

Prisons, Community Partnerships, and Academia: Sustainable Programs and Community Needs

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IN RECENT YEARS, the effect of the economic downturn on state budgets has exacerbated the urgent needs of our most vulnerable citizens. Services across an array of state institutions have been cut, often significantly, with potential consequences threatening to have cascading effects and further overwhelm an insolvent system. There is an immediate need for innovative, low-cost programs to meet community needs.

One of the most underserved arenas, and one of the hardest hit by diminishing resources, are state prisons, where inmate programming is often the first service to face cuts (Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal, Solomon, & Lindahl, 2009; Wilhelm & Turner, 2002; Williams, 2009). Among the many targets of cuts in pre-release services for inmates are vocational and educational programs, as well as substance abuse treatment services (Brazzell et al., 2009; Stevens & Ward, 1997; Wilhelm & Turner, 2002).

Fortunately, there are cost-effective and efficient solutions to help meet the needs of community members, address social and educational inequalities, and assist prisons in discharging public safety mandates. Community-academic

partnerships are increasingly seen as a way to bring vital resources to the community and to underfunded state institutions. Regrettably, however, there is a dearth of literature on how universities and prison systems can create sustainable partnerships.

There are many reasons for this. For academicians, chief among their concerns are: unfamiliar rules, bureaucratic hurdles, hesitancy in dealing with members of a “protected class,” liability issues associated with the perceived dangers of being in a prison environment, and even fears of cultural and socioeconomic clashes between academicians and prison staff (Brazzell et al., 2009; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Nyden & Wiewel, 1992; Schultz, 1992; Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, & Lewis, 2005; Wolff & Gerardi, 2007). Prison management teams have somewhat different concerns; they fear the introduction of programs and curricula that are not sanctioned by the state bureaucracy, as well as the establishment of non-evidence-based programs that do not contribute to inmates’ desistance efforts (J. Boyer, personal communication, June, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to thematically address these issues by:

1. Discussing a successful, sustainable community partnership between Portland State University (PSU) and an Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC) state prison, Columbia River Correctional Institution (CRCI);
2. Demonstrating the relevance of salient elements in the literature to the specific partnership detailed here; and
3. Explaining the benefits of academic-prison partnerships for the correctional system, academic institutions, inmates, and the community at large.

Community Partnership

In 2009, PSU started a partnership with the local state prison, CRCI. CRCI is a pre-release facility with approximately 550 beds, located in northeast Portland, Oregon. The partnership grew out of an environment of mutual concern and genuine interest—both PSU and CRCI recognized the gathering storm of an economic crisis, the profound and inadequately-addressed needs of prisoners releasing to the community, and attendant issues of public safety. With full support of CRCI’s

leadership team and the prison's superintendent, the partnership initially took the form of an internship. One graduate student intern from PSU's criminology and criminal justice division of the Hatfield School of Government sought external funding by researching funding agencies and subsequently managing and editing a grant, with the explicit purpose of helping high-risk inmates successfully transition back into the community. The intern worked closely with the CRCI leadership team, ODOC transitional services, a former ODOC research manager, and a faculty member from PSU's philosophy department.

The intern and ODOC staff submitted a grant proposal that targeted the development and evaluation of ODOC's transitional program designed to assist inmates in the desistance and reentry process. Information regarding the grant was disseminated to CRCI's management team, CRCI's incoming superintendent, the director of the Oregon State Department of Corrections, and appropriate academic heads at PSU. The successful development, management, and submission of the grant application exemplify an academic-prison partnership success. Even though this initial effort was ultimately unsuccessful in obtaining the desired funding, the underlying project work is a tangible demonstration of the collaborative relationship between these two state agencies, both of which harnessed their collective resources to address a shared concern.

Because feedback from all of the stakeholders was overwhelmingly positive, PSU and CRCI decided to expand their community partnership by increasing the total number of internships. Three additional internships at CRCI have been approved: one internship was completed and ended with the fall 2011 term; the second was completed in the fall 2011 term and renewed for the winter 2012 term; and the third internship has recently been approved and will be commencing shortly. (In line with PSU's commitment to diversity, the newest grant-writing intern is an exchange student from China.)

In addition to grant-related tasks, other services provided by these interns include assisting prison administrators with ODOC management presentations and interviewing inmates on-site (and over the phone) to match up soon-to-be-released offenders with mentors who will assist them with reintegration in the community.

