Surpluses and Deficits: How Student Leaders Perceive University-Community Partnerships at One Ivy League Institution
Alison K. Cohen

Abstract
University-community partnerships are a critical method for how universities can serve the public interest. Yet key questions remain: how do these partnerships work in practice, and how can university and fill reciprocal and mutual needs effectively? A participatory evaluation of university-community partnerships in education at an Ivy League university found that college student program coordinators had a surplus perspective of the university and a deficit perspective of community partners. Practitioners must shift our paradigm towards mutually beneficial, asset-driven university-community partnerships to ensure success.

As universities become increasingly engaged in their communities, reciprocity and mutual benefit among university and community partnerships become increasingly important. Multiple scholars underscore the importance of mutual benefit for innovative programming that use partners’ respective assets to help address partner-identified needs (Anyon & Fernández, 2007; Harkavy, 1998; Holland, 2000; Israel et al., 1998; Moore et al., 2000). However, historically university-community partnerships have de-emphasized the community’s assets, leading some community members to believe that academics prioritized their research needs over community needs, and overlooked community strengths (Anyon & Fernández, 2007). Community-university partnerships offer value-added for all partners. For professors doing research, added community insight can facilitate innovative work (Anyon and Fernández, 2007; Harkavy, 1998; Israel et al., 1998), and for administrators focused on student learning, community-based work helps achieve educational objectives, although more research still needs to be done (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000). Institutions of higher education (IHEs) are in the

midst of a revolution regarding the role of research on campus, and universities should now be using research and institutional power to realize America’s democratic promise, with a Deweyan conception of democracy as a neighborly community (Benson et al., 2000; Benson & Harkavy, 2000; Harris & Harkavy, 2003).

This perspective is related to the historical mission of American land-grant institutions. Land-grant universities have received special attention in the discussion of engaged institutions because they are mandated to serve the public interest under the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 (McDowell, 2001). Three types of public service activities emerged: public service enterprise, or activities undertaken explicitly to serve the public; public service spillover, or activities that serve the public as an unintended consequence; and public service capacity, where members of the public utilize excess capacity of university services and programs, like museums or faculty (McDowell, 2001). Land-grant universities emphasize applied knowledge, and the connection of theory to practice—methods key to solving social issues today (Amey & Brown, 2005; Benson & Harkavy, 2000). By making knowledge accessible to all people, land-grant universities were quintessentially democratic (Harkavy, 2008; McDowell, 2001). Although elite, private universities are quite distant from land-grant universities in terms of origin and mandate, they still influence the greater region, often through the creation of university-community partnerships (Harris & Harkavy, 2003). Such partnerships are a public service enterprise and create an applied setting for the creation and dissemination of knowledge, a key purpose of universities; these strengthen universities’ contributions to society as they become more responsive to community needs (Cox, 2000).

Methods

This paper aims to understand university partner perspectives of university-community partnerships at an elite, private university in the northeastern United States through a community-based, participatory approach. The research agenda was developed iteratively over the course of the 4-month research process (data collection and analysis), in consultation with students and staff at the university’s Public Service Center (PSC). Prior working relationships with PSC staff and students, as well as prior experience evaluating the PSC health initiatives, meant that I was welcomed into the PSC community. As an undergraduate practitioner and researcher, I acted as a participant-observer by integrating into PSC community, including through participation in the PSC education equity task force (EETF). This allowed me to better understand current issues at the PSC and how my work could address those needs. I participated in EETF meetings (n=10), in which PSC full-time staff and I discussed how the PSC education programs could have been more impactful. I also met with various PSC staff and student coordinators, and attended PSC program volunteer trainings and PSC student coordinator group meetings (n=31). In addition to these field notes, I also conducted semi-structured interviews using a tool (see appendix) designed to facilitate strategic planning for PSC groups (n=15), and the results were both compiled for and presented to the PSC and analyzed here.
While there are a few university-level initiatives at this institution, most community partnerships are based at the PSC, which is housed under the university’s Dean of the College office. The PSC education equity task force was created in February 2008 to develop a strategy for using the PSC education programs to build local community capacity and increase civic engagement, in accordance with the PSC mission and university’s strategic plan priority of engaging with the community. The EETF was composed of the author and full-time PSC staff who oversee community programs related to education. PSC student coordinators were consulted for feedback on the strategic plan developed by the EETF periodically over the course of the semester, but other students did not attend EETF meetings.

