

**Model Youth Programs:
A Key Strategy for Developing Community-University Partnerships
Using A Community Youth Development Approach**

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ABSTRACT

Universities across the nation face the charge of enhancing their intellectual capital as a learning institution while also contributing to the greater social good. While there is great potential for university-community partnerships to create powerful new knowledge for the academic field and transformative experiences for community members, partnerships often fail to produce such meaningful results. In such unsuccessful initiatives, community residents have frequently perceived that university partners spend insufficient time learning about community context, prioritize research objectives over community needs and do not make long-term commitments.

This paper presents how the design and implementation of model youth programs served as an effective strategy in developing a partnership between a university-based center and two local communities over a 5-year period. It also describes essential lessons that other communities, research institutions or universities may use to launch, implement, expand and sustain their own successful partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2000, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University (the Gardner Center) initiated partnerships with two San Francisco Bay Area communities to generate better outcomes for young people. Guided by a community youth development philosophy that values the voices of young people and residents, focuses on assets and emphasizes collaboration, the Gardner Center was able to overcome many of the challenges that have historically plagued community-university partnerships. A key strategy within this process was to co-develop and implement a model youth program in each community. This effort created the necessary conditions for a strong partnership that would develop new knowledge and resources for research and practice in youth development. This paper will outline the approach the Gardner Center used and highlight essential lessons learned about partnership development as the youth program unfolded.

The Historical Context of Community-University Relations

Universities across the nation face the charge of enhancing their intellectual capital as a learning institution while also contributing to the greater social good. Efforts to fulfill the latter come in many forms: college students volunteering in community programs; faculty conducting research activities to support local reform efforts; or university centers and civic leaders launching major community development initiatives. In some cases, collaborative endeavors result in powerful new knowledge for the academic field and transformative experiences for community members. Other partnerships fail to produce such meaningful results. In such unsuccessful initiatives, residents have frequently perceived that university partners:

- *Spent insufficient time learning about the community context:* researchers have theories about how to fix neighborhoods, but they do not consider the experiences and ideas of residents. Researchers focus on obvious community deficits and problems without exploring strengths and assets.
- *Prioritized research objectives over community needs:* information from community-based research projects are not translated into accessible formats or practical tools that community members can utilize to solve local problems. Instead, the data is primarily used to address an academic audience, with few direct benefits to those who were being researched.
- *Do not commit to long-term goals or strategies:* faculty members initiate projects that are connected to short-term grants. Once the funding cycle comes to a close, so does the partnership.

Mistrust is particularly strong in communities of color that have historically been exploited in a variety of research experiments. These perceptions, actual or imagined, are compounded by the real differences that exist between academic institutions and under-resourced communities in terms of privilege, power, and philosophy.

A Community Youth Development Approach to Partnerships

The Gardner Center was established to strengthen policy, practice and research in the field of community youth development (CYD). The Gardner Center's particular focus on community-university partnerships is driven by the vision of John W. Gardner, a nationally renowned civic leader and public servant. Throughout his lifetime, Gardner often spoke of the indispensable role of the university as a member of the broader community with responsibility to improve the quality of

life for everyone.¹ He believed that universities could make unique contributions to local efforts that aim to improve the well-being of young people. Gardner also recognized that residents had distinct knowledge that could inform and build the academic field of community youth development.

Community youth development is an approach predicated on the belief that the health of young people and their communities are interdependent.² As Hughes and Curnan (2001) describe, CYD strategies “harnesses the power of youth to affect community development and simultaneously engages communities to embrace their role in the development of youth.”³ Youth and their communities are not problems to be fixed; they are essential partners with assets and expertise.⁴ This framework also acknowledges that young people grow up in communities, not isolated programs or systems; they develop physically, intellectually, psychologically and socially all at once. Therefore, programs and systems intended to support them should be well-coordinated and context-driven in order to maximize effectiveness. Furthermore, a CYD approach recognizes that the task of creating meaningful and lasting change requires a long-term investment and commitments from all stakeholders.

The Gardner Center’s approach to partnerships applied the main principles of CYD in response to challenges that have hindered collaborative efforts in the past. In order to develop a common vision with partners, the Gardner Center first learned about a community’s history and context through open-ended conversations with residents and local leaders. These discussions also identified potential goals and objectives. Gardner Center staff members then worked with local partners to co-construct model programs that build on effective research-based youth development practices as well as community knowledge. These shared efforts led to new relationships between the university and community, which were leveraged to create opportunities for research and action that will have a lasting impact on young people’s lives.

