

Fields of paradox: university–community partnerships

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Abstract University–community partnerships (UCP’s) are exciting areas of academic and social interest. This interest seems to be a response to the multiple challenges academic institutions and communities face in the context of the social, economic and institutional changes that affect both universities and communities worldwide. Along with the acknowledged benefits of such initiatives, studies have also noticed that UCP’s tend to engender internal tensions and conflicts which harm the spirit of collaboration between partners. This article challenges the conception of UCP’s as inherently conflictive and suggests a more complex vision. It argues that UCP’s can be better understood through organizational paradox theory. This theory offers a way to grapple with the complexity of UCP’s and overcome the binary conception of conflict or collaboration. The article illustrates the interrelatedness of conflict and collaboration by presenting seven areas that characterize the paradoxical nature of UCP’s.

Keywords University–community partnership · Paradox theory · Engaged scholarship · Higher education

Introduction

University–community partnerships (UCP’s) are areas of growing academic and social interest. Both, universities and communities see these joint ventures as opportunities to achieve different goals. Universities see them as expressions of ‘engaged scholarship’, by means of which academic institutions can reinvigorate their academic missions. For their part, communities look at these enterprises as means to advance their social agendas. Studies that have documented these initiatives portray them as complex enterprises characterized by multiple tensions and conflicts which in many cases undermine their

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success. The present article, by contrast, takes its start from Organizational Paradox Theory. On this basis, this study aims to question the binary construction of conflict-collaboration and propose a different view of UCP's as 'fields of paradox'. This article is divided into three sections. In the first section, we briefly review the relevant literature regarding UCP's and introduce the theoretical framework of the article. The second section describes seven areas of paradox that characterize UCP's; the third section assesses the contribution of the organizational paradox theory to the understanding of UCP's and concludes with some practical implications.

University–community partnerships

University–community partnerships concept is a wide umbrella concept which may include community-based research projects, service-learning activities, university–community educational agencies shared programs and even community-based training programs (Russell and Flynn 2001). These collaborations unfold different types of engagement, modes of operation, scopes of activities and levels of commitments. Second, the UCP's construct is deeply affected by unlike perceptions of the term “community” which may be represented by individuals (neighbors), institutions (school or community agencies), or social groups (geographical, functional or virtual communities). Therefore, different representations of the “community” obviously affect the ways in which partnerships are defined and institutionalized. Third, UCP's differ in the meanings enacted to the concept of partnership which is a highly discursive concept. In this regard, it seems important to discern, for example, between UCP's that are sometimes carried out by an individual faculty member involved in a community-based research project from UCP's that are institutionally carried out based on a systemic and long-term comprehensive effort. In this regard, Butcher et al. (2011) distinguish between “transactional” partnerships and “transformational partnerships.” Transactional partnerships are based on the achievement of individual or institutional interests through exchange processes. However, both parts which benefit from the interchange are likely to remain fundamentally unchanged. In contrast, a transformational partnership has multiple dimensions including ideological, ethical, institutional and social dimensions in which all the partners pursue common actions and goals as they use their capabilities and assets to tackle complex social issues. These transformational partnerships are characterized by comprehensiveness, shared planning, management and evaluation, mutuality, long term commitment, strong leadership support, and university immersion in the process of capacity building within the community. In this article, we refer to UCP's in the last, wider conception as a complex, institutional, lasting collaboration between academic institutions and communities.

The development of UCP's arena in the last decades has responded to huge social, economic and institutional transformations that have affected the academic and organizational cultures of research higher education institutions (Brown-Luthango 2013; Carlton et al. 2009; Fisher et al. 2005). Many research universities have positively reacted to the call to expand the boundaries of the narrow concept of scholarship beyond the limits of academic research by launching programs and activities which promoted a new kind of scholarship, a scholarship of engagement (Boyer 1990, 1996). Governments and leading funding institutions infused vitality to this trend by supporting and funding campus–community initiatives all over the world. In this way universities started addressing pressing social issues through innovative, long term alliances with communities (Amev and Brown 2005; Arches and Aponte-Pares 2005b).

