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- a) **Title of Submission:** What Role Should Higher Education Play in University-School Collaborations?
- b) **Topic Area:** Other Area: University-School Collaborations
- c) **Keyword descriptors:** Partnerships, Role-relationships, collaboration
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Preferred Type of Presentation: Ongoing Research Report, University/School Partnerships

2003 Hawaii International Conference on Education
Honolulu, Hawaii
January 7-10, 2003

What Role Should Higher Education Play in University-School Collaborations?

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Objectives

One of the challenges facing programs that seek to establish university-school partnerships that lead to school improvement is engaging a university, a college or a department at the university level in a long-term collaborative relationship. One question that is often not given enough attention is, "What role should higher education play?" in such a partnership. The Gear Up Project in Chicago is a five-year collaboration between universities, the public school system, and networks of inner city schools that is dedicated to the improved college preparation of grade 5 – 12 urban students. The Woodlawn Network, one of nine throughout Chicago, involves six elementary schools and one high school on Chicago's south side. The question, "What role should higher education play?" is explored within the context of the experiences of this project after three years of operation. For the purposes of this paper, leadership and the role that leadership support plays in such a relationship, is a primary focus for discussion.

Conceptual Framework

Three major areas of inquiry are relevant to this presentation: managing organizational change in education, schools as learning communities, and shared decision making within and across institutions. Creating and managing successful educational reform requires changes in basic policies and structures that govern how organizations

function. These include shared institutional vision, altered staff allocation and work patterns, shared decision-making policies, and different reward structures (Burstein, et al., 1999; Fullan, 1994; Goodlad, 1994; Levine, et.al., 1997; Senge, 1990. Change (reform) is enhanced when ideas are shared across partnerships and where such change across institutional boundaries is coordinated and supported by external forces such as state mandates (Bullough, et al., 1997; Burstein, 1999; Darling-Hammond, et al., 1996; Fullan, 1994).

A related body of research suggests that a learning community's approach to schools can foster the kind of collaborative culture recommended above (Gablenick, et al., 1990). Newman and Wehlage (1997) have demonstrated that interdependent learning and work structures such as teaming increase opportunities for elaborated communication. Clark (1996) and Fullan (1993) emphasize that in schools that emulate the characteristics of learning communities, students, teachers, and parents are more likely to openly exchange ideas and engage collectively in reflective inquiry. Darling-Hammond (1996a) recommends greater involvement of teachers in professional standard-setting, collaborative inquiry and related experiences as fostering collective inquiry as well. Poole in 1995 concluded that administrators should assist teachers in becoming more self-directed and self-evaluating. These studies suggest that if teachers are to assume leadership positions, they will need to further their understanding of the nature and context of schools as learning communities and their position in them as a leader. Shared decision making requires that the act of leading be understood by those with whom decision making is shared.

The proposed presentation will discuss the rationale for partnering across institutions and the factors that can affect the success and/or failure of partnerships to accomplish their intended goals. It will demonstrate the added value and tangible benefits of shared leadership within and across school settings and will discuss some of the issues surrounding the sustainability of longer-term relationships that seek to facilitate and maintain positive school change.

Background: The Gear Up Woodlawn Network

The Gear Up Woodlawn Network, in partnership with Roosevelt University, provides services to teachers, students and parents of the Woodlawn Network schools. Network elementary schools include McCosh, Fermi, Fiske, Dumas, Carnegie, and Wadsworth. The feeder high school for the Woodlawn Network, also a part of the Woodlawn Network, is Hyde Park Academy. The Gear Up effort has the distinction that it attempts to address multiple elements at the school level that could contribute to better student preparation for college: actions of administration, professional preparation and development of teachers, actions and involvement of students, and the role of parents in supporting student success in preparing for college. A summary of these activities is presented below to provide context for the discussion that follows concerning the role of higher education in university – school partnerships.

Student Activities

A number of different activities were provided for Gear Up students during the 2001–2002 academic year. Preceding these activities was a six-week summer Academy for middle school students in the Gear Up schools that was held at Roosevelt University during the summer of 2000. More than 100 students from the feeder schools attended

