

Disaster Response Multiple University-Community Partnerships: A Case Report

Jerry Watson¹
Shonda K. Lawrence²

¹The University of Mississippi
²Jackson State University

Abstract

The purpose of this case report is to examine, document, detail, and describe the lessons learned and taught related specifically to university-community partnerships in the context of the Spring 2013 tornado in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Using a multiple university-community partnership of undergraduate social work faculty and students to respond to the tornado created a unique pedagogical opportunity for social work professors to utilize innovative teaching and experiential educational approaches. Placing the students in the aftermath of the storm to provide social services also produced the unintended consequence of needing to be fully versed in university-community partnerships. This case report presents the major thematic areas associated with university-community partnerships that were covered prior to, during, and after the service-learning event.

Key Words: university-community partnerships; innovative experiential education; social work education

Introduction

Traditionally, university-community partnerships are urban universities connecting university programs within the geographic proximity next to the institution's campus. Most often, university faculty, staff, and administration have a colorful history of working with neighboring communities, facilitating the development of programs, projects, and initiatives. Much of the work of higher education-community partnerships falls into this category. Contrary to the norm of university-community partnerships, this case report explores the work of multiple universities' undergraduate social work faculty and students rapidly forming a university-community partnership to respond to the aftermath of a disastrous storm in the spring of 2013. Most notably, this project is a partnership of a historically Black university (Jackson State University) and a majority white university (the University of Mississippi) and tornado impacted communities in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

This case report examined, documented, detailed, and described the lessons taught related specifically to university-community partnerships in the context of the Spring 2013 tornado in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. In the aftermath of the storm, promising practices, and unintended consequences associated with teaching about university-community partnerships were extracted from the experience. This set of unique learning opportunities and subsequent experiences was born out of the confluence of faculties' commitment to experiential pedagogy and the students' desire to honor social work's core value of service by re-claiming and

building on the commitment of early social workers 'to work with forces that make for progress . . . to forward the advance of the . . . common people' (Richmond, 1899, p. 151).

Prior to the implementation of the Disaster Relief Organizing Project (DROP), undergraduate social work faculty and social work students from Jackson State University and the University of Mississippi agreed to partner with the city of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, faith-based institutions, community-based organizations, and disaster relief and response agencies to work to provide educational, advocacy, and social services to the storm-impacted residents of Hattiesburg. Faculty members from the two teams representing the respective institutions provided training, facilitated pre-event planning, and mobilization of water and personal hygiene items for residents impacted by the storm. For the purposes of this case report, the authors will focus on the educational material and training provided to students to increase their knowledge related to university- community partnerships.

The students were provided with educational and training experiences focusing on increasing their knowledge of university-community partnerships in the hope of increasing the likelihood of improving the chances for success in the implementation of their disaster response efforts and to prepare them for professional practice as generalists. It should be noted that other topics were also addressed in the education of the students but for the purpose of this case report, the authors have chosen to focus on university-community partnerships. The primary learning objectives related to university-community partnerships were to gain or increase knowledge and understanding of terms and concepts associated with university-community partnerships; increase understanding and usefulness of university-community partnerships; introduce students to the history of university-community partnerships and various structures of university-community partnerships; discuss the taxonomy or types of university- community partnerships; and conclude with an introduction to the Sankofa framework or approach to university-community partnerships. While the context is the Spring 2013 tornado response, valuable lessons directly related to social work beyond the storm were taught by faculty as they joined together to create a multiple higher education-community partnership. In retrospect, the following material or topical areas were covered prior to the event, during the implementation and during the reflection period following the actual on-site experience.

