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Essential facilitators in building university partnership with ethnic minority communities

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Article abstract

Recently, universities have paid attention to partnership with local communities for mutual benefits. However, this partnership is a complex and challenging process because it brings two different organizations to work together. Many challenges encountered often produces dissatisfying results and distrust among all participants. Using the BRAVE youth violence prevention program as a case study, this study describes the essential facilitators affecting the university partnership with disadvantaged poor ethnic communities in Chicago. Identified facilitators are: agreed mutual benefits, trust relationship, open and transparent communication, shared missions and interest, equal power in decision-making, empowering organization's sustainability, flexibility, and cultural activities. Building on the lessons from this case example, this study presents that the university-community partnership demonstrates a shared responsibility of the university to serve community members and of the partner agency's commitment to strengthen the community's capacity to prevent youth violence.

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Essential facilitators in building university partnership with ethnic minority communities¹

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Le partenariat universités-communautés est un processus complexe et difficile parce qu'il convie deux organisations différentes à travailler ensemble. De nombreux défis rencontrés produisent souvent des résultats insatisfaisants et de la méfiance chez tous les participants. Utilisant le programme de prévention de la violence chez les jeunes BRAVE comme étude de cas, cette étude décrit les éléments facilitateurs essentiels affectant le partenariat universitaire avec les communautés ethniques pauvres défavorisées de Chicago. Ces éléments consistent en : avantages mutuels convenus, relation de confiance, communication ouverte et transparente, missions et intérêts communs, pouvoir égal dans la prise de décisions, renforcement de la durabilité, de la flexibilité et des activités culturelles de l'organisation. Le partenariat université-communauté relève ainsi d'une responsabilité partagée de l'université visant à servir les membres de la collectivité et l'engagement de l'organisme partenaire à renforcer la capacité de la collectivité de prévenir la violence chez les jeunes.

Mots-clés : partenariat université-communauté, facteurs de facilitation, prévention de la violence chez les jeunes, développement communautaire, jeunes en situation minoritaire

Recently, universities have paid attention to partnership with local communities for mutual benefits. However, this partnership is a complex and challenging process because it brings two different organizations to work together. Many challenges encountered often produces dissatisfying results and distrust among all participants. Using the BRAVE youth violence prevention program as a case study, this study describes the essential facilitators affecting the university partnership with disadvantaged poor ethnic communities in Chicago. Identified facilitators are: agreed mutual benefits, trust relationship, open and transparent communication, shared missions and interest, equal power in decision-making, empowering organization's sustainability, flexibility, and cultural activities. Building on the lessons from this case example, this study presents that the university-community partnership demonstrates a shared responsibility of the university to serve community members and of the partner agency's commitment to strengthen the community's capacity to prevent youth violence.

Keywords: university-community partnership, facilitating factors, youth violence prevention, community development, minority youth

La asociación universidades-comunidades es un proceso complejo y difícil porque reúne a dos organizaciones diferentes para trabajar juntas. Muchas dificultades encontradas a menudo producen resultados insatisfactorios y desconfianza entre todos los participantes. Utilizando el programa de prevención de la violencia juvenil BRAVE como estudio de caso, este estudio describe los elementos facilitateurs esenciales que afectan la asociación universitaria con comunidades étnicas pobres desfavorecidas en Chicago. Estos elementos consisten en: beneficios mutuos acordados, relación de confianza, comunicación abierta y transparente, misiones e intereses compartidos, igual poder en la toma de decisiones, potenciación de la sostenibilidad, flexibilidad y actividades culturales de la organización. La asociación universidad-comunidades demuestra la responsabilidad compartida de la universidad de servir a los miembros de la comunidad y el compromiso de la agencia asociada de fortalecer la capacidad de la comunidad para prevenir la violencia juvenil.

Palabras clave: asociación universidad-comunidad, factores facilitadores, prevención de la violencia juvenil, desarrollo comunitario, jóvenes minoritarios

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1. Introduction

In recent years, universities and communities have established interest in building partnership for their mutual benefits. Shifting its traditional tasks of teaching, research and service to community engagement, the university addresses the community's emerging problems such as violence, poverty, and health care, and consequently integrates them into community-engaged curriculum, community service learning, community-based participatory research, and field practicum education (Curwood, et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2003; Steinmo & Rasmussen, 2018; Wilson et al., 2015). The university's engagement with a local community facilitates a higher education institution to expand its mission for social justice and to promote its reputation to the public.