from 9:00 AM until 1:00 PM, Monday through Friday for 6 weeks. Students participated in enhancement activities in math, technology, art, dance, social studies and science. The most enduring student activity during the 2001–2002 academic year was tutoring and mentoring of Gear Up students. Tutoring came from four distinct sources. The first involved Roosevelt University students, who performed part of their clinical hour experiences in the Gear Up schools. They tutored students in areas of academic need. Three university faculty members from the College of Education participated in this endeavor, holding classes at the Gear Up schools and administering the efforts of their students to provide these valuable services. This component was expanded in the spring 2002 term to include a fourth faculty member. A second source of tutoring comprised graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Chicago who were involved in the Neighborhood Schools Program. Through a subcontract arrangement with the University of Chicago, college students with strengths in the major content areas provided tutoring to students in the Gear Up schools. The third type of tutoring was provided by high school seniors at Hyde Park Academy who satisfied their service hour requirement by tutoring in the elementary schools or by tutoring freshman at Hyde Park Academy. A fourth area was tutoring provided by adults from the Woodlawn community. These combined efforts not only increased dramatically the amount of tutoring and mentoring that was available to Gear Up students, but increased significantly the quality of tutoring. Data are being gathered to assess the impact of this increased tutoring on grades, test scores, students' career aspirations and attitudes towards school. Other student activities included participation in Success Clubs, Technology Clubs, and a variety of other club activities that were supported through Gear Up. At Hyde Park

Academy a debate club is being formed, as one example of a new club inspired through Gear Up participation. The Gear Up Transition Coordinator worked with the drama and music faculty at Hyde Park to design and implement this year a “Freshman Follies” program involving Gear Up 9th graders. Hyde Park participated in the “Do You Want to Win a Scholarship” program, fashioned after the “Do You Want to Be a Millionaire” program. One full scholarship was donated by each of the Gear Up Universities, including Roosevelt for those students who answer all 15 questions successfully. Prizes such as laptop computers, book stipends, and school supplies were awarded for competitors. The scholarship is the capstone prize of this event. Four separate shows, one for each participating university were shown on ACCESS Cable TV in late spring, 2002. During the fall 2001 semester, Gear Up teachers had a majority of their students fill out the Student Success Profile. This profile contains those aspects and characteristics that describe the successful 9th grader. It is filled out by Gear Up students for the purpose of identifying areas where they are excelling and where they need improvement. Students fill out, maintain, and modify their profile over time as they acquire the skills and abilities needed to succeed in high school. An electronic version of the Success Profile was produced this past fall enabling students to fill out and modify their profile on-line. Students who completed the profile had the opportunity to discuss their profile and future plans in a video-taped interview. This represents the first step in the development of an electronic portfolio for elementary students, which they will develop and take to high school as evidence of their positive performance.

Professional Development

Professional development activities were provided for teachers of the Gear Up schools in the areas of Math, Literacy, Technology, Classroom Management and Assessment, and Leadership Development. Some included the option for academic credit. Sixteen teachers from Hyde Park Academy, Dumas, and Wadsworth Elementary participated in a Leadership Development course for Vertical Team members from the Gear Up schools.

The class met this past fall in the Wadsworth Elementary School Library and included two intensive seminars in instruction on how to use IBM's Learning Village. Teachers developed their own web pages and are currently experimenting with using these web pages to communicate electronically with students and parents concerning homework assignments. Homework can be posted on their web pages, and students and parents can access the teacher's web page at any time to find out what the assignment is. If they have questions, or problems, they can email their teachers.

A number of teachers also participated in a series of five seminars on effective strategies for improving classroom management. A separate group attended the seminar series entitled, Zen and the Art of Reading and Test Taking. Technology Coordinators attended seminars in how to operate a digital camcorder and the production of video segments using I-Movie Macintosh software. With successful completion of training, technology coordinators received an IMAC and digital camcorder for use in video projects with students at their respective schools. A new project for the fall and spring involved student designed video presentations on academic areas that typically provided the most difficulty for students (fractions, word problems, etc.) They are entitled "Video Minutes" are designed to teach technology skills as well as engage students in creative

and effective ways of addressing difficult academic areas. This was one of the major projects for the Technology Coordinators at the schools. Video minutes were produced on the Scientific Method and Graphing Quadrants. Some students chose to write and present poetry readings. One major outcome of the seminar on classroom management was the development and implementation of a strategy at the middle school level to deal more effectively with severe behavior problems in the classroom. An in-school suspension program and “opportunity room” strategy were two very successful pilot programs attempted at one of the elementary schools that was experiencing major student behavior problems. This will be continued the following year and is being considered as a strategy as well by two other Gear Up schools.

Parent Involvement

Activities were provided for parents which prepared families to become more aware, and to enable parents to take full advantage, of college options that will be available to their students when they complete high school. A growing trend in activities that support college enrollment is to include activities for parents and students jointly. Computer training for parents and visits to colleges and universities are examples of these joint activities. Parents came out in large numbers to support these activities, and both parent interest and parent initiative in Gear Up activities have increased dramatically this past year. In the fall semester, parents attended seminars on the psychology of the adolescent. Parents at the high school level were invited to participate in Gear Up activities for the first time. The high school parent coordinator presented a seminar for parents on high school orientation. Parents presented a series of six information and orientation sessions for parents on Access Cable TV. These were highly successful in

getting information about the Gear Up Project, and the services it provides for parents, to a wide audience. Parent activities numbered almost two per month. Participation in these activities grew significantly over time.

