Pre-capacity Building in Loosely-coupled Collaborations

Setting the stage for future initiatives

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Healthy community-based organisations (CBOs) at the grassroots level are essential to civic engagement and the creation of social capital, and consequently are considered critical elements in building localised democracy (Maloney, Smith & Stoker 2000; Skocpol 2003; Weisinger & Salipante 2005). Nevertheless, such organisations, many of which provide critical services to their communities, are at high risk of dissolution during tough economic times because they rely heavily upon volunteers and lack sufficient evaluation and fundraising capacity. For instance, in order to remain viable and contribute to the creation of healthy communities, CBOs must demonstrate their quality and effectiveness and understand their own organisational processes and outcomes, the service environment and existing best practices. They must also understand how to use such information for decision-making and action. Unfortunately, many grassroots CBOs lack resources and expertise for benchmarking, evaluative inquiry and program evaluation, putting them at a competitive disadvantage.

This is particularly the case in organisations within disenfranchised communities, where fundamental capacities for growth and development often are lacking. Such a situation, however, presents opportunities for collaboration with larger, better resourced entities – namely, universities with research-trained faculty who are expected to perform community service as part of their responsibilities and are increasingly aiming to create engaged learning experiences for their students. Indeed, institutes of higher education (IHE) nationally and globally, heeding calls by foundations, government officials and the public, are striving to become more engaged with and responsive to the needs of their surrounding communities. Community-university partnerships (CUPs) are proliferating across campuses in the US, as is the literature on their benefits and challenges – generating what some have described as a national 'civic university movement' (Harkavy & Hartley 2009).

This article describes efforts by university faculty to respond to requests for research by grassroots CBOs in a marginalised

urban community in Baltimore. These projects aimed not just to meet the immediate research needs of the grassroots groups, but to set the stage for future capacity-building initiatives and more formally developed partnerships that could equip the civic and service infrastructure in this community to survive, especially during periods of economic recession.

In this sense, the work we examine here can be described as 'pre-capacity building' through 'loosely-coupled' collaborations. The term 'pre-capacity' captures both the underdeveloped nature of these grassroots organisations in terms of leadership, membership and infrastructure and the assessment nature of the research projects. The research included simple needs assessments, identification of 'best practices' and basic program evaluation, all of which could lead to program modification and development and help agencies raise funds for future capacity-building activities. The efforts are 'loosely-coupled' because, in contrast to more well-established, long-term community-university partnerships, they are intentionally of limited duration with relatively informal collaborative guidelines and fewer available resources. In our discussion of the research projects, we intend to illustrate how loosely-coupled collaborative structures enable faculty to respond rapidly to community requests for research and provide needed information and feedback that equip CBOs to engage in strategic capacity-building (not necessarily with the same university partner). However, the article's primary focus is to identify the limitations and pitfalls of the loosely-coupled approach to CUPs, particularly when working with small, underfunded grassroots CBOs and within a research university that has not fully committed itself to structurally supporting engaged teaching and research. Limitations in both the community organisations and the university that compromised project processes and products are highlighted. We consider some reasons for these obstacles, their consequences and the impact that failure to successfully execute 'pre-capacity building' work has for future community-university relations and capacity-building efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Successful examples of grassroots development and community empowerment underscore the importance of nurturing respect and trust among partners, sustaining bonding and bridging social capital, viewing and capitalising on diversity as a strength, and leveraging an array of resources (Figueira-McDonough 2001; Mizrahi, Bayne-Smith & Garcia 2009; Putnam 2000; Saegert, Thompson & Warren 2001; Sanyal 2006; Weisinger & Salipante 2005; West, Alcina, Peterson & Laska 2008). Although often not stated explicitly, all of these factors require a comprehensive, overarching strategic plan allowing sufficient time for the project to come to fruition (Fasenfest & Gant 2005; Gass 2005). Challenges arise, however, when community groups lack resources, have internal membership conflicts, and weak ties with other

local organisations, even when issues among groups/communities are shared (Chaskin 2003; Hurlbert, Beggs & Haines 2001; Knickmeyer, Hopkins & Meyer 2003; Lopez & Stack 2001; Meyer & Hyde 2004). These challenges are likely to be especially severe in marginalised and vulnerable communities in which community organisations and associations are relatively depleted.

Increased scholarly attention has been paid to the role that non-indigenous organisations play in promoting or facilitating the health and wellbeing of communities and in building the capacities of CBOs. These 'intervening institutions' (Cohen 2001; see also Fehren 2010, who uses the term 'intermediary') can provide critical resources (i.e. funds, technical assistance, space, manpower, training and support) that allow communities, their organisations and associations, to assess their needs and cultivate their own human, social and economic capital for purposes of developing and delivering services and building collective political power. Intervening institutions have commonly included private foundations, local and state governments, policy research centers, labor unions and universities (Bartczak 2005; Fasenfest & Gant 2005; Ferman 2006; Fisher, Fabricant & Simmons 2005; Maurrasse 2001; Sanyal 2006).

A variety of factors influence whether or not a partnership between a community organisation and an intervening institution is successful; these factors are illustrated in Figure 1. The type of assistance offered by an intervening institution, and its capacity (available funding, manpower and expertise as well as restrictive rules and regulations) to support the effort will affect the partnership. Influential characteristics of community organisations include the nature of the leader-member relationship (where 'member' is broadly defined to include staff, volunteers, constituents, service users and/or participants), the extent to which leaders and members can clearly articulate their goals, needs or grievances and the organisation's capacity level (i.e. funding, staff time and commitment, and staff knowledge and skill levels). Within the broader community context, the gap between available and needed resources and the strength of area networks are significant issues. Finally, time factors, such as the desired duration of the partnership and the history of prior collaborative efforts in which the community has engaged (including those with different intervening institutions), will influence the current partnership (Cohen 2001; Fasenfest & Gant 2005; Fehren 2010; Figueira-McDonough 2001; Hurlbert,Beggs & Haines 2001; Hyman 2002; Maurrasse 2001; Wright et al. 2011). Although we recognise the importance of collaboration history and the community context, the factors examined here for their influence on collaborations are limited in focus to the intervening institution (e.g. the university) and grassroots community organisations.