The Strategy of Implementing Model Programs

The steps and lessons presented here are derived from case studies of partnerships between the Gardner Center and two local communities: Redwood City and West Oakland. Although the partnerships in each community have evolved in different ways, they both began with a youth leadership program, Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL). For the past five years, YELL has provided Kennedy Middle School (Redwood City) and McClymonds High School (West Oakland) students with the opportunity to lead action projects on social justice issues they find important and relevant. Throughout the program, youth learn research, advocacy and organizing methods in order to seek and implement answers to the difficult problems that face their school and community. YELL participants use these skills and knowledge to inform and improve local youth and education policy through shared decision-making with adults. Beginning with 2 cohorts of approximately a dozen young people at the program’s inception, the project now supports almost 200 youths.

¹ Gardner, John W. (2002) A New Spirit is Stirring. Haas Center for Public Service,

² McLaughlin, M. W. (2000). Community Counts. Public Education Network. p 25-27

³ Hughes, Della M, Curnan, Susan P. (2001) Community Youth Development: A Framework for Action, , CYD Journal

⁴ National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth.(1996). Reconnecting Youth & Community: A Youth Development Approach. Family and Youth Services Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, U.S.Department of Health and Human Services.

The process of co-developing and implementing YELL within each community was a key strategy to create the necessary conditions for successful collaboration on systems level research and action efforts. As a Gardner Center sponsored program, YELL fundamentally changed the dynamic between the community and the university. Community partners no longer perceived the university to be an elite institution, but instead associated it with a set of human relationships built on mutual respect and trust. Furthermore, seeing the YELL model in action prompted a range of stakeholders to become more deeply invested in CYD strategies and more willing to engage in a partnership with the Gardner Center to better support youth in their communities.

With respect to building a partnership, the Gardner Center had three main objectives in co-creating and sponsoring YELL as a model program within a CYD framework. This paper will highlight examples and lessons learned in meeting each of these objectives.

- *Objective 1:* Address Negative Perceptions of University Partners
- *Objective 2:* Generate Community Commitment to a CYD approach
- *Objective 3:* Engage in Systems-Level Change

OBJECTIVE 1: ADDRESS NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY PARTNERS

To change community members' negative perception of the university, the Gardner Center had to:

- Understand community context and co-construct the model program collaboratively
- Support both research and practice
- Develop agreements for sustainability

Understand Community Context and Co-Construct the Model Program

Instead of the university setting the agenda with preconceived ideas about the nature of the partnership or model program, the Gardner Center's first role was to listen to community leaders and learn about the local context before making any decisions. Gardner Center staff members spoke with city leaders, school staff and members of community-based organizations in both Redwood City and West Oakland about their past experiences and new ideas for better supporting young people.

All voiced a need for more coordinated systems, services, and supports for young people in and out of school. The conversations also revealed a need for research that could inform these desired changes. In particular, community leaders wanted to better understand: how to apply academic theories of youth development to their context; the everyday experiences and needs of local youth; and young people's opinions about how to improve youth services and opportunities. It quickly became clear that both communities could benefit from developing youth leaders who could generate new knowledge about youth to inform local decision-making. Out of these discussions emerged a program design for YELL in which young people led action research projects on issues important to youth.

Essential Lesson: Frame initial conversations broadly. The Gardner Center did not come prepared with proposals or solutions to these early meetings. Community leaders were surprised to hear that the Center did not have a specific program or particular grant in mind. Instead, the guiding question for partnership development was, "What might we be able to do together to further support young people?" This framing proved to be effective in opening rather than closing doors.

Support Both Research and Practice

To overcome perceptions of the university as only acting in academic self interest, the Gardner Center's second task was to ensure YELL supported the Gardner Center's research and dissemination goals along with the community's need for high quality training and direct service. Therefore, it was critical that YELL's design was informed by effective practices that could be aligned with concrete research questions about their effectiveness within a particular community context. That way, the knowledge gained from this work could be shared with academia, but would also allow the Gardner Center to create tools, models and strategies that local community members could also use in their practice.

Essential Lesson: Give program coordinators explicit responsibilities in both research and practice. In order to eliminate any impression that one set of goals was more valuable than the other, Center staff worked diligently to make the work of running the program and documenting the youths' experience as seamless as possible. In particular, the YELL Director served a critical role of research-practitioner with two primary responsibilities: interface with the youth and community members to meet program goals and support university students and staff in implementing the research agenda. As a result, the documentation of youths' experiences in YELL was an intentional effort to bridge research and practice. This multi-purpose data was used to answer academic questions, contribute to program improvement, support grant evaluations, advocate for additional funds, and share successful program strategies through curricula and training.