Furthermore, PSU's Graduate School of Education, Curriculum and Instruction has

opened a curriculum designer internship at CRCI. The curriculum designer will work with correctional administrators to determine the outstanding educational/instructional needs of inmates. Based on feedback from prison staff, the curriculum designer will develop evidence-based education and programming curricula, and relevant interventions for high-risk inmates. The ultimate objective of the curricula is to equip inmates to successfully transition back to the community. Additional interns from PSU's Graduate School of Education and Postsecondary, Adult, and Continuing Education (PACE) will subsequently teach this curriculum.

Finally, the goal is to make this partnership sustainable, and to do so a graduate public administration internship (GPAI) was created. The person who holds the GPAI manages and coordinates the interns, recruits new candidates, and finds replacements for the positions, including her own replacement. (The criteria for the GPAI are a solid history of high academic achievement, previous management/recruitment experience, and faculty and employer recommendations.) This public administration internship, which focuses on the administrative aspect of community partnerships, is vital for the long-term maintenance of these programs, as it minimizes faculty time commitments while maintaining accountability.

None of these internships are paid, but all interns receive academic credits for the successful completion of their work (which includes graded papers detailing their experiences and relating what they have learned back to the relevant literature). To ensure the ethical treatment of unpaid interns, strict guidelines are followed to guarantee that the intern relationships are not exploitative.¹

Creating Sustainable Community Partnerships

There is no single recipe for creating and managing a mutually productive, sustainable academic-prison partnership. Much has been written about effective community partnerships in other domains, particularly with regard to healthcare, but there is little literature about the types of partnerships discussed here (Ahmed, Beck, Maurana, & Newton, 2004; Minkler et al., 2008). This section will note three strategies found in the literature, offer

pragmatic suggestions for developing sustainable community partnerships between prisons and academic institutions, and show how these strategies informed and guided the community partnership between CRCI and PSU.

Listen

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey identifies an indispensable "habit" that also has an extensive pedigree in the community-based research literature: "Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood" (Birrell et al., 1998; Covey, 1989; Wiewel & Broski, 1997). Each community partner needs to assess not only its own needs and motivations, but the needs and motivations of both the institutions and of the specific individuals involved in the relationship. Only after genuinely listening to the needs and concerns of each partner and explicitly understanding the advantages of community partnership can programs be designed that specifically target desiderata. Through mutual understanding, each actor has a vested interest in the outcome, and concerns—like hegemonic fears over lack of autonomy—can be preempted.

In regard to the PSU-CRCI partnership, internship creation was a direct response not only to budget cuts but also to *specific staff concerns* regarding what services inmates needed but were not receiving. For example, one of the transitional services staff at CRCI wanted to further develop and evaluate Home For Good in Oregon (HGO). HGO is an ODOC institutional program that works "to insure [sic] successful transition of offenders from prison to the community" ("Home for Good," 2011). Anecdotal reports of the program were universally positive (O'Connor, Cayton, Taylor, McKenna, & Monroe, 2004). The staff's desire to further develop the program and seek independent and demonstrative evidence of HGO's effectiveness culminated in the criminology and criminal justice intern assisting in the management and preparation of a detailed government grant proposal that would assess HGO's efficacy. The concerns of the ODOC staff, as they related to the needs of the inmates, directly determined the nature of this internship.

Finally, both PSU faculty and CRCI staff regularly meet and listen to each other's concerns about making existing internships more productive and expanding opportunities for

¹ For more information on the ethical treatment of interns and accepted standards for interns, see the National Association of Colleges and Employers *Position Statement on U.S. Internships*: http://www.naceweb.org/connections/advocacy/internship_position_paper/

each community partner.² Listening does not cease once initial ideas become realized.

Sustainability

Too often community partnerships fail either because they rely too much on particular individuals or they lack sufficient funding (Baum, 2000; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). For collaborative programs to be sustainable, that is, successfully maintained over the long term, there must be an institutionalized mechanism in place that ensures their success in perpetuity while limiting expenditures. This is even more pertinent in an age of draconian budget cuts.

