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Community Collaboration: Effective Partnerships with Steering Committees

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Community Collaboration: Effective Partnerships with Steering Committees

Abstract

This article reports the findings of a study examining the development, use, and effectiveness of community-based steering committees at three different rural sites. Each site developed projects administered by local Extension Educators aimed at benefiting at-risk youth and families. The effectiveness of the steering committees was evaluated by whether conditions were cultivated that would lead to program sustainability. Factors examined at each site included: availability and deployment of resources; steering committee composition; and leadership/ownership of the project. The article details the results of the study and suggests some implications for the development of community partnerships.

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Introduction

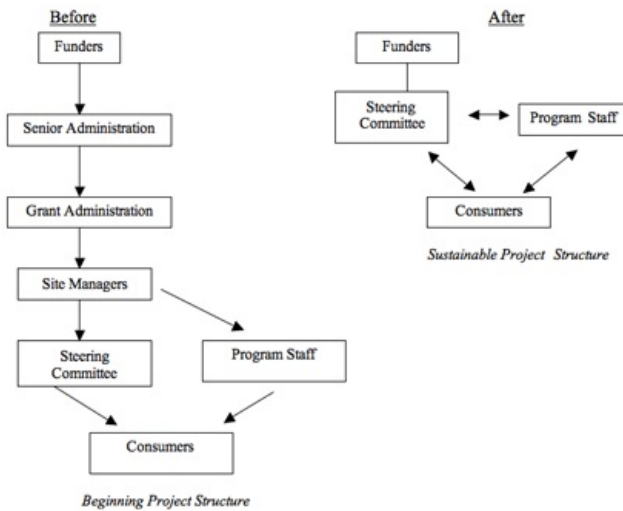
Extension program developers, interested in building a community initiative, often look to some form of citizen association composed of residents who know the local culture and feel a stewardship towards their area's resources (Carlton-LaNey, Edwards, & Reid, 1999). An example of such a mechanism is a community based steering committee. Community-based steering committees have many potential benefits, such as:

1. Engaging a broad spectrum of citizens' experiences and perspectives,
2. Ensuring a program's relevance to the community,
3. Developing indigenous leadership,
4. Creating widespread public awareness of the program, and
5. Allowing diverse input about evaluation and accountability.

The case study described here examines how three similar Extension projects approached the use of community-based steering committees and what their experiences can tell us about their

effective use in establishing programs. For the purposes of the study, the effectiveness of a steering committee is defined by whether they cultivated conditions that can lead to program sustainability. This definition was chosen because program sustainability was an initial, articulated goal of the start-up grant period. Figure 1 illustrates a "before" and "after" model of what sustainability might look like for a program in this study.

Figure 1.
Sustainable Program Structures: Before & After



The three studied initiatives were part of a statewide effort to expand rural communities' capacity to support vulnerable and low-income families by providing educational resources and opportunities. These initiatives were to be developed through partnerships between Extension and community-based entities, utilizing community assets to ensure program sustainability, including the formation of a local steering committee.

Program Description

Three rural communities in a Northern New England state that had a high percentage of identified at-risk families were selected to receive start-up grant funding. Data indicated that all three selected communities were above the state averages in: children living in poverty, percent of low wage earners, number of adults with less than a 9th grade education, and the number of students scoring lower on standardized reading tests (Bensen, 1998, Children's Alliance, 2000):

1. Site A was located in a rural community with a population of 3,500 but within commuting distance to a larger population center. Their program goal was to serve 15 to 20 limited income children and families through the development of a resource and child enrichment center in the community's newly built elementary school.
2. Site B was located in a larger community, set in a more rural environment, with a population of nearly 14,000. Their strategy was initially to offer programs for middle school youth that would continue to support them through successive grades. Over time, they hoped to expand to reach out to the families of the program's youth.
3. The community hosting Site C was in the most rural setting, with a population of 4,000. This site targeted 25-35 middle school children to participate in an after school enrichment program, in addition to summer and family support initiatives.

The study looked at data gathered during program evaluations conducted at Sites A, B, & C. Each site received an equal amount of funding over a period of 5 years. While the programs implemented by each community varied somewhat, each site formed a community steering group as part of their implementation strategy.