Likewise, the community also benefits through university partnership because a higher education institution brings intellectual, professional, and evidence-based programs to resolve presented community problems. Previous studies affirm that a university-community partnership is an effective and promising community development approach because it has immediate impact on promoting community members' healthy behaviors, preventing community violence, enhancing community social capital, and improving youth educational outcomes (Axtell et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2016; Fagan et al., 2009; Kim, 2021; Nation et al., 2011; Umemoto et al., 2009). In addition, a community agency facing a shortage of personnel and internal resources can benefit from university support such as intern students, faculty consultation, usage of campus facilities, and program development (Williamson, et al., 2016).

While university-community partnership can ensure mutual benefits, the collaboration process is complex and challenging because it brings two different organizations, personnel and cultures together. In addition, facilitators and barriers affecting a successful collaboration vary because each collaboration is unique and differs in purpose, duration, location, and scope. Despite various collaborative situations, previous research identified several core facilitators that commonly attributed to successful university-community partnership. Identified facilitating factors are: agreed goals, mutual benefits, trust relationship, open communication, shared mission and values, member's commitment, equal power relationship, clarification of scope, strong leadership, and adequate funding (Bosma et al., 2010; Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Ellen et al., 2011; Fagan et al., 2009; Kim, 2021; Nation et al., 2011; Sargent & Waters, 2004; Strier, 2011; Thomson et al., 2003; Viswanathan et al., 2004; Williamson et al., 2016).

However, there has been a literature gap in identifying unique facilitators or comparing them with existing facilitators in collaborating with ethnic communities, especially disadvantaged, oppressed, and poor urban communities. Moreover, facilitators affecting an ethnic community-based youth violence prevention program have not been identified to date. To address this gap, this study uses the Loyola University Chicago's BRAVE (Building Resilience Against Violence Engagement) project as a case example and examines several facilitators associated with three levels: 1) the interactional relationship level (mutual benefits, trust relationship, transparent and appropriate communication), 2) the organizational system level (shared values, missions and interest, equal power, sustainability), and 3) ethnic and cultural context factors (flexibility, recognition of ethnic cultural activities). By specifically examining key facilitators associated with ethnic and cultural community contexts and a community-based youth violence prevention program, this study hopes to identify which facilitators are essential, work better and are relatively more important in building successful partnerships. The outcomes of this study may suggest meaningful insights to others who undertake collaborative relationships between university and

ethnic communities. Moreover, this study may assist a community developer to equip strategies of sociocultural community development approach and find “points of consensus or dissent” when he works with two different organizations together in building a collaborative youth violence prevention in a poor urban ethnic community (Augustin, 2020).

2. Need for Collaborative Youth Violence Prevention Program in Ethnic Communities

Youth violence is a serious public health problem because it is not only prevalent but also disproportionate. National Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance study in 2017 indicated that 24% of high school youth were in a physical fight one or more times; 19% of high school youth were bullied; and 11% of female youth were victims of sexual dating violence during the last 12 months (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 2017). Youth violence is disproportionate, as ethnic minority youth living in disadvantaged poor communities are more likely to be exposed to community violence. In general, one third of youth living in urban areas are estimated to have experienced violence or been the victim of violence (Bennett & Joe, 2015). However, nearly all African American youth living in poor urban communities are at higher risk of exposure to violence (Chicago Center for Youth Violence Prevention, 2018). Moreover, ethnic minority youth are at the highest risk of serious harmful violence. For African American youth and Latino youth, homicide is the first and second leading cause of death, respectively, although it is the 3rd leading cause of death for all youth ages between 10 and 24 years (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). In Chicago particularly, 75% of victims and 71% of murderers of 754 homicides in 2016 are African Americans living in poor ethnic communities (Foley, 2016). Furthermore, nearly a half of Chicago homicide victims are youth aged between 10 and 25 years, and 65% of all violent crime arrests are under 25 years old.

