



## Between & Betwixt: Considerations of Cross-Organizational Readiness in University/Public School Partnership

Shallegra Moye   
University of Pittsburgh, United States

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## Between & Betwixt: Considerations of Cross-Organizational Readiness in University/Public School Partnership

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### Abstract

University partnerships with public schools are an innovative opportunity to marry research and practice. One such endeavor was the Heinz Fellows Program at the Center for Urban Education in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. The Heinz Fellows Program existed at the intersection of community engagement, public school praxis, and university collaboration, with a pursuit of equity and justice. Yet, despite four years of programming, significant investment from philanthropy, and deep commitment from the university and public-school partners, much of the services and activities were not sustained beyond the conclusion of the program. What has remained, though, are salient lessons about the preparatory work each organization must engage in prior to collaboration. A public school is an inherently complex organization, while a university is also complex, but in substantially different ways. Thus, to bridge the chasm, both organizations must participate in self-reflection about their readiness, resources, and right constituents to implement, evaluate, and sustain the collaboration. The article offers a robust framework to consider cross-organizational collaborative readiness and to guide future university/public school partnerships into sustainability.

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### Introduction

Schools are a key institution in our society, serving students from all backgrounds (O'Day & Smith, 2016) and influencing children's life trajectories; and politicians, reformers, and citizens often state that education is the great equalizer of opportunity. Yet those of us who study and practice within public education know this is a hollow promise. A host of factors such as race, economics, and housing coalesce and continue to be predictors of educational outcomes (Thompson Dorsey & Plucker, 2016). As Day and Smith (2016) noted, "The current American system exacerbates the problem [of unequal opportunities outside school] by giving these children less of everything that makes a difference in education" (p. 14). Therefore, if public education is ever to become an equalizer of opportunities, schools must recognize how historical and contemporary policies and associated practices have limited access to learning for certain populations of children and actively work to disrupt inequities for the students, families, and communities they serve. Considering this, university/public-school partnerships can cultivate the opportunities and experiences that help schools acknowledge, address and act on the matters noted above.

Systemic themes such as underprepared school personnel, ever-declining investment in inadequately funded public schools and the students within them, coupled with post-pandemic economic instability, reproduce and reify inequity. Scholars and practitioners must commit to analyses that name, interrogate, and disrupt inequities. Thus, drawing on the work of Nygreen (2006), if we understand the problems of public schools as nested within sociopolitical contexts, we are led to a different set of questions, and I posit different interventions. On the other hand, Slater (1996) tells us that universities are a loosely coupled group of individuals, viewing themselves as removed and protected from shifts of power and authority that are politically and socially motivated. Thus, if universities recognize and acknowledge their organizational positionality, university/public-school partnerships offer a way forward. For example, insights into learning, community practice, and additional funding are several ways that university/public school partnerships address sociopolitical challenges (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Warren and Peel (2005) additionally note that universities can assist public schools with developing, implementing, and evaluating plans of reform that address contextual needs.

Yet, universities and public schools face challenges of cross-organizational collaboration, such as different approaches to defining and forwarding equity, differences in bureaucratic and organizational structure, and differences in the roles and expectations of frontline workers within each entity. University resources such as research capacity, funding, and professional learning for public school personnel are the critical assets found within a partnership, but more is required for effective collaboration. To be sure, there is an incalculable time, monetary, intellectual, and emotional investment made by multiple stakeholders connected to a university/public school partnership. For example, Bishop and Noguera (2019) assert that lack of clarity, shared goals, and administrative support remain threats to university/public-school partnership. These themes point to the need for both inter- and intra-organizational clarity to develop and sustain partnerships and ultimately transform educational outcomes for students. This requires stewardship, which derives from an analysis of each organization's capacity to collaborate to achieve equity, sustainability, and transformation.

Universities can be described as a loosely coupled group of individuals, viewing themselves as removed and protected from shifts of power and authority that are politically and socially motivated, and lacking formal procedures to accomplish tasks (Slater, 1996). Another defining characteristic of the university as an organization relates to time. In *Anatomy of a Collaboration*, Slater (1996) noted,

For the university, time is relative, and deadlines are less dependent on links to other parts of the organization. On the other hand, for public school systems, time is indicative of finances, political feasibility, and approval giving across a complex network of offices (p. 44).

