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Democratically Engaged Community–University Partnerships: Reciprocal Determinants of Democratically Oriented Roles and Processes

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Abstract

A relatively new conception of engagement provides a framework by which institutions of higher education engage with communities in democratic ways, which include inclusive, reciprocal problem-oriented work that brings together university and community stakeholders as co-generators of knowledge. The resulting democratically engaged partnerships position diverse members to take on roles as collaborators and problem solvers. They are mutually transformed through the processes of reciprocation, power diffusion, and knowledge generation. How these roles and processes emerge is unknown. Neither the literature on democratic engagement nor that on community–university partnerships address this gap. Using a purposefully selected community–university partnership that has a high degree of democratic engagement, evidence was collected of the ways in which the roles and processes of democratically engaged partnerships were enacted. Of particular interest were the blend of democratic and technocratic characteristics present, the critical role of orienting new partners, and the role of leadership in promoting a democratic orientation.

Despite the repeated calls and policy statements requesting that higher education reorient its efforts toward addressing public problems and embracing its democratic purposes, engagement of this sort is not occurring widely. This study was performed to better understand how institutions of higher education can realize a public and democratic purpose through democratic engagement. Specifically, the study promotes the development of democratically engaged partnerships as one instrument to bring about a democratic engagement agenda within higher education.

The Democratic Engagement White Paper (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009) established the conception of democratic civic engagement within community–university engagement. Within the paper, the authors positioned the use of partnerships and mutuality (among other characteristics) as indicative of normative engagement, which had lost its political and civic nature. In

their later work on democratic engagement, two of those authors *(Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011)* claimed that engineering more effective partnerships would not bring about the democratic aims missing within higher education. They stated that partnership development misses the mark of fundamental reorganization within higher education: It is simply another adaptation of business as usual. Other works that established the importance of democratic engagement within higher education celebrate the partnership as a vehicle for authentic engagement. Partnerships are seen as a medium for engagement *(Kellogg Commission, 1999)* and as a tool for mutual transformation of university and community stakeholders *(Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2011)*. This study asserts that the general idea of partnerships is accessible to democratic engagement; the difficulty lies in partnerships that rely on mutuality and a normative orientation for engagement. This study illuminates the type of community–university partnership that is informed by and can inform democratic engagement: democratically engaged partnerships (DEPs). DEPs are defined as community–university partnerships that embody the roles, processes, and purposes of democratic engagement.

In order to better understand DEPs, the following research questions were posed:

1. How are the processes and roles of a democratically oriented community–university partnership exhibited and enacted?
2. How do social, political, and organizational conditions facilitate the emergence of democratically oriented processes within a partnership?
3. How do partnership learning interactions among stakeholders facilitate the emergence and application of democratically oriented processes within a partnership?
4. How do the individual attributes of stakeholders facilitate the emergence and application of democratically oriented processes within a partnership?

Community–university partnerships operating under a democratic-centered framework are thus the focus of this study. These partnerships are a process within a process—the process of partnering within the process of democratic engagement.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

The conceptual framework guiding this study is democratic engagement. Democratic engagement stands in contrast to the technocratic and normative paradigm of engagement. The democratic paradigm manifests the use of inclusivity, reciprocity, asset frameworks, collaborative epistemological stance, and intentional political consideration to promote the democratic purpose of higher education.

The conceptual framework of democratic engagement used in this study is rooted in four works. *The Kellogg Report (1999)* on engaged institutions made clear the necessity for two-way, reciprocal engagement that is conducted through partnerships in which the assets of both community and university stakeholders are valued. Weerts and Sandmann *(2008)* described the opportunity to shift from a delivery of expert knowledge from university to community to collaborative generation and sharing of knowledge between partners. *The Democratic Engagement White Paper (Saltmarsh et al., 2009)* clarified the goals and processes of such engagement, calling for "inclusive, collaborative, and problem-oriented work in which academics share knowledge-generating tasks with the public and involve community partners as participants in public problem-solving" (*p. 9*). Jameson et al. *(2011)* further clarified the outcomes of reciprocal partnerships that foster authentic participation, stating that they can build the capacities of those involved and lead to mutually transformative partnerships.

These foundational writings reveal that the roles within democratically engaged partnerships include collaborator, solution generator, knowledge producer, willing participant in problem solving, cocreator, colearner, and coeducator. They also portray the processes of democratically engaged partnerships as inclusion, collaboration, reciprocation, transformation, power diffusion, and knowledge generation. None, however, provides an explanation for how roles and processes indicative of democratically engaged partnerships come to be embraced. This study applies the conceptual framework of democratic engagement to community–university partnerships to illustrate a form of community–university partnership that embraces and promotes a democratic paradigm: democratically engaged partnerships (DEPs). The membership of a DEP involves a diverse array of community and university stakeholders in the roles delineated by the four foundational writings.