University Faculty Involvement

Gear Up also provides many opportunities for university faculty to team with school faculty in action research projects designed to improve schooling in urban environments. In year three, Gear Up collaborate directly with the Quest Center of the Chicago Teachers' Union to support 12 teachers in their pursuit of National Board Certification. Regular university courses in the Elementary and Secondary programs were offered in the Gear Up schools, in which clinical hours were satisfied by activities in the Gear Up schools that included tutoring and team-teaching. Many Roosevelt Students continued to offer services in the school as paid tutors through the Gear Up Project. One faculty member in Literacy at Roosevelt University collaborated with the Chicago Public schools to organize a for-credit course in child and adolescent literature. It was offered at Dumas elementary school, one of the Gear Up schools, for 38 Chicago Public School teachers. Twelve of these teachers were from Dumas elementary alone. The Chicago Public Schools paid for tuition as part of a collaborative program with Gear Up to improve the literacy skills of elementary teachers. Results of the Gear Up project in Woodlawn were presented last year at AREA. In spring 2002, two education faculty members from Roosevelt presented again this spring on results of the effect of the Gear Up project on student performance.

Leadership

An important element in the Gear Up initiative is the support and participation of principals of the Gear Up schools. The Woodlawn Network is fortunate to have principals who put the achievement and success of students first, and are willing to collaborate with other institutions in the pursuit of these goals. Principals meet to plan and deliberate on how best to integrate Gear Up activities and resources in the Network schools. Since principals in particular are pulled in so many ways in Chicago and because the pressures to drive test scores upward are extraordinary, efforts to keep principals involved and giving of their time on a continual basis is a continual challenge. With the stakes so high for showing increases in student performance, it is often difficult for principals to delegate authority and to share leadership, and to provide themselves with the time to plan and to collaborate.

While principals see the advantages of additional resources for their schools, it is often difficult for them to realize the importance and value of their continual support and involvement in the programs that these funds provide. The same can be true of leaders of the other partner agencies. In looking ahead to the final years of the Gear Up Project, the role of higher education in this partnership will undergo serious scrutiny and possibly some re-thinking. The role will be examined particularly as it relates to leadership in the partnering agencies, and the part that leadership plays in the long-term success of such collaborations.

Methodology and Data Sources

Under the auspices of the Gear Up Project, a federally funded initiative that supports university-school partnerships, all activities are evaluated in some manner. For activities involving school and university personnel, it is standard practice to seek

feedback through survey, focus group discussion, and/or individual interview. In instances where problems or obstacles are revealed or emerge, efforts are undertaken to overcome these obstacles and determine the reasons for the difficulty. Over that past year in activities involving faculty going out to Gear Up schools and working collaboratively in an action-research mode, university faculty members often were reluctant participants. Almost as a special Gear Up project, efforts were initiated to determine the causes of faculty resistance and to overcome them. A combination of 12 university faculty, school faculty and school leaders were consulted informally and formally to get their views on this particular situation. The feedback from this specific "project" led to a broader questioning of additional university teacher education faculty in particular, those who had participated, those who were reluctant, and others who had not been approached before. The questions were framed within the broader context of university-school partnerships and the motivations and obstacles they hold for school personnel. These somewhat disparate information pieces, which comprise the main source of data and evidence, included notes from informal conversations, survey information and specific interview questions, were content analyzed and then summarized in terms of those areas of high agreement. This presentation will describe and discuss these common points of agreement.

Results

In the analysis of how role relationships appeared to affect outcomes of Gear Up activities, it became evident that while much was assumed by both parties, the assumptions were not always held in common and were not usually shared overtly with

each other. For a partnership to get off to a good start and to sustain itself, certain questions needed to be asked or revisited:

1) Why Collaborate? Revisiting the Rationale of Enlightened Self Interest

Urban universities often lament the quality of public school graduates, much as high schools lament the poor preparation of entering elementary students. Yet, urban universities, even those that are totally disposed to embrace the improved preparation of urban high school graduates, often question how much they should commit their energies and resources to help that improvement. The simple answer to this quandry is often to engage in loosely formed or non-specific collaborations whose general goal includes working with schools to improve the quality of students entering the university. Often, however, universities and schools do not ask specifically about the "why" of partnering. In partnerships, each partner needs to ask, and keep asking, what is the self-interest of each in the collaboration? In the case of Gear Up, what is the self-interest that resides in helping urban students to be better prepared to enter and succeed in post secondary education in greater numbers? If, in that examination or re-examination, one cannot find benefit for both partners, then the reasons for engaging, and perhaps the rules for partner engagement, need to be re-evaluated and possibly changed.

2) What should the collaborative relationship look like; what are its desirable characteristics; what should it be?