Public schools, on the other hand, have been described as organizations that do not meet the academic and social needs of – nor have they been provided with access to the design, practice, and resources needed to achieve equity goals for – populations of students (Lipman, 2011; Tyack, 1974). Bishop and Noguera (2019) asserted that public schools have been and continue to operate as organizations where inequality based on race, class, culture, and language are manifest and often reproduced. Slater (1996) tells us that as organizations, public schools are inherently bureaucratic, predictable, placid, and top-heavy in reform and administration. She goes on to assert that as an organization, public schools are marked by legislative constraint, decoupled activities, and high response to

external demands, which render goals ambiguous.

Despite the vastly different structures of universities and public schools, partnerships remain a powerful lever for advancing equity and transforming change. From a public health perspective, several overlapping and intersecting policy arenas such as housing, health, and criminal justice impact education, meaning that equity in education cannot be addressed singly from within schools. It has been noted by Goodlad (as cited in Slater, 1996) that:

University/school partnerships have not been a failure so much as they have been directed toward arrangements that have not been carefully created arrangements and programs to which both the individuals and institutions separately and collectively have a sustained commitment. Such efforts require planning, equality of purpose and parity, an agenda or mechanism for bringing both sides together, and a structure to maintain momentum and sustainability (p. 48).

Indeed, cross-organizational partnerships can attend to multiple arenas that offer effective solutions. So, the establishment of a university/public school partnership should begin with the recognition of a common goal that would be impossible or terribly difficult to achieve without collaboration of one another, where a mutually developed definition of mission, goals, necessary values, and beliefs become the guiding force. Mutuality and clarity around mission, goals, and values support conflict resolution, as well as when participants enter and/or leave the partnership.

To be sure, to be between and betwixt something is to be suspended in the contradiction of unbecoming who/what we were, while simultaneously becoming something new. As Larson and Nelms (2021) point out, a precursor and ongoing focus of such partnerships must be getting people from the university and public schools ready for change by way of establishing interpersonal accountability, trust, and conflict resolution through consideration of cross-organizational readiness. Therefore, a readiness assessment becomes a primary and critical first step of engaging in university/public-school partnerships, as well as any other cross-organizational collaboration. A university/public school partnership must acknowledge, accept, and act on environmental conditions, including previous collaboration efforts and organizational readiness to implement and sustain programs and activities that result from the collaboration (McNall et al., 2008). Effective, cohesive, and sustainable university/public school partnerships are guided by an understanding of the activities that will provide opportunities to establish and deepen trust across the organizations, adequate communication channels and action agenda (Williamson et al. 2016), and resources aligned to purposes (Baum, 2000).

## **Between & Betwixt**

### **Cross-Organizational Navigation**

Cross-organizational collaboration is the long-term, intensive interactions between at least two sectors for the purpose of addressing social, environmental, or complex problems that the sectors could not readily accomplish individually (Clarke & Crane, 2018). A critical driver for cross-organizational collaboration is the increased likelihood for systemic change that increases effectiveness of services to identified constituents. It is helpful to consider how actors in a cross-organizational collaboration understand, rationalize, enact, then re-enact work (or

not), and perceive conditions toward the development of roles, practices, and norms to accomplish tasks (Eppel, et al., 2013). Cross-organizational collaborations require time, talent, and treasure, which do not always fall evenly across the partners. Thus, contextual review of each individual organization is necessary to determine the preconditions and availability of resources, as well as joint goal-planning, prioritization of tasks, and sustainability plans.

At minimum, a university/public school partnership exists between and betwixt two distinctly different organizations and simultaneous navigation of the structures, roles, cultures, and practices requires awareness. Organizations have different missions and different assumptions, and as a result, function in different ways. Beyond some overlapping focus on education as a public good and professed commitments to “diversity” and “equity,” the stakeholders, participants, and decision-makers must understand how tasks fit into and are shaped by the organizations called schools, school districts, and universities. Thus, providing opportunities to apply a deep understanding of organizations and how they function is a central part of any collaborative partnership. King and colleagues (2010) asserted that organizations are actors that exert influence on individuals, shape communities, and transform their environments and are thereby bona fide mechanisms for societal change. They further indicate that organizations are intentional, in that by design they are structured to carry out a particular point of view that the whole organization then orients itself to. When practitioners understand and apply organizational theory to university/public school partnerships, they are better able to anticipate, embrace, and move through the uncertainty, ambiguity, and shifting priorities that inevitably arise. Which then supports decision-makers and implementers in a university/public school partnership in critical analysis and problem-solving.

