COMMON GROUND AND UPWARD BOUND: LESSONS FROM A CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION

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Introduction

Abstract

Research findings demonstrate the importance of shared understandings, or "cognitive common ground" in collaborations. Yet, college-going is complex, and potential differences in perspective among scholars, practitioners, and students may easily arise. In this paper, we use insights from practice and relevant research to describe how common ground can be nurtured.

Federal TRIO programs provide vitally necessary educational programming designed to increase access and equity for historically underrepresented and underserved populations. By design, they also employ innovative strategies grounded in best practices and rigorous empirical research. However, TRIO programs also pose a paradox: while they present potentially fruitful sites for research, seemingly very little is known about their impact and what is "known" may be confusing or even incorrect (Cahalan & Goodwin, 2014). The framing for the recent joint undertaking between ASHE and the Pell Institute suggests one reason why: collaborations between higher education researchers and TRIO practitioners are relatively infrequent.

In this essay, we highlight two related potential reasons for the infrequency of collaborations in research and practice: 1) the divergent needs and interests of scholars and practitioners; and 2) a difficulty in creating the sort of shared meanings that would allow collaboration to occur. We then describe the development of an ongoing collaboration between personnel in the higher education program and the Upward Bound program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, highlighting the ongoing conversations and reconceptualizations of research design necessary to make this collaboration work. We describe the collaboration from both perspectives—scholar and practitioner—affording an opportunity to highlight the initial differences in motivation for participation and ultimately the similarities in values for the work.

Problems in Scholarship and Practice

Messages received from professional conferences, literature on best practices, and graduate training exhort those working in higher education to think of themselves as scholar-practitioners (e.g., Bensimon, 2007; Love, 2012; Reason & Kimball, 2012). This knowledge base reminds interested parties that evidence-based decision-making is facilitated by deep engagement with

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relevant theory and empirical evidence. However, it can also be enhanced through practical wisdom gained over a professional lifetime of experience. Evidence suggests that this sort of deep, reciprocal engagement between scholarship and practice results in improved student experiences; however, an even larger literature base demonstrates how very difficult it is to blend effectively the pressures that motivate scholarship and practice (e.g., Bensimon, 2007; Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994; Kezar, 2000; Love, 2012).

To address this issue, higher education scholars have proposed a number of theory-to-practice models—including guiding concept approaches (e.g. Love, 2012; McEwen, 2003), process models (e.g. Evans, 1987; Stage & Dannels, 2000), and integrative models (e.g. Kimball & Ryder, 2014; Reason & Kimball, 2012;). Much of this literature treats the need for theory-to-practice conversions as a problem confronted by individual practitioners. This framing treats theory-to-practice conversions as an extension of the innate human ability to make meaning of new situations, take action, and learn from the outcomes of one's actions. Less frequently, theory-to-practice models acknowledge the importance of team-based work, but still make the assumption that the group is comprised of professionals who share similar value commitments and goals for whatever project is being discussed. However, that assumption is naïve and fundamentally problematic on several grounds.

Teams addressing complex problems in higher education of the sorts confronted by TRIO programs are likely to bring together complex coalitions of students, faculty, program staff, administrators, and community members. The role construction of these disparate constituencies differs markedly (Kerr, 1963 / 2001). For example, students likely will be most interested in issues that directly impact them. Faculty members may be most interested in academic matters or could be disengaged from conversations about TRIO programs entirely. Further, while staff likely will look after the quality of the program as a whole, administrators have a broader institutional view that may conflict with the immediate best interests of TRIO programs. Finally, community members may seek to use colleges and universities to pursue broader economic or community engagement opportunities. These different roles produce markedly different views of the organization that, when coupled with a person's previously held values and prior experiences, means that they may understand the purpose of TRIO programs differently from one another. For example, a belief in the importance of social justice might be shared among TRIO collaborators, but the way that they operationalize these ideas is likely to differ based on differing roles and personal experiences. As a result, intentional conversations are necessary to surface these differences and the assumptions upon which they are based (Bensimon, 2007).

Searching for Cognitive Common Ground

As described above, solving complex problems in higher education requires the integration of multiple perspectives and forms of knowledge. Such undertakings are fundamentally similar to the research process for scholars bridging multiple disciplines—particularly those who engage in the sort of research that focuses on pressing social problems (Moran, 2010). Consequently, in this section, we describe literature related to "grounding"—a theoretical construct developed by cognitive psychologists to describe effective communication strategies. Prior research has employed this approach to study how interdisciplinary collaboration works and to explain radically different productivity levels of research teams (e.g. Bromme, 2000; Repko, 2007).