Develop Agreements for Sustainability

Many community-university partnerships face challenges in securing and sustaining the financial resources needed to support their work. However, as a new center with the prestige and backing of Stanford, the Gardner Center was in a unique position to support YELL's early development. Housed within a school of education at a major research university, the Gardner Center had expertise to offer in research training, curriculum development, data collection and analysis. Furthermore, the Gardner Center had been awarded initial research and development funds from a foundation for a feasibility study of partnerships in local communities. Community partners offered in-kind resources such as staff time, local knowledge, connections, space, equipment, and commitment to making the program work.

The Gardner Center assumed managing responsibility for the YELL program with verbal agreements and trust that both parties were committed to a long-term partnership. However, after years of developing YELL as a successful (but costly) research and development model, grants came to a close and more than enough data had been collected to meet research goals. At this point, questions of what each partner would ultimately and officially be accountable for had to be addressed. These conversations were difficult and brought out old suspicions that the university would back out. Once the Gardner Center communicated with partners more explicitly about their commitments to continue providing technical assistance in program design and fund development, however, many of their fears were assuaged and the school even committed to take on additional responsibilities for managing the program.

Essential Lesson: Create a plan for sustainability and shared accountability up front. Although a two or three-year grant was enough to launch a youth program, it did not represent the kind of long-term investment needed to see meaningful community change. Communities want to see that universities are partners for the long haul, not just when the grant money is available. This kind of enduring partnership requires foresight, planning and difficult conversations about shared responsibilities

from the start of model program development. In the case of YELL, confusion could have been avoided by creating a Memorandum of Understanding for the partnership and each program as it developed during the first year of implementation that also addressed issues of sustainability. Today, these MOUs now explicitly outline shared and individual responsibilities for fund development and ongoing support of the program.

OBJECTIVE 2: GENERATE COMMUNITY COMMITMENT TO A CYD APPROACH

A second major goal of the Gardner Center’s model program strategy was to generate community investment in a CYD approach. In particular, community members wanted to see how related academic theories were relevant and useful in local improvement or reform efforts. Sharing these same interests and eager to meet this need, the Gardner Center used YELL to:

- Model effective practices in community youth development
- Develop positive relationships with community leaders and stakeholders

Model Effective Practices in Community Youth Development

YELL was developed in part to create a model that demonstrated the effectiveness of a community youth development approach, with a particular focus on youth voice in decision-making. By supporting staff knowledgeable in youth development to run YELL, the Gardner Center was able to adapt effective practices⁵ to local contexts before suggesting that schools or community-based organizations embed these strategies in their own work. YELL served as a tool to translate CYD theories into concrete examples from which partners could draw lessons and inspiration. As partners observed their own youth successfully fulfilling roles as researchers and advocates, they became more excited about the potential of youth leadership and more willing to develop new venues for youth voice and involvement.

Evidence from YELL that CYD strategies actually worked led to more supports and opportunities for young people. Partner schools now offer the YELL program as a course during the mainstream school day, have created structures for youth voice in decisions about school policy and youth programming, and use YELL curriculum to enrich classroom and after school learning. For example, in Redwood City, YELL students now sit on school decision-making bodies related to school climate and are participating in civic activities in greater numbers. In West Oakland, youth were a part of a major school reform effort that created small schools within the larger school site, while others serve as key decision-makers and evaluators in the high school’s after-school initiative. The Oakland Unified School District now also collects data on youth’s perspectives, modeled after YELL research, at all grade levels. In this way, YELL became an important vehicle for the Gardner Center to introduce innovative approaches and ideas that could encourage other stakeholders in the community to embrace youth voice.

Essential Lesson: Translate academic theories into applied strategies. While the Gardner Center rarely found partners disagreed with theories of community youth development, community members often expressed skepticism about how CYD strategies could successfully be applied in their neighborhoods, with *their* youth. Many were concerned that the young people researched in these studies did not reflect the unique ethnic, cultural, and social identities of their students. Model

⁵ National Research Council – Institute of Medicine. (2002). Community Programs to Promote Youth Development. Executive Summary. National Academy Press.

programs that translate theory to local practice proved to be effective tools for generating the will of school and community leaders to move from theory to action and implement strategies on their own

Develop Positive Relationships with Community Leaders and Stakeholders

In early conversations, community leaders shared that past relationships with university researchers were often distant and detached. The Gardner Center understood that strong relationships were the building blocks to a comprehensive partnership that could improve outcomes for youth. Through YELL, the Gardner Center worked side by side with partners and essentially became embedded researchers. Staff members gained credibility by working directly with youth and demonstrating commitment by doing rather than just telling. As a result, the Gardner Center had the unique opportunity to learn about the day to day challenges faced by youth and the adults who serve them. Furthermore, with time and trust, community members began to open doors to research and program staff that were previously closed to outsiders, providing the Gardner Center with unprecedented access to local leaders and informal settings where decisions about policy, practice and research are made.