The theory of reciprocal determinism *(Bandura, 1977, 1978, 1986)* is used to make sense of the influences exerted upon the partner-

ship that encourage the emergence and application of such democratic processes and roles. Reciprocal determinism provides a way to analyze human motivation, thought, and action *(Bandura, 1977, 1986)*. It is a social cognitive perspective: "Social cognitive theory embraces an interactional model of causation in which environmental events, personal factors, and behavior all operate as interacting determinants of each other" *(Bandura, 1986, p. xi)*. Bandura's theory of reciprocal determinism portrays the interaction between these determinants as iterative: As personal and environmental factors interact, they determine behavior, which when enacted affects the environment and person. This interactive pattern is based on triadic reciprocality *(Bandura, 1977)* that associates behavior, cognition, and other personal factors and environmental factors within an iterative relationship.

Community–university partnership literature identifies three factors that appear to influence acquisition of democratic roles and processes: (a) learning, modeling, and empowering that occur among stakeholders; (b) individuals' partnership competencies; and (c) social, political, and organizational conditions. These factors are easily mapped onto the reciprocal determinants identified by Bandura. Environmental factors are defined within this study as social, political, and organizational conditions. Behavior and cognitive factors are defined within this study as partnership learning interactions. Other personal factors are defined within this study as individual stakeholder attributes. Together they interact to influence the development of democratically oriented roles and process.

Reciprocal determinism is a powerful lens to assist in making clear the complexity within a phenomenon such as democratically engaged partnerships. Through this theory we can investigate how the conditions that surround a partnership combine with the partnership learning interactions as well as the individual stakeholder attributes to affect the emergence of democratic roles and processes and, in turn, how the democratic roles and processes within the partnership affect the influence of conditions, stakeholder attributes, and learning interactions.

Methods and Data Sources

The study is a qualitative explanatory case study *(Emigh, 1997; Fisher & Ziviani, 2004; Yin, 1994)* that investigated one case of community–university partnership in which a democratic orientation was demonstrated. Explanatory case studies utilize a rigorous proposition-testing method to systematically investigate the rela-

tionship between phenomena of interest and preidentified factors. This study sought evidence of the ways that three determinants (conditions, partnership learning interactions, and stakeholder attributes) reciprocally interacted to explain the adoption of democratic processes and roles within a community–university partnership. Data sources included interviews, observations, and document review.

A purposeful selection strategy was used to identify an example of an information-rich *(Patton, 1990)* community–university partnership. This example was what Patton calls a typical case: It exemplified a typical example of a particular concept. Because the concept is relatively new, few empirical studies have identified a typical case of democratic engagement. Consequently, the selection strategy itself constitutes a contribution to the available literature on democratic engagement. A rubric (including characteristics of democratic, technocratic, and blended partnerships) was developed by the investigator and applied to a range of cases that had previously been vetted as strong partnerships (through inclusion in an edited volume and review by awards committees).

Once the focal partnership (referred to in this study as "RiseNature") was selected, a data collection strategy was used that yielded qualitative post hoc longitudinal data *(Yin, 1993)*. These data include partnership timelines, meeting minutes, resultant project documents, web pages, published articles related to the partnership, 37 telephone and face-to-face interviews, e-mail communications, and 31 days of direct observations of partnership interactions. Interview participants were identified by using the SOFAR model *(Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009)*. The SOFAR model classifies the stakeholders as students (S), community organizations (O), faculty (F), administrators (A), and community residents (R). Semistructured interviews were conducted in face-to-face and telephone formats and were recorded and transcribed. Follow-up conversations with participants occurred as needed to clarify their narratives and case details and to delve more deeply into the ways they understood, acquired, and embraced the roles and processes of democratically engaged partnerships. Over a period of 3 months, four partnership meetings were observed, and one partnership meeting was recorded and listened to remotely. Detailed notes were taken on these meetings, and the patterns of interaction between members were mapped via diagram.

Data were analyzed in two phases. In the first phase, provisional and in vivo coding reduced the abundant data. During the second phase of coding, data were further reduced to identify themes that

highlighted particular elements of reciprocal determinism present within the members' experiences. After shared themes were established, they were compared with a priori categories of information related to the emergence and application of roles and processes as gleaned from the literature. Coding also documented participant descriptions of significant characteristics that were present within their experiences that did not fit any of the predetermined provisional codes.

