

Frameworks for Community Sector Partnership and Engagement

Howard P^{1*}, Ryan M¹, Butcher J¹, Surrey M², Lyons C³ & Bright L⁴

¹ Australian Catholic University, Australia

² NSW Rural Fire Service, Australia

³ The Benevolent Society, Australia

⁴ St Vincent de Paul Society, Australia

Abstract

Three community organisations — the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, The Benevolent Society and St Vincent de Paul Society — and the Australian Catholic University, are partners in a three-year research project titled 'V21 — Enhancing volunteering for the 21st century'. This project was initiated to address the questions of the changing nature of volunteering, the need for new pathways into and within the different organisations and ways of enhancing the volunteer capacity of the volunteers and the organisations. The project has engaged the four organisations in understanding the organisational and societal contexts in which volunteers operate, and the critical issues to be addressed in the development of new frameworks for these and other organisations aiming to effectively enhance their volunteer capacities.

Key to this project is the need to examine how three community organisations develop their ability to work as partners and learn from each other in ways that enhance each other's capacities. This has led to a form of scholarship and an approach to research that respects the insights and expertise of all members and challenges all four organisations to genuine engaged citizenship.

The changing nature of communities and volunteering calls for new forms of communication and collaboration between the organisations themselves as well as with community, particularly for rural and remote areas. The project is developing the capacity of each of the organisations through critique of practice, mutual learning and skills transfer. The implications of this project for the community and higher education sectors are also presented.

The V21 Project and its aims

Three community organisations — the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, the St Vincent de Paul Society and The Benevolent Society — and the Australian Catholic University are partners in a three-year research project called 'V21 — Enhancing volunteering for the 21st century'. The four partner organisations represent a diversity of social and organisational contexts. The Benevolent Society is a public benevolent institution operating as a company limited by guarantee with a voluntary board, more than 700 volunteers and 640 paid staff. The St Vincent de Paul Society operates more as a charity-based organisation with over 21,000 volunteers in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. The New South Wales Rural Fire Service

is a statutory body with 67,000 volunteers. The Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a publicly funded university with approximately 12,000 students and approximately 800 full-time equivalent staff. A number of courses at ACU National require students to be involved with community organisations as volunteers. These partner organisations provide a wide variety of volunteer services across diverse social contexts in all parts of the metropolitan area and in regional and rural areas.

The V21 project is a research-focussed project on volunteering, bringing community organisations and the research expertise of a university together. The project was initiated to address the questions of the changing nature of volunteering, the need for new pathways into and within the different organisations and ways of enhancing the volunteer capacity of the volunteers and the organisations. These agencies want flexible organisational structures and processes that maximise their volunteer pool through increased/volunteer retention and the development of alternative pathways to attract and retain volunteers from diverse backgrounds. Thus, the agencies are seeking ways of becoming contextually proactive in enhancing the capacity of their volunteers and maximising their volunteer base. To achieve these goals the agencies are working collaboratively in the development of new knowledge for themselves and the community organisation sector generally. To achieve this, each of the four partners have formed a collaborative research partnership team to enhance the research capability of each organisation. Formal attention has been given by all partners to the processes of implementing a research project, focus groups, defining and refining survey questions, and interpreting findings.

Key to this project is the need for the community organisations and university to examine how they develop their ability to work as partners and learn from each other in ways that enhance each other's capacities. The primary facilitating factors for the partners are:

- meeting as a project team
- gathering and analysing data
- collaborating with the university
- collaborating with other community organisations.

From the analysis of the data from structured interviews this paper reports on the key elements identified by the community agencies underlying the development and effectiveness of this community–university research partnership.

