Abstract  Partnerships and collaboration have become popular in higher education; and partnerships with community agencies, K-12 schools, and businesses are common. However, formal and sustained partnerships among institutions of higher education are not nearly as widespread. This article presents a model for collaboration in higher education focused on a partnership among teacher preparation programs at three institutions. The article provides an overview of theoretical underpinnings for collaboration, the process and practices used, and lessons learned by Valley Partnership, as well as the stages of partnership development, the governance model, and key elements related to sustaining the partnership.

Keywords  Higher education · Partnerships · Collaboration · Teacher preparation

Stacy Duffield· Alan Olson· Renee Kerzman

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2012

Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries: Collaboration Among Higher Education Institutions

Stacy Duffield · Alan Olson · Renee Kerzman

Stacy Duffield serves as Associate Professor and Coordinator of the teacher preparation program at North Dakota State University, Fargo. She received her B.S. degree in secondary English education from the University of Mary in Bismarck, ND, and a M.Ed. degree in reading education and Ph.D. in secondary and higher education from the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks. Email contact stacy.duffield@ndsu.edu.

Alan Olson serves as Associate Professor and Assessment Coordinator in the School of Education and Graduate Studies at Valley City State University in Valley City, ND. He received his B.S. degree in mathematics and physical education at Valley City State University; his M.A. degree in Physical Education from Northern State University in Aberdeen, SD; and his Ph.D. in teaching and learning from the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. Email contact: al.olson@vcsu.edu.

Renee Kerzman is the Principal at Roosevelt Elementary School in Detroit Lakes, MN. Ms. Kerzman formerly coordinated the Bush Foundation grant project for the Minnesota State University, Moorhead. She received a B.S. degree in elementary education from Minnesota State University, Moorhead, and a M.S. degree from Northern State University, Aberdeen, SD. Email contact: rkerzman@detlakes.k12.mn.us

S. Duffield (✉)
North Dakota State University, P.O. Box 6050/Dept. 2625, Fargo, ND 58108, USA
e-mail: stacy.duffield@ndsu.edu

A. Olson
Valley City State University, Valley City, ND, USA
e-mail: al.olson@vcsu.edu

R. Kerzman
Roosevelt Elementary School, Detroit Lakes, MN, USA
e-mail: rkerzman@detlakes.k12.mn.us

Published online: 27 September 2012
Partnerships and collaboration have become popular in higher education, and partnerships with community agencies and businesses are common. Collaboration across departments within an institution is gaining momentum, and partnerships between teacher preparation programs and K-12 schools are now considered necessary. However, formal and sustained partnerships among institutions of higher education are not nearly as widespread.

Institutions of higher education are generally not designed for collaboration with one another. They are built upon individual missions, and campus leaders make every effort to establish unique and recognizable identities. Many institutions are part of a larger state system. On the surface the system appears to be collaborative, working toward the good of the state; but each institution has its own unique role and place. They typically do not work with other institutions but instead work side-by-side. Additionally, institutions compete with one another on every level from athletics to academics to research, and physically they are their own community with gates to mark the boundaries of the campus. The typical institution is autonomous by tradition and practice.

This situation was the case for the teacher preparation programs at three institutions in the upper Midwest. Located in close physical proximity to one another, they compete for students and field placements; and their graduates compete for jobs. While a formal agreement was in place between two of the institutions for course sharing, the agreement was at the institutional level and did not necessarily mean that there was collaboration at a program level.

All three institutions are public and award both undergraduate and master’s degrees. North Dakota State University (NDSU) awards doctoral degrees and is a research institution. Valley City State University (VCSU) is located in a small, rural community of about 7,000 residents and serves approximately 1,300 students. Minnesota State University-Moorhead (MSUM) is located in a community with a population of approximately 200,000 and serves over 14,000 students. MSUM is located in the same community as NDSU, but the community crosses two states’ boundary lines, placing MSUM and NDSU in different states. About 7,500 students are enrolled at MSUM.