### ***University/Public School Partnerships***

The National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good (Pasque et al., 2005) states that community engagement continues to be an important consideration in institutions of higher education to improve relationships with the societies it serves. Community engagement describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and communities as the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. It is a “form of scholarship that cuts across teaching, research, and service” (McNall et al., 2009, p. 318). Described another way, community–university partnerships are an integral part of research and practice, a collaborative relationship involving mutually beneficial exchange and best methods for meeting those needs (Williamson et al., 2016). In this conception, university partners provide the framework, resources, and theoretical knowledge important in creating intervention strategies as well as assistance with the implementation and evaluation of programs and services. Williamson and colleagues (2016) also state the importance of building a solid foundation of trust and mutual respect to ensure sustainable working relationships that meet the needs of all stakeholders within university/community partnerships. Specific to university/public school partnerships, Slater (1996) shares that identifying areas of mutual concern guides the process of partnership and agreement on change, power sharing, and control through exchanges of ideas and opportunities. In considering what advances or detracts from an effective and sustainable university/public school partnership, discrepancies in expectations, timelines, role confusion, and communication are factors recognized in the literature. For instance,

Zetlin et al. (1992) shared how despite lengthy discussions and planning between university and school staff, when a program was implemented, it was perceived differently among the teachers, school principals, and even some university members. According to Baum (2000), planning partnerships should accommodate ambiguities and changes in the partners' identities, their relationships, and their separate and common purposes. Lastly, planning partnerships should accommodate ambiguities and changes in the partners' identities, their relationships, and their separate and common purposes (Baum, 2000).

### ***Cross-Organizational Readiness***

Larson and Nelms (2021) note that a precursor and ongoing focus of such partnerships must be getting people from the university and public schools ready for change by way of establishing interpersonal accountability, trust, and conflict resolution. Thus, each organization within the collaboration must assess its own readiness to forge ahead by acknowledging where challenges, barriers, and gaps in service are. A readiness assessment can also buffer against time limitations, changes in personnel on either side of the partnership, and unforeseen circumstances. Features of the readiness assessment should include indicators of the resources, time, and climate/culture. Assessment of resources reveals availability of human and capital capacity within the public school to support, implement, and sustain the programming introduced by the university. In this way, determining and assigning roles as well as activities of street level bureaucrats within the partnership is clearer. Also under the category of resources is examination of the policies, politics, and power dynamics of the external organization. Policies include rules that advance or constrain activities and agreements within the partnership (Brooks et al., 2007), politics includes the worldview of broad stakeholders (Slater, 1996), and an assessment of power includes who wields formal and informal modes, influence, and the encouragement or absence of sharing power. Larson, et al. (2021) inform the reader that power relations produce changes in culture that in turn generate further changes in initiatives that can improve outcomes. For effective cross-organizational partnership, participants must be willing to share power, reconsider value positions, and make the commitments of time and talent to the process, including providing people the time to let go of old ways of behaving (Slater, 1966).

A cross-organizational readiness assessment should also include the goals, objectives, and outcomes that guide the relationship. Establishing clear, common goals, opening lines of communication, and developing a shared answerability improves trust (Zetlin et al., 1992) and helps prioritize the most effective way to utilize the combined time, talent, and treasure. Communicating a clear image of what the future will look like, using multiple leverage points, making organizational arrangements for the transition, and an evaluation component to inform the change process that can be tracked over time. A cross-organizational readiness assessment also aides in acknowledging the environmental conditions, including previous collaboration efforts and organizational readiness to implement and sustain programs and activities that result from the collaboration (McNall et al., 2008). Effective, cohesive, and sustainable university/public school partnerships guide an assessment of the activities that will provide opportunities to establish and deepen trust across the organizations, adequate communication channels and action agenda (Williamson et al. 2016), and resources aligned to purposes (Baum, 2000). Ultimately, a cross-organizational readiness assessment, identifies the key indicators that must be acknowledged and/or present prior to collaboration, as well as a mechanism for how to reconcile gaps in the readiness, selecting priorities, and

addressing dissonance. The readiness assessment is designed to determine if cross-organizational collaboration is the right approach for the social or environmental issue, and the extent to which the conditions for success are in place for the initiative to succeed.