Terms and Concepts of University-Community Partnerships

Defining terms and concepts was important for student learning in this project. Terms and concepts utilized in the study and practice of university-community partnerships can be confusing, misleading, and lead to mistakes in project implementation. Community practice concepts, terms, practices and ideas exist in our minds as the result of our organized and systematic experiences in our senses as well as the classroom-based educational experiences of our social work generalist practice students. It was important for this disaster response project to provide clarity to the loosely tied group of concepts and terms utilized throughout the effort based on the experiences of practitioners and researchers. The following terms were critical for maintaining unity in the group's understanding and implementation activities.

Community - For the purpose of this study, community and neighborhood define a pre-determined geographic area – the city of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The definition of community is essentially geo-focused or "place-based". Community and the city of Hattiesburg in this case report are used interchangeably and synonymously. Community is defined as a physical territory or pre-defined area. Ties in the city of Hattiesburg are based on sharing a lifestyle, though these ties are often reinforced by common ethnic or cultural

backgrounds shared by people in a common space, the city or community. People in small, rural cities like Hattiesburg, Mississippi face similar problems and have comparable resources (Rubin, 1998). As the home of the main campus of The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi is considered by many to be a “college town”. The University of Southern Mississippi is the anchor economic and cultural institution of the city of Hattiesburg. Locality-based efforts such as community or neighborhood efforts that attempt to improve the economic and/or social conditions using professional or technical assistance, and/or financial assistance from outside of the community (Voth, 1975) are common in distressed communities.

Community building and community intervention were used interchangeably and synonymously in this case report. Community building and community intervention are defined as a group of people focusing on a locality initiating a social process (i.e., planned intervention) to change the economic, social, cultural, and/or environmental situation (Christenson & Robinson, Jr., 1989). For the purposes of this study, community building and community intervention is the expanded set of social work practice activities relating to community improvement efforts including but not limited to developing and maintaining partnerships to achieve community improvement goals by interacting, educating, and advocating for residents and working in collaboration with service providers. Furthermore, community building operationalized is defined by the researchers as demonstrating or possessing the following components integrated together in practice with the intent of responding to the needs of both community residents and service providing entities after the storm. Dunbar (1972) explains community building as a series of deliberately planned community improvements, which take place as a result of the common efforts of various groups. Similarly, Ploch (1976) declares that community building is a distinguishable process to improve identifiable aspects of community life such as housing, commerce, or resident health and well-being.

Key stakeholder or stakeholder was defined as members of the following groups: community residents, community-based organizations, faith-based institutions or organizations, governmental agencies, disaster response and emergency management organizations, and not-for-profit service providers.

Most importantly, multiple university-community partnerships are a response to current and emerging conditions in both the university and community. Higher education is being called upon to renew its commitment to its societal purposes on a larger scale. Higher education is being urged by its critics and supporters to assume a leadership role in addressing society’s global concerns and meeting growing and overwhelming human needs (Jacoby & Associates, 2009). What a great place for social work faculty and students to partner in a leadership role to provide services in disaster response.

History of University-Community Partnerships

Across time, American colleges, universities and communities often share common geographical ground that is the product of conflicting traditions. According to the first and more honored difference, at many institutions of higher education, knowledge is pursued for its own sake without regard for the impact of the institution on its surrounding community. The development and the increase of knowledge and the capacity to think are seen as an end in itself. The preservation of man's intellectual storehouse and heritage as well as the passing on of society's store of knowledge to succeeding generations is considered the special province of the liberal arts colleges while responsibility for expanding the seemingly endless boundaries of the known world through research efforts is said to lie particularly with the graduate schools. Both university and community,

however, share the mandate and bear the responsibility to improve, expand, and to build upon the knowledge garnered in each and every corner (Pierson, 1959). On the other hand, universities and colleges that have religious connections in their history of origin have been uniquely connected to their surrounding communities from their very beginning. Mayfield (2001) asserts that the higher education connection seen regularly in communities is most pronounced through the religious education and preparation for service of ministers and missionaries and entry for the social elite.