In conversation with EETF members, I designed a strategic planning tool to facilitate program evaluation and assessment of community and institutional assets and needs with PSC student coordinators. PSC student coordinators typically have previously volunteered with the program they now coordinate and so often have prior experience with both the community partner and community-based public service more generally. The tool that guided the semi-structured interviews asked coordinators to define the PSC community and target community, and the assets and needs of each community. Then, partnership operations and stakeholder interactions were discussed. Questions about program evaluation and program impact upon community needs and PSC learning outcomes followed. Coordinators also reflected upon indicators of sustained commitment to the program by both the university and the target community. PSC staff required all PSC community program coordinators to complete the tool, but only 15 of the 25 programs related to education and health did so, for a response rate of 60%. Given the nature of the conversation, as well as small sample size, a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) is used to identify themes that emerged from the analysis of the strategic planning tools. These themes were triangulated with local knowledge gained from participant-observation in the PSC context to make conclusions consistent across multiple sources of data.

**Discussion**

**How Communities Are Defined**

In the strategic planning tool, coordinators began by defining the PSC community and the target community for their program. The PSC community was typically first defined by occupation (i.e., job titles) and academic interests (i.e., area of study). Some respondents also spoke about the gender and geographic origin of their volunteers; a few discussed general “demographics” of the PSC community as being similar to that of the university and identified the PSC community as “diverse,” but not as diverse as their target community. In the strategic planning tool, no one reported (or, when prompted, knew) specific numbers related to the race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status of the PSC community. No one knew specific numbers related to the race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status of the PSC community, perhaps because
race and class are seen as taboo topics to discuss. One can infer that if coordinators do not know the race or class of the PSC community and/or their volunteers, or at least do not choose to share it, then there is still a level of discomfort in acknowledging the critical importance of race and class in community partnerships. Chávez, Duran, Baker, Avila and Wallerstein (2005) discuss the importance of understanding frameworks of racism and oppression when doing community-based work; one way to do so is by practicing cultural humility rather than simply being culturally competent (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998).

In contrast, the target community was almost always defined by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status: programs categorically served low-income communities of color. It is important to know the race and class of your target community because there is often a tailored research base to address needs of these particular communities. For example, the research base on targeted programs for urban, low-income students of color is substantial (Bourke & Jayman, 2011). Knowing the approximate percentage of Hispanic and Black students in a school and the percent eligible for free or reduced lunch reflects a preliminary level of knowledge about a community that can inform further research to tailor the program to the local context, since this information is typically easily available online. However, no coordinators reported using research as an asset for their programs. Therefore, we must consider what the added value of knowing the racial and socioeconomic breakdown of the target population is, to avoid making the stereotypical assumption that people are in need or at risk because they are low-income and of color (Bourke & Jayman, 2011). We must use the information about race and class to inform programmatic work and advance the work to have a deeper impact by focusing on issues that have been determined to be particularly important in the target community subgroups. For example, knowing that a program’s target population is primarily children of Spanish-speaking immigrants could allow the program to translate the materials they send home.

This mismatch in descriptors of each community raises the question of whether PSC coordinators thought about themselves in relation to their target community, something that is critical for functional partnerships (Minkler, 2004; Montoya & Kent, 2011). Something that a number of coordinators identified was that the PSC volunteer population did not mirror the local urban population. Again, this is an important observation, but we must delve deeper to understand whether having a volunteer population that more closely reflected the target population would increase the impact of the program, and how. Additionally, given that the university’s demographics are not going to dramatically change in the near future, we must think about what we can change in order to have a similarly increased impact.

**Asset Mapping**

The process of asset mapping (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1997) or asset identification (Minkler & Hancock, 2003) has been discussed at length elsewhere. The coordinators identified their primary responsibilities as logistical in nature, and as such, tended to focus on the logistical assets each partner provided, commonly listing facilities like space, computers, and vans as
assets for both the PSC/university and community partners. The PSC and university assets also included student volunteers and PSC full-time staff (who helped guide programs). In general, people power was much more likely to be mentioned as a PSC/university asset than as a community partner asset. PSC coordinators also had a limited view of what resources were available to them at the university, including the PSC public service fellowships. Currently, the main university assets used by PSC programs are university students and university e-mail. There are clearly more resources available within the university as an institution that can be used to support this work, including the faculty and students in the Education Department.

In general, coordinators had a more difficult time identifying the assets of the community partner. They tended to identify fewer assets and many more needs of their community partners. In one respect, the program was created to offer the university’s resources to fill community needs, so this makes a certain amount of sense. In another respect, this is a potentially troubling theme because it can perpetuate ideas of university students coming "down the hill" to share their resources rather than sustaining a reciprocal programmatic partnership. When considering sustainability, partners must be involved in the operation of a program to fully value the program's continued existence. In general, the university students' mindset is closer to that of “outreach,” or one-way, programs than of “engaged,” or two-way, programs, as defined by Ramaley (2005).

