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Brief 5: For Funders of Multi-Institutional Collaborations in Higher Education: Support Partnership Building

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NERCHE BRIEF

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The following Brief from the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) is a distillation of collaborative work of members of NERCHE's ongoing think tanks for administrators and faculty in the New England region. NERCHE Briefs emphasize policy implications and action agendas from the point of view of the people who tackle the most compelling issues in higher education in their daily work lives. With support from the Ford Foundation, NERCHE disseminates these pieces to a targeted audience of legislators, college and university presidents and system heads, and media contacts. The Briefs are designed to add critical information and essential voices to the policy decisions that leaders in higher education address.

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For Funders of Multi-Institutional Collaborations in Higher Education: Support Partnership Building

This brief was derived from the discussions of NERCHE's think tank for coordinators of GEAR UP school-college partnerships. The insights of these coordinators point to the principle that it is the quality of the relationships among the partners that determines the effectiveness of multi-institutional collaborations. This means then that those who support and invest in multi-institutional collaborations should also focus on supporting the process of partnership building. But what does this mean in practical terms? It means being strategic right from the beginning in the design of grant structures, and throughout the relationship with the grantees. This brief provides examples of the kinds of structures and purposeful actions that build effective partnerships. The examples and the recommendations that follow are intended primarily for project funders but are relevant for all those involved in higher education collaborations. Both the funders and the grantees need to advocate for partnership building as a sound investment strategy.

In 1998 federal legislation created the GEAR UP grants as a means to target low-income, middle school children and ensure they are better prepared for college (see www.ed.gov/gearup). There are many models of GEAR UP programs, including partnerships between a single university and a single school and those among several colleges and multiple schools. The Nellie Mae Foundation [www.nelliemaefoundation.org], a regional funder of these programs, asked NERCHE to design this think tank to facilitate reflection and dialogue that would inform the foundation as it evaluates its future directions. Nellie Mae recognized the need to fully understand the realities of implementing the GEAR UP programs in order to be a responsive funding partner. In June 2000 NERCHE convened the first in a year-long series of think tank meetings.

<u>Lessons to Learn from GEAR UP</u>

A few exemplary stories illustrate how the structures of a grant, such as the **timeline**, **budget**, **evaluation mechanisms**, and **reporting procedures**, can have an impact on partnership building.

Scenario A) A college that had no established partnerships with local schools sought GEAR UP funding. Potential partners were identified, but they were not willing to begin working together until funding was confirmed. This meant that when the proposal was accepted, the partnership existed only on paper but the grant timeline indicated that project activities should begin immediately. The GEAR UP coordinating team understood the need for the partners to get to know each other, identify differences in organizational culture, and create a common language to talk about the meaning and goals of the project. A planning retreat, although it delayed the launch of "official" project activities, helped the partners shape the common vision that had to exist before the project could move forward.

Scenario B) In a certain school-college partnership the project design called for college faculty and student volunteers to work with local teachers to develop approaches that

would raise the academic performance of at-risk children. However, the teachers initially resisted participating. The project coordinators initiated dialogue among faculty and teachers that surfaced teachers' concerns such as a perceived threat from outsiders imposing changes and a lack of incentives for participating in a short-term grant. As a result, the project model was revised so that teachers were paid to design and lead professional development workshops for their colleagues. This revised model proved successful because it demonstrated first, a respect for the teachers' expertise and second, an investment in the long-term future of the school. At the same time, the funding categories in the budget only covered expenses for materials and direct services to the students. Payments to the teachers meant cutting expenses in other areas where resources were already tight.

Scenario C) A school-college-community partnership was operating well for several years when it received an additional grant. Under the terms of the new grant, the college partner managed the funds and submitted the progress reports to the funding agency. The community and school partners perceived that the role of the college shifted from an equal partner to a supervisor. They expressed resentment that threatened to undermine the commitment to project goals. The current system could not be changed, but the partners held a special planning session to prepare an approach for future funding applications. They achieved consensus on an equitable system for financial management which they presented to prospective funders.

Scenario D) The federal government agency that funded a school-university partnership required the program to submit certain data as part of the evaluation of student performance. The data collection was a challenge because program coordinators had no authority to demand the information from schools and in some cases the schools did not record the data needed. Furthermore, the teachers and students' families noticed improvements in behavior and confidence of students (critical to successful academic performance), but the government assessment criteria did not include these measures of success. To address these issues, the partner institutions developed training programs to help schools learn to use the government evaluation more effectively in their self-

assessments and to develop additional assessment tools that would target the specific criteria they considered most important. The program left a legacy of assessment strategies that would exist long after the end of the grant.

<u>Policy Recommendations</u>

These scenarios highlight the challenges faced when the structures of a partnership initiative are not aligned with the priorities of the partnership itself. Careful attention to these systems in the early stages can prevent dilemmas later when it is much more difficult or even impossible to make changes. The following policy recommendations for funders emerged from the experiences of GEAR UP partnership coordinators.

1) Timeline
   - Partners are more likely to commit to a project that is long-term or that will result in enduring gains for the institutions involved. Create a timeline that reflects long-term commitment whenever possible.
   - Consider the history and stage of the partnership and build in appropriate planning phases in order to construct a realistic timeline that is not obsolete before the project begins.
   - Allow adjustments in response to unexpected challenges or opportunities.

2) Budget
   - Involve all partners in designing a budget that makes sense for the way they operate and also requires shared responsibility and shared accountability.
   - As with the timeline, allow some flexibility to be able to address needs and opportunities as they arise.
   - Partnership building and its outcomes are often less visible, but not less important than other project activities. Fund activities that directly fall within the rubric of partnership building.
   - Partners should share indirect costs.

3) Evaluation and Reporting
   - Involve all partners in defining the criteria of success.
   - Build in feedback mechanisms so that all partners both contribute to the assessment process and make use of the evaluation data.
   - Create reporting mechanisms that do not place an undue burden on one or more partners in terms of collecting data or preparing reports.
   - Create a balance of power among partners when establishing lines of responsibility for reporting procedures.

Conclusion

Multi-institutional collaborations are often hailed as the model for community development, school reform, and healthcare initiatives. Indeed, the complex nature of societal problems requires the cooperation of groups across the sectors of a community. But effective cooperation cannot be taken for granted or overshadowed by the drive to produce measurable program outcomes. Collaboration needs to be attended to throughout the duration if the partnership is to survive. Similar to building the infrastructure of a business, investments in building partnerships have short-term costs with long-term, sustainable rewards.

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