In the spring of 2009, representatives from the Archibald Bush Foundation of Minnesota approached the teacher education faculty from the three institutions about a project to improve teacher preparation in the region; but a condition for participation was that the three institutions work as a team. The project would involve working together to recruit high quality candidates into teacher preparation, prepare highly effective teachers, place graduates in partner schools, and support graduates in their first years of teaching. Arguments were presented by the three programs as to why collaboration would not be feasible. The faculty already knew how difficult change could be working with one faculty group on a single

---

1 Note that the names of the institutions are used with permission of the persons involved.
campus. How much more challenging would it be to try to achieve consensus and buy-in when working with faculty members at three institutions?

Competition for students was a barrier because of close physical proximity of the institutions. Faculty members felt uncertain whether or not it was wise to share ideas and resources with competitors, and deeply embedded feelings of loyalty to the institutions and the desire for autonomy created conflict in their minds. Collaboration involves compromise and balance of power, and each institution wanted to ensure that it would retain its individuality and independence. The faculty members did not want their freedom to govern their own teacher preparation program hindered by a partnership.

The project itself also posed threats to faculty members who were already carrying full work schedules. Collaborating with two other institutions would mean additional meetings with the faculty from other campuses and increased work to carry out grant activities. The process of collaboration involves openness, compromise, and time; and to make this project worth the effort the faculty needed to know that the end result would mean a better experience for students. After much discussion, and with a bit of trepidation, a partnership was initiated. In this article we present an overview of the theoretical underpinnings for collaboration, the process and practices used, and lessons learned by the faculty members of the three teacher preparation programs who agreed to form a new entity called Valley Partnership.

Review of Literature

In 2005, Kezar wrote that there has been “virtually no research on how to enable higher education institutions to conduct collaborative work” (p. 831); and seven years later this statement still holds true for research related to collaboration among institutions of higher education. There is a fair amount of literature about partnerships within a higher education institution as well as between higher education and outside entities such as community agencies, businesses, and K-12 schools; but there is very little about partnerships across institutions. The following review of literature presents information about both partnerships in general and partnerships involving institutions of higher education.

Reasons for Collaboration

Both internal and external factors motivate entities to collaborate. Internal factors such as leveraging resources and pooling talent, sharing common interests, and solving challenging issues act as incentives for engaging in a partnership (Amey et al. 2007; Eddy 2010; Scherer 2009). The most important internal factor is the presence of common goals. Shared goals (Bringle and Hatcher 2002) are what drive the need for a partnership (Eddy 2010). Kezar (2005) described external pressures from several sources, including foundations that require collaboration for funding, accreditors and state agencies that call for collaboration around assessment, and employers that value collaboration in the workplace. Baumfield and Butterworth (2007) also stated that partnerships are popular with policy makers because they may increase the efficiency of an institution, allowing for shared resources and more efficient use of public monies. In the end, partners do not need common motivators: “The fact that partners have their own reasons (motivations) for participating is not inherently problematic so long as the partnership is mutually beneficial” (Amey et al. 2007, p. 7).

A partnership should produce increasing returns, providing more to the partners than they were previously receiving (Child and Faulkner 1998). A partnership may provide a competitive advantage to an institution because it can offer its constituents goods or services that
were not possible without the partnership (Heffernan and Poole 2005). Benefits may also occur on the individual level if faculty members are rewarded by their institutions for collaborative work (Eddy 2010).

The literature often refers to benefits and motivators associated with collaboration, but it is also important to consider the possible costs (Bringle and Hatcher 2002). For example, there is an immense time commitment required of stakeholders to initiate a partnership and to make it thrive (Baumfield and Butterworth 2007). While the partnership may be personally and professionally rewarding, the commitment may be too high if the work is not valued by the academic community. Therefore, the decision to partner should be thoughtful and strategic. Partners need to be a good fit, sharing common values, goals, and ways of doing business (Child and Faulkner 1998; Creamer 2003). Gajda (2004) recommended partnering only when it makes sense to do so.

Developing a Partnership

Partnerships are built over time and assembled in stages (Amey et al. 2007; Kezar 2005). After the decision to partner has been made and common goals have been established, the partnership requires development through the forging of relationships, articulation of mission, establishment of governance, and determination of roles that are framed by the type and depth of the partnership.