The University Land-Grant system was established by the Morrill Act of 1864. This was among the first attempts to leverage the assets and resources of public universities to address the problems that were impacting communities. The Land-Grant system focused on providing educational opportunities targeting agricultural communities at the beginning of the Industrial Period and did not extend the benefits of education to urban areas. Around the same time, the college-settlement house movement at Smith College in 1887 focused its efforts directly on the plight and struggles of suffering inner city residents and immigrants. Middle and upper class college and university students worked directly with working class and poor immigrants who were new arrivals in America to ease their assimilation into American society. Subsequently, this did have a spill-over effect that brought benefits to the people in the larger community (Carr, 1999).

State and land-grant institutions historically differentiate between the creating access and the community outreach components of engagement with community partners. Access is usually described as creating opportunities for making university resources available to students and community residents. Outreach constitutes the collective group of activities that promote the application of university resources to partner with communities (residents, institutions, and organizations) in meeting their needs, identifying their issues and obstacles, solving their problems, and meeting their challenges (Martin, Smith, & Phillips, 2014). The aforementioned study posits that there are critical parallels and similarities between the land-grant and urban university. First, each institution seeks to expand access to higher education. Second, these institutions take their products: knowledge, technology, and skills generated and learned and apply them to the challenges faced by both the farmland and the cities. Third, these institutions play a pivotal role in the development of the vital infrastructure of the nation. The important parallels and similarities between the land-grant university and the urban university reveal higher education's unique and common historical mission and responsibility to participate in the development and progress of areas outside of the campus proper. It is clear that American institutions of higher learning have always included among their core purposes responding to the call of society's pressing issues and preparing graduates for responsible and participatory citizenship (Martin, Smith, & Phillips, 2014).

Over time with industrialization, cities have begun to deteriorate and universities could no longer turn away or ignore the urban problems when physical decay and rising crime began to directly impact their ability to recruit and retain students, faculty, and staff. Issues existing in the communities surrounding the outer walls of the institution began to impact the marketability of the institution. Administrators are acutely aware of the relationship between the marketability and appeal of their campuses and the perception and realities associated with the university's surrounding campus community. Consequently, today many universities actively are inextricably tied to their surrounding communities through their mission and ongoing service and development initiatives (Carr, 1999). University-community partnerships that focus on the development of communities adjacent to the university are important efforts for the viability of the university.

While executing university-community partnerships, institutions of higher education often protect their practical, immediate, and ongoing interests to stabilize and improve the surrounding environment or neighborhood and thusly ensure high enrollment rates of students. The economic, social, housing, educational, and safety conditions of cities and adjacent communities where many universities and college campuses are located may represent the most pressing problems facing the institutions. Simply put, institutions of higher education cannot pick up, move or relocate to escape crime, avoid poverty, or separate itself from the physical deterioration and realities at their gates. That deterioration can threaten the very core and existence of a university or college situated adjacent to declining or blighted neighborhoods making it harder to recruit and retain students, faculty, and staff. Essentially, the viability of those institutions is likely to decline in response to the corresponding decline around them forcing the institution to enter into partnerships for protection and ultimately survival (Cox, 2000).

Over the years, there has been increased understanding and recognition that universities can bring about change in communities. Universities are identified as the central institution in modern society and in most communities where they exist. Additionally, few other institutions are better equipped than institutions of higher education to meet the challenges that society presents. First, their placement in the community and their history are closely tied to these cities. Second, universities have seemingly unlimited capital including intellectual, technical, human, and sometimes financial resources. In many cities, higher educational institutions are ranked among the largest nongovernmental employers. And finally, altruism pays, "Doing good may be the best way for universities to do well." (Carr, 1999).