Acknowledgment, identification, and resolution of the barriers and challenges inherent to individual organizations is crucial for consideration of any cross-organizational collaboration. Especially that of a university/public school partnership in lieu of vastly different organizational identities. Neglecting, minimizing, or failing to acknowledge the barriers and challenges of a cross-organizational collaboration limit effectiveness and sustainability of solutions. Working collaboratively across organizations to solve social problems such as those posed by public education requires managing complexities embedded in bureaucratic processes and reified through everyday practices (Eppel, et al., 2013). Some examples of what can happen when an assessment of cross-organization readiness is missed are role confusion or ambiguity, competing priorities, frustration among actors, and lack of sustainability of solutions. As noted by Williamson et al. (2016), roles, duties, and personnel evolve over the duration of collaborative projects and therefore cross-organizational partnerships benefit from ongoing integrated quality improvement and evaluation efforts. Competing priorities, mismanagement of resources, tasks that hamper effectiveness, and create discord (Sujan, et al., 2015) are hallmarks of collaboration that has proceeded without an assessment of readiness.

## **Method**

To best understand the departure from stated goals and commitments between the university/public school partnership, qualitative methods were used (Leavy, 2014). This method enabled me to engage the stories of participants from both the university and the public schools in capturing their experiences. As the researcher connected to the Heinz Fellows Program directly and indirectly throughout its duration, I was aware of some of the ways the experiences of partnership participants would suggest a priori codes. For example, role confusion, self-efficacy, and administrative support were consistent themes in responses. While a priori codes were developed before examining the current data, they do not limit the analysis. Instead, they reflect the view of participants (Elliot, 2018).

The qualitative method was also selected to amplify the social construction of interactions between individuals within contexts, such as those found in a partnership across multiple organizations (Merriam, 2002). During the four years the Heinz Fellows Program operated, data were collected from journal responses, meeting notes, observations within the university and the public schools Fellows were assigned to, as well as ongoing check-ins with university and public-school participants by me and the previous program lead. My method choice is significant because my goal as a scholar-practitioner is to design research that intervenes in ways that expose and disrupt patterns of inequity in the public education experience for all stakeholders (Nygreen, 2006). Rendering the use of decontextualized analysis of data produced through quantitative methods as obscuring the role of power operating in human interactions and replicating inequity. Thus, the key to understanding qualitative data analysis is embracing that its meaning is socially constructed by individuals and their interactions in the world at a particular point in time (Merriam, 2002). Table 1 captures the sentiments of Heinz Fellows as they navigated the

university-public school partnership and the associated themes.

Table 1. Category of Respondents Codes, Themes, and Subthemes

Quote	Initial/A priori Code	Subtheme	Theme
<p><i>“Oh my goodness, if you wanted to do anything, the chain of command for permission could take the entire program year. Even for what seemed like really simple requests of bringing in guest speakers.”</i></p> <p><i>“I didn’t know how I was supposed to utilize them. Nobody ever told us they (Heinz Fellows) would be in our rooms or for how long, or for what.”</i></p>	Role confusion	Dissonance	Misunderstanding of the goals, priorities, and functions of the Heinz Fellows Program.
<p><i>“There was a strong desire to embed social justice and equity; the hesitation was that social justice and equity was occurring in the school when so many anti-social justice and equity were happening in the community and district. Heinz Fellows were used as an avenue to “go around” the district.”</i></p> <p><i>“I was asked to call families whose students were truant (during the pandemic). I didn’t feel it was in the spirit of the Program to call families to deliver messages about the consequences of missing school during a pandemic. The other Fellows were able to work directly with students in classrooms and through community-based organizations that really supported the work we were there to do.”</i></p>	Self-efficacy	Social justice and equity orientation	Deepening understanding of the way public schools can reify and perpetuate inequities.
<p><i>“At my school, there was a new administrator every year and they each brought a new agenda with them.”</i></p> <p><i>“There was really an effort made to make sure we were on the same page with school. Like in the beginning, I came into it and there seemed the initial discussions with our liaisons and principal and stuff like that. But there seemed to be ambiguity still, even though you know Fellows had been there for three other years.”</i></p>	Administrative Support	Organizational Readiness	Prioritizing time, trust, and tools to understand and navigate two vastly different organizations (the university and the public school).

## **Results**

Analysis of the combined data sources from multiple years illustrates how the ways a lack of cross-organizational assessment of readiness limited the Heinz Fellows Program's capacity to consistently meet goals and objectives and sustain the intervention. To be sure, there are at least two critical projects that were developed by the Heinz Fellows Program that exist to this day. However, the sustainability of those projects relied heavily on two key personnel from the university and public school remaining in their roles for the entirety of the Heinz Fellows Program and the continued involvement of the university employee when the program ended. Program participants who were interviewed included teachers, principals, Heinz Fellows, and other faculty and staff members from the university. Heinz Fellows discussed how they formulated alternative methods to interact with students when they were prevented from doing so in the normal course of their work. This breach of the memorandum of understanding resulted in finding alternative school placements for Heinz Fellows at this location.

