Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating Off-Campus Credit Programs

Michigan State University's process for planning, implementing, and evaluating off-campus credit programs is a team effort. While the academic units make the final determination, each programmatic decision is made from at least three perspectives. Representatives from the outreach office of the College of Education at Michigan State University, from the Department of Educational Administration within that college, and staff from two regional offices, along with the on-campus coordinator, illustrated the process.

Leadership and Community: A Collaborative Program for Educators

The Department of Educational Administration at Michigan State developed a Grand Rapids, Michigan off-campus master's program of study entitled "Leadership and Community: A Collaborative Program for Educators." This program involves the College of Education, Grand Rapids educators, community leaders, and a Michigan State University regional office (MSU-West) in the development of K-12 leaders. The goal of the program, which currently involves a cohort of twenty-six students, is not just to prepare participants for principal or superintendent positions, but to enable them to better support classroom teachers in dealing with the complexities that they face daily.

Several K-12 superintendents contacted Michael Spurgin, assistant director of MSU-West, about the need for this kind of program. The superintendents were loyal MSU alumni but felt that MSU's relationship with the community and its College of Education alumni was deteriorating, that MSU was "losing touch." The superintendents also felt that teacher education graduates were ill-prepared for the problematic nature of today's classroom, especially in the growing K-12 districts of West Michigan. "School leaders cannot function in a vacuum," Spurgin said. "They need to know something about the communities in which they work."

The superintendents agreed that they needed an MSU program offering leadership development to K-12 educators. If that did not happen, the superintendents were prepared to turn elsewhere to other colleges, to packaged leadership training programs, or to entrepreneurs offering quick courses on developing leadership skills. Still, none of these options met the essential framework for leadership the superintendents were seeking. The consensus among the superintendents was that MSU needed to see its commitment to the community in a different way. "Both the MSU staff involved and the school administrators saw this as an opportunity to redefine the relationship between the university and the community and an opportunity for collaborative planning," Spurgin said.

In the two years between the first meeting and the program's initiation, the program planners devoted much energy to understanding the two

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cultures of university and community and rethinking the relationship between them. Because K-12 educators felt that the university culture was distant and removed from their practical concerns, the College of Education sought to identify faculty who would be interested in and committed to establishing a dialogue with K-12 educators and community leaders. The goal was to develop working relationships, teamwork, and a mutual understanding of issues among the various participants.

They asked focus groups throughout the community: What are the important issues facing public education today? How can K-12 education meet the needs of children in this community? If you had the opportunity, how would you create a program for educators that would address these needs? The result of these efforts was a problem-based, experiential, service-learning program which takes an integrated approach to issues in education. Rather than a set of single courses, each focusing on a particular topic, educational leadership is studied within the context of the community. In doing so, education is seen in relationship to other societal institutions and concerns, and the program provides a forum for understanding community processes.

The program is delivered on-site and all classes in the program are co-taught by people from the university and school professionals from the community, and practitioners who have the day-to-day knowledge of structures and events. University faculty are selected from throughout the university, not just from the College of Education. Participants are screened and admission is selective, with a concern for diversity. The program includes two internships in schools and two in community agencies, mentoring experiences, and portfolio and performance-based assessment. "For the first time, we could say to a group of students: 'We can assure you that not a single course would need to take place on campus.' The program is cohort-based, and involves team learning. The cohort is an essential element in this program, and it involves both faculty and students." Spurgin believes that while the term "co-learners " has been used a great deal, it is a reality in this program. "Both faculty and students are learning from the experience."

Spurgin predicts the effort will change the way the department and college develop and deliver programs. "The program is transformative in that it has made people in the community think about the university in a different way." Challenges are many. The community expects decisive and prompt program development, so meeting critical deadlines is important. Not all departments respond in the same way, nor will all commit to collaborative program development. Outreach administrators may lose perspective on how much effort collaborative program development demands of academic departments. Academic departments will find it hard to know what planning approaches to take, how long the process will take, and the faculty time involved.

The Role of the Academic Department

The commitment of the academic department is an essential aspect of this community/ university partnership. Gary Sykes spoke from his role as a key faculty member involved in the project. The process was often unpredictable and awkward. "Although one can reconstruct the logic of how these programs got started, it's never a neat process. You proceed in the face of massive uncertainty." Progress is often nonlinear and disjointed, marked by people coming together in circuitous and unplanned ways. "These conferences always remind me of plays where people come into a theater, sit down, and see a polished play on the stage. You'd never suspect from watching the play that things are happening behind the scenes, and things aren't always going right."

Community-university partnerships involve answering many questions. With whom should you partner? Districts, associations, intermediate agencies, state policymakers? Having many potential partners means dealing with many suspicions and concerns regarding turf. Why should faculty be involved? They have many demands on their time and these programs compete with highly lucrative consulting projects. "There are many things that compete for faculty time. Faculty organize their schedules for their convenience. They don't want to commute to off-campus sites and get involved in outreach because that's disruptive," reflects Sykes.

