Six Keys to Successful Nonprofit-Academic Collaboration:

Results of a Study

Are nonprofits and universities two different worlds? Or can they collaborate for success?

BY LINDA CAMINO AND KATHERYN HEIDRICH

Many nonprofits are collaborating with universities to develop nonprofit management education programs. Why do some fail while others succeed?

Keys are provided by a recent initiative, "Building Bridges between Practice and Knowledge in Nonprofit Management Education" (Bridges).[1] Grantee projects were required to form teams that included nonprofit leaders and academics. The premise was that achieving quality programs in nonprofit management depends on the full engagement of nonprofits and academics because knowledge is developed by, and resides in, both groups.

We conducted a study of these nonprofit-academic teams.[2] Overall, we found that they were successful in their collaboration. Six conditions led to collaboration success:

Condition 1: Team Members Perceived a Good Reason to Work Together.

Collaborating parties must see their work as goal-oriented, legitimate, and having meaningful consequences. The Bridges teams were successful, according to interviewees, because both nonprofits and academics valued their teams' goals. Prior to their Bridges collaboration, interviewees' most common nonprofit-academic interaction was through academic advisory committees. This advisory role was not nearly as satisfying as the Bridges teams, where all joined not just to make suggestions but to work for common goals. One team member commented, for example:

> It works as a body of shared ownership. Members are more than just recommenders…the project is owned by [all] members of the team.

Implications: Convening nonprofit leaders and academics to solicit advice is not enough to sustain commitment over the long term. Goal-directed work leads to collective commitment. Shared goals may override the differences in cultures that others discuss as barriers to collaboration.

Condition 2: Team Members Were Acquainted.

Trust is crucial to productivity. Familiarity is an important component of trust. In the Bridges teams, most people were acquainted with at least one other team member beforehand. As one stated:

> There is a high level of trust [on our team]. There are years of relationships among us. We have mutual respect for competence on the team.

Implications: Creating teams of people who know each other is effective for projects that are time-limited or must show results quickly. Trust leads to creativity because people are more willing to take risks.

Nonprofit World • Volume 21, Number 1 January/February 2003 • Published by the Society for Nonprofit Organizations • 5820 Canton Center Road, Suite 165, Canton, Michigan 48187
734-451-3582 • www.snpo.org

Process without structure can devolve quickly into chaos.

Condition 3: Teams Were Supported by Formal Structures.

Most members of the Bridges teams were affiliated with a university program on nonprofit management.[3] Having this common affiliation provided several types of support:

- **People were oriented** to the same mission.
- **Their offices were near one another,** prompting "water-cooler" dialogue and impromptu meetings.
- **Teammates were mutually aware of the "big picture"** and the changes, both small and large, that occurred over time. They thus carried out jointly recognized responsibilities. In cases where team members did not share place of employment, there were usually other structures that held members together, such as a contract or memorandum of understanding.

Implications: Structures facilitate collaborative work by providing scaffolding and focus. Process without structure can devolve quickly into chaos. Building structures requires time, however. A lesson from Bridges teams is that the use of existing structures expedites action.

Condition 4: Team Members Respected Each Other.

The literature about nonprofit-academic collaboration reveals that hierarchical models have dominated. Universities and academic faculty usually have greater status and influence than any nonprofit organization, coalition, or practitioner. However, nearly all Bridges team members felt that their voices were valued by everyone on their teams. These feelings were based on the following factors:

- **Teammates weren't afraid** to disagree with each other.
- **They viewed** one another as equals.
- **They recognized** each person's area of competency.
- **They had previous** (sometimes longstanding) relationships.
- **They liked** one another.
- **They were willing to share** authority and power.

The following statement is illustrative of the majority of responses:

> There is absolute parity of voices on the team… We chose leaders of the community to begin with, and then worked with them as a community of equals. Each individual has an area of expertise which they can claim. This creates parity. The practitioners on our team are well educated and not intimidated by the university.

Implications: Successful collaboration depends on a synergy of previous acquaintance, trust, respect, and the confidence to express yourself and challenge teammates. When putting nonprofit-academic teams together, pay attention to such characteristics as trustworthiness, confidence, forthright expression, and empathy, as much as formal credentials and experience.

Condition 5: Team Members Had Experience in Each Other's Domains.