As described by Clark and Brennan (1991), grounding involves the cultivation of "mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions" (p. 127). That "shared information" then becomes the basis for conceptual common ground. However, as Clark and Brennan (1991) also note, the shared information required for the existence of common ground changes moment-to-moment. Consequently, all communicative exchanges involve ongoing updates to the basis for common ground. The fact that common ground is constantly evolving makes it possible for human beings to communicate effectively across a wide range of differences but also makes it difficult to comprehend when a lack of shared information exists in the moment. Essentially, human beings are neurologically hardwired both to create common ground and to assume its existence (Clark, 1996). However, while grounding has its basis in individual physiological traits and imperatives, it is also a fundamentally social process—the rules to which are learned early in life and reinforced through routine human interactions (Bangerter & Clark, 2003; Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Davies & Katsos, 2010).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the absence of common ground in communication has been associated with a variety of deleterious outcomes. Beers, Boshuizen, Kirschner, and Gijselaers (2006) describe the inherent problems of bringing together professionals of diverse backgrounds to address problems of practical significance as one of "multiple ignorances" (p. 532). A person's idiosyncratic and perspectival viewpoint can prevent them from understanding the equally idiosyncratic and perspectival viewpoint of others (Bromme, Rambow, & Nuckles, 2001).

The importance of shared information has led many to adopt one form or another of the "common ground technique," which in its most essential form is a way of creating and acknowledging jointly-held beliefs (Clark, 1996; Repko, 2007). As made clear above, however, the common ground technique merely formalizes a process in which human beings routinely engage, but which may not be fully completed in the face of complex problems (Beers et al., 2006). The common ground technique simply involves: 1) the structured sharing of information; 2) opportunities for clarification of meaning; 3) the negotiation of joint meaning, and 4) an agreement to revisit mutually-agreed upon common ground on an ongoing basis.

As it applies to collaborations among researchers, program staff, and TRIO participants, literature on grounding helps one to understand better the potential for miscommunication and the need for proactive work to ensure the creation of shared meaning. Key strategies to facilitate this process include: 1) regular, ongoing conversations outside of the context of pressing issues associated with programs or research projects; 2) the mutual development and refinement of shared principles, goals, and strategies for action; 3) a shared willingness to revisit and revise these principles, goals, and strategies whenever the need arises; 4) a tacit assumption that when problems arise they do not stem from malevolent intent but rather from an ignorance of full impact on others (or more likely "multiple ignorances"), and 5) an intentional orientation to these shared principles as new parties are introduced the relationship.

Building a Collaborative Partnership

Our collaboration began in spring 2014. The initial idea for the partnership originated with Zeke and Yedalis while brainstorming possible research sites for an exploratory study on college access. After discussing the need for research that could enhance understanding of how to rectify structural inequities in the college-going experiences of students from underrepresented

communities, they agreed that the most effective research design would involve collaboration with an existing access program that utilized critical praxis to both challenge and help students navigate institutional barriers to college attendance.

Both team members had prior experience doing action research (Stringer, 2007) and were interested in producing scholarship that informed practice (Reason & Kimball, 2012). Having previously worked with Tyson, the University of Massachusetts Amherst's Upward Bound program director, Yedalis suggested that the Upward Bound program could be a good fit. They reached out to Tyson to share initial ideas to develop a collaborative research program that would examine the influence that program administrators, high school students, high school personnel, college tutor mentors, and university administrators all had on the college-going process. Given their action research backgrounds, they also hoped to do this research in a way that directly benefited the program.

While Yedalis and Zeke knew that collaborative research could pose a burden to programs, they were confident that the benefits of their proposed study would far outweigh the negative consequences. At the outset, however, Tyson had no way of knowing any of this information. In retrospect, it is perhaps unsurprising that early conversations proceeded in fits and starts as all involved began to define the scope of the project and to implicitly (but not yet explicitly) take part in mutual development and refinement of shared principles, goals, and strategies for action. As has been noted elsewhere (Clark, 2008), many community-based organizations and programs get fatigued by academic inquiries and research that do not lead to an actual benefit for the community being served. At these early meetings, Tyson expressed a desire to protect the best interests of the student program participants and also questioned the potential benefits for the Upward Bound program. Importantly, he also asked for time to consider how this potential partnership could best include the program's needs before allowing access to the program and to be involved in defining the scope of the proposed research.

Working with Tyson, Yedalis and Zeke prepared a series of project summaries that described study goals, theoretical frameworks, and research designs. These documents helped to refine the study's overall purpose and research questions, and even more importantly, the process of drafting them resulted in a collaborative working relationship and shared understanding of the research project. After several weeks, Tyson, Yedalis, and Zeke all agreed to a draft project summary. Once this draft summary was complete, Yedalis and Zeke attended an Upward Bound program meeting where they met the rest of the full-time staff members. Just as the introduction of Tyson's thinking on the project reshaped it in important ways, the conversation with the program staff did as well. This meeting led to ongoing conversations about program well-being, how researchers would impact interactions with students, and whether this work would be helpful with evaluation activities. It also resulted in a number of modifications to the project summary and a collaborative working relationship with the members of Upward Bound program's staff that meant that they were comfortable providing ongoing feedback about the research project and its impact on program operations.