Coordinators acknowledged the need for more conversations with community contacts to better understand assets their partnership could utilize. Moreover, coordinators who had worked longer with their target community had a more advanced understanding of the assets of their community partner. This was demonstrated in several ways: better understanding of logistical items; having identified small grants from local foundations that they could apply for together; and having deep enough relationships with each of their community contacts to know who is best at helping boost morale, versus troubleshooting an issue, versus helping handle nitty-gritty details.

Needs Assessment
It was similarly difficult for respondents to identify the university’s needs. Some coordinators found the language of the tool (which equalized each partner in terms of assets and needs), problematic, because they believed that their partnership was based in a one-way transfer of university resources to fill their community partner’s needs. This suggests that student coordinators need to be trained in university-community partnership frameworks in addition to logistical matters. Although respondents agreed that PSC/university needs were few, the needs they identified included giving back to the community and gaining exposure to the local community, underscoring the perceived one-way resource transfer. Interestingly, PSC staff, but not student coordinators, also discussed academic “needs”—that is, ways in which student learning could occur through volunteering with community programs.
After struggling to identify needs of the PSC and the university, coordinators readily identified the target community’s needs. These needs, including after-school programming and improved literacy and math skills, were often filled by the program being discussed. This is further suggestive evidence of coordinators’ deficit view of the community partner: not only is the target community defined in terms of race and socioeconomic status as a proxy for need (as researchers of the “deficit model” suggest [Weiner, 2005]), but they also have fewer assets and more needs. However, this is also the view perpetuated by society at large and in the media, and student coordinators are not wholly responsible. Their coordinator position is a part-time job, and they spend a limited number of hours at their community partner’s site each week. While we can expect them to think critically about what they know and what they don’t, we cannot expect them to know the target community as well as their community partner for the simple reason that they are not immersed in the experience.

**Partnership Operation**

Each PSC program tended to have at least four stakeholders with unique roles: student volunteers, the student coordinator(s), the PSC staff supervisor, and the community partner. The coordinators discussed their role and the volunteers’ role in terms of logistics: organizing every aspect of the program and day-to-day operations. The relationship between coordinators and PSC staff supervisors varied significantly across programs, but all PSC staff supervisors filled a unique role that also helped the coordinators achieve one of the six PSC learning outcomes: local knowledge. Similarly, the role and responsibilities of the community partner varied substantially from program to program. In general, the community partners served one of two distinct roles: physically, some partners provided space (one program listed its primary contact as the school custodian, because he had the keys); and intellectually, other partners shared local knowledge and networks within which programs operated.

There were also questions about indicators of university and community partner sustained commitment. Coordinators generally said that the indicators of sustained commitment were a continued volunteer base and a continued base of participants. While these are very important indicators, PSC staff and coordinators should think about some other indicators of commitment other than the maintenance of the status quo (e.g., CCPH Board of Directors, 2006; Sandoval et al., 2011). For example, constructive criticism from the community partner may be an even stronger indicator of sustained commitment because they have invested the time to critique the program to ensure that it is as successful as possible (Wallerstein et al., 2005). Additionally, I posit that an advanced indicator of sustained community commitment could be the program no longer needing to exist because its activities have been integrated into the operations of the community partner or because it has become an independent community organization. Both of these sample indicators would seem negative on the surface because they disrupt the status quo, but both represent a higher level of commitment and one worth working towards.
Evaluation

Very few groups measured their program’s impact. The programs that do report measuring impact have easily quantifiable measures to use, such as SAT scores reported by a SAT and college preparation program. A number of programs report doing constant self-assessment of the program, through check-ins with volunteers and with participants, but do not consider these to be program evaluations. Counting things and surveying people are common evaluation tools, but there are myriad other ways to evaluate a program. These include having a conversation to “take stock” of the current status of the program (Roe et al., 2005), interviewing a diverse set of key stakeholders and identifying areas of overlap (e.g., Cohen, 2011), and more (Rubin, 2000). Student coordinators and community partners should receive training about evaluation to understand its importance and to learn evaluation methodology (including some creative ways to measure impact) throughout the year, but it is critical to start this training at the beginning of the year, because the most informative program evaluations are forward thinking and are planned in advance. Many, such as Stoecker et al. (2010), note the importance of including community partners in assessment, including methods such as participatory or empowerment evaluation (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007), which attempts to build community capacity through the evaluation process (Coombe, 2005). Impact evaluation and program assessment, in which evaluation results are used to inform strategic planning (Watkins and Kaufman, 2002), are current gaps in coordinator knowledge that PSC staff supervisors and university faculty trained in program evaluation methods could fill. By measuring programmatic impact, PSC programs will know if they are addressing the needs of each partner, and the PSC and the EETF will have a more comprehensive understanding of the current and potential impact of the PSC programs. Evaluation is critical to the health of a program, and there is much room for improvement in the evaluation of PSC programs.