A branch of Extension managed the grant funding and provided senior level administrative support to the three site managers who were all Extension Educators. Site managers, in turn, provided guidance and oversight to the program staff and steering committee members who interacted directly with the program recipients (Figure 1). Every Extension site manager had other job responsibilities and was expected to devote less than 25% of their time to these projects. Similarly, these projects were neither the sole job responsibility of senior Extension administrators nor of the local program staffs.

Literature Review

A scarcity of literature speaks to successful use of steering committees in development of community initiatives. Therefore, information was gleaned from related topics, such as: work team management, non-profit board management, consumer advisory boards, coalition building, and

community development. The literature suggests three interconnected attributes as vital to the effectiveness of community working groups:

1. Adequate resources,
2. Representative committee composition,
3. Leadership that communicates clear goals, roles, and a unified vision. Note: Since one goal of these projects was to eventually turn over the programs to indigenous leaders (Figure 1), leadership was seen to include encouraging steering committee ownership of their program.

A review of the literature on these three attributes is summarized below.

Resources

It is important to analyze what resources the supporting organization is able to commit to establishing a steering committee. Resources might include: 1) leaders' experience with group facilitation, 2) availability of leaders' and members' time, 3) concrete resources, such as space and funds, and 4) commitment of leaders to genuine power sharing (Cohen, 1994). Such organizational supports are common themes in the literature for predicting group effectiveness (Hirokawa, 1990; Hersey & Blanchard, 1993; Hirokawa & Keyton, 1995).

The community's "readiness" is another important resource. Community readiness includes economic and social resources a community is willing to make available to the program. Predicting a community's readiness requires an understanding of the culture, values, history, and politics of the community, as well as the relevance the community sees in the issues addressed by any new initiative (Bergstrom, A., et al., 1995; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001).

Member Composition

Broad representation across the constituent base of a community program is needed to develop feasible and sustainable solutions to complex social problems (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). The nature of these problems cannot be fully understood by only a handful of stakeholders. In order to capture a diversity of representation across traditional boundaries of public, private, and non-profit sectors, relationship building is a critical element in steering committee development (Crocker, 2000; Mulroy, 2000).

Efforts aimed at engaging hard-to-reach or excluded groups (including consumers) are important to achieve organizational integrity. Efforts to recruit broad participation should be sensitive to the culture of the supporting organization, including the location and structure of meetings (Pargament, Habib, & Antebi, 1978). In addition, consumers, who are affected by a lack of needed services can become frustrated by a long-term process where their participation does not seem to bring about meaningful and timely change.

Maintaining a diverse membership requires the activity of a nominating committee, or some other standardized process by which citizens can be recruited to participate in the group (Rabinowitz, n.d.; Kolzow, 1995; Herman, Renz, & Heimovics, 1997). However, volunteering on a steering committee can be strenuous and time consuming, leading to member resignations or periods of inactivity (McFarlen, 1999). Therefore, ongoing maintenance of members' interest, (re-)motivation, and engagement are at least as important as recruitment of new members.

Leadership and Ownership

One of the leader's major responsibilities during the development phase of a steering committee is to guide the group in creating a vision, mission, goals, and objectives (Eadie, 1991; Kolzow, 1999; McFarlen, 1999). Leaders must both ensure that new members have an understanding of the vision and values of the committee and that ongoing members undertake a regular review of the organization's direction (Kolzow, 1995; Herman, Renz, & Heimovics, 1997).

Another major role of any leader is the development of clear, efficient information pathways (Hirokawa, 1990; Hersey & Blanchard, 1993; Hirokawa & Keyton, 1995). It is especially important that there be clear and candid internal communication regarding member roles and leader expectations. Additionally, strong external channels of communication between the steering committee and other community organizations can increase the potential for program effectiveness and sustainability (Kolzow, 1999). Reliable communication channels can: identify community assets, prevent duplication of efforts, find ways to share existing resources, and create a sense of working within the community-as-a-whole.

There is a relationship between high expectations from the leadership and effective performance by the steering committee (Hirokawa & Keyton, 1995). Leaders who encourage members to function independently help the committee develop the competency to take on larger and more complex tasks (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993; Axelrod, 1997). By delegating tasks and being open to dissenting opinions, leaders illustrate trust in, and respect for, the steering committee.