3. Description of BRAVE Project

Considering a higher risk of youth violence embedded in poor and disadvantaged ethnic communities in Chicago, the Loyola University Chicago and community partner agencies have collaborated the BRAVE (Building Resilience Against Violence Engagement) project since 2017. The BRAVE project is an evidence-based, culturally appropriate, and community-based youth violence prevention program that is tailored to each community partner agency’s unique context. The BRAVE project is funded by the Minority Youth Violence Prevention II grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The collaborating community partner agencies are the Vietnamese Association of Illinois, Centro Romero, and By the Hand which are specialized for serving Asian, Latino, and African American youth in the Edgewater, Rogers Park, and Englewood communities. All three communities are disadvantaged urban neighborhood where federal poverty level is relatively high (i.e., 18.3% in Edgewater, 26.3% in Rogers Park, and 46.3% in Englewood); have a higher crime rate (i.e., 40.3, 55.0, and 188.4 per 100,000, respectively); and are ethnically concentrated or segregated (i.e., 45%, 58%, and 95% of the community populations are minority, respectively) (Chicago Crime Map, 2019; Farooqui, 2017). The BRAVE program offers a comprehensive violence prevention service including individualized case management, group work program, after-school tutoring, weekend field trips, and individual and family counseling service. In addition, the BRAVE offers recreational and ethnic cultural activities to enhance participating youth’s ethnic identity. This project also provides implicit bias training and fundraising events to community members to strengthen community social capital and youth’s ethnic and cultural identity.

4. Case Study Methodology

The case study methodology is appropriate for directly investigating complex interactional relationship and unique phenomenon that cannot be examined through other research methods (Boblin et al., 2013; Stake, 2006; Yin, 1994). Using a case study methodology, this study systematically identifies unique facilitators affecting university-community collaboration in implementing a community-based youth violence prevention program. The findings identified from this case study can generate insights beyond the individual exemplary case and may be applicable to a variety of university-community partnerships via the implementation of a community development program.

5. Facilitators for Developing Successful Partnership with Ethnic Community

5.1. Interactional Relationship Level

1) Agreed Mutual Benefits and Trust Relationship

In the beginning stage of partnership, it is crucial to develop mutual benefits and a trust relationship between collaborators. The university may view the partner community agency as research subjects or service recipients rather than equal partners or community experts. Reciprocally, the community agency may perceive that a university approaches a community to test a new program or to obtain field education sites for its own benefit. While promoting the BRAVE project and looking for partner ethnic communities, for example, some agencies expressed that they were honored because a well-known Loyola University proposed a partnership with them. However, other agencies viewed the university as a white, privileged organization that only comes to their community in order to take advantage of community problems for securing research funding for the university's own interest. They felt abused from previous university partnerships and distrusted a time-limited project because they would not benefit from long-term sustainability. Furthermore, some immigrants in Latino communities shared their strong concerns that their immigration status would be exposed to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) if they participated at university-initiated program. Such misperceptions and skepticism about partnership with university are not surprising because of historical tensions that the African American community has suffered and current immigration policy the Latino community has faced.

In order to minimize any misperceptions of university partnership with ethnic communities, thus, the university's BRAVE team has frequently visited community partner agencies and attended numerous community events and townhome meetings to promote the goals of the project, benefits of collaboration, and guarantee of confidentiality. In addition, the university's BRAVE team assisted community partner agencies to advocate the benefits of university partnership throughout community. Reciprocally, university invited agency staff to university's training events or academic seminars. Building trust relationship through mutual respect and frequent appearances in community events strengthens community agency's interest in university partnership.

2) Clear and Transparent Communication

Once mutual benefits and goals for collaboration are agreed, both partners need to clearly communicate about the scope of collaboration (e.g., duration, roles, budget management, reporting system, etc.) in general and the components of community-based BRAVE violence prevention program in particular (e.g., types of services, target populations, qualification of

providers). Clear and transparent communication not only helps each collaborator recognize its roles, duties, and accountability but also further strengthens the trust relationship by avoiding any conflicts of interest. In working with ethnic minorities whose English are not proficient, clear and open communication is needed for building agreed scope of works.

In communicating with ethnic partner agencies, it is essential to adopt culturally appropriate communication skills and offer a language interpretation service, especially if their first language is not English. For example, when promoting the BRAVE project to a Vietnamese community, the university's BRAVE team learned that certain Vietnamese terms and dialects are not appropriate to their community members because most of them came from South Vietnam and felt hostile toward terms used in formerly communist North Vietnam. Another example of culturally appropriate communication with an ethnic agency is employing a term of violence in a project title. One agency was reluctant to use the term "violence" in promoting the BRAVE project to community members because it may remind youths of the trauma they experienced in their community and generates the stereotype of participating youth as perpetrators to other community members. Considering this unique community context, the university BRAVE team subsequently replaced the project title to a more ethnically and culturally suitable one - "BRAVE for Young Leaders."