Reviewing partnerships

University–community partnerships are integral to enhancing the work of both types of organisations (Howard et al. 2005; Sachs and Groundwater-Smith 1999; Stevens 1999; Butcher 1998). Many universities, nationally and internationally, are becoming increasingly committed to genuine partnerships with community agencies in order to address social issues with creativity and new insights (Benson et al. 2000). A key question in any genuine partnership

is how to attain purposeful learning outcomes for all involved. Butcher et al. (1999) found that partnerships are dynamic in nature, encourage varying ways to achieve common goals and give priority to cultural development. Continuing conversations across the different organisations contribute to each partner having a better understanding of the perspectives of the other organisations involved. Open and honest communication contributes to a sense of mutual trust and respect that promotes understanding of the different organisations and fosters an effective professional relationship among partners.

Different phases have been identified within the partnerships and collaborative endeavours of organisations (McLaughlin 2000). Such phases involve different tasks to facilitate and maintain group cohesion and effectiveness. Butcher and Howard (1999) indicated that partnerships incorporate three phases of establishment, maintenance and continuation. These three phases are built upon seven principles:

- A shared agenda
- Core rather than peripheral issues
- Commitment to the goals and resource implications of the partnership
- A win/win environment for all partners
- An appropriate meeting of cultures for all organisations
- All aspects of the partnership are operational, actionable and open to review
- New professional relationships and a constructive meeting of differing priorities and approaches are established (Butcher 1998).

From its inception in 2003, the V21 team has been committed to reflecting upon how they learn both individually and as a team. A constant focus of the team's learning has been around finding a common language and ensuring that the learning and research are inherently inclusive (Howard et al. 2005). It is important that partnerships are aware of the diversity of terminologies and meanings within the language that will foster their joint effectiveness (Griffiths 2004). For the V21 project, this process of a common understanding of language terms across the partners has continued throughout the project. The challenge to understand each other has been notable in the differences in the language used between the partner organisations. The language differences highlighted the complexities and diversity of organisations that come together in partnership (Butcher et al. 2004).

Appropriate reflection and evaluation makes the learning about partnerships more explicit making connections between research, learning and the project's dimensions. There is a continuing need to devote time to both developing the understanding of each other's organisation and ensuring agendas and priorities are mutually beneficial. Listening and open communication informs the thinking, decision-making and actions of the partners (Howard et al. 2003).

In furthering the team's understanding and appreciation of the effectiveness of the V21 project, this paper examines the partner's views of their involvement, learnings, supports and challenges.

Methodology

Throughout the V21 project, the partner organisations recognised the need to examine how they might best develop their ability to work as partners and to learn from each other in ways that enhanced each other's capacities. Thus, this paper reports specifically on structured interview comments gathered from the community partners. The key focus areas for the structured interviews were: working together; mutual learnings; respecting insights; and expertise. The interviews were audio-taped and administered in March 2005 by the project's research officer, meeting with a representative from each of the community partners' groups.

Interview analysis

The data from the interviews is reported with respect to each of the eleven interview questions. The partners are referred to as Rural Fire Service (RFS), St Vincent de Paul Society (SVDP) and The Benevolent Society (TBS).

1. Why did your organisation get involved in this project/partnership?

The RFS wanted to be involved in order to enhance both the research capabilities of the organisation and the management skills of managers in volunteer relations across the state. As a community organisation it made sense to be engaged with an academic community. "For a volunteer organisation, it is important to find out why people are volunteering. Currently, we don't have the data or information to identify this."

The SVDP became involved to investigate "how we could improve our volunteer management after being approached by the University." The original project focussed on youth volunteering, but changed once it was discovered that youth volunteering according to ABS statistics was actually quite high. The project was seen as an opportunity to examine some volunteer perceptions and experiences. "We have not been good at State Council level at having a good handle on what is happening away from State Council level — so it was a good opportunity for that. The SVDP hadn't been a very big research-based organisation although we did have specific research areas particularly around homelessness. A change of leadership emphasised that the society was going to establish a learning culture. This project was one of the things seen as slotting into that broader cultural change within the Society."

TBS became involved in the project for a number of reasons as presented below:

i) The need for research

As an organisation based on delivering services, TBS recognised a need to develop effective long-term partnerships with academic institutions in order to have the capacity to undertake meaningful research. "This project will also inform current endeavours to develop a more

seamless 'workforce' by investigating some of the tensions around the staff/volunteer divide and developing approaches for minimising those tensions.”