Types and Levels of Partnerships Anticipated goals should guide the decision about what type of partnership to construct (Scherer 2009). Scherer described a continuum upon which partnerships can be placed to explain their structure with “centralist” at one end and “hub and spoke” at the other (p. 2). The centralist model involves a central governing body made up of representation from all partners while the hub and spoke model has a leading partner with several lesser partners. In addition to structure, depth can be used to describe a partnership. A partnership can be transactional, operating on a mostly superficial level, or transformational, targeting deep and systematic change (Butcher et al. 2011). Finally, partnerships can be described in terms of duration. While some partnerships are established with the goal of surviving long term, others are established to solve a problem or support an initiative and will be dissolved when the work is done. Not all partnerships are meant to endure (Bringle and Hatcher 2002).

Relationships The establishment of relationships and the subsequent development of campus networks are the most important elements of partnerships (Kezar 2005; Luschei et al. 2009). Relationships among constituents are so important in the development of an effective partnership that faulty or missing relationships will likely cause a partnership to fail (Martin and Samels 2001).

Getting to know one another during the development stage of a partnership is critical (Butcher et al. 2011). Formal meetings encourage planning and force members to acknowledge the partnership, especially early in the relationship. Butcher et al. also stressed the value of “candid conversations” for building relationships (p. 37). Challenges and rough spots can be expected in developing and maintaining relationships. The development stage often includes a sense of ambiguity as relationships are negotiated and roles are established among the partners (Baumfield and Butterworth 2007). If the partnership is successful, the process of establishing relationships and identifying roles results in the forging of a bond among partners which creates an exclusivity, solidarity, and reciprocity for the partnership that can lead to the establishment of trust.
Trust is essential for a working partnership (Child and Faulkner 1998; Osborne 2006). While technology can support communication and build trust, geographical proximity seems to be even better than virtual meetings or telephone calls. “There is no substitute to sitting around a table and getting to know new colleagues” (Osborne 2006, p. 120.) However, proximity alone is not sufficient to develop and sustain a relationship; mutual trust, built over time and through open, regular communication, is necessary (Bringle and Hatcher 2002). Once partners have established trust, later initiatives are easier to negotiate (Butcher et al. 2011). Additionally, leadership impacts communication and relationship building (Scherer 2009): “Leaders within the partnership initiate, guide, interpret, and monitor communication dialogues and identify communication needs and shortcomings” (p. 10).

Governance The governance of a partnership will be determined by the partnership’s purpose and goals. As identified above, Scherer (2009) described a continuum with mutual, centralized governance at one end of the continuum and the “hub and spoke” configuration at the other, where one partner takes the lead. The governance agreement must clearly define the roles and expectations for each of the partners (Amey et al. 2007).

In addition to having an agreed upon model for decision making and accountability, Amey et al. (2007) stated that every partnership needs at least one champion, someone who believes deeply in the partnership and can influence others to feel the same way. The champion must have significant social power in order to generate and maintain constituent commitment through the stages of the partnership.

Sustaining a Partnership

More attention is often paid to establishing the partnership than there is in maintaining it (Child and Faulkner 1998). In order to maintain viability, relationships need to be nurtured; and the benefits touted at the onset of the partnership need to be realized. Bringle and Hatcher (2002) recommend monitoring partnerships through regular feedback from partners and formation of advisory groups to guide decision making. Successful partnerships change the structure of their institutions (Kezar 2005). Surface structures are altered through actions such as the hiring of support staff and project coordinators, and deep structures are impacted by redesigned campus systems. Collaborations provide opportunities for cross-institutional work that promotes interdependence and urges accountability from administration. This sort of interwoven work requires faculty release from regular responsibilities to work on collaboration (Kezar 2005; Peterson 2007).

Maintenance of the relationships built during the development stage is also essential (Heffernan and Poole 2005). These relationships can be solidified and formalized through contracts and memoranda of understanding. Formalized agreements and processes clarify roles and establish the commitment of all partners and make it less likely that the partners will shift apart and grow in separate directions. When partners lose their cohesiveness, there is the probable development of differing understanding and goals that will divide and damage the partnership (Baumfield and Butterworth 2007).