Determining the components of a youth violence prevention program also requires clear and transparent communication in order to understand agency's unique needs. In developing specific activities and programs of the BRAVE, one agency wanted to replace a commonly required after-school tutoring program to a weekend field site travel because their youth did not have an opportunity to visit other parts of Chicago, including the downtown area only 8 miles away from their community, because they are an enclave in an ethnically segregated community with limited public transportation service. In addition, a partner agency noted that escaping from the community during the weekend may help participants avoid any violence engaged activities.

5.2 Organizational System Level

1) Shared Values, Missions and Interests

When both collaborators, while coming from different contexts, share a common vision and interest in collaboration, they can effectively develop healthy partnership for their mutual benefits and for the larger good such as community development. Hence, a university needs to choose community partner agencies who share similar mission, values, beliefs, and interests. Prior to initiating community collaboration, thus, a university needs to identify its own missions and assess available internal resources for pursuing its missions because community partnership requires longstanding and multifaceted supports from the entire university (Curwood et al., 2011). As a Jesuit institute in Chicago, the Loyola University Chicago has long acknowledged the severity of youth violence in higher risk ethnic communities as well as their needs for sustaining community capacity.

To this end, Loyola University Chicago evaluated prospective partner community agency's missions and interests along with community's socio-economic-cultural characteristics in order to ensure a sustainable partnership. In particular, understanding a partner agency's organizational structure, capacity, and atmosphere (e.g., internal decision-making process, expertise of staff, resources, and reputation in the community) as well as cultural and social norms within the community (e.g., norms of allowing violence) are critical because this information represents a community's unique perspective in dealing with university collaboration.

With a thorough knowledge of the community environment, the BRAVE team contacted as many community agencies as possible to explore their motivation and interest in implementing a collaborative youth violence prevention program. Across all meetings, most participants agreed that youth violence is the most serious community problem requiring immediate and professional intervention. However, most community agencies expressed a lack of funding to carry out a new program and were not familiar with university-initiated collaboration within their community contexts. After promoting the purpose and benefits of university-community partnership through a series of community meetings, the Loyola BRAVE team and the three community agencies who have concerned youth violence as the serious community problems agreed to collaborate.

2) Equal Power in Decision Making Process

Another facilitator in organizational system level is to share equal decision-making power. Previous studies indicate that a university often tends to have more power than community agencies in leading partnership (Altman, 2005; Cherry & Shefner, 2004; Maginn, 2007; Strier, 2011). When partner agencies feel an unequal power relationship due to a lack of formal education degrees, outdated technology, poor English proficiency, and lower socioeconomic status often apparent in ethnic minority agencies, it creates tensions and distrust within a relationship that impedes successful coalition. Thus, maintaining the egalitarian relationship with ethnic partner agencies demonstrates that a university values an agency staff's cultural competence and treats them as community experts. Consequently, shared equal power encourages agency staff to freely express their lived-experiences in generating more effective community-based, culturally appropriate violence prevention program.

3) Empowering Organization's Sustainability

If a partner agency or an ethnic community do not have sufficient resources or expertise to carry out the collaborative violence prevention program, the university needs to share its resources with that community rather than prematurely terminating community collaboration. For example, when one partner agency addressed the difficulty of recruiting college student tutors and mentors from its own community, the university's BRAVE team cooperated with the university's Experiential Learning Center and Social Work Internship Department and recruited volunteers and intern students. Furthermore, the university's BRAVE team hired a supervisor and liaison for partner agencies, because most ethnic agencies did not have educationally qualified staffs to oversee graduate level intern students' field practicum. Moreover, the university has provided diverse trainings and education to agency staff as their duties and roles evolve over the project period and environmental changes. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, partner agency staff were trained to learn virtual violence prevention programs, employ an online case management software program, and comply with the university's requirement for electronically storing collected data. Partner agencies and staff appreciated the training because it enriched their quality of services and enhanced a feeling of collaboration.

Sharing the university's resources with a deprived partner agency helps the community ensure that university collaboration is beneficial to its community. In addition, community collaboration benefits the university's traditional tasks because the university can expand a student's experiential learning experience and field practice education as well as accomplishing the university's mission of serving a community. Empowering a partner agency's capacity is further beneficial in preparing a grant proposal for securing an adequate funding when a time-limited project ended.