This development has pushed forward the area of UCP's as important arena of research. Studies on UCP's cover multiple issues such as their impact on both the academic institutions and the communities (D'Augelli 2006; Dulmus and Cristalli 2012; Buys and Bursnall 2007); the production of knowledge and the development of teaching methodologies (Farquhar and Dobson 2004; Johnson Butterfield and Soska 2005; Suarez-Balcazar and Kinney 2006); the positive impact of UCP's in the production of social capital (Feagan and Rossiter 2011; Gronksi and Pigg 2000; Mulroy 2008); the function of UCP's in processes of policy advocacy and advancement of social rights (Mulroy 2004); the characteristics of successful partnerships and best practices (Stewart and Alrutz 2012; Taylor et al. 2004); and finally on the study of collaboration–conflict paradigm (Jarvis-Selinger et al. 2008; Kaufman 2004). These studies show that UCP's building is a highly complex process which involves multiple tensions and conflicts (Strier 2011).

These studies confirm the intricacy of these processes and illustrate the barriers to collaboration and mutuality (Cobb and Rubin 2006; Maurrasse 2002) which are linked to the structure of universities or communities and the nature of their interactions (Gronksi and Pigg 2000; Huxham and Vangen 2000). Collaboration processes may fail for various reasons. One of the main reasons for failure relates to issues of unequal power division (Gray 2003; 2004a, b; Maurrasse 2001). Imbalances in power between faculty and community inhibit movement toward engagement (Dantnow 1998). Studies show that universities tend to benefit from these long term partnerships more than communities do, creating a sense of resentment and mistrust (Gray 2000; Perkins et al. 2004). These studies reveal that the development of significant partnerships assumes to dealing with institutional tensions, conflicts of interests, bureaucratic constraints, poor planning and implementation, lack of ongoing evaluation processes, competition over resources and recognition, stakeholders' differential knowledge and experience, value clashes, mistrust and frequent uncertainty about the viability of the proposed outcomes (Altman 2005; Maginn 2007). Whereas these factors are seen in most studies as barriers to collaboration, this article suggests an alternative theoretical framework which overcomes the binary perception of collaboration–conflict as opposite concepts. This perspective stresses the interrelatedness of collaboration and conflict as formative and generative aspects of UCP's.

Partnership: the paradox of collaboration and conflict

Partnerships are complex organizations characterized intermittently by both conflict and collaboration (Strier 2011). In contrast to a dysfunctional view of conflict, the simultaneous presence of conflict and collaboration in partnership building can be seen as a paradox, namely as the simultaneous presence of seemingly mutually exclusive elements (Luscher et al. 2006). Smith and Lewis highlight “two components of paradox: (1) underlying tensions—that is, elements that seem logical individually but inconsistent and even absurd when juxtaposed—and (2) responses that embrace tensions simultaneously” (Smith and Lewis 2011, p. 382). Desivilya and Palgi (2011) portray partnerships as dialectical entities. On the one hand they are established in order to enable cooperation among the partners, yet each of the partners is motivated to promote and emphasize its own interests, at times at the expense of the others. The inherent complexity of partnership organizations lies in the fact that they are intentionally designed to face complex tasks by managing, integrating, balancing competing interests and demands in multifaceted institutional, economic and social environments (Luscher and

Lewis 2008). Although neutralizing competing tensions might improve immediate performance, a paradox perspective argues that the long-term sustainability of partnership organizations requires continuous efforts to meet multiple, divergent demands. The paradox perspective facilitates the integration of collaboration and conflict by viewing duality, uncertainty, equivocality, and ambiguity as inherent features of the organizational complexity of UCP's (Lewis 2000).

UCP's: fields of paradox

Based on the literature review above, let us now turn to a discussion of seven areas of paradox that characterize transformational UCP's. These areas of paradox refer to the "built-in", inherent tensions in the establishment, management and development of UCP's (Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009).

"Top down" institutional presence versus "bottom up" grassroots orientation

One of the more common goals of transformational UCP's is the promotion of social change (Werkmeister Rozas and Negroni 2008). A UCP's endorsement of social change necessarily entails engagement in non-consensual and sometimes highly sensitive political issues (Cherry and Shefner 2004). It is not unusual, therefore, for the actions of a UCP to clash with strong, entrenched political or economic interests (Davies et al. 2007). Such actions may cause trouble for the local (and sometimes even the national) authorities and negatively affect present or future sources of private or public funding for the University (Arches and Apontes-Pares 2005a). Clearly, in light of the potential political tensions these partnerships may cause, UCP's commitment to social change cannot thrive without a clear and solid "top-down" support and a commitment at the highest institutional level of the university. This institutional support is only achieved through the real involvement and close supervision by the higher-level ranks of academic authority.