A primary challenge within partnerships is recognising and balancing differing sources of knowledge and expertise, status and access to resources; a challenge that intensifies when

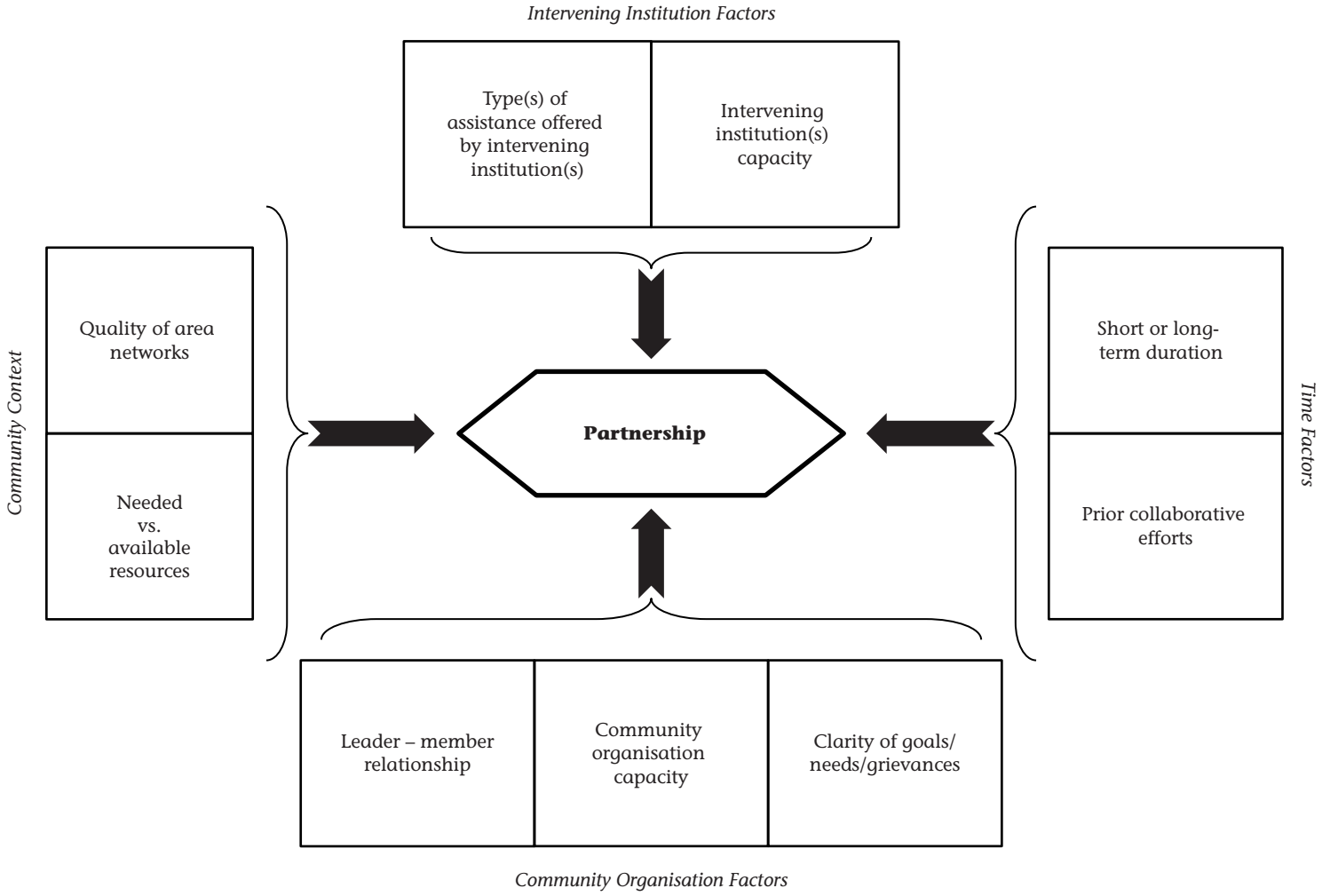


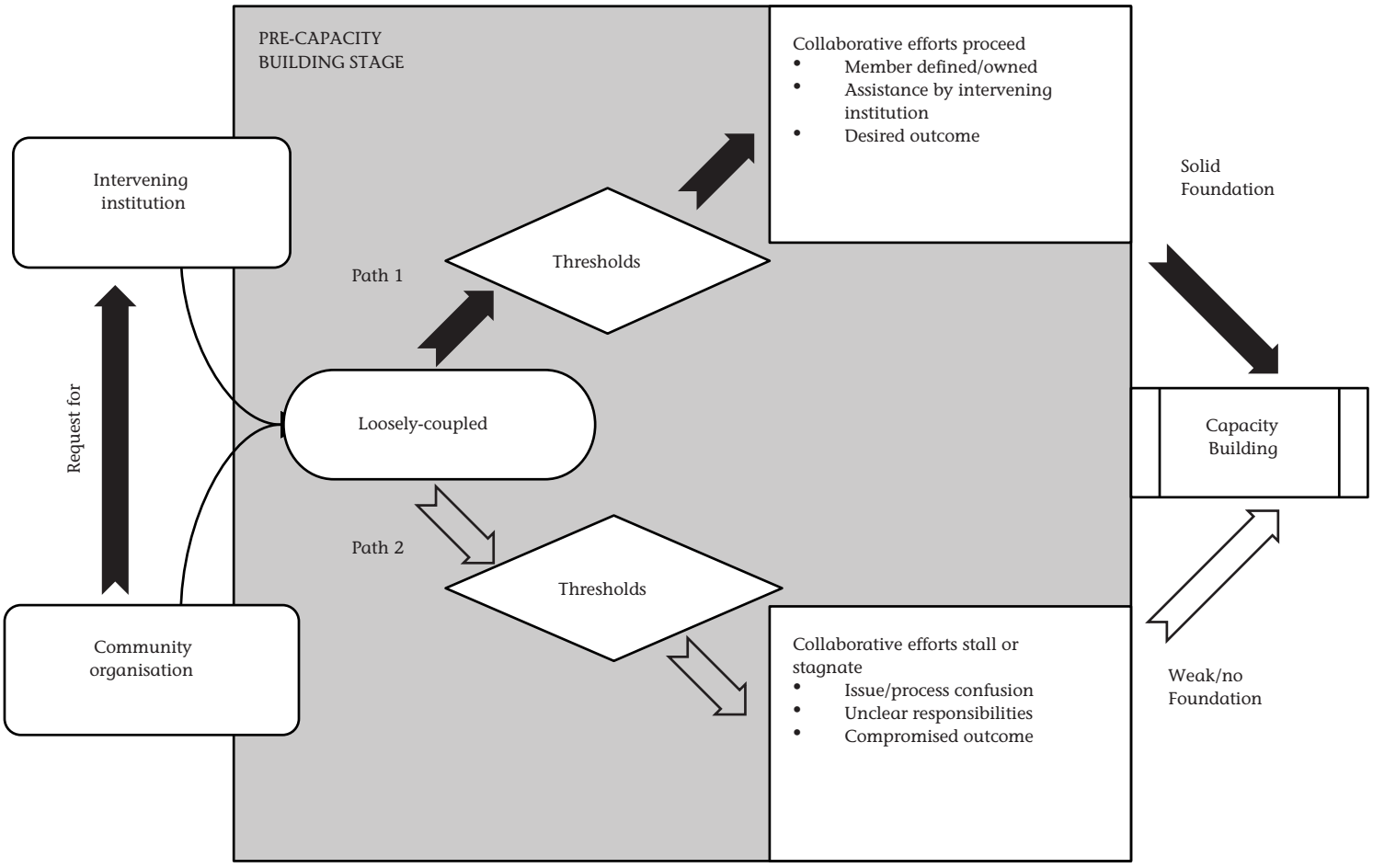
Figure 1: Factors that influence partnership efforts between community organisations and intervening institutions

community partners are already marginalised. Intervening institutions have been rightly criticised for being disconnected from local communities and assuming patronising stances towards them (Coffin 2005; Cohen 2001; Fasenfest & Gant 2005; Fehren 2010; Fisher, Fabricant & Simmons 2005; Gass 2005; Maurrasse 2001). There have been many attempts to address and rectify this imbalance by acknowledging and cultivating community-based knowledge (Ferman 2006; Strand et al. 2003; West, Alcina & Peterson 2008; Wright et al. 2011). Reflecting these criticisms, recent scholarship on CUPs has stressed the need for universities to adopt a 'transformative engagement' approach when working with communities and to generate true 'reciprocity' or 'reciprocal learning' among partners (Brown et al. 2006; Reardon 2006; Weerts 2004). Within these frameworks, universities are encouraged to become conscious of power differentials between university and community members and the inevitable tensions that arise as a result – what some have called the 'politics of engagement' (Fear et al. 2004). Scholars argue that universities must shift their fundamental approach to engagement from acting 'for' communities to acting 'with' them – where the motivations, strengths and limitations of both partners are clearly articulated, goals and knowledge are co-created and benefits are shared (Begun et al. 2010; Buys & Bursnall 2007; Silka & Renault-Caragianes 2006).

This perspective on community-university partnerships is grounded in the assumption that CBOs have the ability to define and delineate their problems and have sufficient capacity for leaders and members to understand and participate authentically in a collaboration. Where this is the case, the collaboration has a high probability of success – with success being defined as completion of the project and either improved capacity or greater preparedness for future capacity-building activities. Yet there may be instances where leaders or representatives of CBOs are not fully able to articulate their concerns and/or do not have the capacity for sustained participation in the collaborative process.