Conclusions

The findings presented in this paper contribute to the existing research base on university-community partnerships by adding to our understanding of how university partners perceive the roles of the different partners, including what the role of a private university in the public interest should be. In particular, a surplus perspective of the university partner and a deficit perspective of the community partner are observed. The challenge is to ensure that these surplus and deficit perspectives do not restrict partnerships to the “charity” portion of Morton’s (1995) spectrum but instead understand and address why such inequities exist and how these partnerships can work to address them to achieve the “social change” end of the service learning spectrum. Recommendations about program management to assess impact are also made.

Surplus Perspective of University Partner

The PSC community was often identified by skills offered, either by occupation or course of study descriptions, rather than race or class. This mismatch in descriptors of each community
raises the question of whether PSC coordinators thought about themselves in relation to their target community, something that is critical for functional partnerships. Although program coordinators tended to identify the university as being more resource-rich than the community partners, the main university assets currently used by PSC programs were students and e-mail. Coordinators did not identify many PSC and university assets that they were currently not using but had access to, indicating that they were not in a mindset of continual programmatic improvement and iterative progress. Public service centers can help by providing an infrastructure for professional and programmatic development that encourages creatively identifying diverse assets.

In comparison to the six PSC learning outcomes developed by PSC full-time staff, which they consider to be the university “needs” or, more precisely, wants (see Watkins and Kaufman, 2002) filled by community programs, the list of respondent-identified needs does not match well. Some coordinators mentioned items aligned with some of the learning outcomes, but they were not discussed as a set. The mismatch between PSC staff-identified university needs and student coordinator-identified university needs signals that the perceived needs of university students are unclear within the academic partner.

**Deficit Perspective of Community Partners**

The community partner was most frequently identified in terms of race and class. We must consider what the added value of knowing the racial and socioeconomic breakdown of the target population is, so that we do not make the stereotypical assumption that because people are low-income and of color that they are needy. Information about race and class can be used to inform programmatic work and advance the work to have a deeper impact by focusing on issues that have been determined to be particularly important issues in the target community subgroups, like immigration rights. However, the deficit perspective focuses on individual characteristics (like race, class, and parents) rather than social paradigms (like racism and endemic poverty) as the explanation for poor student achievement (Weiner, 2005).

Respondents easily listed the needs of their community partners. While it may be true that many of these target communities do have more needs that university students can fill and that the resource dynamic may be unequal, deficit views can limit the expectations programs and schools have for student achievement and can help perpetuate racism (Yosso, 2005). Having a deficit view of students can prevent principals from leading schools that are equitable for all students (including students of color) (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004), so it follows that maintaining a deficit view of students could hamper coordinator efforts to implement the EETF’s education equity strategy.

**Mutually Beneficial, Asset-Driven Partnerships**

In conclusion, university stakeholders routinely conceptualized university and community partners as coming from surplus and deficit, respectively. In order to do more deliberate, asset-driven work (e.g., McKnight & Kretzmann, 1997), we must recognize and critically analyze how
stakeholders conceptualize their roles within a university-community partnership. In particular, how do community partners conceive the roles of the university and community partners? In surveys of both university and community partners in a sample of public service programs at the same university, Cohen et al. (2008) found that community partners were grateful for any and all assistance and helped perpetuate a perceived unidirectional deliverance of resources, but further research must be done to understand if these results are replicable.

Student leaders of community partnerships are in a dual role of both student and university partner in program provision. We encourage university public service centers to scaffold student leaders’ training and learning such that student leaders become better students by helping weave together academic knowledge with the applied setting, and become better leaders by having a deep understanding of the community with which they are working. We acknowledge that developing sustainable and impactful university-community partnerships is resource- and time-intensive, which is not necessarily compatible with the frequent turnover among student leaders, who are only enrolled for a finite period of time. We encourage university public service centers to help develop and maintain the infrastructure initiated by student leaders and community partners.

More generally, university-community partnerships should look to the rich body of literature in community-based participatory research (see Israel et al., 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008) and to the growing literature in university-assisted community schools (see Benson et al., 2000) to develop guiding principles for program management that encourage community-based, asset-driven, and mutually beneficial partnerships. More research also should be done to develop best practices.