Essential Lesson: Invest significant time and resources early on to building relationships. Developing positive relationships with youth and respected school or community leaders created a ripple effect to counter negative perceptions of the university with other members of the community. These crucial players served as champions for the partnership, brokering additional relationships and setting the stage for partnership efforts to expand.

OBJECTIVE 3: ENGAGE IN SYSTEMS-LEVEL CHANGE

While the development and implementation of model programs reap immediate rewards for youth participants and local communities, the ultimate goal of these partnerships is to create long-lasting systemic change. To position the Gardner Center for involvement with systems level work, staff members leveraged relationships built through YELL to:

- Expand youth development opportunities in the community
- Develop new research projects that can inform policy

Expand Youth Development Opportunities in the Community

YELL staff, products, events and images promoted positive public perceptions of the Gardner Center and led to greater willingness to engage in collaborative efforts. Relationships built during the program's implementation were leveraged to expand CYD programming for all youth in the community. In West Oakland, YELL participants used research data to obtain funding for a youth and family center. Today, that effort has grown to include youth leading evaluations and grant-making processes for the programs at the center. In Redwood City, local YELL data was used to secure funding for a family resource center which now serves hundreds of students every year.

Relationships built from YELL also provided the Gardner Center with access to information about emerging prospects for systemic reform. For example, connections from YELL at Kennedy Middle School in Redwood City led to the participation of multiple schools in a reform effort to develop community schools that bring together schools, families and the broader community to better support youth. Similarly, because of the relationships staff members had with school leaders through YELL, in West Oakland the Gardner Center is working with school leaders on an effort to integrate and align in-school and out-of-school learning through professional development and collaborative projects between teachers and youth workers.

Essential Lesson: Maximize relationships to engage in systemic reform. The Gardner Center leveraged relationships from YELL to expand community youth development programming and engage in broader reform efforts. The credibility and connections from model program implementation served as critical tools for engaging partners in systems-level change efforts.

Develop New Research Opportunities That Can Inform Policy

The Gardner Center also capitalized on relationships in the community to initiate research projects that would answer both academic and practical questions. These research projects provided faculty members, along with graduate and undergraduate students, unique access to research subjects within their community contexts.

For example, Stanford faculty and students had the opportunity to study the process in which West Oakland students become disconnected from the institutions meant to serve them and become significant costs to the state. McClymonds High School granted researchers permission to shadow cohorts of high school students throughout the school day and into the neighborhood. In both communities, city and county officials are now beginning work to look at youth data across systems to examine how young people move between health, welfare, education and juvenile justice departments. Both projects intend to identify ways to reengage young people and understand what can be done to better support them. Given the previous, problematic history of academic institutions in these communities, these research activities are extraordinary and reveal the power of relationships built through model programs.

Essential Lesson: Site-based placement of university staff can yield critical knowledge for researchers and practitioners. Since Gardner Center staff members were embedded in the community, they were privy to local knowledge that could be used to develop research questions to inform policy. Lessons learned from these real-life CYD settings came back to the university to inform theory and support the development of future leaders across academic disciplines through the involvement of students as research assistants and courses which included community-based research projects. Staff members' dual roles as research-practitioners also supported this goal. Instead of sending university "experts" out to the field to train community leaders and providers with what "the research says" about supports young people need, the Gardner Center partnered with these individuals to build better tools, resources, and local models of community capacity together. For example, YELL program directors served as a "critical friend" and shared YELL research results with local leaders in a way that was depoliticized and did not feel like an attack from a powerful outsider. In other words, community members believed in the Gardner Center's good intentions and understood that the Center's research was intended to support improvement efforts, not to punish or criticize. Response to researcher's recommendations was purely voluntary and there was no mandate or consequence attached to study results - only the shared vision for promoting CYD.

CONCLUSION

Universities will continue to face challenges presented by the checkered history of university-community partnerships. However, a community youth development approach, with model youth programming as a key strategy, can help realize the promise of community-university partnerships. We hope this paper provides some useful strategies and highlights key pitfalls to avoid in carrying out such effort.