5.3. Ethnic and Cultural Context Level

1) Flexibility

The important facilitator in an ethnic and cultural context level is the flexibility which allows a partner agency to adjust the components of the BRAVE project to its cultural contexts. Without distorting the key components of the BRAVE violence prevention program, it was important to decide when and how to integrate the new program into their existing youth programs because the BRAVE program is designed with the premise that risk and protective factors of youth violence differ based on ethnic cultures, youth developmental stages, and a community's socio-economic contexts. Thus, allowing for a partner program's flexibility means ensuring a partner agency's shared decision-making power when an agency modifies the BRAVE program to accommodate its ethnic-cultural values, and community contexts. For example, one partner agency was a Christian-based organization well-known for its Bible study class as an agency-specific violence prevention program within the community. Respecting the agency's mission and its preferable intervention method in preventing youth violence, the university's BRAVE team agreed to include a biblical approach such as peace-making and conflict resolution in a group work program. The partner agency appreciated the university's flexibility and respect for the agency's preferable approach, which made the collaboration more successful.

2) Honor and Recognize Ethnic-Cultural Activities

The other facilitator affecting a successful coalition with ethnic partner agency is to maintain and recognize partner agency's reputation within its ethnic community. Often, an ethnic community's social service agency plays a central role for offering a gathering place, sharing information, and ensuring ethnic identity and cultural values more than providing professional social services to its members. Most minority youths and families, especially those who have recently immigrated, tend to visit ethnic community agencies to feel welcomed and comforted by speaking their own language, sharing ethnic cuisines, learning cultural values and crafts, and hanging out with ethnic friends. To an ethnic agency, it is important to offer these roles because public reputation about an agency is directly connected to the types of ethnic cultural activities which an agency provides. It seems that the more an ethnic community agency presents ethnic cultural activities, the better reputation it has within the ethnic community, and consequently, the faster its organizational capacity grows. For example, prior to collaboration, Asian partner agency has offered a language class, cultural craft activity and tutoring service which all satisfy Asian immigrant parents' needs for educating traditional cultural values and achieving academic excellence. Due to various cultural youth programs, this agency has received good reputation from Asian community, and can easily recruit participating youth when implementing the BRAVE youth violence prevention program.

6. Discussion

Given the fact that little is known about university partnership with ethnic community agencies in poor and disadvantaged urban communities, this case study illustrates essential key facilitators that impact a successful collaboration. Upon participating at the BRAVE project, both university and community agencies learned about not only the effectiveness of community-based youth violence prevention program but also unique facilitators affecting partnership. Building trust relationships through clear communication is the first and foremost crucial factor in interactional relationship level. Especially when the university is not present in a poor and disadvantaged ethnic community, the university needs to better endeavor to collaborate with the community because

community agencies may perceive the university as a white, privileged institute that pursues its own benefits through collaboration. Without becoming defensive, the university needs to listen to the community stakeholders' perceptions and stories, and respectfully communicate the mutual benefits of collaboration.

When university-community collaboration is led by an individual faculty without the university's multifaceted systemic support, community partnership could be extemporaneous and unstable. In order to move beyond the verbal gestures of collaboration and to sustain community partnership even if the time-limited project completed, the university should value community collaboration as its social responsibility; encourage community-engaged teaching, research, and services; and share its resources with deprived local communities.

Other important facilitators identified from this case study are shared power in decision-making and flexibility of the program to accommodate an agency's ethnic and cultural needs for services. Considering ethnic and cultural diversity among partner agencies, the BRAVE project incorporates diverse ethnic groups' cultures and languages in developing documents and materials (e.g., educational brochures for preventing youth violence, flyers for recruiting and promoting program in school and community, etc.) and offers language assistance services (e.g., interpreters and translators) to youth participants and parents who have limited English proficiency at no additional cost. The challenges that occurred during the collaboration process are the frequent turnovers of the agency staff and a lack of resources to refer to within a community. Thus, it is clear some disadvantaged communities will benefit from university-community collaboration because it offers great promise for the stretching of limited community resources to serve as many youth participants as possible. Although the specific natures of this case study may be idiosyncratic to this particular collaboration with ethnic communities, lessons from this study may more generally apply to develop various community-based ethnic youth programs. Despite its usefulness, this study illustrates a university-initiated community collaboration from a university's viewpoint although it tries to include partner agencies' unique perspective and their lived experiences. Thus, this study suggests that future research needs to explore ethnic community agency' own experiences and essential facilitators in developing a successful partnership with a university.

Conclusions

Every university-community partnership is unique and different because of each collaborator's distinctive interactional, organizational, cultural and community contexts. However, the facilitators described in this case study are expected to be applicable to a wide range of university partnership with poor, disadvantaged ethnic communities in a urban city. Moreover, recognition of essential facilitators played in three levels provides an insight for prospective collaborators to prepare future university-community collaborations in developing community-based youth violence prevention program.

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