TBS was initially looking at youth participation, but after early literature and statistical reviews became more interested in a broader focus on the volunteer workforce and how to better meet the needs of our current volunteers. TBS saw the reciprocal nature of volunteering as a critical part of its social capital framework. It was interested in undertaking research in conjunction with other organisations and forming a partnership to explore issues for volunteers and staff that work with volunteers. TBS saw the project as an opportunity to:

- help fill the gap in its current understanding on how to more effectively engage people in volunteering
- clarify complex issues evolving through partnership discussions such as the motivational base for volunteering, capacity of volunteers, support and how volunteers feel about the organisation and their current roles and opportunities
- assist TBS to understand and resolve tensions which exist in organisations with staff and volunteers.

ii) Social capital side of volunteering

TBS saw the V21 project as complementing and building on earlier research work by specifically focussing on volunteers, who are both a source and reflection of social capital.

iii) Recruitment and retention of volunteers

TBS saw the research contributing to:

- specific strategies on how TBS can increase and sustain involvement of volunteers within our organisation
- help develop new forms of volunteering which better fit the lifestyles, interests and competencies of people who approach us
- help the society explore if/how technology can play a role in the volunteer engagement.

2. How would you describe the existing partnership?

“Bringing us together has been quite productive, providing an insight into outside organisations. We are not that far apart in the volunteering issues that we all face. In the partnership, we have volunteer organisations that work differently. One of the things we have identified and highlighted is the language within the organisations — totally different within the three organisations” (RFS).

“The existing partnership is very cooperative. A pleasant working relationship, even a level of familiarity has been formed. We have had the opportunity to learn about the other partner organisations and be welcomed into their working environment. We came into the project somewhat in awe of the university — and a lot of the strategies undertaken lessened that. I also

came into the project with no knowledge of the specifics of volunteering in the other partner organisations. We are on a reasonably level playing field — respectful, listening, learning from each other, and feeling free to be able to share for others to learn. I think one of the pivotal things was the examination of the focus group transcripts where we had people from different partner organisations working together “ (SVDP).

TBS views “the existing partnership as going through a number of stages and currently describes it as very collaborative.”

3. What are the strengths of the developing partnership?

It is good for RFS, as an organisation, to know that they have similar volunteer management problems as far as an ageing volunteer population, the same recruitment and retention issues we have with young people, old people and the people in the middle who go off to have families and create a life and a career for themselves. The other organisations are suffering from the same gaps. If not for the project, I would not have been interested in these other organisations — you know it’s like tunnel vision within your own organisation. It’s comforting to know that other organisations are having the same problems. The partnership gives everyone the opportunity to share these problems/difficulties and to look for common solutions. There is a better outcome when you work in a team than working by yourself.

For SVdeP one of the strengths of the partnership is certainly a willingness to let other people “not just into our buildings but also into a part of our culture”. The knowledge gained from other organisations in how they do things provides insights into how they as an organisation can do things differently. Having the university involved provides the academic credibility as well as continually keeping the team focussed on what is needed. The community organisation involvement provides general day-to-day input, which provides a balance to the academic speak that the project can sometimes be caught up in.

One of the strengths is the quality of the interpersonal relationships. The quality of these relationships and the way they have developed around the table has been very important for this partnership. Perhaps it is a partnership of organisational representatives rather than a partnership of the organisations themselves.

In the initial meetings TBS was surprised by “how much the ACU wanted to hear and understand the language of the partner organisations and how much we needed to listen to each other.” The process of understanding each other came first and then the work flowed from this. The research evolved through the process of hearing from the volunteers and staff. The group is understanding each other and has the ability to break into working teams, displaying the comfort level now established and the respect participants have for one another. There will now be points where members can be helpful consultants or advice givers for other projects involving volunteers across the partner organisations.