When a partnership is mutually beneficial to all parties, it is more apt to be sustainable. However, longevity is not necessarily the indicator of a healthy partnership; it could be a sign of unhealthy co-dependence (Bringle and Hatcher 2002). Partnerships need to be dynamic (Amey et al. 2007) to meet the changing needs of the partners and to avoid stagnation. Whether a partnership is intended for a long or fixed term, it should be born in equity (Baumfield and Butterworth 2007), which is not to say that all things need to be equal. Rather, all partners contribute; and all partners benefit from the partnership.
(Baumfield and Butterworth 2007; Butcher et al. 2011; Heffernan and Poole 2005; Kezar 2005). When everyone benefits, the partnership is more likely to endure.

Valley Partnership

The teacher preparation programs at the three institutions began to collaborate formally during the proposal writing process for the Bush Foundation grant proposal during the summer of 2009. Representatives from each of the institutions held regular meetings to determine how to come together over the common goals of the initiative. (See Fig. 1.) Because the faculty members were accustomed to competing with one another, there were conflicts and disagreements that needed to be worked through as the plan for preparing more effective teachers was developed. Faculty members had a great deal of ownership in their own programs and a sense of self-preservation that could hamper change. For example, each institution had its own process and tools for evaluating student teachers for the development of which the faculty had invested time and careful thought. One initiative was to develop a single, consistent system for student teacher evaluation across the three institutions. Over time, the faculty recognized the benefits that could come from the shared work; and barriers began to break down. Trust was established that all three programs would benefit from the work of the project in an equitable manner. The following explanation provides an overview of the development and sustenance of this partnership.

Purpose of the Partnership

Institutions partner for a variety of reasons and pressures, both internal and external (Amey et al. 2007; Eddy 2010; Kezar 2005; Scherer 2009); and there were several factors influencing the initiation of Valley Partnership. At the onset, external pressure from the granting foundation and the financial inducement of the grant funding served as incentives. Grant awards are valued by the administrations of all three institutions, so faculty members involved with the proposal and possible grant award could also benefit professionally (Baumfield and Butterworth 2007). However, the stipulations of the foundation required careful consideration because accepting the funding was an agreement to participate. There were concerns voiced by faculty members that they did not want to lose their professional independence. Alternately, some faculty members recognized the potential for teacher candidates to benefit through better preparation although this was not the main incentive.
for collaboration because faculty members believed the programs could operate individually to achieve this outcome. Gradually the faculty came to realize the extent of the benefits of sharing ideas and resources that could make each teacher preparation program better. The parameters of the institutions’ obligations to the Bush Foundation were laid out in a memorandum of understanding that helped to alleviate faculty doubts. Heffernan and Poole (2005) recommended formal agreements to ensure that all partners have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. The faculty members at the three institutions felt they could operate effectively within this agreement, and it was signed by all partners in May 2010.

Developing the Partnership

As development has been described by several authors (see Amey et al. 2007; Kezar 2005), Valley Partnership progressed through stages. Once the commitment was made, the partnership needed to be developed into a working entity with a governance structure, identification of partnership roles, and trusting relationships.

**Governance** Valley Partnership was designed as a centralist model (Scherer 2009). A leadership group called the Core Team is made up of two representatives from each of the institutions as well as administrators and curriculum directors from local K-12 schools, for a total membership of 10 persons. The Core Team not only has decision-making power for the initiative but also accountability for ensuring that the requirements of the grant are being met. The Core Team meets face-to-face on a regular basis; it began meeting twice a month during the implementation phase of the project and then once a month during the sustaining phase. The importance of regular meetings was stressed by Scherer (2009).

To carry out the work of the initiative, cross-institutional workgroups were formed around the goals of the partnership. Eddy (2010) stressed that the most important internal factor for successful partnerships is the presence of common goals. There are groups for (a) recruiting the best candidates to the teacher education programs, (b) aligning and designing field experiences to support preparation of effective teachers, (c) designing and implementing a process for working with K-12 schools to place graduates in supportive school environments and for supporting graduates in being effective teachers, and (d) facilitating evaluation of the project. These workgroups include representation from each of the institutions based upon faculty expertise. Additionally, each campus established a leadership team to work toward full implementation of the project at the institutional level. Finally, each institution created campus-level workgroups as subgroups of the cross-institutional workgroups to carry out the work on the campus. Because each campus maintained its own teacher preparation program, the preparation goal is overseen by the Core Team and carried out at the campus level. The intention of the project is to collaborate by sharing resources and ideas to make each program better (Amey et al. 2007; Eddy 2010; Scherer 2009) but not to merge or dissolve programs. See Fig. 2 for a representation of the governance model and identification of each cross-institutional and campus-based workgroup.