On the one hand, healthy and genuine UCP engagement in community building requires a "bottom-up", participative grassroots orientation, which favors a non-hierarchical and egalitarian approach to decision-making. To be compatible with the premise of community empowerment, a UCP's organizational culture should reflect its democratic and emancipatory nature. In order to create this open, non-bureaucratic organizational environment for the empowerment of community members, faculty and students, the academic authorities must voluntarily give up a great deal of institutional control over the management of the partnership. The paradox entails in maintaining "top down" legitimacy while ensuring an authentic "bottom up" orientation is one of the multiple sources of tensions in UCP's. These tensions may be expressed in the overt disagreement of academic authorities with decisions and actions determined and carried out by community members, faculty or students at the grassroots level. In some cases, these tensions may be expressed in the discontent of community, faculty or students with decisions taken by the academic authorities without their involvement.

Improving the quality of relations versus increasing organizational effectiveness

According to Wiewel and Lieber (1998) relationship building (input) and goal achievement (outputs) are not opposites, the relative emphasis on one or the other depends on the specific context in which the partnership evolves. The tension between building and

maintaining relationships and taking actions can be viewed as a matter of sequencing. However, a strong transformational UCP is a coalition of differences, an alignment of partners that would never have acted in a shared manner had the partnership not been established. These partners usually come from different institutional affiliations and differ in social class, ethnic, cultural, educational and sometimes even ideological background (Sandy and Holland 2006). Indeed, it seems that the more the variety among its members, the greater the strength and complexity of the partnership (Baum 2000). Complexity means the need for constant maintenance of the quality of relationship among the partners. But the more energies are channelized into this, the better internal communication will be within the partnership. Complexity allows for building bridges between diverse groups, creating a climate of acceptance, opening channels for understanding, and conflict resolution (Strand et al. 2003). On the other hand, the effectiveness of a UCP is assessed by its outcomes, namely, the achievement of tangible goals. These accomplishments require a mobilization of the internal energies of the partnership (Rogge and Rocha 2004). The more the energy of the UCP as a whole is focused on the external sphere in which it must act the greater its effectiveness (Nocon et al. 2004). Poor internal relations would lead to organizational stagnation, where multiple internal conflicts neutralize the ability of the partners to act as a unit (Ostrander and Chapin-Hogue 2011). Hence, a UCP requires the investment of considerable resources in “internal” maintenance which means fewer resources directed toward “external” goals.

Exposing unequal power relations versus strengthening trust

University–community partnerships tend to address social problems which are closely connected to unequal power relations in society (McCroskey and Einbinder 1998). To be effective, UCP’s should strive to publicize and to underscore the detrimental impact of social injustice (Mulroy 2004). However, UCP’s are themselves constituted by representatives of different social segments (faculty, students, local authorities, local services, members of excluded or marginalized groups) which, despite the best intentions to collaborate in the creation of more balanced power relations, reflect and embody the imbalances of the society in which they operate (Wiewel and Knaap 2005). In addition, many of these initiatives are shaped by critical ideologies that propose to examine openly the hitherto hidden inequities in a society (Gasker 2005). This stage in which participants explore power relations between them may lead to painful questions of trust (Strier 2011). Here is the paradox. The recommended examination of power relations among the partners may open questions of trust which in some cases may lead to internal tensions and conflicts. Old wounds are reopened, along with mistrust, past disappointments, the traumatized nature of exclusion, marginalization and discrimination. On the other hand, a refusal to discuss power relations carries its own risk. The UCP may replicate or even deepen unequal and oppressive relations between marginalized communities and elite groups. This unique situation can lead in one of two directions: stagnation in a swamp of mistrust and grievance or, if handled well, an experience of rejuvenation, new hopes for collaboration, and greater trust (Gass 2008).