Author Note
✓ The author acknowledges the guidance, feedback, and support of Brown University’s Laura Snyder, Roger Nozaki, and Linda Cunningham. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2009 American Educational Research Association conference in San Diego, CA.

References


Appendix: Public Service Center Strategic Planning Tool

1. Basic information:
A. General Data:

Date:

Community program:

Coordinator name:

Public Service Center supervisor:

Community Partner(s):

Primary community contact(s) and contact information:

B. Who is the Public Service Center community? Be as specific as possible, including demographic and geographic information to describe them. How does the Public Service Center community compare to the university community at large?

C. Who is your target community? Be as specific as possible, including demographic and geographic information to describe them. Why were they chosen as your target population?

2. Asset mapping:
In a partnership, it is critical to first consider what assets each partner brings to the collaboration. Assets include tangible resources like facilities, monetary resources and donations, people power (including students), and intangible qualities like knowledge, ideas and models, and flexibility.

A. Public Service Center:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSC assets we currently use:</th>
<th>PSC assets we could use in the future:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who do you talk with when you try to identify the Public Service Center’s assets?
B. University (beyond Public Service Center):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University assets we currently use:</th>
<th>University assets we could use in the future:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who do you talk with when you try to identify university assets?

C. Community partner:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partner assets we currently use:</th>
<th>Partner assets we could use in the future:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who do you talk with when you try to identify the community partner’s assets?

D. The community and other organizations (if applicable):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assets we currently use:</th>
<th>Assets we could use in the future:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who do you talk with when you try to identify other organization’s assets?

3. Needs assessment:

A needs assessment is a critical step in identifying areas for the partnership to work on improving so that they can have a measurable impact. An important distinction emphasized in the research literature is that there may be a difference between what outsiders believe the needs of the community to be and what the community states its needs to be. One particularly good definition of engagement is “mutually beneficial community-university knowledge-based relationships” (Holland, 2000). This makes us recognize that all partners must have needs being filled for a partnership to be a continued success.

A. What are the needs of the Public Service Center /University community? (Examples include fulfilling student learning outcomes, preparing students for non-profit work post-college, public relations) How were these needs determined? (Examples include conversations with PSC staff, reading mission statements, personal observations.)
Public Service Center/University needs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSC/University need:</th>
<th>How need was determined:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. What are the needs of your target community? (Examples include college access, leadership development, disrepair of school facilities, after-school programming for high schoolers, improved math performance, etc.) How were these needs determined? (Examples include standardized test scores, communication with community partner, discussions with students in target community, etc.)

Target community needs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target community need:</th>
<th>How need was determined:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Partnership operation:

*Communication is a critical part of any partnership and can help inform your program’s continual progress. One analysis (Cohen et al., 2008) that considered how university student groups serve local communities found that student group leaders tend to initiate communication, and the frequency of communication affects student groups’ understandings of the communities’ demographics and needs. There is also a discrepancy between how effective the student groups and the community partners perceive the partnership to be, in part due to minimal contact between the two entities around issues of evaluation of program impact.*
A. How do you interact with the other stakeholders in your partnership?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder:</th>
<th>How you communicate with this stakeholder (i.e., e-mail, phone, in person) and how often (weekly, daily, etc.):</th>
<th>What you discuss with this stakeholder (assets, needs, evaluation, logistics, etc.):</th>
<th>Primary responsibilities of stakeholder:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-coordinator(s) (if applicable)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Service Center staff supervisor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student volunteers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community partner(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. How do you use other resources to strengthen your partnership?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource:</th>
<th>How often you use this resource:</th>
<th>What you use this resource for:</th>
<th>How you share these resources with other stakeholders:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other people you’re in regular communication with (like faculty)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print resources (research, materials from your classes, local newspaper, current policy issues)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Evaluating programmatic impact:

*We have invested so much in these projects because we believe that they can make a difference.*

A. How does your program evaluate your impact? How would you like to evaluate your impact?

B. Describe the impact this program has (or can have) on addressing community needs, in terms of type of impact and sustainability. How is it measured?

C. Describe the impact this program has (or can have) on PSC student learning outcomes.

D. What are the indicators of student sustained commitment to the program?

E. What are the indicators of community sustained commitment to the program?

6. Next steps:

*There is always room for improvement in any partnership, but it is just as important to recognize what parts of your partnership work well and are worth sharing with others. This is helpful in terms of thinking about what other coordinators are doing that works well and identifying areas of overlap where you can work together on identifying solutions.*

A. What are three parts of your partnership that operate particularly well?

B. What are three areas that you would identify as current priorities for improvement?