Ultimately, the process from idea-to-agreement took almost a full semester, but it resulted in a study design that produced higher quality findings that were grounded in the real experiences of program staff and participants. The ongoing collaboration and development of shared meaning-making proved a critical component of its success. Through the process, it became clear that the

project's common ground would be a shared focus on the students and their success. It also became clear that those approaching this commitment from both a research and a practice perspective were all interested in better understanding the mechanisms by which participants in the access program form college-going aspirations.

By design, the project aimed at generating actionable findings that could inform policy, budgetary, and programmatic decisions. A secondary aim was to gain knowledge about the way that students form, reshape, and nurture a college-going identity in relation to structural obstacles and personal experiences. Additionally, the program leaders identified a need for investigating key components associated with student participation in the access program specifically related to student participant satisfaction and elements of social support. The project approach included multiple methods for investigating these key components including interviews, focus groups, observations of program activities and document analysis.

The communication established in the initial stages of the project continued as the research began in earnest, and was instrumental in the success of this work. Yedalis and another graduate student researcher regularly attended Upward Bound program meetings and spent a great deal of time as observers at the program site. When the research team was on site at the access program, in addition to the interviewing or field observations, they would join in program activities and operations as needed, which made them useful to the program staff in multiple ways. This work helped them not just to develop better rapport with the Upward Bound program staff but also a better understanding of the Upward Bound program—and how it differed from others around the country.

By working closely in an integrated fashion with the program, it became clear what additional resources would be useful to the program and offered an opportunity for developing access to other community networks and services. For example, the students in the program identified an interest in interning in the field of public health directly connected to food access and healthy behaviors. As a result, Yedalis was able to make a connection to a community health center with which she had a long-standing professional connection and knowledge of their regular work with community partners. The health center and the Upward Bound program met to explore future health programming collaboration, including possible opportunities for student internship programs. Although the health center and the high school where the Upward Bound program is based are within walking distance of each other, it was through this collaborative research project that they became aware of common ground in their respective programming and goals. This example demonstrates the opportunities for developing new members within a collaborative project and identifying additional resources and opportunities for meeting research and programmatic aims when all involved have an "intentional orientation" to the shared principles of common ground discussed above.

Addressing Concerns Regarding Impact on Practice

Throughout this collaboration, those involved returned frequently to the idea that community-based action research should be more focused on the community served than on the research results. The idea served as the common ground that held our collaboration together (Bromme, 2000). As a result of this shared understanding, people with disparate motivations and interests could work together on a research process that resulted in outcomes meaningful to all involved.

This collaboration is consistent with Wenger's (1998) community of practice, which is a collection of individuals and groups sharing a common purpose and learning together in the service of that purpose. Participants in a community of practice share their knowledge, experiences, and resources to achieve meaningful goals.

In our collaboration, common ground occurred more easily due to the prior backgrounds and experiences of the personnel involved. As Clark and Brennan have noted (1991), common ground has to be built from shared systems of meaning. Both Yedalis and Zeke identify as scholar-practitioners rather than researchers and value community-based work. When the Upward Bound staff sought definition and redefinition of the work Yedalis and Zeke proposed to do, they saw it as an opportunity to revisit and revise the principles, goals, and strategies the partnership was based upon rather than an imposition. Doing so is consistent with Bensimon's (2007) admonition that examining the implicit theories utilized to structure practice is critical to cultivating student success outcomes. Further, Yedalis' extensive professional experience working in community-based education, and her personal experiences as a bilingual/bicultural first-generation student participating in programs such as this one made her uniquely well-suited to engage in this sort of research. Therefore, her ability to meet and join the access program staff in a conversation about a potential collaboration included elements of membership that helped to bridge the research and programmatic aims.