Fostering an egalitarian approach versus respecting hierarchies

Sometimes, the institutional and societal hierarchies in which participants are embedded are transferred into the UCP. In other cases, according how lines of authority and decision making processes are structured within the UCP, they may be re-structured to attenuate

power differentials emanating from outside the UCP sphere. As stated above, the development of UCP's implies adopting a different, more egalitarian paradigm opposed to the existing unequal relations in society (Holland 2005). The experience of such an egalitarian framework within the UCP is a precondition for more open channels of communication between the university and the community, and thus a more open and authentic interchange of knowledge and experience (Barnes et al. 2009). Despite huge disparities in educational level between faculty members, students, community members, professionals and practitioners from social services and civic organizations, the egalitarian approach of a UCP opens the door to reflexivity, organizational learning, and a flexible and informal framework for the personal and collective growth of participants. On the other hand, the egalitarian, informal, internal approach of the UCP may be in tension with the external, formal and hierarchical institutional environment in which the relationships of UCP's members are embedded (faculty and students, social services providers and their clients, local authorities and community members, university administrations and faculty members). This tendency to foster egalitarianism in the midst of hierarchical power relations may generate multiple difficulties: the transgression of norms, the violation of formal boundaries, and the creation of a counter-culture which threatens necessary formal structures of power (Cox 2000). In other words, egalitarianism is both a precondition for mutuality and a latent threat to the viability and long term sustainability of UCP's.

Transformational goals versus tangible achievements

One of the critiques to UCP's, is that they distort political change. Davies et al. (2007), argue that many of UCP's are simply neo-liberal fictions, an illusory substitute, or escape, from real social and political engagement and change. Marullo and Edwards (2000) contrast the state of higher education institutions with a vision of a transformative academy committed to social change. They suggest that universities should help to politicize students. Moreover, they must change academic processes and criteria, alter faculty roles so these changes become part of a wide social transformation process. A difference, some UCP's build up their transformational profile to addressing major social problems such as poverty, exclusion, racism and other social ills (Gelmon et al. 1998). Naturally, large scale transformations of such structural issues demands time, energy and a long term commitment. These changes engage participants in advocacy campaigns, coalition building, lobbying, social action and other activities that characterize a transformational political process (Marullo and Edwards 2000). Communities find in UCP's real avenues for civic participation in processes of transformational social change. However, by their own nature these are long term processes, dependent on political circumstances beyond the partners' control. Sometimes, in the absence of tangible achievements (even small ones), communities lose their faith and desert. Therefore, despite their broader agenda, UCP's tend to work on short term, attainable goals and may sometimes lose sight of long term, transformational goals. Caught in this paradox, UCP's have to handle tensions between keeping transformative, far reaching goals and looking for short and middle range goals, tangible achievements that would keep the community engaged, though perhaps skeptical of the UCP's commitment to structural change.

Encouraging a shared *esprit de corps* versus respecting the multiplicity of identities

As stated previously, the success of UCP's depends, to a certain extent, on their internal cohesiveness (Nation et al. 2011). This cohesiveness is achieved through multiple activities

oriented toward creating a sense of togetherness, a shared identity able to sustain the initiative as a covenant between all its members. This sense of belonging helps participants collaborate, find shared answers to intricate issues, and conceal internal differences. In other words, cohesiveness is crucial for the achievement of a common morale, a strong *esprit de corps*.

On the other hand, the success of UCP's relies no less on the acceptance of identities, experiences and perspectives (Prins 2005) which are diverse, and sometimes radically dissimilar (Shefner and Cobb 2002). For faculty members, UCP's are sometimes an expression of their engaged scholarship, personal values and political beliefs. The students' experiences of partnership are logically shaped by their status and affiliation as university students. This pedagogical conception of UCP's generates great involvement in the educational process but may also engender questions about the student's real level of commitment to the goals of the UCP. For civil society organizations (NGO's, social services, community organizations), UCP's may respond to different needs and motivations of each organization. In contrast to all others participants, for community members, participation in the UCP is crucial to the future of their own families and the community as a whole. This hope for transformational change is a source of motivation for community members, resulting in a high level of participation. In addition, UCP's are sometimes perceived as viable means for oppressed groups to get recognition to their silenced identities, a way to become visible. Therefore, while consolidation of a solid *esprit de corps* requires emphasizing a shared new identity, an identity based on commonalities, the internally diverse composition of the UCP's also necessitates paying attention and recognizing the different identities, motivations and experiences of participants.

Discipline for long term involvement versus generating permanent innovation

The engagement of people in transformational social change demands perseverance, self-discipline and innovation (Rodin 2005). For UCP's, success depends on the ability to overcome changing political circumstances, shifting funding preferences, competing social agendas, and frequent disappointments (Arches and Apontes-Pares 2005a). Clearly, then, the achievement of long term goals demands a deep commitment. However, holding together a disciplined constituency over considerable periods of time requires permanent innovation, which is necessary for preventing obvious problems such as "burn-out" and high turnover, which would risk continuity. In the lifetime of a UCP, students will permanently rotate in and out of the partnership as they complete their studies and new, young recruits take their place. Similarly, confronted with the obligations of everyday life and the demands of participation on their time and energy community members will also exhibit a high rate of turnover. Faculty members, too, must fulfill their academic and career responsibilities, and thus will rotate in and out of active membership in the partnership (Maurrase 2001).