The PSU-CRCI partnership remedied this through the creation of the graduate public administration internship (GPAI). The purpose of the GPAI is to self-replenish and self-manage academic resources and human capital by taking a leadership role in managing all of the other internship placements. The GPAI ensures that positions are filled by qualified graduate students (i.e., students demonstrating high academic achievement as well as direct experience and/or relevant skill sets) and also interfaces with various stakeholders. The GPAI is inherently sustainable and requires minimal faculty oversight. Due to this unique description of the position, and because the role itself is institutionalized and is part of academic course offerings, success is never dependent upon any single individual for an inordinate length of time.

It must be noted that the GPAI and other intern placements are only possible because interns are unpaid and receive academic credit (and other non-monetary benefits, like resumé building, practical experience, networking, etc.) for their labor. It is this necessary condition, "payment" in academic credits and not money, that allows for the possibility of the program's sustainability. This is not just limiting but exclusory for non-academic institutions. In the context of *academic* contributions to community well-being, however, offering academic credits for meaningful, relevant, and timely community work allows for the possibility of providing critically needed services and programs at no-to-low-cost. (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Chau, Vinekar, & Ran, 2006; Richards et al., 2008; Rose, Reschenberg, & Richards, 2010).

Finally, the community partnership described in this paper is also distinctive because the grant-writing internships are not solely limited to assisting prison staff with operational tasks; rather, the interns seek funding to develop existing (or implement entirely new) programs for inmates. In this regard, the internships have the potential to yield truly generative benefits to the prison staff, the inmates, and the community.

Dissemination

To offer possibilities for reevaluating and improving existing projects, to recognize the efforts of individuals, to demonstrate the results of collaboration, and ultimately to help maintain a successful community partnership, informal and anecdotal reports should be shared among stakeholders. Dissemination at the informal level could take many forms, including openly recognizing individual accomplishments at meetings, distributing project analyses to stakeholders, self-reporting project successes, etc.

Disseminating collaborative results at the stakeholder level yields possibilities to revisit two strategies noted in the beginning of this section: listening and sustainability. Findings can be used by members of a community partnership to refine goals, discuss specific strategies, and revisit sustainable solutions by genuinely listening to the needs of stakeholders and making appropriate adjustments.³

Benefits

Chief among the difficulties in establishing these programs were the initial steps in articulating the advantages for all involved partners. (One reason that formalization of academic-prison partnerships may be so rare is that there is scant literature detailing the benefits of these collaborative relationships.) This section will detail potential advantages for each community partner and explain underlying motivations for successfully interfacing with stakeholders.

Academia

Community collaboration has many distinct advantages both for individual academicians and for colleges and universities. First, principal among these is the possibility of

conducting research in prisons *with the institutional support of management teams*. Even the knowledge that the superintendent and staff are not just tolerating, but are actively supportive of academicians' projects, is highly coveted because it allays fears among academic researchers that they will not have an opportunity to complete their research and thus will lose a tremendous time investment.

Second, over the past decade there has been a trend in academia advocating that community service (also referred to as "service learning") be accorded the importance and merit that has been traditionally conferred upon scholarly research and teaching. Several universities have expanded the existing conception of service to include community-based activities (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Calleson, Jordan, & Seifer, 2005; Chau, Vinekar, & Ran, 2006; Holland, 1997; Sandmann, Saltmarsh & O'Meara, 2008). Traditionally, university services have included such metrics as the number of committees in which one was involved, one's service in governance roles, and participation in other activities that contribute to the effectiveness of the university and that benefit the discipline overall (Boddy et al., 2002; Woods, 2006).

With the institutional reevaluation of these traditional categories, new opportunities that center on community engagement are available for faculty and students. The resultant civic participation can improve the surrounding community's livability, aid in recruitment (i.e., attract students and faculty to the university), and enhance the public's perception of the university (Chau, Vinekar, & Ran, 2006).

Prisons

Collaboration with both academicians and academic institutions has numerous benefits for prison staff, the community, the prison's leadership team, and even state-level administrators. One critical objective of *every* department of corrections in the United States is ensuring public safety (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Collaborative relations with universities can improve public safety in a number of important ways.

First, correctional administrators need reliable ways of teasing out which interventions, among the suite of programming options offered, achieve their preventative ambitions. Measuring and assessing the effectiveness of particular programs is particularly problematic given that research budgets are being slashed and that measuring a program's effectiveness can be time consuming and costly

² For more information about practical ways for prison leadership teams and community members to navigate problems of common concern, see Boghossian's "The Delphi Technique: Correctional Administration and Community Consensus" (Boghossian, 2010).