Much has been written about the clashing cultures of nonprofits and academics. Differences in culture include the following:

- **Academics are rewarded for individual success** rather than collaboration.
- **Nonprofits often rely on soft money** and thus feel pressured to show results quickly.
- **Nonprofit leaders are rarely rewarded** for taking time to reflect and read.

While the academics and nonprofit leaders on Bridges teams sometimes misunderstood one another due to such differences, they were willing to be patient and strive for understanding because they had work experience in each other's environments. Many of the nonprofits had taught university courses bearing academic credit, while many of the academics had worked in the nonprofit sector. And both nonprofit practitioners and academics reported volunteering for nonprofit organizations.

Implications: Builders of nonprofit-academic teams should include members whose experience crosses nonprofit and university domains. Individuals who have "walked a mile in each other's shoes" have unique insights, innovative ideas, and empathy grounded in first-hand experience.

Pay attention to such characteristics as trustworthiness.

Condition 6: Team Members Brought Complementary Strengths.

As much as nonprofits and academics had some overlap in experience, they also brought distinct differences to the table.

Nonprofit practitioners brought:

- **Grounding in reality.** Practitioners have first-hand knowledge of how nonprofit organizations operate. They have insights into needs for staff training and day-to-day responsibilities of nonprofit leaders. An academic stated, "Without practitioners, we would have had a shallower concept of what the Center [for nonprofit studies at the university] could be. It would have been more focused on research—much narrower."
- **Links to other nonprofit organizations.** Nonprofit practitioners brought connections to such target audiences as executive directors, board members, and other potential course participants.
- **Creativity.** Nonprofits weren't afraid to challenge university culture. As one academic noted, "Having practitioners on the team helps faculty see outside the box."

Academics brought:

- **Institutional and academic legitimacy.** Academics' experiences in teaching and research were perceived as critical to developing credible educational programs.
- **Intellectual rigor.** Academics brought research-and-theory-based knowledge to curriculum content and program development. One nonprofit practitioner stated, for example, "When practitioners see how research can influence decision-making, they become alerted to its value."
- **Access to university resources.** Universities are some of the most resource-rich institutions in their communities. Resources include convening space, classroom space, bookstores, ability to apply for and administer grants, time to develop course materials, and time to spend with students.

Implications: Combining complementary strengths integrates the wisdom of practice and academe. Builders of nonprofit-academic teams should use these criteria in recruiting members. Cross-professional teams can be an effective bridge between institutions of higher education and the nonprofit community. ■

Footnotes

[1] This four-year initiative was launched in 1997 by the W.K. Kellogg Fouondation to improve practice and build the knowledge base for nonprofit management education. These educational programs were of two types: (1) academic and (2) continuing education and professional development.

[2] Our study included all 19 U.S. Bridges grantees. We interviewed 78% of Bridges team members (55 of 71) in extended, individual, semi-structured interviews. Interviews averaged one and one-half to two hours. In addition, the participant observation method informed the study. Both of us served on the Bridges Initiative leadership team and spent time interacting with grantee teams at networking conferences and through e-mail exchanges and telephone calls.

[3] In the Bridges Initiative, universities were the fiscal agents for all but a few of the grants. Over two-thirds of nonprofit leaders and academics on teams were employed through the university. Through that employment, most team members were affiliated with a university center or program focused on nonprofit management charged with community outreach.

Selected References

*Clary, Diana et al., "Looking for a Win-Win Partnership? Look to the University!", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 4.

Hess, Peg & Edward J. Mullen, *Practitioner-Researcher Partnerships: Building Knowledge From, In, and for Practice*, Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Light, Paul, *Sustaining Innovation: Creating Nonprofit and Government Organizations That Innovate Naturally*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

MacDuff, Nancy & F. Ellen Netting, "Lessons Learned from a Practitioner-Academic Collaboration," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1.

*Sturm, Paul, "The Seven Rules of Successful Collaboration," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 2.

*Starred resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 734-451-3582, www.snpo.org.

Linda Camino, Ph.D., is a senior scientist at University of Wisconsin-Madison and has a consulting practice, Camino & Associates (2811 Regent Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53705). Katheryn Heidrich, Ph.D., is president of CenterPoint Institute (114 Church Street, New Lenox, Illinois 60451), a consulting firm serving primarily the nonprofit sector.