On the one hand, such turnover risks undermining the continuity of UCP's; on the other hand, it brings new blood, ideas and new energies to the initiative, which helps to keep the partnership young and vital. Thus, the long term sustainability of UCP's depends on what seem to be mutually exclusive qualities, such as perseverance and innovation, self-discipline and spontaneity, continuity and change which are intimately and paradoxically intertwined. Along with the six paradoxes described above, this paradox illustrates the concurrent existence of seemingly reciprocally exclusive elements in the development of lasting and transformative UCP's.

Discussion

The article suggests a more multifaceted vision of UCP's which better fits their complexity as organizations characterized by a high level of tension, conflicts, contradictions, and competing identities, interests and agendas. The article illustrates the interrelatedness of conflict and collaboration through seven central paradoxes of UCP's, which we have discussed thus far. The article suggests viewing UCP's as constructed fields in which different agents re-negotiate their identities and hierarchies as part of a search for new shared meanings. A field, according to Bourdieu is in the first instance, a structured space of positions and in a second stance "an arena of struggle through which agents and institutions seek to preserve or overturn the existing distribution of capital...it is a battlefield wherein the bases of identity and hierarchy are endlessly disputed over" (Wacquant 2008, p. 8). In other words, we can define a UCP as a contested arena in which different agents with different social positions (in this case from academia and the community) come together to renegotiate, struggle over, and define new hierarchies, meanings and distributions of capital—whether social, cultural, economic or symbolic. This theoretical conception helps us to overcome the dysfunctional view of UCP's by integrating collaboration and conflict as formative and generative components of UCP's.

We argue that UCP's would be better understood through the organizational paradox theory. This theoretical lens reflects the complexity of UCP's and helps us overcome binary conceptions of conflict as opposed to collaboration. By adopting this model, the duality, uncertainty, equivocality, and ambiguity that characterize UCP's, rather than being portrayed as dysfunctional components, are seen as integral components of its organizational success. The definition of UCP's as fields of paradox proposed in this article simultaneously incorporates elements that seem inconsistent and generate high levels of internal tension but nevertheless respond to the needs of organizations facing the economic, political and institutional complexities of a changing world.

Implications for the establishment, management and development of UCP's

The conception of UCP's as fields of paradox implies the need to train and prepare all leadership and members partaking in the partnership (from the university and the community) for dealing with the intricacies of paradox, an ability Duncan referred to as "organizational ambidexterity" (Duncan 1976). It entails coping with the contradictory logic of learning and performing, exploring and exploiting, reflecting and acting, being and doing.

In line with this theoretical perspective, leaders and managers of UCP's should be able to effectively handle tensions and conflicts related to different types of paradox. Luscher et al. (2006) identify three types of paradox: belonging (clashing but complementary identities), performing (role conflict and cooperation) and organizing (divergent and convergent organizational sub-cultures). These types of paradox present leaders and managers with several challenges. For example, challenging belonging paradoxes implies looking for ways to stressing internal cohesiveness while celebrating diversity of identities or recognizing unequal power relations while enhancing trust by attenuating power inequalities. In addition, partners should face performing paradoxes such as improving the quality of internal relations while increasing organizational effectiveness; looking for transformational, long term goals while attaining tangible, short term gains, nurturing "bottom up" organizational structure while ensuring "top down" support, respecting

institutional formal hierarchies while developing internal egalitarian counter cultures or fostering continuity while creating a culture of permanent innovation.

In order to handle with high degrees of complexity which are intrinsic characteristics of partnerships, UCP's primary premise is therefore to establish a critical and reflective organizational culture in which UCP's participants advance a collective mindset centered on the theoretical and practical embrace of paradox (Smith and Tushman 2005). A critical and reflective organizational culture means the establishment of organizational climate, practices and processes that make room for a continuous open dialogue on the views and perspectives that informed how UCP's participants frame social issues, define goals, develop actions, and assess results, especially in light of unequal power relations in UCP's and in society in general (Schön 1992).

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