Additionally, the organizational culture within and across the six public schools compelled those closest to the implementation of the intervention to develop techniques to maintain self-efficacy, values-orientation, and goal accomplishment within the limits imposed on them mostly by the structure of public schools. This included, but certainly was not limited to, leveraging advocates within the school to raise ideas and concerns, utilizing their differing levels of influence with personnel within school sites, and reinterpretation of policies and practices. Another key finding in the data analysis was the tension in the university's school-based goals of increasing attendance, decreasing pushout, and improving academic identity of students amid the public schools shifting goals, resources, and priorities. For instance, Heinz Fellows willingly worked beyond their requisite schedules to formulate and facilitate out-of-school time mentorship and health and wellness programs for students that increased their attendance in school, decreased pushout, and improved academic identity.

A final result to reckon with was the inconsistent receipt of data from the public-school partners which could offer the opportunity to examine the statistical significance of the Heinz Fellows Program. Despite ongoing conversations and inclusion in the memorandum of understanding, acquiring data in a timely and cohesive manner remained unfulfilled. The goals of the university/public school partnership were to increase attendance, decrease referrals, and increase student academic identity and the only sure way to measure accomplishment of the first two goals was through attendance and suspension data. Certainly, we were able to ascertain anecdotal evidence of program goals being met, particularly around student and teachers' positive attitudes about the presence of the Heinz Fellows Program in their schools. For example, the university was responsive to the partner public schools by returning Heinz Fellows to schools for continuity, accepting grant funds on behalf of schools who could not do so without district involvement, and adapting Heinz Fellows schedules to meet building needs. A mutual decision was made to embed Heinz Fellows in classrooms to academically support both teachers and students and the critical mentoring of students and in schools for shared professional learning, in- and out-of-school enrichment programs, and the yearly youth participatory action research projects. However, it is difficult to capture, meet, improve, or sustain what we were not measuring. Moreover, the inability to receive data to measure impact in a cross-organizational partnership is to squander the intellectual, physical, emotional, and monetary resources of all

those connected to it. Table 2 demonstrates the inquiry questions, collection protocol, and data sources utilized to guide the findings of the university-public school partnership.

Table 2. Inquiry Questions

<b>Inquiry Question</b>	<b>Collection Protocol</b>	<b>Data Source</b>
How would you describe the planning process of what roles, activities, and events would take place?	Semi-structured interview	Interview responses from program participants
What were the shared goals of the university/public school partnership?	Semi-structured interview, document analysis	Interview responses from program participants and review of journal responses and meeting minutes
What impact if any did you observe about the partnership in school or with students?	Document analysis	Review of notes from ongoing check-ins and self-efficacy ratings

## Discussion

Entering a cross-organizational collaboration, such as a university/public school partnership should not occur without appropriate consideration of resources, gaps, and politics of each organization. Del Prete (2006) noted that managing the accomplishment of the externally based program goals while simultaneously navigating the organizational structures, roles, cultures, and practices implicated in the process presents challenges to all parties involved. Thus, recognition of inter- and intra-organizational positionality is what sustains partnerships and increases achievement of educational equity within a university/public school partnership. As Larson and Nelms (2021) point out, a precursor and ongoing focus of such partnerships must be getting people from the university and public schools ready for change by way of establishing interpersonal accountability, trust, and conflict resolution.

Organizations are actors that exert influence on individuals, shape communities, and transform their environments and are thereby bona fide mechanisms for societal change (King et al., 2010). As such, organizations by design are structured to carry out a particular point of view that the people within the organization then orient to. Acknowledging organizational positionality becomes a navigation tool to unveil and mitigate countervailing forces within universities and public schools. Use of this knowledge can lead to goal achievement and to sustained effective partnerships (Brazer et al., 2014). Researchers and practitioners who understand organizational theory and apply it to a university/public school partnership are better able to anticipate, embrace, and move through the uncertainty, ambiguity, and shifting priorities that inevitably arise, which then supports decision-makers and implementers in a university/public school partnership in critical analysis and problem-solving. It has been noted by Goodlad (as cited in Slater, 1996) that:

University/school partnerships have not been a failure so much as they have been directed toward arrangements that have not been carefully created arrangements and programs to which both the individuals and institutions separately and collectively have a sustained commitment. Such efforts require planning, equality of purpose and parity, an agenda or mechanism for bringing both sides together, and

a structure to maintain momentum and sustainability. (p. 48)

Despite vastly different organizational positionality, university/public school partnerships remain a powerful lever for advancing equity and transformative change. Overlapping and intersecting policy arenas such as housing, health, and criminal justice impact education such that equity in education cannot be addressed singly by schools. Indeed, it is cross-organizational partnership that can attend to multiple arenas and offer an effective solution.