The trustworthiness of interpretations was enhanced in three ways: monitoring the researcher's subjective lens, member checking the interpretations, and utilizing peer review throughout the process. The researcher observed the misleading and unique insights the subjective lens provided by carefully noting her emotional responses to information presented in interviews and document review and by recording these moments in the field journal *(Glesne, 2006)*. The interpretations of the data were shared with the members of the study for their review and comment *(Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994)*. Finally, peer review was utilized by working with the members of the dissertation committee throughout the study to review coding schemes, categories of themes, and interpretations *(Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 2006).*

Results and Conclusions

Of the factors explored within this study and this partnership, the following were determined to be the most salient to facilitating a democratic orientation:

- Conditions that located the partnership in the context of citizen action, public process, and interorganizational collaboration
- Learning interactions in which members empowered one another to participate fully by directly stating the type of participation that was desired and holding one another accountable to that; intentionally designed events that included dialogue and reflection on the processes of collaboration; and participating in a formalized curriculum that reinforced inclusive dialogue, consensus building, and collaborative problem solving
- Individual stakeholder attributes that feature depth of social involvement in relation to depth of partnership involvement

- Leaders who advance a democratic orientation and who promote structures and facilitation techniques that create space for transparency, deliberation, and inclusion of diverse stakeholders

The explanatory proposition that grounds this study states that the interaction among the three factors (conditions, partnership learning interactions, and stakeholder attributes) will promote the adoption of processes and roles indicative of democratic engagement. However, the three factors do not interact with equal force for all democratic roles and processes. Rather, conditions and individual attributes appear most pertinent to the publicly-oriented processes and roles, and learning interactions and individual attributes appear most pertinent to the participation-oriented processes and roles. The conditions that locate the partnership in the public sphere and the individual attributes that leverage a preference for social involvement apparently necessitate processes that are publicly oriented (inclusion, deliberation, and transparency) and roles that allow connection of the partnership's work to the larger public (connector, networker, public pragmatist, and salesman). Processes that facilitate democratic participation (e.g., collaboration, power diffusion, full participation, reciprocation, and consensus-seeking) and roles that shepherd those processes (e.g., wise elder, facilitator, and synthesizer) are specifically promoted by (a) conditions that require interorganizational collaboration; (b) the learning interactions that encourage empowerment, full participation, collaboration, and problem-solving; and (c) the personal attributes that promote depth of involvement within the partnership.

In addition, one important finding was unexpected and not accounted for within the original explanatory proposition: the influence of leadership. The formal leadership provided by the partnership chairpeople endorsed and encouraged structures that promoted transparency, inclusion, and deliberation.

Significance of the Study

Higher education is being called upon within the national arena (and has been for more than 50 years) to embrace its public purpose and yet has not found a way to do so consistently. The framework of democratic engagement provides a paradigmatic ideal of what that will look like, but we need to understand the moving parts associated with such a change. The purpose of this study is to understand how the conditions, partnership learning interactions, and stakeholder attributes influence the adoption of

democratically oriented processes and roles within democratically engaged community–university partnerships. It is necessary to understand this so that we can nurture the characteristics of democratic engagement.

This study proposes that democratically engaged partnerships (DEPs) serve as one part of the equation and fills an empirical gap to document the processes and roles of such partnerships as well as the means by which those processes and roles emerge and are enacted. DEPs could be a powerful tool to disrupt the culture and practices of higher education in a way that leads to the wider pursuit of democratic purposes within an institution of higher education. Those DEPs that truly embody the roles and processes of democratic engagement may be able to provide a locus of action and resistance to the dominant culture of higher education by calling attention to the structures and norms they encounter in their pursuit of democratically oriented public work. Knowing more about such partnerships is critical to the development of democratic engagement and legitimizes the focus of this study.

Gaps within the literature leave unexplained how democratic roles and processes emerge and are enacted. Some community–university partnership studies briefly mention potential influencers, but few empirically investigate them. Because democratic engagement is a relatively new framework, no empirical studies exist to explain the emergence of such roles and processes and their effect on a partnership's democratic orientation. The study described in this dissertation provides an empirical investigation of the influences that affect the roles and processes of DEPs.

In further developing the democratic orientation of community–university partnerships, we may be able to further disrupt the normative ways universities and communities work together and produce problem solving that authentically leverages the experience and contributions of various sectors. This dissertation provided an empirical investigation of one such partnership, and its findings provide instructive steps for enacting a democratic orientation within partnership work.

A democratic orientation is both acquired and adopted. Though the partnership may not express democratic engagement as its primary mission, this study suggests that being clear on the means by which stakeholders engage one another is important to creating a shared understanding and appreciation for democratic engagement. Partnerships should also consider the means they have to sustain the adoption of democratic engagement, including

whether they have the necessary skills to effectively encourage deliberation, inclusion, and collaboration on their joint work and if not, what they can do to develop them. Member socialization is critical for transmission of democratic practices. The present study suggests that partnership learning interactions help new members understand the type of interactions they will encounter in a democratically engaged partnership. Making space for inclusion, deliberation, and transparency is the responsibility of all partnership stakeholders but may often be enacted by partnership leadership. The findings of this study indicate that it is imperative for partnership leadership (whether one-person or collaborative leadership) to understand democratic engagement and its associated processes and roles. It is also important that the leadership have the skills necessary to steward a democratic process.

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