A related challenge in these partnerships is devoting sufficient time and attention to the early phases of the relationship. Anecdotal and scholarly accounts of partnerships between community organisations and intervening institutions underscore the importance of planning for the entire trajectory of the project (Coffin 2005; Fasenfest & Gant 2005; Hyman 2002; Mancini et al. 2004; Wright et al. 2011). Gass (2005, p. 16) delineates six broad stages: (1) issue/opportunity; (2) catalyst/invitation to partnership; (3) threshold dimensions; (4) partnership agreement; (5) operating the partnership; and (6) mutual benefit/increased social capital. While his model is more formalised than the collaborative projects we undertook, the 'threshold dimensions' stage is worth noting. In this stage, partners undertake the development of trust, respect, communication and a mutual understanding of strengths and

Figure 2: Two paths to capacity building partnership in pre-capacity building stage



limitations. A mutually agreed threshold needs to be reached in each of these areas before the partnership can proceed. It is in this threshold stage that assessments should made of the community organisation's ability to articulate its concerns, verify membership buy-in and demonstrate a basic understanding of what the project entails. During this stage, the limitations of the intervening institution, such as insufficient resources and faculty time, also need to be identified and communicated to the community partner. Broadly stated, there are two possible paths in moving from loosely-coupled collaborations to capacity-building partnerships, as illustrated in Figure 2. Path 1: Adequate threshold levels are met and the collaborative effort proceeds based on a solid foundation for a capacity-building partnership. Path 2: Threshold levels are not sufficient and the collaborative effort stagnates, resulting in issue and process confusion, unclear responsibilities, compromised outcomes, a weak foundation for community capacity-building, and ultimately, the risk of damaged intervening institution – community relationships.

KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS OR FAILURE IN TWELVE COLLABORATIONS

While the literature on CUPs includes numerous case studies, many of which highlight successes, challenges and critical lessons learned, articles that compare and contrast successful and unsuccessful cases and clearly articulate why and how projects succeed or fail are less prevalent. This article begins to address this gap by comparing 12 collaborations, some successful, others not, to identify the key factors that facilitated or hindered each project's level of completion and success.

Partner Community Characteristics

The collaborative research efforts took place in a mixed race and income community covering 75 city blocks in the eastern section of Baltimore. Approximately 30 recognised community associations are located in the catchment area (although membership widely varies), as well as a number of overburdened and under-resourced social service organisations (*Baltimore City Community Association Handbook* 2005). During the past several years, under the auspices of a local university, the authors have been involved in providing technical assistance, staff /member development training, community organising assistance, 'best practices' research and program evaluation services to a number of grassroots associations and organisations in this community (Hyde & Meyer 2004; Knickmeyer, Hopkins & Meyer 2003). These collaborations could be described as 'loosely coupled' in that they were not formal in the sense of a bona fide community-university partnership (Bowl 2010; Fasenfest & Gant 2005; Gass 2005; Maurrasse 2001; Mizrahi, Bayne-Smith & Garcia 2009), although these efforts informed the eventual creation of such an initiative.

East Baltimore is one of the more diverse sections of the city. Historically a blue collar, working class area, it has been

the point of entry for most immigrant groups in Baltimore. The neighbourhood areas that comprise the catchment area reflect much greater diversity than that of the city as a whole. The area's 2000 population was 32.5 per cent White, 60 per cent African American, 7 per cent Hispanic and the remaining half per cent American Indian and Asian (BNIA 2003). Yet despite this overall diversity, these areas are concentrated racially and economically. There are several public housing projects in the catchment area which are primarily occupied by African Americans (65.3 per cent to 96.9 per cent). The Latino population, located primarily in the southeast part of the city, increased substantially in the past decade. Four neighbourhoods within the catchment area have Latino populations that have grown four times more than the city's overall growth rate. The percentage of families reporting that they speak a language other than English in the home ranges from 1.5 per cent to 23.3 per cent (*Baltimore City Community Association Handbook* 2005; *Consolidated Plan, 2001–2005* 2001).

In East Baltimore, the 2000 poverty rate ranged from 10.1 per cent to 58.6 per cent and median family income ranged from $11 618 to $47 143 (*Consolidated Plan, 2001–2005* 2001). The consequences of these economic figures are manifested clearly in the housing situation in East Baltiore, where median home values ranged from $34 600 to $112 100 across the catchment area. During the 1990s, vacant housing units increased by 43.3 per cent to 70 per cent across catchment neighbourhoods (*Consolidated Plan, 2001–2005* 2001). The city has attempted to remove marginal or abandoned housing and replace it with affordable units for low-income families; yet demand far exceeds availability. The loss of relatively inexpensive rental units has left many having to choose between substandard units or paying an extremely high rent. For low- and moderate-income individuals and families, this increasing lack of affordable housing is likely to be exacerbated by redevelopment efforts. An estimated 1000 households are being displaced by a Biotech Park project; another 140 families lost their low-income housing when a subsidised rental complex was sold.

The catchment area remains particularly vulnerable to these demographic and economic trends because of a largely uncoordinated service/advocacy network comprising many weak or close to failing agencies and associations. Agency and association representatives reported that their organisations faced heightened demands from community members in the areas of housing assistance, resettlement, protection of property values, jobs, basic health and welfare, safety and transportation. These representatives also indicated that fragmentation within the catchment area sabotaged broad and coherent collective responses to these concerns. Instead, they noted that distrust within and between the catchment area neighbourhoods had developed (Hyde & Meyer 2002; Knickmeyer, Hopkins & Meyer 2003; Meyer & Hyde 2004). Moreover, the community organisations suffered from

inadequate financial resources and, in some cases, leadership with insufficient experience and knowledge to deal with these growing problems.

Nonetheless, these grassroots community organisations were the primary vehicles for the (potential) engagement of various disenfranchised groups. Community leaders also expressed a desire for greater collaboration between their various organisations and associations so that the community could more effectively address these problems from within, and successfully negotiate for assistance from intervening institutions beyond its boundaries.

Collaborative Research Projects – Overview

The above profile of the catchment area provides a context for the various projects in which we engaged over a three-year period. The issues on which we collaborated included financial literacy for consumers, affordable housing, support for senior citizens 'aging in place', crime reduction, cross-cultural service delivery (specifically for immigrant populations), neighbourhood safety and health education. In each case, a community organisation leader initiated a request for research assistance, often by contacting one of the authors. By way of an initial response, the authors held a series of meetings in which the focus and scope of the project were discussed and the kinds of resources the intervening institution (as represented by the authors) could provide were identified.