Due to the complexity of managing a project across three institutions, a coordinator was hired. Gajda (2004) recommends having a facilitator to support the work of developing and sustaining the alliance. The coordinator acts as a project manager, facilitating communication between the Bush Foundation and Valley Partnership and among campuses, workgroups, and the Core Team. She maintains documentation of the completed work and updates the work plans for the partnership and campuses. To allow her to work with each
of the campuses and gain an overall sense for all three programs and institutions, work space is provided on each campus; and office time is split among all partners.

As discussed by Amey et al. (2007), a champion is needed to build and maintain engagement with the partnership and corresponding initiatives. For Valley Partnership, at least three champions were needed, one on each campus, to reach out to all faculty members in these programs. Social power, which Amey stated is an essential quality of a champion, is built over time and through relationships; therefore, the champions needed to have campus-level affiliation. Even the most influential champion will confront resistance; and Valley Partnership struggled to secure buy-in from faculty members not on the Core Team, especially the Arts and Sciences faculty, who had only partial roles with teacher preparation. Because this project involved significant changes to the preparation programs, the project could not fully function without cooperation from all course instructors. For example, the curricula for all courses were revised; and field experiences were embedded within the
courses. When a faculty member refused to teach the new curriculum or include the field experience, the project suffered.

**Relationships** Relationship development is complex. When the work of this project began, there was distrust and fear of losing program identity. The partners felt a sense of loyalty and protectiveness toward their own program because faculty members at each institution were used to seeing one another as the competition. Through the planning phase and beginning of the implementation phase, steps were taken to ensure that all three institutions had equal presence. For example, when the press conference was called to announce the grant award, each institution wanted to ensure they had equal billing and face time with the press. Conflict resulted when partners felt they were not being treated fairly.

As the teams spent time with one another, friendships grew (Butcher et al. 2011). Some groups jelled more quickly than others because they already had a foundation for their relationship (Eddy 2010). For example, the field experience workgroup had a history together based on previous work the field directors had done with placing student teachers. However, another workgroup experienced a series of conflicts based on personality and the personal agendas of particular faculty members. Faculty members whose focus seemed more self-serving than in the best interest of the partnership risked undoing months of relationship building. At times, the Core Team made decisions to remove people from workgroups for the well-being of the partnership. These groups went through rebuilding phases that involved reconfiguring the group, and they now function well.

**Sustaining the Partnership**

Over the past three years, Valley Partnership has worked together through several phases of the grant project, including a multi-layered proposal process, planning phase, and implementation phase; and it is now entering a phase that encompasses both sustaining work that has been put in place and implementing new project initiatives. The most important aspects of sustaining the partnership involve the maintenance of relationships and governance. The workgroups all meet on a regular schedule, collaborating on preset project goals. The master work plan provides a road map with benchmarks along a timeline and measures against which to determine accomplishments. See an excerpt from the master work plan in Table 1.

Because this project involves many pieces and multiple workgroups that operate with a high degree of autonomy, oversight is a challenge. The Core Team meetings include updates from each of the cross-institutional teams and campuses. All project-related plans are typically designed in the workgroups and brought to the Core Team for approval with the Coordinator facilitating this communication. A website has been built for the project that includes a members’ section with a login. Team members can access meeting minutes, the work plan, and other documents through this site. Additionally, processes have been put in place to ensure more effective management of the project. For example, approximately a semester in advance, workgroups are asked to present their plans for the upcoming semester, which include budget requests. Joint meetings are also hosted where work that crosses more than one workgroup can be addressed. For example, the assessment workgroup met with the field experiences workgroup to design survey items to measure student teacher perceptions related to the newly implemented co-teaching model (Heck et al. 2009).