In summary, a review of the literature points to three interrelated areas that affect program

effectiveness and sustainability. These areas are: 1) resources, 2) steering committee composition, and 3) leadership and community ownership. The case study described here examines how these areas manifested themselves in the development of the three selected programs.

Methodology

The study analyzed data gathered from interviews with Extension managers and steering committee members in three sites during a first- and second-year program evaluation. Faculty and graduate student research assistants from the social work department of a local university conducted the semi-structured, telephone interviews. Interviewers asked managers to comment on several content areas, including: steering committee functioning, sustainability, grant administration, progress towards program goals, suggestions for future planning, and the way their individual skills had been used.

First-year evaluation interviews analyzed from the three sites included eight managers and 19 steering committee members. Responses from eight managers and 22 steering committee members represent the second-year evaluation data analyzed. Responses were grouped by site and by the year the interview was conducted.

Respondents' interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Transcript excerpts were examined for data that pertained to committee, site managers, and leadership functions as well as the project's interface with the overall community. Qualitative analysis of the data utilized standard activities of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing, and verification for a grounded theory approach identifying key concepts. All transcript excerpts were coded using theories, concepts, and categories that emerged through the data. Particular attention was paid to themes relating to the use and development of the steering committees and variances among the three sites in moving toward sustainability.

Verification was achieved through a process of triangulation involving each of the three authors examining transcripts and analyzing data for theories and concepts, which were then compiled into data tables under the most robust themes.

Findings

The analysis of the case study's data allowed a comparison of steering committee development in the three programs. The discussion below delineates the study's findings using the broad categories supported by the review of the literature and which emerged as themes in the data analysis: resources, steering committee composition, and leadership skills and ownership issues. Table 1 presents a summary of the findings.

Table 1.
Differences Between Sites in Years 1 and 2

Differences by Site During Year One			
	Site A - Year One (n=8)	Site B - Year One (n=15)	Site C - Year One (n=4)
Resources	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Public and private sectors unaware of project or goals 2. Site managers overwhelmed by multiple responsibilities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Public and middle school responsive to program 2. Site managers shared tasks with committee and each other 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Relationship with middle school strained 2. Site managers unable to hire program staff
Member Composition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Community well represented, except for area businesses 2. Consumers very hard to reach 3. Poor attendance; loss of members 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Widely representative; high commitment by members 2. Consumers involvement in decision making desired 3. Good attendance 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Need to reach out for more representation 2. Consumers involved, contributing 3. Poor attendance
Leadership &	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communication 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communication 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communication

Ownership	<p>felt as unclear from senior extension administration</p> <p>2. Site managers felt unsupported, undirected, and conflicted.</p> <p>3. Members were unclear about goals</p> <p>4. Members were unsure of their role</p>	<p>at all levels wanted</p> <p>2. Site managers felt pulled between existing programs and new project</p> <p>3. Members felt site managers were capable</p> <p>4. Leadership among members encouraged</p>	<p>perceived as going great</p> <p>2. Program and community focus difficult for site managers</p> <p>3. Members felt their input was being used</p> <p>4. Members felt committed but unsure of their role</p>
Differences by Site During Year Two			
	Site A - Year Two (n=10)	Site B - Year Two (n=13)	Site C - Year Two (n=7)
Resources	<p>1. Partnerships with other community projects considered</p> <p>2. Better marketing needed to inform other groups about program</p> <p>3. Considering program fees, grant funding and partnerships to get \$</p>	<p>1. Program impacted by school funding debate in the community</p> <p>2. Program recognized as a model for school district through marketing</p> <p>3. Grants written for sustainability</p>	<p>1. Relationship between program and school strained</p> <p>2. Importance of advertising and public relations recognized</p> <p>3. Still working to get the community behind the program for \$ support</p>
Member Composition	<p>1. Good community representation</p> <p>2. Small, consistent, and dedicated core group</p>	<p>1. Good diversity; but group big and unwieldy</p> <p>2. Core of consistent attendees</p>	<p>1. Need more diversity; need new members</p> <p>2. Increase in member consistency needed</p>
Leadership & Ownership	<p>1. Site managers got clearer about their roles and program direction</p> <p>2. Site managers want more collaboration between sites</p> <p>3. Members became more cohesive; problem solving as a group</p>	<p>1. Some unclear communication with Sr. Extension grant administrator</p> <p>2. Site managers' developed good working relationships as a team</p> <p>3. Committee members taking ownership</p>	<p>1. Grant administrator perceived as doing an excellent job</p> <p>2. Site manager felt alone and overwhelmed</p> <p>3. Committee taking ownership; indigenous leaders emerging</p>

Resources

The resources discussed in this section include: those already available in the communities at program start-up; those developed at each site during the first two years of the project; and those

in process of being, or that have yet to be, developed by manager.