The three types of requests for research assistance were: (1) a needs assessment, so that the organisation could pursue funding with greater knowledge and authority; (2) an investigation into 'best practices', which could be used as models for the development of programs and services; or (3) a program evaluation, so that the organisation could obtain feedback on what it was doing well and what it needed to improve. It is important to underscore that the projects were to provide requested research for these community organisations and not to train organisational members in research skills. These projects cannot therefore be described as community-based participatory research (CBPR). Nevertheless, openness and active participation of organisational members was needed to help researchers gather information from agency documents, staff, clients and inter-organisational networks. Within a three-year period, we (either individually or together) provided pro bono research for 12 community organisations, all of which were tied to some aspect of grassroots capacity-building. These organisations, with brief summaries of the projects and outcomes, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Community Organisations in Research Collaboration Projects

[1] Organisation names changed for purposes of confidentiality.

Community Organization[1]	Research Project Focus	Process and Product
Archway Association	Assessment of community residents' main health concerns and recommendations regarding health education programming	—Organisational contact person repeatedly changed project focus —High level of disagreement between leader and members, and among members, regarding focus —Lack of resident availability/willingness to be interviewed —Final project: Effort switched to basic organisational development through technical assistance
Cherry Hill Association	Best practices, with recommendations, on affordable housing options within an urban community with emphasis on viability of single room occupancy	—Focus remained clear and consistent —Good access to interview respondents —Final project: Detailed report on merits of SROs and other options provided to organisation
Community Centre	Evaluation of adult literacy program with recommendations	—Agency staff unavailable for information —Agency staff not helpful in identifying individuals who participated in the program —Poor records —Final project: No evaluation, focus switched to best practices report
Elder Housing	Best practices for residential 'Aging in Place' programs, and community assessment of the desirability of such a program in the area	—Organisational contact person and other key staff disagreed on focus and were never available —Organisation decided to work on another service project —No final product

Community Organization[1]	Research Project Focus	Process and Product
Job Resource Centre	Outcome evaluation of organisation's job training program, specifically use and satisfaction	—Organisational contact person and staff not available —Limited access to program records —High degree of leader-staff conflict —No final product
New Neighbors Centre	Assessment of rising tensions between recent immigrants and long-time residents with focus on how to 'acculturate' immigrants	—Focus remained consistent —Good access to organisation and community members regarding cross-cultural relations —As research progressed, it was apparent that the acculturation focus was not appropriate for the situation —Final project: detailed assessment that was rejected by organisation because analysis and recommendations differed from what was wanted
Outreach Centre	Best practices and techniques for evaluating operation and use of a cooperative (with other agencies) food pantry	—Other pantry agencies opted out of the project (after it was underway), which severely limited data collection and substantially delayed project. —Final project: Report on 'best practices' used by food pantry operations and assessment of Centre
Park CDC	Community assessment of the prevalence and location of vacant lots in the catchment area, and recommendations for addressing problem	—Focus remained clear and consistent —Limited availability of CDC members for data —Most data gathered through detailed 'walking tours' documentation —Final project: Community map of lot use, with emphasis on vacant lot identification and description

Community Organization[1]	Research Project Focus	Process and Product
Port CDC	Best practices on financial literacy programs and community assessment of the desirability of such a program	—Focus remained consistent —Staff unavailable for interviews or to help make contact with potential consumers of such a program —Final project: 'Best practice' report with recommendations, but no assessment because of lack of informant information
The 3-6 Group	Evaluation regarding satisfaction with the technical assistance given to after-school program	—Program goals not clearly defined, which made evaluation difficult —Limited access to partnering agencies (staff and data) —Final project: Descriptive report, not evaluation

None of the requests came with funding support, but because they involved some form of community-based research, the authors engaged graduate student research assistants, interns working in some of the organisations and students in several graduate social work research classes to help with the projects and learn valuable research skills (for discussion on community-based research courses see Hyde & Meyer 2004). All projects involved some combination of interviews, document analyses, meeting observations, community mapping and secondary data analyses (i.e. census data). For each project, the goal was to provide the community organisations with a comprehensive and comprehendible report that could then be shared with members and used for resource and organisational development. This would be supplemented by oral presentations by the project team to organisational members and stakeholders. The authors also would make themselves available for any ongoing or follow-up consultations.

Collaboration Outcomes and Implications – Alternative Pathways

In order to identify factors that influenced the quality of the 12 collaborations presented here, the authors examined field notes kept during the projects and post-project debriefing notes from meetings with students and organisational leaders and members. The review of this material and reflective conversations among the authors about the collaborations revealed clear alternative pathways the collaborations took, based upon the nature of the

project and, most importantly, the adequacy of attending to and meeting the key 'threshold dimensions' outlined in the review of the literature above. Indeed, the efforts examined here illustrate how capacity thresholds need to be identified, agreed upon and solidified in order for promising loosely-coupled collaborations to proceed to comprehensive capacity-building partnerships.

The projects began in a similar fashion. Community organisation leaders sought assistance from university faculty because they recognised the necessity of research in the ongoing capacity development of their organisations and by extension their communities. Moreover, they understood their own limitations in terms of skills and time availability and viewed this kind of collaboration as a means of redress. In early discussions, these leaders were articulate about the focal issue and some were able to indicate exactly what kind of information they wanted. From the outset, these individuals promised complete access to the various sources of organisational information such as files, staff (if present), members and themselves. As projects unfolded, however, they took different trajectories and had differing levels of success.

A few projects proceeded relatively smoothly from beginning to end. One such example was the partnership with the Cherry Hill Association. The focus of the requested research was to identify affordable housing options within an urban neighbourhood with an emphasis on the viability of SROs (single room occupancy). Several factors facilitated the success of this project, most of which had to do with the engagement of Association leadership early in the process. First, the Association's leadership was clear about what they wanted and maintained a consistent focus throughout the duration of the work. Second, they identified, and in some instances made connections with, potential interview respondents, which helped ensure their availability. Third, the leadership was willing to work with the student researchers early in the project to help them fully understand what was needed. Fourth, the faculty member and many of the students working on this project were familiar with the neighbourhood, which helped considerably during the start-up. Finally, the Association staff (including the leaders) were open to alternative housing options, and were willing to discuss with the students the viability of other suggestions generated from their research. (Note that except for this last point, the other factors pertain to the threshold stage of the partnership).