While the partnership was awarded a particular amount of funding, the sum was divided three ways because Valley Partnership is not a legal entity; and each campus receives annual payments from the grantors toward the total award, contingent upon a favorable annual
Table 1  Excerpt from Valley Partnership Master Work Plan. It demonstrates a benchmark for the place and support workgroup

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark</th>
<th>2009-2010</th>
<th>2010-2011</th>
<th>2011-2012</th>
<th>2012-2013</th>
<th>2013-2014</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.4. Develop an annual summer seminar for new graduates prior to start of first year of teaching.</td>
<td>Identified timelines of new teacher support needs. Visit with Noyce Scholars program to get feedback from candidates and new teachers about what would be helpful in their first year teaching experiences.</td>
<td>Review of institutional programs to consider most effective strategies for developing summer academy. Benchmark 4.2 survey informed Partnership about partner district needs for new teacher information.</td>
<td>Summer Academy has been drafted and shared with area districts for feedback.</td>
<td>Summer Academy is developed and piloted with first graduates.</td>
<td>Summer Academy is developed and regularly scheduled with new teacher participation planned.</td>
<td>Summer Academy is developed and scheduled.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
review. This type of payment dispersion also allowed each campus to be equally accountable for meeting the requirements of the grant. If one campus managed the award for the partnership, that campus would have been financially responsible for the grant overall. Because a high level of trust did not exist among the partners at the onset of the grant, it was essential that all three campuses took equal responsibility.

A Closer Look at the Cross-Institutional Workgroup Model

The work of two cross-institutional workgroups, the field experiences workgroup and the assessment workgroup, exemplify initiatives that have crossed institutions, benefiting all partners. Workgroups have been used by Valley Partnership to carry out various initiatives within the large project. While the Core Team oversees the project, the scope of the work is too extensive to be completed by this group. Cross-institutional representation also allowed additional faculty members at each institution to become involved with the project, helping to increase buy-in and participation. In most cases, membership was related to the roles faculty members hold for their own institutions to minimize the extra work required by workgroup membership. The workgroups also include members from the K-12 community, when applicable, to increase the expertise of the group and to make it more likely that the resulting outcomes are able to be implemented beyond the institutions to field experience host sites in K-12 schools.

The Cross-Institutional Field Experiences Workgroup

This workgroup developed a common tool for formative and summative evaluations of student teachers using a collaborative process involving Valley Partnership faculty and area K-12 educators. To promote fairness and reduce possible feelings that any institution had unequal influence, each institution hosted at least one workgroup meeting; and several planning gatherings were held at neutral locations. Because involvement included many K-12 educators, it was important that each institution have equal status. If events are held at one institution but not the others, the perception may arise that one institution is the lead. Early on, distrust was an issue; and faculty members needed to be assured that all institutions were on equal footing.

The field experience workgroup divided up tasks such as studying research about evaluation of student teachers and reviewing practices used by other institutions. Face-to-face meetings (Osborne 2006) were an essential component of this process, allowing group members to get to know one another and build trust. Consensus was also a key element of developing the functionality of the workgroups. Voting was not viewed as a productive means for conducting the workgroups because the work needed to be done by all and to benefit all, or it was not identified as something the partnership should take on. Additionally, to address any possible feelings of ownership and institutional loyalty, elements of each institution’s existing system were brought forward into the new student teaching evaluation.

Each institution invited seven educators to participate in the construction of the student teaching evaluation tool for a total of 21 K-12 educators. After the new tool was drafted, it was vetted by faculty members from each institution. After approval was secured from each institution, 36 cooperating teachers who were hosting student teachers from Valley Partnership institutions piloted the new instrument. The process of building, piloting, and validating this new, unified evaluation tool exemplifies work completed to achieve a common goal (Bringle and Hatcher 2002; Eddy 2010).
The Cross-Institutional Assessment Workgroup

Another stipulation of the granting agency was to create common metrics. Thus far, the assessment workgroup has collaborated on the common student teaching evaluation described above and a survey tool used to determine student teacher perceptions about the new co-teaching initiative. Additionally, reports have been generated combining program data from all three institutions to study partnership initiatives in aggregate as well as disaggregated by institution. These reports enable the institutions to look for strengths and weaknesses across the partnership, allowing the institutions to learn from one another and collaborate to address areas needing improvement.