Year One

Few resources were found in any of the small, rural communities for the three programs. Sites A and C both had initial difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff and steering committee members. Such personnel shortages left little opportunity for any discussion of sustainability. Site B managers found that local residents were very responsive to their after-school program aims and more easily recruited committee members with pre-existing skills.

The resources of staff time and energy were at a premium in all three sites. All site managers expressed difficulty balancing this project with their other, concurrent Extension responsibilities. Some managers felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the project and perceived little support.

In all three sites, managers thought more training and better preparation were required to meet their responsibilities. For example, managers expressed the need for additional training on:

1. Community development,
2. Management of steering committees,
3. Examples of program models that worked,
4. Grant management, and
5. Time management

Year Two

Site B was the only site to accomplish the goal of sustainability as the local Board of Education took ownership of the program late in the second year. This was especially noteworthy given the political and legal battles over state and local school financing that had gained prominence in this particular district. The Site B managers and steering committee demonstrated a high degree of political sophistication as they deliberately remained politically neutral in the battle over school funding and thus were able to maintain a positive working relationship with the school board.

By contrast, the other two sites were hindered by continuing confusion about the use of grand funds and communication problems with school administrations. Site C managers faced additional challenges as relationships with school officials had deteriorated to the point that rebuilding relationships became a pre-requisite step to finding any sustainability solutions.

Coordinating multiple tasks and roles remained a challenge for managers in all three sites. Extension staff expressed mixed feelings about the project because of its time demands and the limited funding allocated to support it. Training needs also continued to be an issue. Although improvements were noted, all site managers requested additional training on: facilitated group processes, community development, public relations, and financial management.

Member Composition

Year One

Due to small rural community settings, identifying steering committee members who were interested and able to engage actively was a challenge in all three sites. Both Sites A and C experienced challenges with poor attendance and steering committee dropouts. Reasons for these problems may be attributed to: a loss of interest, confusion regarding the mission and goals of the program, or over-commitment by steering committee members to other activities. On the other hand, attendance was very high at Site B, and the perceived "unwieldy" size of the group was managed by creating smaller work groups and clustering sub-committees of members with similar interests. However, despite the large size of Site B's steering committee, it was felt that actual consumers of program services were still not adequately represented and thus a shifting of member composition was required.

Year Two

All site managers and committee members recognized that there seemed to be a few, very active volunteers in their rural communities. Numerous things vied for the time of the existing committee members, and many members had become "inactive supporters." Even at Site B, where the steering committee remained large, diverse, and fairly representative, there was a debate about whether to put energy into retaining members or into recruiting interested individuals with fresh ideas. Some members were beginning to appear "stretched thin," and there was concern that talented members might burn out.

Leadership and Committee Ownership

Year One

All sites struggled to clarify their relationship with upper level grant administration. For example, some managers felt the leadership from upper level Extension staff provided unclear communication and expectations were unrealistic and confusing. Many site managers wanted assistance resolving their ambivalence about this new project that reduced their available time for other long-standing endeavors. Other managers thought that administrators could have fostered more communication among the project sites, allowing for mutual support.

In terms of relationships between site managers and steering committee members, results were variable. Although Site A managers saw themselves as working well as a team, some steering committee members perceived these managers to dominate meetings with a top-down leadership style. At Site C, managers were confronted by changes in personnel with associated time pressures, which in turn hindered their ability to effectively develop and communicate with the steering committee. In comparison, managers in Site B responded to the increased time demands by encouraging cooperation, delegating leadership responsibilities, and reaching out to those members who had skills that could benefit the program.

Year Two

All sites reported progress. Managers felt clearer about their role and about the program goals. They understood the need for the steering committee to take a more active role in decision-making, and site managers became more adept at:

1. Supporting the transition of committee members into leadership roles,
2. Encouraging problem solving strategies, and
3. Developing effective work teams.