More frequently, however, projects experienced a number of difficulties that clouded the area of focus and/or stymied the involvement of community organisation members who needed to provide information or feedback about their practice experiences. In a few cases, these setbacks were temporary and with adjustments or renegotiation of project goals, the project proceeded. For example, the Outreach Center needed information on best practices and techniques for operating and evaluating a cooperative food pantry. The original project included three other agencies that were interested in being part of this cooperative

venture; all of the participating organisations agreed to being assessed in terms of their capacities for contributing to the food pantry project. After the research began, the other agencies withdrew (citing other priorities, lack of resources, or both). The Outreach Center director worked with the faculty member and student researchers to re-align the project goals to one of assessing the need for the Center to run a food pantry and the resources required, as well as a comprehensive compilation of 'best practices' for such an enterprise. The Center was then able to use this information in its strategic planning and grant writing.

Most common were projects that stalled, were compromised, and in a couple of instances, fully derailed. One such case was the Park CDC. The original project goal was to produce a community assessment of the prevalence and location of vacant lots and recommend how the CDC could address the problem. This focus remained consistent throughout the project. Problems arose, however, because the CDC leadership was unable to communicate the need for its membership to participate in this project. As a result, few members were willing to be interviewed or provide other needed data. The student researchers could only complete a comprehensive community map, identifying and describing the vacant lots based on information derived from a 'walking tour'. They were not, however, able to provide recommendations for possible lot usage which required input from the membership. Similarly, work with the Community Center had to be altered because the staff was not available to provide needed information, nor did they offer suggestions about who else might be interviewed. The final product was a report on 'best practices' for adult literacy programs, but the requested evaluation was not produced because of staff disengagement. These projects can therefore be understood as being partially successful. In both cases, research was compromised because of the disconnect between leaders and members or staff such that full 'buy-in' did not occur.

No final reports were generated from the work with Elder Housing, the Resource Center and the Archway Association. The contact person and other organisational members of the first two organisations were rarely available after the initial meetings. In all three organisations, records and documents were poorly organised or non-existent. Perhaps more importantly, there were high levels of leader-member conflict or disagreement that resulted in significant barriers to the collaborative process. Faculty and student researchers involved in these projects reported chaotic organisational environments, not to mention considerable personal frustration. An agreement was reached with the Archway Association to offer technical assistance to address some of the leader-member problems. Elder Housing opted out of the partnership entirely. The faculty member eventually ended the partnership with the Job Resource Center because of repeated delays and assigned the students to other projects.

In retrospect, we learned that a critical step in the overall project design was the phase immediately following the initial agreement to collaborate, in which the authors and student researchers sought to make initial contact and connections with the organisation and its members. This span of time, usually lasting a few weeks, would often determine our ability to continue the work. The following problems that arose in the partially or completely unsuccessful projects reflect limitations in one of the four factors identified in Figure 1, illustrating the influence of each upon the success of collaborations:

—Initial clarity by the organisational leader gave way to confusion, often resulting in changes in focus so that the agreed upon issue was discarded and replaced with another concern (at times repeatedly)

—Usable organisational data sources were unavailable, which was partly a reflection of how under-resourced and under-staffed these organisations were

—Organisational leaders did not understand or did not convey to staff the demands of the project, which included continued involvement on the part of organisational informants and assistance with the dissemination of project-related material (i.e. consent forms, informational letters, questionnaires etc)

—Leader-member disconnect meant that organisational members did not agree with the research focus, had different priorities, or wanted other forms of assistance

—Outright leader-member conflict suggested that the leader (usually our contact) was viewed as a 'problem' within the organisation, to such a degree that members did not feel safe participating in the projects

—A desire for quick fixes or immediate action prevailed over understanding and embracing a more protracted and iterative research process

—Assumptions typically overestimated the breadth and depth of the intervening institution's available resources and project responsibilities

—Project findings differed from what the organisational leaders and/or members 'wanted to find'

—Research team members had insufficient understanding of organisational or community dynamics and structure.

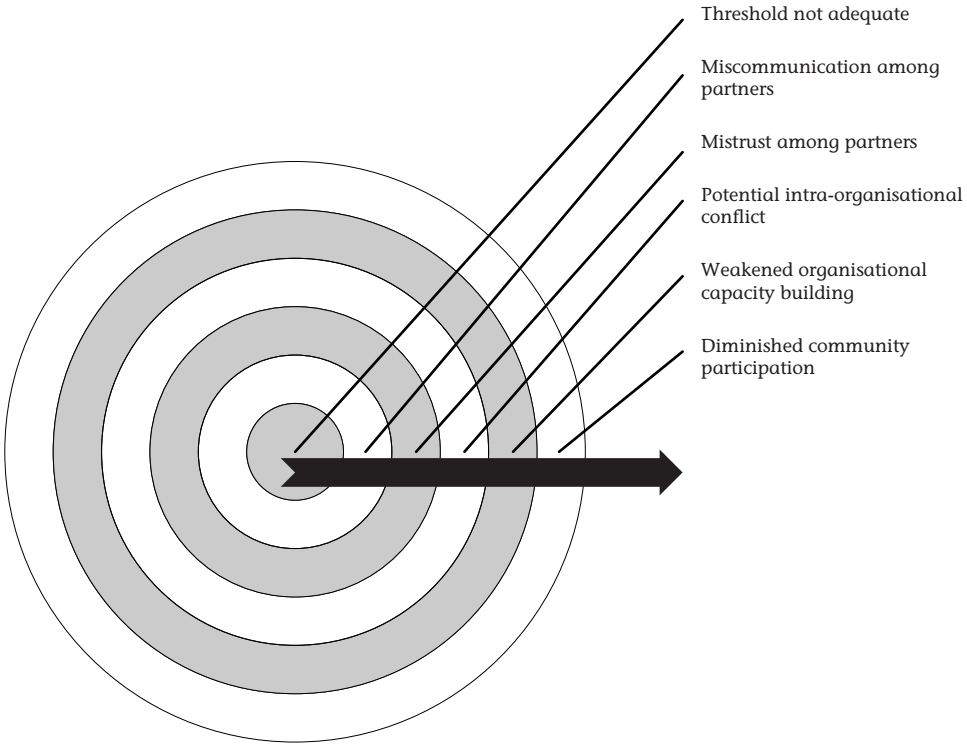
Constraints were placed on the collaboration by the intervening institution, particularly with respect to resources (i.e. faculty and student time, funding, manpower) and faculty job expectations (i.e. fundable and publishable research).

