management teams responsible for the care of youth, and county funding for the program has been expanded.

The success of these projects was leveraged into an internal partnership, in which the student was compensated as a paid graduate assistant, and

was responsible for the evaluation of multiple mental health and prevention programs (Level 1), as well as grant writing related to these programs. Primary responsibility for student supervision shifted to organizational staff, and the student became more engaged in day-to-day programs and operations. During this time the student helped to create a research advisory committee, consisting of agency staff and community stakeholders, to guide and assist with evaluation across programs (Level 5). At the completion of this assistantship, the student was hired full time to oversee evaluation across programs (Level 1), support the development of collaborative community initiatives (Level 4), and help develop internal infrastructure to support long-term growth and research capacity (Level 5). The partnership with the university faculty was maintained to continue opportunities for applied learning experiences for additional students and to support ongoing capacity across the organization's programs. Graduate assistant positions, undergraduate honors projects, and student coursework continue to be an important part of the partnership and continue to contribute to the capacity of Teen Health Connection in specific program areas, where the responsibility for supervision of students is shared between Teen Health Connection and university faculty. Students continue to be engaged in ongoing capacity-building around data collection and analysis (Level 1), prevention skills training for adolescents on their Teen Advisory Board (Level 2); modification of data collection and reporting processes within parenting programs (Level 3); and supporting newer initiatives such as the Youth Drug Free Coalition to develop programming (Level 4).

Appendix B

## Case Study: Thompson Child & Family Focus

*Organizational Context:* Thompson Child & Family Focus is a 501(c)(3) organization providing a continuum of residential and outpatient mental health services, foster care, early childhood education, and child abuse prevention programs. Due to a multi-million dollar endowment, Thompson is able to operate relatively autonomously, with oversight primarily from an internal Board of Directors and Executive Team, but the agency collaborates regularly with local child-serving systems and care providers in the delivery of services and supports to children and families.

*Description of partnership:* In 2011, UNCC partnered with local child protective services (CPS) around a family support initiative, following the results of a federal review. With the university taking the lead, the partners sought federal funding to support their work in addressing issues impacting the children and families served. A National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH Award 1R21MH083088-01A1; 2009-12) research grant was subsequently awarded to UNCC to facilitate an external partnership between the Community Psychology Training program, CPS, and Thompson (selected by CPS as the local agency to provide families with support through their Family Partner [FP] program) in order to monitor and document the development and impact of the FP program (Level 1). UNCC faculty members supervised graduate students and provided ongoing support to Thompson staff. Students enhanced the skills of family partners to develop and incorporate electronic documentation into their daily work (Level 2) and modified processes for their reporting of information (Level 3). The project resulted in recommendations to improve referral processes between CPS and Thompson, and a series of outcome reports that led to expanded organizational support for the FP program. Recommendations that required procedural changes within the partnering CPS agency were not implemented due to the complexity of this system.

In spring, 2013, after the FP project had been completed, faculty contacted Thompson to discern any capacity needs a student could address as part of a capstone course. An advanced graduate student undertook the evaluation of a Thompson parenting program. Through this

external partnership, Thompson enhanced its evaluation capacity around the parenting program; leadership staff received a valuable report of the functioning and impact of their program (Level 1) and staff received training in how to better use existing data to inform approaches to working with families (Level 2). Shortly after the project concluded, Thompson created an internal position and hired the student as Director of Evaluation. Over time, her responsibilities included assisting with implementation of agency-wide strategic data reporting systems (i.e., data dashboards; Level 5). Additionally, through a strategic planning process, Thompson adapted its service offerings, eventually resulting in an expansion of prevention services and closure of residential programs that were no longer aligned with current community contexts (Level 4). Thompson continues to examine its services relative to community needs and national best practices so that the organization can invest in new programmatic opportunities. With these program changes, the need for ongoing capacity building created opportunities for additional student involvement. Through graduate assistantships, students have continued to focus on monitoring and documenting new programs (Level 1) and developing the skills of new staff members (Level 2), allowing for the Evaluation Director to focus on building new organizational infrastructure such as research committees and strategic data reporting systems (Level 5).

# Appendix C

## Case Study: Bright Beginnings

*Organizational Context:* Bright Beginnings provides publicly funded pre-kindergarten (pre-k) programming to four-year-olds identified as at-risk for school failure, using a child-centered curriculum focused on literacy, social-emotional development, and parent engagement to prepare children for academic success. The program is housed within one of the largest school systems in the U.S., and is influenced by a variety of regulatory groups and administrative procedures based on its location within this large system.

*Description of partnership:* Following budgetary discussions and cuts that reduced funding to the Bright Beginnings program, executive staff of the school system requested an evaluation of the program, conducted by a third-party due to the complexity of the work required. Initially, faculty submitted an unsuccessful proposal for this evaluation; however, they were asked to conduct retrospective analyses of administrative data regarding the program's impact. After completing this work, they were eventually asked to conduct a prospective evaluation based on their prior proposal when the evaluator selected did not meet expectations.

The evaluation design and implementation involved a team-based external partnership aimed at monitoring and documenting the adherence of the program to the educational curriculum, and its influence on children's learning and development (Level 1). The evaluation involved multiple methods of data collection including classroom observations, focus groups, teacher surveys, assessments of children's social-emotional functioning, and data from standardized assessments administered by the school system. To accomplish the goals of this new partnership, university faculty enlisted a team of six graduate and ten undergraduate students. Students assumed varying roles as a function of their experiences, abilities, and learning needs. Advanced graduate students planned, managed, and designed measurement tools and protocols for classroom observations, teacher surveys, and focus groups. These students also supervised more novice students, overseeing and refining their work and incorporating it into products reviewed by the supervising faculty. Faculty supervisors oversaw the design and development of all measures and

aspects of the evaluation procedures, and approved measures and reports before sharing them with school partners. Graduate students were compensated for their work through paid graduate assistantships, while undergraduates received course credit. Findings from the evaluation, while positive, pointed to the need for additional training and support for teachers to promote greater fidelity to the curriculum (Level 2), among a variety of needs related to procedural modifications (Level 3).

Due, at least in part, to the complexity inherent in a large school system and diverse competing priorities, leveraging local funding for higher levels of capacity building in early childhood education has presented challenges. To facilitate this additional capacity building, the university and school system partners submitted an application for federal funding (note: funding has been awarded) to extend their work and support the program in enhancing their capacity for data collection, management and utilization, as well as refining the skills of program teachers. Despite the challenges to engaging in ongoing, active partnership, additional analyses have been conducted using data from this project for student milestone projects, with support from the program and school system.