4. What would you identify as the successes of the project/partnership so far?

For the RFS, one success has been the long group discussions “to progress what we wanted to achieve. The survey has gone out and now we’re looking at the responses from the survey to develop the tools which we set out to achieve right from the very start. It has taken us a while to get here but we can see a finite result in the survey. Personally, networking with the external organisations has been a success.”

The successes for SVdeP have included the:

- various collaborative community–university presentations made at conferences over the past 12 months
- successful development of the survey seeking information regarding volunteering
- preliminary information gathered from sample survey and from focus groups
- face-to-face contact with volunteers in rural areas and gathering their verbal input following the completion of the survey.

For TBS, successes emerged when the group stabilised and in the more practical opportunities to work together. The partnership has also been successful for learning about other organisations, how they work, what structure they operate under and the talking about “some of the initial assumptions we may have had about each other.” The reflection from the focus groups also started giving some indication of issues of importance to volunteers and the staff that work with volunteers.

5. What learnings have you gained through the joint partnership?

For all partners, the learning and understanding of what is involved in the intensity and volume of work required in a large research project has been important. The RFS just saw SVdeP and TBS as other organisations really and had little appreciation that they would ever experience similar issues. “I think this view was eliminated as soon as we started to talk with them.”

SVDP has learnt that opinions towards both state council and the volunteering are much more positive than initially thought.

TBS believe language has been a significant learning from the partnership for, “How can people talk to each other when most of the terms used are different across different settings?” TBS has also learnt that the community partners have a specific type of knowledge to put forward from that sector

6. What learnings do you think you have given to the others in the partnership?

All partners have learnt to appreciate the complexity of organisations with their various structures and terminology. For the RFS partners the project has been a good learning curve: “as far as our own organisation is concerned because it has enabled us to delve into places that

we wouldn't otherwise have had the time to consider. Through learning about our own organisation we can relay that to the other organisations. We have encouraged the other organisations to look at us as well. Other groups we have come in contact with through conferences have been able to put a face to the Rural Fire Service. We have been able to portray a human face of the organisation to other volunteer management groups."

The SVDP believe they have brought some difference perspectives on volunteering to other organisations. One perspective has been "the ability of our organisation to depend on the volunteers as the supervisors, decision makers, and managers rather than as the supervised and managed. The inverted pyramid is a whole different model. Conferences more or less do their own thing."

A learning of TBS has been presenting a shared understanding of the way they work with volunteers, the language they use and their view of the roles of volunteers.

7. What have been the challenges to the success of the project/partnership?

For the RFS, it has been coming to an understanding of each other, stepping outside of the RFS box and into the world of volunteer management and the varying languages. "Personally, understanding my own organisation and the organisation's views on volunteer management at a higher level."

The SVDP believe the challenges have been:

- trying to develop a common language that correctly related to all the organisations
- the length of time devoted to the project; at times, it feels like it takes forever to get to an end point
- trying to get my head around some of the research jargon that is used.

Another challenge, for SVDP, has been to get a clearer perspective on the commonalities and differences of the other organisations. "I don't know whether we have really got there yet."

"Coming into the group after it had already started the process was, at first, confusing. When that happens you tend to not take an 'ownership' of the project straight away — if left for too long this can become a problem. For a while the group kept growing in numbers which was also difficult but this is all part of normal group dynamics of getting to know each other enough to voice your feedback and opinions and to become productive. Initially, it was a challenge to not have a 'formula' that was going to be tested or that we were working towards. The process of drawing the information from the volunteers and staff turned out to be invaluable. This helped in finding out what the issues were for people in these roles and then it was used to start informing the structure and the process."

8. To what extent have these challenges been resolved? How?

“The dialogue and opportunity for us as mere mortals to give feedback to the academics has been beneficial. One of the challenges for us has been for us to get our layman’s terms across to the academic side of things, and for us to understand the academic terms. The result of these challenges is we have met in the middle. I feel, as a representative of our RFS, that we can say what we are thinking now and the other organisations understand what we are trying to say and achieve.”