Many of these difficulties exposed confusion and conflict within the organisation; factors that could have a considerable impact on the organisation's development, regardless of the successful (or otherwise) completion of our projects. While we were able to intervene in ways that opened access or gained clarity when some of the problems arose, such efforts were not without frustration or delays. More often, we needed to halt or

substantially slow down the projects in order to attend to the tensions or concerns that presented themselves. Misunderstandings or impatience regarding what we, and the intervening institution, could reasonably offer in terms of expertise or resources had the potential to damage the nascent partnership, as well as future partnerships. Harder to address were the conflicts or disagreements that emerged between the organisational leader (with whom we initially partnered) and the membership. These incidents signified fundamental differences regarding the purpose or direction of the organisation, and raised doubts about who truly guided and spoke for the organisation – leaders or members. These internal organisational dynamics that affected project outcomes were very difficult to assess in just one or two initial meetings. Only after the projects were underway, and the authors and students began to deeply engage with the CBOs, was the depth of internal conflicts revealed.

Difficulties also arose from the side of the intervening institution. No university funding (or other support) was available to respond to the numerous requests for assistance the authors constantly received, and the community organisations had no means to pay for research services. Thus, the authors decided that using Masters research classes was one way to respond to community needs, as well as meet teaching and service responsibilities. This strategy, however, placed limits on the collaborations. Because of the urgency of the community organisations' requests and the requirement to complete class projects within a 16-week semester, a time-consuming threshold assessment was not possible. We could not, for example, devote sufficient time to understand the organisational or community context before proceeding with the requested research (although over time, our 'entry' became more efficient).

Figure 3: 'Ripple Effect' when threshold dimensions are not met



Because projects were compromised (although nonetheless completed), stalled or derailed, any hoped for community engagement that could have resulted from this work also suffered. The ripple effect of disruption at this early stage of a partnership could be significant as issues of trust and respect between all the actors were raised, as illustrated in Figure 3. Incomplete or inaccurate information about the intervening institution that filtered through the community could damage future collaborative work. The intra-organisational conflicts that arose had to be addressed before the organisation could move forward on any change effort, and even though we were collaborators, we were not, as 'outsiders', well situated to productively resolve these conflicts.

DISCUSSION

The experiences presented here should serve as a cautionary tale regarding the initiation of loosely-coupled CUPs. Upon reflection, we severely underestimated the issues that needed attention and clarification in terms of 'threshold dimensions' (Gass 2005) during the early phase of the collaborations, and overestimated both our own and the CBOs' capacities. Despite the very real time constraints, we should have determined some strategy for completing a threshold assessment. Mutual trust and respect existed between the authors and organisation leaders (largely based on prior work with some of them, who in turn, recommended us to others). Communication about the organisational issue or concern seemed clear – at least initially. With these dimensions (seemingly) in place, the critical step of discussing and understanding one another's assets and deficits should have happened, but did not. Rather, this step was glossed over affecting the subsequent partnership agreement phase, in that clear roles and responsibilities and time commitments were informally agreed upon (i.e. no formal MOUs were drafted and signed). Factors that overrode the critical threshold assessment included: (1) the urgency felt by CBOs to get their research needs met immediately and the authors' desire to respond to increasing requests for help from CBOs starting to feel the effects of the looming 'Great Recession'; (2) increasing encouragement by the university for faculty to satisfy and closely tie together their tripartite goals for teaching, service, and research; (3) enthusiasm among the authors and agency partners generated during the initial conversations; and (4) the need for faculty to employ the time-limited availability of student manpower. All these factors encouraged the relative informality of the partnering. However, as a consequence, we never fully understood or factored into our planning, the lack of readiness within these organisations to collaborate on these projects. Conversely, the organisations and their members never gained a realistic picture of what we could and could not do.

Taking seriously this stage in a partnership requires a willingness for all parties to assist one another in becoming self-reflective and critically constructive (Bartczak 2005; Brewerton &

Millward 2001; Busch et al. 2005; Coffin 2005; Maurrasse 2001; Mizrahi, Bayne-Smith & Garcia 2009). Strategies might include teaching leaders assessment skills that can be used within their own organisations, so that they have clarity regarding their strengths and limitations and the potential affect they could have on the partnership (Hyman, 2002). A clearly written agreement would delineate respective roles and responsibilities which would require time to negotiate (Mattessich 2003; Mattessich & Monsey 1992). Additionally, a realistic assessment of member 'buy-in' is crucial and cannot be assumed (Brewerton & Millward 2001). These measures are difficult to balance against the often intense pressures involved in meeting the needs of the community in immediate and tangible ways and initiating community engagement efforts. Yet failure to implement them runs the risk of ambiguity in terms of roles and responsibilities and with respect to the articulation and 'ownership' of the issue, concern and project outcomes (Wright et al. 2011).