Also, many departments are deeply factionalized. "There's almost always an old guard and a number of young Turks. The old guard has been around for a long time and they're deeply committed to the programs in place. The young Turks regard the programs in place as the perfect definition of low-quality, ugly stuff that they have no commitment to, and are interested in innovation. There are complex dynamics among faculty that need to be overcome." Sykes described how the "young Turks" of the department began the process of beginning a new program responsive to community needs, while the rest of the faculty held back, indifferent and hostile, until gradually the process began to pull people in.

Often, the culture of the university does not encourage partnerships. A number of disincentives by the university adversely affect faculty involvement in community projects. For instance, faculty are paid more for staying on campus during the summer than for off-campus work. "The way it really works is a lot of problem solving as you go. You have ideas and you work them out one at a time. And that's what it feels like from the inside to do this work."

There have also been a number of "spin-off effects" in the department, initiating profound changes throughout the entire department. Under discussion with practitioners are a new master's program, a new doctoral program, and the possibility of nondegree programs in collaboration with

practicing educators around the state. "In terms of learning how to work with the field, we've begun to learn how to do that work successfully." The department now sees the program as a base for continuing program development across the state. Sykes believes that the work of getting one program started with one set of partners "can create the basis for continuing and elaborating work even in the face of difficulties and problems."

Implications of Collaborative Program Planning

Mary Jim Josephs, assistant vice provost for outreach, explained that, in the integrated MSU model, responsibilities often associated with central administration have been shifted to the departments, including program development and financial responsibility. Still, the outreach office provides on-site logistical support and local marketing, and remains involved in providing incentives and facilitating faculty progress. "We always ask: Are the faculty able to obtain, from the connections they are making, good faculty development opportunities for themselves, research opportunities for themselves, consulting opportunities for themselves, all of which tie together teaching, research, and outreach, which we believe is extremely important."

Bruce Burke, assistant director for outreach in the College of Education, spoke of current realities of the College of Education. The faculty is being reduced, just when the department is discovering potential students not only from around the state but worldwide. "By definition, we have to link faculty with students where the students are. And we have to link our programs with the needs of students where the students live: in communities. We've gotten involved with communities deeply enough to figure out what their needs are, rather than assuming what the needs are and slapping on an educational solution."

The Leadership and Community program succeeds, Burke contends, because it meets real needs of K-12 teachers. K-12 teachers have many demands on their time. They do not have much time to share information on professional practices or to explore new literature about their profession. A cohort-based program allows teachers to talk with their peers in ways they never could before and to feel an identity as part of a professional team. Furthermore, faculty members find renewal with this and other collaborative programs. University "faculty are proud of what they're doing because of the level of engagement they're having with students."

Collaborative programs are challenging old paradigms such as the image of the college as keeper of knowledge. Community-university partnerships increase understanding of what can be learned in community settings.

The Role of Regional Staff

The role of regional staff in the delivery of off-campus programs is an integral part of the success of university/community partnerships and has changed over time at MSU, according to Sandra Buike, director of instructional programs at MSU-Southeast. Currently, the regional staff plays an important part in the planning and delivery of new programs. The MSU model means that the roles of all staff members are complex, active, and varied, as they serve on a larger university team, attempting to support faculty, the colleges, and the academic departments in a variety of ways. "The role of the regional instructional director is characterized by a management function and an operational function, blending leadership with a visionary role. We need skills as a negotiator, communicator, diplomat, change agent, and researcher."

Mary Jim Josephs described the experience of the integrated model at MSU. "Program planning for us has all the advantages and the disadvantages of working with a committee, rather than as an individual. We have learned to respect the camel, the horse designed by a committee. We particularly appreciate its ability to manage where horses cannot maneuver, and its ability to survive for long periods of time without visible sustenance."

A major advantage of the model is that a variety of perspectives are involved in every planning process. Ideas, credit, and financial advantages are shared. One major disadvantage is that many details have to be coordinated, resulting in complex agreements that take into account the perspectives of the various parties involved. "As in any change model, what we try to do is to create incubators that support ideas until they grow on their own," Josephs summarized.

Emerging Themes and Future Considerations

Community-university partnership models can be mechanisms for changing departmental program perspectives and priorities, and for stimulating faculty development and research possibilities. To be effective in this venture, colleges and universities will need to examine internal "disincentives" to community collaboration and may have to create incentives for faculty involvement.

Ongoing participation and communication by both community members and universities enhance community-university relationships. Colleges and universities may further benefit from including community leaders and/or leading practitioners on departmental curriculum and outreach committees. The colleges and universities need to take the lead, becoming more active in community life, with university faculty and staff serving on boards, committees, and task forces with alumni and professional groups. As a result, partnering with communities takes considerable time and commitment from academic departments and other college/university personnel.

Community-university partnerships are successful when they combine both theoretical and practitioner perspectives. The Leadership and Community program has shown that experiential, cohort-based models may be an effective foundation for community-university partnerships. The old prescriptive approach by colleges and universities is not effective in partnering with communities. College staff and university outreach administrators interested in building community-university collaboration will need to build partnerships with other academic colleagues within their own institutions as well. Outreach staff play a vital role by bringing together community and university staff to develop partnerships.