In resolving the challenges the SVDP believed the language issue was resolved “after numerous meetings and discussions in how we can include all organisations in a common language. Moving the perception of the university from lead agency to one of the partners was resolved by having the other partners fully involved from the beginning — even to the extent of developing the first submission [to the ARC], asking partner organisations what they wanted out of the project so that the agenda right from the start was everyone’s and not just the university’s.” This has continued throughout the project with all the organisations involved in all the decision-making.

TBS believe that once the group reached a point of stability the smaller working groups helped participants to communicate and work with each other’s style of getting things done.

9. Are there any [ongoing] constraints to the existing partnership?

For the RFS it is important that if we are to get involved in something like this again, it is important to ensure that everything is well scripted and constructed. “We know the meeting times, agendas and workload so we can work our timetables around the project. When we first started it was all very new — especially as I had just started in this role — and I was getting all sorts of things dumped on me and this project was just one of them. It is important that we not only meet the project’s requirements to produce but that we meet everything else we are required to do.”

SVDP and TBS saw no obvious ongoing constraints. For SVDP, “the challenges are going to come when we get the information. I just wonder at the challenges that are to come. Analysing the focus group data did change the perception a bit, it became less academic, if you like. We had people talking more in the language of what concerns volunteers. There has been no friction, perhaps that is a shortcoming that we haven’t challenged each other enough. Is what we get back from the survey going to challenge the partners or university?”

“I felt that there was some fatigue being felt during the analysis of the focus group material because it was analyse and re-analyse and re-analyse. I think there is a perception that process is going to happen again with the survey and that it is going to be fairly intense, time-consuming and there will be a certain amount of fatigue. I’m not sure how you resolve either of those.”

“The number of university people coming to meetings has reduced over the period of time — and I don’t know how to interpret that, whereas the partner agencies are still turning up in the same numbers. This is a constraint as far as I am concerned because we need to bring the university perspective. We give up our time and this shows the commitment of the partner agencies and I would like to think that was shared by the universities.”

10. Can you identify ways in which these constraints could be overcome?

“It is important to ensure that everything is well scripted and constructed ...”. “If we are to give guidance, I would relay that it really needs to be managed at the highest level ...otherwise it can get away from you and your partner organisations will tend to lose interest in the project because you feel you are either being inundated or you feel you are wasting your time” (RFS).

11. Would you like to make any other comment on the partnership?

“Correct project management goes a long way. The provision of an interesting research topic is probably a key to success...keep the whole flow of the project interesting. From a partner organisation perspective, it is important to have people helping you who are interested in the project — having people who are keen and motivated to work on the project” (RFS).

For TBS, “this partnership has increased the research skills of staff involved. Many of our programs and services have been interested in participating in the research through focus groups and by filling in the survey so the results will be of interest to a wide group of people and will encourage much discussion. There are also other staff who have indicated an interest in gaining some practical advice on research from some of the partner participants. So — some skill exchange should start happening through this year. Relationships need time to establish; the partnership has resulted in a rich learning experience between the different organisations.”

Discussion

The analysis of the V21 partner responses from the structured interviews is discussed using the following categories: Partner involvement (Q 1, 2); Partnership strengths and successes (Q 3, 4); Partner learnings (Q 5, 6); Partnership challenges (Q 7, 8); Partnership constraints (Q 9, 10).

Partner involvement

There were clear initial reasons and purposes for the involvement of each of the community partners. The overall focus was on gaining organisational data related to the roles, pathways, capabilities and capacities of volunteers, which were integral to each of the partner’s operations. However, specific interview comments showed that the development of the organisation’s research capabilities was as an integral element of establishing a learning culture through:

- establishing and developing long-term relationships with an academic institution
- developing organisational capacity to undertake meaningful research
- investigating the tensions about staff/volunteers workers

- becoming informed through a partnership with other community-based volunteer organisations
- building upon previous research projects
- beginning to explore the role of technology in volunteering.