Specifically, we often were surprised by the level of disconnect between the organisational leaders and members. The leaders seemed to have good reputations among their constituencies and most had demonstrated the ability to bring much needed resources into their communities. Yet something had occurred in these organisations which led the leaders to view needs and priorities differently than the members. And, at least from our vantage point, the leaders often seemed more realistic than the members about what could or should be done (although this was not always the case). More problematic was that the ability to conduct dialogue and debate within many organisations was weak or non-existent. This, in turn, raised issues of leadership accountability and constituent responsibility.

This disconnect between organisational leaders and constituents is part of a broader 'ripple effect' that occurs when the capacity threshold is not adequate (see Figure 3). In an immediate sense, the projects we undertook were compromised in some ways because of the barriers we experienced while dealing with the organisations; the research process, as well as outcomes, illuminated these problems. On a larger scale, however, by proceeding with the projects while not addressing threshold dimensions adequately, we may have set in motion more suspicion and mistrust, misinformed assumptions, and diminished or marginalised engagement by the community. Based on our experiences, future collaborations and partnerships will be informed, for better or worse, by current relationships. Therefore, despite the urgency of meeting the needs of the community or at least those of the organisational leaders, it will be essential to assess the capacities of all partners before engaging in initial, loosely-coupled collaborations and before proceeding with more formal partnerships (Bowl 2010; Gass 2005; Hyman 2002).

Ultimately, project participants must recognise and commit to the essentially iterative nature of community-based

research collaborations, in which goals, roles, responsibilities and expectations need frequent revisiting and renegotiation (Baum 2000). Such a process requires the time-strapped community organisation leaders and university faculty to remain fully involved in conversations beyond the initial agreement phase. This is a time consuming requirement that is difficult to fulfil when no funding is available to support faculty or free organisational leaders from their constant struggle to obtain resources.

Finally, the capacity limits of intervening institutions also influence the degree to which the obstacles presented by resource-depleted community organisations can be overcome. Faculty who engage in such collaborations typically face competing pressures: (1) produce research that is publishable in top research journals to achieve tenure and promotion; (2) teach and provide students with real-life research experiences; and (3) meet demands from the university and the community to engage in community service. While community-based research collaborations hold the potential to satisfy these competing demands, funding and other institutional incentives are not always forthcoming to support faculty in these endeavors; the research that results is much more useful in practice for the community agencies than for publishing purposes. Having graduate students do most of the research 'leg-work', while providing invaluable learning experiences for them, further complicated the process as they may not have clearly communicated to the organisations what was needed for the research. Yet using students in this way was necessary because of the lack of research funding as well as our own teaching obligations. Additionally, some institutional constraints and requirements, such as the academic calendar and Human Subjects Review procedures (often not sensitive to community-based research), can limit faculty responses to community requests for assistance (Berg-Weger et al. 2004; Bowl 2010; Hyde & Meyer 2004; Mancini et al. 2004; Strand et al. 2003; West, Alcina & Peterson 2008).

CONCLUSION

This article has focused on loosely-coupled community-university research collaborations; specifically the critical, yet often overlooked, threshold stage in these collaborations during which the strengths and limitations of all participants are fully understood. The 'lessons learned' from our experiences hopefully underscore the importance of this aspect of the relationship between grassroots CBOs and intervening institutions. The assessment of abilities and resources, the insistence on a clear and sustainable focus, and the clarity of responsibilities, ultimately helps provide a more solid foundation upon which to engage in the capacity-building efforts necessary for localised civic engagement.

Faculty who wish to pursue the types of projects described here should be careful to accurately estimate the amount of time needed to establish a clear threshold process and be wary of doing

so outside a formally developed, university-sanctioned long-term CUP. Ideally, such work should be legitimated and encouraged by top campus leadership and supported by sufficient campus infrastructure in the form of an established CUP office. These offices (or centres) have proliferated across campuses in the US during the last decade and have reached research universities more recently. They typically have long-term goals and are guided by a formal steering committee comprising faculty, staff and community stakeholders who consistently identify priorities, often for a clearly delineated geographic territory, and establish clear partnership guidelines and processes. These offices are also often responsible for soliciting and reviewing formal requests and applications from CBOs for research and volunteer services and prioritise and 'match' these requests with faculty expertise. Processes might begin with the creation of a university website where community agencies can learn about the types of research assistance faculty and students could provide and complete an on-line application for collaboration. The application form may include deadlines that accommodate the academic calendar and specify a period before a project's commencement during which resources, responsibilities and timelines to be met by project partners must be clearly identified in the form of an MOU.

Such 'bridging' work by the university can be invaluable in that it significantly improves the chances of success of collaborations, enhances the level of trust developed between an institute of higher learning and its surrounding communities, and promotes the ability of both to address significant social problems over the long term.

The problems highlighted in this paper echo the complaints community partners have made about service-learning projects generally: that absent an overarching, long-term CUP, faculty members can seem unavailable and aloof and lack substantive interaction with community members, where motivations, goals and responsibilities, benefits and costs can be clearly articulated. Ultimately, commitments and collaborations must go beyond a one-time service-learning project, research grant or course to build satisfying and solid relationships (Baum 2000; Buys & Bursnall 2007; Leiderman et al. 2002; Sandy & Holland 2006). Universities that fail to recognise the importance of such consistent and ongoing relationship-building and infrastructure development will prevent community-university partnerships from reaching their full potential thereby limiting the creation of engaged learning and research opportunities for faculty, students and the community at large.

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