We have moved into a new era of higher education where universities have become keenly aware of their relationships with their surrounding communities. Universities realize opportunities to live out their democratic duties and responsibilities. Scholars report the creation and development of a new type of university. The democratic cosmopolitan model civic university has emerged. This new type of university is engaged in the advancement of democratic education and the practical realization of the democratic promise of America for all Americans (Benson & Harkavy, 2000). Higher education has finally positively reacted to the increasingly obvious, embarrassing, immoral contradiction between the increasing status, wealth, and power of American higher education (particularly its elite research university component) and the increasingly pathological state of American cities (Benson & Harkavy, 2000). Higher education must play a prominent role in eradicating residential segregation. Going forward, the "New American College" would respond to connect thought to action and theory to practice. A connected institution would be committed to improving the human condition (Harkavy, 1996, 2002).

The mandate for university-community partnership is clear, urban universities must function like land-grant institutions and extend their reach to the inner city and urban communities. Conversely, the land-grant institution that fully surrenders itself in a spirit of service, that institution shall truly be among the greatest among us (Powell & Spencer, 1998).

Rubin (2000) reports that community partnerships such as those promoted by HUD's Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) Grants are representative of a larger movement toward supporting and promoting engaged universities. Progress towards that goal will depend heavily upon faculty being able and willing to operate effectively as teachers within the context of the community. In many institutions, tenured

track or junior faculty members are discouraged from university-community work as there is not enough experience in turning the work into publishable research.

Maurrasse (2001) is particularly significant for two reasons: broad topical and thematic coverage of university-community partnerships and his research focusing on addressing community issues. Maurrasse presents and compares four diverse higher education institutions and their community partnerships. Secondly, and more important for our purposes, Maurrasse examines Xavier University of New Orleans, a historically black college/university (HBCU). Prior to his study, there had been no other noteworthy studies of HBCU-community development or service learning partnerships. Maurrasse (2001) presents a brief summary of the mission of HBCUs and delves into the unique nature and relationship of urban HBCUs with their surrounding communities. He further discusses faculty and staff involvement in the partnership and issues related to impact on the community. Finally, he adds to the body of knowledge by stressing the importance of aligning and incorporating the partnership into the long-term mission of the university while illuminating the challenges that confront university partnerships.

Structure of University-Community Partnerships: An Overview

Understanding complex higher education-community partnerships can be a complicated and confusing affair. For students involved in community service projects and service learning classes, it is critically important to be clear about the history and the structure of university-community partnerships. Cox (2000) provides a foundation to define the sections of partnerships as parts of the whole. Three key concepts can be found by answering the following questions: 1). What types of activities or programs are implemented to improve neighborhoods? 2). Who are the parties involved in or affected by those activities? And, 3). What are the individual interests of those parties in the community improvement activities? Issues concerning how researchers and practitioners investigate and evaluate university-community partnerships present common challenges and obstacles.

Institutions of higher learning are well-prepared to play a contributing role in the community building process. The academic world is uniquely positioned and poised to respond to these issues. In the areas of research and public policy, academicians cannot be content to sit idly by on the sidelines as mere data-collectors, forecasters, and analyzers. Academics must get into the fray.

Universities must become actively involved in finding solutions to the social ills utilizing structured partnerships as a viable strategy. University-community partnerships exist in a variety of different forms. According to Checkoway (2001), these include an assortment of activities such as: outreach, teaching, research, consultation and technical assistance activities, collaborative planning for coordination of activities, joint evaluation of program effectiveness, sharing of staff in common facilities, and organizations meeting together for shared planning, and out-stationing of staff. Most research universities have a number of partnerships across disciplines that, however thoughtfully constructed and conceived, have little or no strategy or structure in place for learning from the community.

The absence of structure in university-community partnerships creates difficulties and prevents the full realization of the learning opportunities (Checkoway, 2001; Isreal, Schuly, Parker & Adam, 1998). Successful partnerships benefitting both the university and the community typically would have a cadre of leaders representing the community and the higher education institution and a structure that embraces the civic mission

while facilitating its achievement. These would include leadership from the highest ranking officials as well as representative leaders from the community. The university president and executive officers who promote policies and ensure much needed funding support, and deans and department heads who have responsibility for making curriculum decisions, personnel appointments, and performance standards are all critical to the structure of university-community partnerships. Otherwise, the lack of structure can and will be a detriment or obstacle instead of a benefit to university-community partnership efforts.