However, even given the researchers' backgrounds and commitments, the collaboration would not have been possible without the ongoing commitment, expertise, and willingness to find common ground of the Upward Bound program staff. As with many grounding processes, this commitment took considerable time (Bromme et al., 2001). Here again, the prior experiences of the personnel involved proved helpful. Tyson readily identifies as a scholar-practitioner and is a graduate of an academic program closely related to the one that serves as Yedalis and Zeke's academic home. Further, he is thoughtful and intentional in his approach to programming: virtually all of the work that he does is informed by critical and social justice perspectives. These commitments were infused into the programmatic and staffing decisions. Consequently, while deeply committed to the best interests of the program, Tyson and the Upward Bound staff were already positively predisposed to a project of this sort—provided it could be framed in the right way. Perhaps more importantly, they had the "intentional orientation" needed to engage with the process, and with others with different roles, experiences, values, and assumptions about the work. This observation is consistent with literature that suggests that the creation of common ground is a complex, negotiated process (Beers et al., 2006). Both the research team and the Upward Bound program staff members also worked to make students active participants in the research by sharing with them the purpose of the work and allowing them to help shape research in important ways. For example, student participants first suggested the importance of fear as a motivation for both college-going and dropping out. They also helped to shape the research methods on this theme in important ways—for example, providing suggestions for new research topics and letting researchers know when they felt they had something to contribute via an interview.

Importantly, Tyson and Yedalis' prior working relationship effectively established a baseline level of trust and provided an opening for conversation. This statement is consistent with literature on common ground that describes it as a dialogic process (Bangerter, & Clark, 2003). This conversation proved to be critical in addressing Tyson's well-founded skepticism. The

Upward Bound program staff members had built a program infused with a commitment to social justice—committed to recognizing and working to address the effects structural racism, poverty, and other forms of oppression have on the daily life of program participants. Consequently, the Upward Bound program staff members are very intentional in looking at practices, collaborations, relationships and processes that stem from and embody shared philosophical and ideological beliefs. As noted above, prior literature has shown that structured thinking about program purposes and design produces positive outcomes (Reason & Kimball, 2012). Before approving Yedalis and Zeke's proposed research, Tyson and the program staff needed to develop a deeper understanding of the perspectives of the research team. This process helped to address concerns regarding the program staff's fear that the research team would not value the expertise of the practitioners or program participants, the prospect that research would only serve the academic designs of the researchers, and the perception that the research process would be intrusive. In so doing, concerns that academic research might not prove useful were overcome (Kezar, 2000; Love, 2012). These concerns are quite real for TRIO programs—given a paucity of available empirical information.

Ultimately, Tyson and the Upward Bound program staff grew comfortable with the researchers and the design that they proposed through sustained dialogue. However, that comfort alone would not have been sufficient motivation for them to allow the researchers access. The program staff members were also concerned about potential adverse impact on student participants. These concerns stem from the recognition that many researchers may not possess necessary cultural competencies to work with students from marginalized communities (see Bensimon, 2007). To address this concern, the design proposed by the researchers needed to address pressing issues of program concern while also taking into account the knowledge, experiences, and backgrounds of program participants. Based on a design that did so, the program staff gained access to information and research capacity to which they would not have otherwise had access.

For under-resourced TRIO programs, these sorts of collaborations can be particularly fruitful. In this case, the program has been able to investigate the experiential and anecdotal knowledge of practitioners and provide evidence that is necessary to implement programmatic interventions and positively impact student outcomes. The research also offered the opportunity to delve deeper into and understand the student experience without expending valuable internal resources. Additionally, the research has offered the program the critical inquiry and feedback opportunities. What emerged through the intentional process of developing, deepening and maintaining common ground was a research collaboration that represented the rigor and mindfulness necessary to recognize and attend to the concerns held by the program staff while also meeting researcher needs. It created the opportunity whereby the researchers and the program gained valuable insight and knowledge that will impact the program across multiple levels of the organization. Ultimately, what was created was an environment where the reciprocal goals of research and practice could be realized.

Conclusion

Reciprocal engagement between scholarship and practice offers opportunities to share scarce resources and vital insights. However, to successfully collaborate with people who have radically different role constructions—scholars, practitioners, students and community

members— requires intentional relationship building in order to establish lasting partnerships. First, the divergent assumptions, values, and priorities of those involved must be acknowledged and respected. Second, common ground in purpose must be established, explicitly explored, and systematically revisited. Third, a shared group identity that is simultaneously enduring in its general purpose and flexible in its members must be created based on mutual trust. Finally, the collaboration must foreground actual impact—what works and what does not. None of this work is easy, but it is possible.

The collaborative project that we described in this essay achieved common ground, which has helped it to continue despite conflicting demands and priorities. Working to establish a community of practice engaged in a single community-based research project has yielded broader dividends. Through ongoing discussions regarding resources and common purpose, the original goals of the conversation have shifted to the potential for larger impact. As a result, a subsequent collaborative was developed through this process—the Access Pathways Project (APP), a collaboration between the Upward Bound program and key departments within the university that are committed to higher education access among underserved populations. It also provided an opportunity to bring in other researchers—Ryan Wells among them—as we sought to understand student success not just in accessing higher education institutions but in flourishing within them once enrolled. This project illustrates an example of the process of developing a collaborative partnership and describes the key factors to establishing a mutually beneficial, trusted and sustainable partnership between researchers, practitioners, and community.

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