### **Recommendations**

As a scholar-practitioner who studies and leads cross-organizational collaborations within the university, I engage a distinct set of resources to maximize input and outcomes. Utilization of a (1) readiness assessment, (2) articulation agreement, (3) monitoring rubric are critical to my work in university/public school partnerships, and an (4) end of partnership evaluation. Based upon my practice and scholarship, I recommend use of these resources in university/public school partnerships, as well as other cross-organizational collaborations. According to Baum (2000), planning partnerships should accommodate ambiguities and changes in the partners' identities, their relationships, and their separate and common purposes.

### **Readiness Assessment**

A readiness assessment is a framework that helps an organization recognize and name its positionality prior to a collaboration. Outcomes of cross-organizational partnerships are mediated by organizational readiness, prior collaborations and motivations, the leadership abilities of partners, institutional demands, trust, and the balance of power (McNall et al., 2009) prior to partnership. Acknowledging threats, challenges, and barriers at the onset is useful in developing action plans to address and correct problems that arise throughout cross-organizational partnership. This enables both the university and its public-school partners to determine where challenges, barriers, and gaps in service are so that tailored decisions about activities and implementation are made.

A readiness assessment that occurs prior to commencement of a university/public-school partnership can also buffer against time limitations, changes in personnel on either side of the partnership, and unforeseen circumstances. Features of a readiness assessment should include indicators of the resources, time, and climate/culture. Assessment of resources reveals availability of human and capital capacity within the public school to support, implement, and sustain the programming introduced by the university. In this way, determining and assigning roles as well as activities of street level bureaucrats within the partnership is clearer. Also under the category of resources is examination of the policies, politics, and power dynamics of the external organization. Policies include rules that advance or constrain activities and agreements within the partnership (Brooks et al., 2007), politics includes the worldview of broad stakeholders (Slater, 1996), and an assessment of power includes who wields formal and informal modes, influence, and the encouragement or absence of sharing power. Larson, et al. (2021) inform the reader that power relations produce changes in culture that in turn generate further changes in initiatives that can improve outcomes. For effective cross-organizational partnership, participants must be willing to share power, reconsider value positions, and make the commitments of time and talent to the process,

including providing people time to let go of old ways of behaving (Slater, 1966). Engaging in a readiness assessment confirms that partners possess the internal dynamics associated with effective university/public school partnerships, such as human, financial, and material resource availability to commit to collaboration. Or at least, reveals where energy in the partnership should be directed. As noted by McNall and colleagues (McNall et al., 2009), the quality of community–university engagement is only as good as the quality of the individual partnerships through which that engagement is enacted. The following figure is an example of the dimensions and considerations necessary to determine readiness of each organization preparing to collaborate. It is important to note that a low score does not have to halt collaboration, but rather that each organization should earnestly consider and plan for addressing disparities.

Table 1. University/Public School Collaboration Readiness Assessment

Domains of Readiness	Domain Description	Queries
Necessity of Collaboration	Assess needs through stakeholder identification, existing efforts, and clear articulation of mutual goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What other projects are currently under way related to this issue?</li> <li>• What other organizations are involved and how?</li> <li>• Will the collaboration face resistance, from whom/where?</li> </ul>
Competence of Collaboration	Assess openness to collaboration and strength of internal relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the participants have the skills and personal characteristics that foster/enhance trust?</li> <li>• What are the resources (human, capital, material) available to the collaboration among the partners?</li> <li>• Are communication channels open, effective, and bi-directional?</li> </ul>
History of Collaboration	Assess whether prior/current experience of collaboration efforts with the community/other orgs was positive or negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What structural, historical, political barriers exist?</li> <li>• Is the organization in good standing with existing community?</li> <li>• What are the key environmental conditions, initiating forces, and tactical drivers and remediations?</li> </ul>
Skilled and Committed Leadership	Assess leadership capacity to guide and facilitate partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does leadership have networks and influence to obtain resource commitments and enlist support?</li> <li>• Does leadership have a history of ability to articulate the mission and goals of the collaboration to internal</li> </ul>