All partners recognised that the coming together has provided insights into the workings of each other which, in turn, has clarified their purposes for being involved in the project. The importance of the coming together for each of the community partners in the research project has brought about an evolving sense of the value of their involvement. It is apparent that there is involvement at both a personal and agency level. The ways in which the individuals have worked cooperatively in a climate of respect, shared learning, active listening and a sense of freedom have enhanced levels of involvement. The recognition of the emerging benefits as a result of involvement in group task-based work has increased the individual's commitment of time and personal effort, which is reflected in the ongoing commitment of the partners.

Partnership strengths and successes

The partners have appreciated knowing that each one has similar issues around volunteering. The project has taken away the 'tunnel vision' that is often found when one is working only with one agency. One strength of the partnership has been the way in which formally and informally each partner has come to learn about the functions of each other. There has been a willingness to allow partners into the culture of each other so that each can potentially learn from one another different ways of doing things. The university as a partner provides a credibility and the relationship of the community agencies with the university provides a balance to the overall research project.

The time spent on developing positive interpersonal relationships has been important in attaining the project's successes. The initial time spent on listening and understanding one another has led to the respect and the comfort level of the individuals within the group which have formed the basis of the project's strength and success. The relationships and networking are viewed as successful outcomes that have enabled progress towards the project's goals. In concrete terms the conference presentations, survey development, initial data return and face-to-face meetings with the agency volunteers are evident successes of the partnership.

Partner learnings

The intensity and volume of work involved in a research project has impacted upon the learnings about self and the role one plays in developing relationships that lead to group harmony, a supportive 'critiquing' climate where people can listen to and work through differences. There has been a deepening awareness of the learnings about the organisations within which people work and the complexities of their structures and terminologies. There have been learnings about other organisations with respect to the ways they work, the language they use and their view of the role of volunteers.

The conference papers and focussed group tasks (e.g. survey development, focus group interviews) were effective learning instruments leading to project achievements. Such work has resulted in the partners appreciating the ability to generalise the value and rigour of research structures and methods. Through the cooperative and collaborative nature of the partners and a respect for the expertise of each partner, there has been a shared learning in the development and modification of appropriate cross-organisational research methodologies. Such methodologies cross the cultures of the organisations whilst being strongly embedded within the cultures of the individual organisations.

Partnership challenges

A key challenge has been for each partner to come to know the other partners. This has been evident in the challenges of developing a common language and in gaining clearer perspectives of the commonalities and differences across the partners. This project has the inherent challenge of partners working across diverse organisations, and in doing so, being challenged to appreciate and extend their understandings of the culture of those organisations.

The language challenges have been resolved through purposeful and planned dialogue with feedback to the university staff from 'mere mortals' in a manner that brings the 'lay person's terms' and the 'academic terms' closer together. Once the group had come to a stage of stability the small working group parties helped partners to communicate and work with each other's styles of getting things completed. Of overall importance, has been the continued importance of having all partners involved in the decision-making.

Partnership constraints

Project management is seen as a key to overcoming possible project constraints. The progress has stemmed from the project to being well scripted and constructed for partners to plan meetings, workloads and timetables. There was a lack of awareness of the time and the fatigue that can go into data analysis in a significant research project. There is the need to prepare the partners for this phase of a research project and to structure the progress in a purposeful way. The lack of a consistent presence of all university staff involved in the project was seen as a constraint as it may colour the showing of commitment from the university. The university staff have to show similar time, presence and commitment as the community partners.

Conclusion

The potentials and opportunities for intended and unintended learnings and outcomes that impact upon the individual and the partner organisations have emerged through the reported comments. The V21 project community partners reported that collaboration has been successful because differences across the partners are valued, the project goals and the ways of working have been negotiated openly, and team members have been willing to learn and adjust their thinking to accommodate varying perspectives. The community partners often

commented that the research team's interactions were characterised by these approaches. The team members also described how these approaches had contributed to the successful outcomes of the project and assisted in resolving challenges. Analysis of the community partner comments has shown the importance of investigating the development of their perspectives in order to identify gained learnings, success and strengths as well as the challenges and constraints to project effectiveness.

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