Positive communication and working relationships among the Site B managers continued in year two. Therefore, Site B managers began to engage in a more sophisticated dialogue about accountability as well as the benefits and shortcomings of a grass-roots leadership model.

The steering committee in Site C felt that gains had been made in the structure of the meetings, use of members' time, and appreciation shown for member contributions. Members perceived the level of collaboration between managers and the steering committee to have increased. The committee was taking ownership of the program, and indigenous leadership was emerging from within the group. The committee members felt unified in their understanding of the program's goals, and failures in meeting goals were mainly due to their continuing struggle to adequately staff the program.

Summary of Findings

In examining the data, several observations can be made regarding resources, steering committee composition and leadership/ownership issues. It should be noted that as of this writing, only Site B had gained financial sustainability for its program. Both Site A and Site C were still trying to explore alternate funding sources. What contributed to Site B's success?

In looking at resources, Site B began with a considerably larger population and therefore a larger pool from which to draw participation. Individuals already existed who were previously active in other community initiatives, interested in at-risk families, and had previous experience in resource development. Thus, Site B demonstrated the benefit of having a large enough recruitment pool to ensure that committee members had sufficient expertise and committee tasks were widely shared. They were better able to encourage and advance collaboration, and, as a result, Site B steering committee members articulated an ownership of their committee early into its development. Clear communication, group decision-making, and engaging members in task involvement appeared to assist in this process.

The Site A and C communities, although similarly identified as needing programs for their at-risk families, had not previously been mobilized as a community the way Site B had been by a longstanding, acrimonious debate about public school funding. Therefore, site managers in Site A and C faced greater start-up challenges in identifying and attracting diverse steering committee members, and in readying them for task acceptance.

Implications for Practice

Several implications for Extension program developers can be drawn from the study. These implications are particularly important given the emphasis on collaboration with community stakeholders, which is the foundation of Extension-sponsored endeavors. Recommendations can be identified in three areas: the need for adequate preparation, leadership tasks and skills, and maintenance of a focus on sustainability.

Preparation Process

All participants often underestimate the time and effort needed to develop a new program with a steering committee. Unfortunately, there is usually a demand, either by consumers or funding sources, for immediate start-up services and demonstrable results. Such demands can shortchange the time needed to develop clear task assignments, draft initial program goals, and consider a steering committee's composition. Therefore, suggestions include:

1. Realistic project time lines to allow sufficient time for the formation of policies and initial steering committee development.
2. Cultivation of the community's awareness and buy-in to the program in order to facilitate sustainability. If services are initiated prior to input from the community-based steering committee, then the committee will be less empowered to take on the responsibility and roles necessary to achieve ownership.

Leadership Tasks and Skills

Leadership issues are a second concern for Extension personnel attempting effective steering committee development. Leadership of a community-based initiative may not be a well-developed skill, particularly if concentration has previously been on education or direct services to clients. Effective leadership seemed to require the following:

1. The ability to actively recruit steering members. Community-based committees are reliant on volunteers, and the study illustrates how other constant demands on civic-minded volunteers can result in attrition. Vigilance over steering committees composition must be maintained so that a few key members are not over-extended.
2. Attention to the optimal size for a steering committee to achieve efficiency, specialization, and representativeness.
3. The ability to facilitate the steering committee's process and eventually relinquish their own leadership role. Indigenous leaders should be supported through the transition from Extension-led to community-led efforts.

Maintaining a Focus on Sustainability

A final implication is to remain focused on the goal of sustainability. Although this is particularly important for programs funded with time-limited start-up grants, all programs can benefit from constantly monitoring viability. A focus on sustainability requires:

1. Monitoring whether the community has embraced a program and its efforts through steering committee member feedback.
2. Advancing public relations to highlight the need for the program and publish its successes.
3. "Keeping an eye on the clock." The pursuit of multiple sources of funding is needed early on. Consideration of steering committee composition is important to ensure that there are members who are knowledgeable about financial considerations and avenues for future funding.

In conclusion, the study illustrates several elements important to effective steering committee development by Extension Educators. However, the small sample size and geographically specific, rural setting may mitigate its generalizability. Additional research is needed to determine the degree to which the finding would be replicated in other settings and with different types of programs. Further testing of how various aspects of preparation effect steering committee development would be valuable to expand upon this study's findings.

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