Domains of Readiness	Domain Description	Queries
		and external participants and sustain legitimacy?
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does leadership communicate, problem solve, diagnose resistance, negotiate, and energize a group?</li> </ul>
Sustainability	Assess the governance, policies, and probability of consequential change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who has the power and/or influence manage accountability, modify processes, regularly monitor outcomes?</li> <li>• Do all participants attend cross-organizational professional learning activities?</li> <li>• What are the shared metrics and the cadence of evaluation for improvement?</li> </ul>

*Note.* Within each domain, Score (1-5): (5) Established, (4) Acting on, (3) Developing, (2) Considering, (1) Yet to consider

*Note.* Within each domain, rate Likelihood of Collaborative Success: High (20-25), Medium (15-20), Low (5-10)

*Note.* Low Likelihood of Collaborative Success score does not imply inability to collaborate; just to proceed with caution

### Articulation Agreement

An articulation agreement between organizations is a vehicle that can address the experiences, perceptions, barriers, and impact of the partnership. Managing the complexity of such an ambitious and multifaceted agenda such as that within a university/public school partnership, while simultaneously addressing the organizational structures, roles, cultures, and practices implicated in the process is best captured through an agreement that regularly engages partners in reflection and action (Del Prete, 2006). An articulation agreement can also increase the cohesiveness and sustainability of a university/public school partnership through accountability and redirection through establishing clear, common goals, opening lines of communication, and developing a shared answerability that can lead to improved trust (Zetlin et al., 1992).

An articulation agreement should organize partners around regular meetings, changes to personnel, processes, and/or practices, as well as barriers to program implementation. Buys and Bursnall (2007) state that even when partnerships move beyond the articulation and agreement stage, issues surrounding the planning, goal setting and nature of the project arise throughout implementation and evaluation indicators in an articulation agreement helps determine if goals are being met. Finally, an articulation agreement can provide an equitable way to address the different perceptions of partnership, role conflicts, organizational cultures, institutional contexts, professional views, and power differentials inherent in university/public school partnerships (Strier, 2010) (see Figure 1 for an example of an articulation between organizations).

<p><b>1. Intervention</b> (programming)</p> <p><u>Best University</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Programming actions and activities...</i></li><li>• <i>Programming actions and activities...</i></li></ul> <p><u>Dynamic School District</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Programming actions and activities...</i></li><li>• <i>Programming actions and activities...</i></li></ul> <p><b>2. Data Sharing</b></p> <p><u>Best University</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Data sharing actions and activities...</i></li><li>• <i>Data sharing actions and activities...</i></li></ul> <p><u>Dynamic School District</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Data sharing actions and activities...</i></li><li>• <i>Data sharing actions and activities...</i></li></ul> <p>If you can meet the requirements for participation, please sign below and return to Program Director at PD@bestuniversity.edu within 30 days of receipt. When we receive the fully executed Articulation Agreement, we will reach out with the next steps. We are excited to remain in partnership with you!</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Name <span style="margin-left: 300px;">Signature</span></p> <p><i>*Signed by a school representative who has the authority to commit to this service agreement.</i></p> <p>_____</p> <p>Date</p>
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Figure 1. Sample Articulation Agreement

***Articulation Agreement between Best University and Dynamic Public School District***

The Articulation Agreement set forth contains the actions and activities of the above-named organizations during the specified program period. The Articulation Agreement will be used to ensure fidelity of implementation and a request to modify the Articulation Agreement should be submitted in writing to either party. Review and written response should be made within 30 days of receipt of request to modify. This Articulation Agreement covers the minimum requirements of both the Best University and Dynamic School District necessary for collaboration. Please review and return with the appropriate signatures to commence services within thirty (30) days of receipt.

**Monitoring Rubric**

Greater attention should be paid to monitoring the activities and outcomes of social problems of partnerships such

timely, relevant research is contributed to the field. Monitoring also informs and supports the legitimacy and credibility of partnerships as an effective and efficient approach to solving complex social and environmental issues, as well as in determining their necessary limits (Tulder, et al., 2015). A process for monitoring activities and progress toward goals within a cross-organizational partnership is essential to effective use of time, talent, and resources.

Yet, the monitoring process should be adaptive enough to account for the myriad ways that context shapes and reshapes dynamics within collaboration (Eppel, et al., 2013). It is within the monitoring process that elements of readiness assessment and articulation agreement coalesce and inform evaluation data of cross-organizational partnerships. Sustainability of the intervention and goals include and deepening ownership of an intervention by public schools occurs through continued monitoring of fidelity of the articulation agreement (Walsh & Backe, 2013). Partnership research and praxis in monitoring frameworks hold high potential for the development of relevant and useful theory for practice and methodologies (Tulder, et al., 2015).