One approach to university-school partnerships is to view them as a relationship, one that needs careful crafting, constant vigilance, and room and motivation to evolve and grow. The needs, interests, and idiosyncrasies of each partner need to be understood and acknowledged. To overcome and accept these, partners should identify what the parties

(the agencies) have in common, and then seek to identify the common goals that each party is seeking to accomplish. The following describes some of the characteristics and considerations that need to be raised if partners seek to develop a relationship that will ultimately land them "on the same page" and be sustained.

1. Parity among partners is needed in the relationship.
 2. Identify the benefits for both parties. Value can be added through the building a base of mutual understanding and respect.
 3. Identify the preferred communication patterns. Look at the members of each institution, the key roles in the two cultures that will be important in the partnership, and then facilitate communication among these key roles.
 4. Continually keep all informed and avoid any secrecy or the perception of it.
 5. Be aware that the landscape can change, particularly when key roles in the systems change, or the individuals in those roles change.
 6. Never assume total trust and integrity as a given between two partners. Pursue and nurture trust continually. Building trust is a continual and a long-term effort. It is to be valued and maintained almost as a crucial and precious entity.
- 3) What are the authority roles within the partnership: Is one partner assumed to be charge or in control of the other?

This is rarely raised for discussion. For true collaboration, perceptions of the partners should be explored on this matter. When this is explored, it is usually determined collectively that neither party should have full authority over the other, and that there is usually a desire for distributed leadership among the partnership leaders. Many

partnerships begin with this as an unstated assumption, however they often break down over time when initial conditions and assumptions are not revisited periodically. For a sustained partnership, leaders of the parties need to be kept in the loop, informed and involved for the length of the partnership.

One factor that stood out prominently in the analyses of the participants' reactions, however, centered around leadership and leadership support. This is stated separately as a fourth area of emphasis.

4) How Important is Leader Involvement in Sustaining Partnerships Over Time?

Three points are summarized below that pertain to this question. Each will be expanded for discussion at the time of the presentation through anecdotal evidence of three actual situations.

1. Changes in Major Leadership Roles--When leadership in key roles changes in either of the partnership agencies, this usually has a strong ripple effect to lower levels in the agency and to those partner agencies as well. When people with whom one may have had good relationships are replaced, the relationship can be severed. To sustain a partnership, one must anticipate the consequences of putting too much dependence upon one person to carry the partnership and somehow compensate.
2. Combined Leadership Support Among Partners--Instances can exist or evolve that reveal that the communication between the partner leaders was not strong or consistent enough to ward off a setback or to embrace a new idea or an unanticipated opportunity, regardless of what may seem to be obvious benefits. The lack of involvement of key leaders beyond initial

approval of a project, even if strong initially, can create insurmountable hurdles later on for the consideration of a new idea, a different approach, or even a mid-course corrections. A challenge for sustaining long-term partnerships is to somehow build in the commitment revisit and possibly refine the agreement.

3. The Importance of Informing: Achieving a Balance of Amount and Substance--Turnover in key leadership positions is often unpredictable. This suggests an avoidance of reliance upon the sole support of one person. Even more important than this, however, is that attention be paid to continually keeping the leadership, singular or plural, informed and in the loop. Partnerships need for their leaders to be informed and to be willing to serve in an advocacy role in such instances. A proper balance must be struck between amount of information to supply and substance. Key information must be shared efficiently and effectively.

Conclusions/Education Importance

Successful, sustained partnerships are characterized by the agreement that both partners have a common stake in the success of the joint endeavor, and that the mutual benefit of the partners provides added value to the relationship. Achieving this enlightened state requires an examination of the interests of the prospective partners and the identification of both individual and common benefits resulting from the partner agencies working together. It needs to be established that each partner believes that self-interests will be served, and that each sees mutual common benefit as well in the joint venture.

In the Gear Up Woodlawn network, the partnership has been working quite well in many different areas. What has been learned in this past year is the importance of ongoing communication among the partner agency leaders. The leaders in each of the partnering agencies must be knowledgeable and kept well informed of the goals and activities of the project if they are to provide the ongoing approval and support of the efforts of the project.

In today's global society there are tremendous advantages to be gained from collaboration, and great deficits facing agencies who choose to remain isolated. From utilizing research findings from recent studies to seeking assistance for locating highly qualified personnel, schools at all levels cannot remain aloof and disconnected from those resources that can help provide these things. Reaping the benefits of a partnership is only possible through working successfully with others across institutional boundaries. As future partners, educators need to get to know each other and to act and proceed in ways that will bring them together in positive and evolving working relationships. Agencies must be more analytical with respect to the act of partnering and what successful partnering entails. What has been presented here outlines some of those important elements that will lead to successful partnerships.

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