Successful university-community partnerships involve an intentional and purposeful linkage or connecting of the university's special capital competence and resources to organizations and individuals outside of the university. Structure is considered by researchers and scholars alike to impact the partnership and a very important component of successful university-community partnerships. Shumaker, Reed & Woods (2001) found simple, uncomplicated, and flat organizational structure generally works well for collaborative activities. These types of structured partnerships streamline implementation, generate accountability and openness, and foster better relations if partners have equal or near-equal ranks in decision-making. Methods and frequency of communication, task delegation, and decision-making avenues need to be discussed and agreed upon by all parties. Otherwise, the lack of simple, uncomplicated, and flat organizational structure generally works best for collaborative activities. It streamlines implementation, generates openness, and fosters better relations if partners have equal or near-equal ranks in decision-making (Watson, 2013). Methods and frequency of communication, task delegation, and decision-making avenues need to be discussed and consensus decision making consummated and agreed upon by all parties. Another advantage of a flat structure is that important decisions will have the benefit of the group's thinking rather than that of a single person at the top. Schumacher et al. (2000) concludes that a group's decision is likely to be more similar and representative of the community partnership's view than any single person's view. Ultimately, the structure of university partnerships varies considerably yet remains important in all university-community partnerships.

Taxonomy or Types of University of Community Partnerships

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (1999) describes five distinct types of university-community partnerships:

1. Service provision denoted by experiential learning activities tied directly to class or course where the benefit might or might not be mutually beneficial to both the community and the university.
2. Student volunteerism including tasks driven primarily by students. Activities are typically short in duration, unrelated to coursework, and provide students with positive experiences while allowing them to fulfill noncredit graduation requirements of volunteerism in community development. These are often isolated, disconnected, and disjointed activities that benefit students and sometimes the community.
3. Community in the classroom defined by the offering of specific courses for local residents designed to enhance community-building and community capacity. These are non-degree, noncredit courses that support the institution's outreach and/or service mission and often benefit the community.
4. Faculty involvement where noncredit student and faculty initiatives that take the form of coordinated, sustained, or long-term projects target a specific community. These activities are designed to foster and nurture community partnerships that are mutually beneficial to all partners.
5. Applied or action research where community members and other stakeholders are involved in the pragmatic research design, data collection, analysis, and reporting efforts. The purpose of the research is to define needs, guide program or community planning and development, assess outcomes or impacts, or

otherwise contribute to efforts to improve the community. This is action research and benefits the community when the community plays a significant role at every phase of the research process.

6. Major institutional change portrays initiatives that change the mission, promotion and tenure criteria, awards, and course offerings of the institution. A specific activity may even overhaul administrative processes to meet an institutional-community goal. This is also called institutionalization.

The university-community environment fosters broader and deeper buy-in from all partnership members. Collaborative projects can get bogged down by a complicated structure that utilizes and requires formal processes and procedures.

The Sankofa Framework for Higher Education-Community Partnerships

Maintaining the campus environment that promotes effective teaching, learning, and research has remained an important concern for university administrators. The urban university undertakes projects and initiatives that not only have local significance, but also can contribute to solving urban problems around the globe. Wiewel, Gaffikin and Morrissey (2000) proclaim that a framework helps researchers and practitioners more fully investigate and understand university-community development partnerships. The Sankofa Framework for working in communities was first presented as an approach or framework for historically Black colleges and university in Watson (2013). HBCU-community development is presented as a perspective or a stance taken by the researcher or practitioner (Figure 1). The word “Sankofa” is derived from the language of the Akan in Ghana, West Africa. The words SAN (return), KO (go), FA (look, seek and take). The symbol tells the story of a mythical bird that flies forward with its head turned backwards so that it may look to the past. This reflects the Akan belief that the past serves as an informant or guide for planning the future, present action or the wisdom in learning from the past in order to build the future. The Akan believe that there must be movement forward but first the gems must be picked from the past and carried forward for a successful future.