Finally, an evaluation of the cross-organizational partnership at its conclusion is conducive continuous improvement. To be sure, an evaluation component informs the change process that can be tracked over time are useful components of articulation agreements (Williamson et al., 2016). Buys and Bursnall (2007) retool the Sargent and Walters framework for partnerships, which emphasizes initiation, clarification, implementation, and completion as phases within a university/public school partnership for effectiveness. However, no evaluation framework should be interpreted as a linear progression through the phases, as this limits the influence of context on each university/public school partnership.

A university/public school partnership must embrace the environmental conditions, including previous collaboration efforts and organizational readiness to implement and sustain programs and activities that result from the collaboration (McNall et al., 2008). Effective, cohesive, and sustainable university/public school partnerships are guided by an assessment of the activities that will provide opportunities to establish and deepen trust across the organizations, adequate communication channels and action agenda (Williamson et al. 2016), and resources aligned to purposes (Baum, 2000). Trust in a university/public school partnership is reflected in taking adequate time with all relevant stakeholders and sharing positive attitude about the collaboration and is found to increase program sustainability (Williamson et al., 2016).

Additionally, Baum (2000) states that for multiple organizations to work together, time is required to develop sufficient understanding of and trust in one another, as well as confidence in shared knowledge to act. Adequate communication such as that found in articulation agreements is important to introduce all parties and openly communicate the needs and expectations of each and is explicit, frequent, and is bi-directional (Williamson et al., 2016). If the collective purpose is clear, specific, and committed to in a formal agreement, when partnership activity requires flexibility goals are less likely to shift or elude (Baum, 2000). Maximization, use, and exchange of resources to fulfill the purpose of a university/public school partnership allow for more accurate analysis of the social reality and increased likelihood of sustainability (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004). Figure 2 captures the elements necessary to guide the cross-organizational collaboration.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Public School</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Collaborative Agreement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identification of mutual goals/objectives</li> <li>2. Barriers, challenges, obstacles identified &amp; mediated</li> <li>3. Prioritization of mutual goals and objectives</li> </ol>			
Collaboration Sponsors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Who are the intra-organizational sponsors of the collaboration?</li> <li>2. Identify those with decision-making authority across both organizations</li> <li>3. Identify external/community-based sponsors</li> </ol>			
Roles & Tasks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What personnel have been identified for full-time participation in the collaboration?</li> <li>2. What are the non-negotiable activities within the collaboration?</li> <li>3. What is the process for onboarding and ongoing development of participants?</li> </ol>			
Processes & Protocols	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Systems exist for onboarding and offboarding participants</li> <li>2. Procedures/protocols exist for organizational cross-training and development</li> <li>3. Procedures/protocols exist for reconciliation/conflict management</li> </ol>			
Ongoing Check-ins	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Agenda should be set and shared ahead of time and used to discuss progress, barriers, and modifications</li> <li>2. Personnel are identified to attend meetings</li> <li>3. Procedure for sharing meeting minutes/notes with relevant participants</li> </ol>			

Figure 2. Sample Collaborative Monitoring

## Conclusion

University/public school partnerships are a form of cross-organizational collaboration that continue to hold great promise on achieving educational equity. The university provides access to evidence-based research, dexterity in the dispatch of human and capital resources, and time with far less limitations. On the other hand, public schools are real-time laboratories of practice where shared learning, meaning making, and application of what the

university offers are established. Yet, for partnerships to develop, launch, reach goals, and sustain there must be systems in place to assess readiness, govern the partnership, monitor implementation, and evaluate ongoing effectiveness.

To produce authentic culture change, power relations need to shift, yet this shift cannot occur until trusting relationships are built among all stakeholders (Bishop & Noguera, 2019). Therefore, strengthening partnerships across unequal contexts requires building a new language of collective empowerment based on asymmetrical reciprocity rather than on assumptions of equivalence (Larson & Nelms, 2021). As partners focus on building trust, they embrace that difference is an asset not a deficit. Also, only after trust begins to take hold will people be willing to take risks to change their beliefs and practices, to make mistakes, and to share those mistakes in ways that promote goal accomplishment.

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### **Author Information**

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**Shallegra Moye**

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8048-6809>

University of Pittsburgh

United States

Contact e-mail: [sdm76@pitt.edu](mailto:sdm76@pitt.edu)

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