³ Dissemination in the public arena (e.g., in the form of articles that report quantifiable project results) is encouraged after a formal evaluation of the program is performed, even if results fall short of initial expectations. Even less than positive results contribute to a body of knowledge that can then be used to inform future academic-prison partnerships.

(Lipsey, Petrie, Weisburd, & Gottfredson, 2006; Wolff & Gerardi, 2007). Academic researchers are uniquely suited to bring their skill sets to bear on this problem and are self-motivated to engage in such work, as it satisfies intellectual and professional goals and often culminates in broadening the knowledge base of the discipline.

Second, community partnerships can reassure the public that prison administrators are actively working on practical, innovative solutions that proactively address public safety concerns. Taxpayers favor state employees providing services that address critical social issues while not requiring additional taxes to support these initiatives. Academic-community partnerships can also have salubrious effects on community cohesion, civic participation, and staff retention (Chau, Vinekar, & Ran, 2006).

Third, there is considerable evidence associating education-based interventions with decreasing recidivism rates (Brazzell et al., 2009; Richards, Faggian, Roffers, & Hendricksen, 2008). Research has shown that providing key skill sets necessary for the economic competitiveness (among other factors) of recently released inmates not only makes inmates feel self-empowered but often through this feeling translates economically into increased opportunities and personally into prosocial attitudes, thinking patterns, and behaviors (Brazzell, et al., 2009). This is particularly beneficial to the communities where offenders are released, as modest increases in educational attainment (e.g., a high school diploma) have been associated with decreased crime rates (Page, Petteuti, Walsh, & Ziedenburg, 2007). Furthermore, academic institutions are ideally suited to provide educational resources and doing so may discharge their secondary mandate of meaningful community engagement.

Obstacles

Every community partnership will face challenges, and alliances between universities and prisons are not exempt from this reality. Some of the obstacles experienced in the PSU-CRCI relationship, particularly during the implementation of the first internship, included prison personnel changes and modifications to the intern's responsibilities. Specifically, because of budget cuts, CRCI staff working with interns were unexpectedly transferred to other facilities. This presented some unexpected challenges for the existing staff and for the interns to keeping the internships

functioning smoothly. Correctional facilities, therefore, need to have a sustainability plan, and it is best if the program is institutionalized in the formal policies and procedures of the particular prison system.

Finally, it should be noted that while every effort can be made to ensure the safety of interns working in a prison environment, ultimately their safety cannot be guaranteed and these internship placements do carry a small degree of risk. Potential dangers, such as the risk of being taken hostage, must be explicitly stated to students during the initial interview, and then again in writing, at the time of placement.

Limitations

This paper has discussed details and benefits of the PSU-CRCI community partnership. However, one limitation is that the partnership benefits have not yet been formally assessed. It should be noted that as this partnership is relatively unseasoned (having been in place for approximately two years), metrics are not available at this time. The number of inmates who directly benefit from the internships depends upon the nature of grants applied for, the number of grants awarded, and the amount of funding received. This data can only be assessed longitudinally due to the protracted nature of the grant life cycle (i.e., grant application, notice of award, disbursement of funds, program implementation, etc.).

However, anecdotal qualitative reports from all stakeholders have been favorable, with students, faculty, and correctional partners informally reporting measures of satisfaction and positive perceptions of professional engagement. The CRCI leadership team has explicitly noted the quality of student services received, and PSU interns have candidly discussed the value of "real world" experience gained, including the opportunity to network with a variety of criminal justice professionals. Faculty have expressed enthusiasm regarding the prospect of future research possibilities that may arise as a result of the partnership, and all parties have discussed personal satisfaction from developing, fostering, and nurturing intern-mentor relationships.

Conclusion

In this age of protracted and often extreme budget cuts, many prisoners do not have access to needed programs and services. There is hope, however, in the form of academic-prison partnerships. Through the unification of individual partners' strengths and assets,

significant contributions can be made toward the well-being of the community. This paper has detailed specific advantages of community partnerships that benefit academicians and universities, as well as prison administrators, prisons, and inmates. This article also demonstrates the application of the thematic strategies to the PSU-CRCI community partnership; it is our hope that this model will ultimately prove effective, demonstrating the potential for successful replication elsewhere. Despite financial constraints, there really are ultra low-cost and sustainable ways to address problems of social inequity.

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