The framework can be utilized in the formulation, development, implementation, and evaluation of HBCU-community partnerships. Three principles describe the framework and guide its application: (a) University-led, (b) community-focused and, (c) asset-based. The Sankofa Framework is both a tool and a guide for working in and with communities. The Sankofa framework was suitable for working in Hattiesburg, Mississippi after the storm of the spring of 2013. The Sankofa Framework symbolizes the ongoing and new adventures into HBCU and majority white institutions’ university-community partnerships.

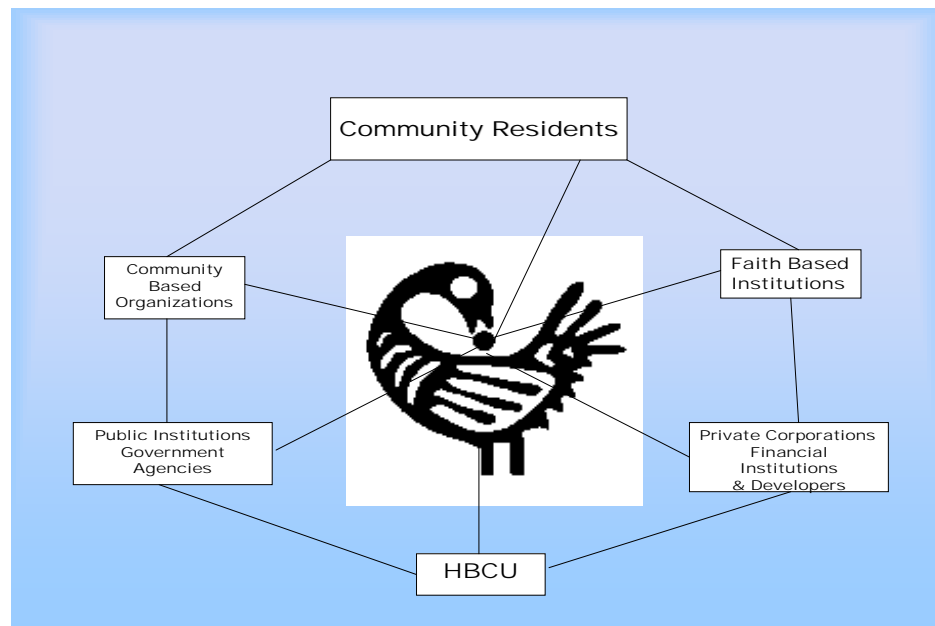


Figure 1. The Sankofa Framework for HBCU-community partnership denoting key stakeholders, their relationships, and connectedness as partners in the university-community partnership process

Conclusion

This case report offers a glimpse of an innovative pedagogical approach to educating undergraduate social work students in the context of responding to a weather-related disaster utilizing the Sankofa Framework. By encouraging service learning through university-community partnerships, faculty can effectively expand the reach of the classroom and provide resources by which people can also get help. It should be noted that rarely have multiple higher educational institutions collaborated to provide students with educational experiences while also serving communities in need.

This case report has presented the university-community partnership topical areas covered while responding to the tornado of 2013 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The case report reminds faculty and students alike of the importance and value of university-community partnerships in responding to the needs of communities and society. This case report is important for faculty and students who seek to develop and implement programs, projects, and initiatives utilizing university-community partnerships and the Sankofa Framework. There is an ongoing and continuing need for further research especially as it relates to multiple higher education-community partnerships. Likewise, it is important to continue to utilize, test, and evaluate the utilization of the Sankofa Framework and approach. Asset and strength-based approaches possess the potential to empower residents, communities, and social workers alike.

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