Several elements from the literature are evident in the cross-institutional assessment workgroup. The institutions were able to collaborate because of the presence of common goals (Bringle and Hatcher 2002; Eddy 2010) including the preparation of highly effective teachers. Shared resources and the benefit of being able to do more together than alone (Amey et al. 2007; Eddy 2010; Scherer 2009) were also strong elements of this process. As pointed out in the literature, trust among the institutions was not immediate (Child and Faulkner 1998; Osborne 2006), and relationships needed to be built over time. Sharing data across institutions is risky and can create feelings of vulnerability. To reduce these feelings, it was decided by the assessment workgroup that the institutions would not be ranked or presented in direct comparison to one another. The focus of the assessment work is on program improvement and effectiveness of project initiatives and not on the promotion of one program over another as is typically the case among institutions of higher education.

Lessons Learned and Conclusion

As stated by Amey et al. (2007), sustaining Valley Partnership requires a clearly defined governance model and policies and procedures that all three institutions support and maintain; each institution has an equal presence in the workings of the partnership to promote feelings of trust and fairness. The cross-institutional workgroup structure employed by this partnership includes regular meetings to encourage collaboration, which provide time to preserve relationships and the trust that has been established (Butcher et al. 2011). Additionally, the Core Team provides leadership, oversight, and a group of champions for the partnership with affiliation at each of the institutions to maintain enthusiasm and buy-in for the work across each institution.

We have learned several lessons through the process of building the partnership. First, it takes time to build trust. There were false starts and frustrations as people learned how to work together. Intertwined with this lesson are the ideas that team members need to be carefully chosen because personal agendas or institutionally competitive interests that are not beneficial to all partners can push partnership work off track and create conflict on the team. Along with the premise that trust takes time is the importance of face-to-face meetings. Despite the fact that one of the institutions was an hour’s drive away from the others, efforts were made to have regular, face-to-face meetings. Conference calls and teleconferences do not substitute for direct personal contact when building relationships. While the members of this partnership expected collaboration to take additional time, the amount of time was actually more than expected. Meetings and carrying out the work became like a second job for many of the members. Release from teaching and other responsibilities and summer support are essential. Without reallocating time, faculty members quickly became
overwhelmed and burned out. Finally, if the partnership is going to be sustainable, it needs to be mutually beneficial. The partnership needs to benefit faculty members, but they also need to see that it benefits their students. The end result needs to offer the partners more than they could gain on their own.

The formation and sustenance of Valley Partnership has allowed each of the member institutions to do more together than could be accomplished alone, and this was identified in the literature as an essential component of a partnership (Child and Faulkner 1998; Heffernan and Poole 2005). Through the partnership, the institutions have collaborated around the common goal of preparing effective teachers, sharing talent and resources from each of the institutions. The explicit benefits drive ongoing success of the partnership such as learning from one another and the collegiality that has emerged. A significant benefit that has emerged from the partnership thus far is the development of common, shared assessments. These assessments allow the institutions to gain insight from host teachers about the preparation of future teachers and to learn more about teacher preparation from common threads identified by students, graduates, and supervisors. Another significant outcome of this work is the collaboration arising from the establishment of the partnership. From the governance model to the workgroups, the processes of collaboration are becoming embedded in the daily workings of each institution.

The work of Valley Partnership can provide a model for other institutions as they build cross-institutional partnerships. As stated by Eddy (2010), “It is important to understand more about partnerships to discern the reasons for their frequent failures and to highlight the structures and processes that promote success and sustainability” (p. 2). The funding will eventually run out on this project; therefore, the project partners have made conscientious efforts to secure other funding sources. For example, the recruiting workgroup is working with their campus alumni foundations to find ways to sustain grant-funded scholarships that are being used to attract academically gifted students into teacher education; and work is being done with K-12 schools to leverage professional development and state funding for support of new teachers. This induction support is initially being supported by grant funding. Finally, program leaders are working with upper university administration to secure additional faculty members to carry out assessment, recruiting, and induction work, which have all been enhanced or developed because of this project. The atypical length of this grant, 10 years, provides time for the partners to deeply institutionalize the changes and to secure replacement funding from other sources. The faculty members who are part of Valley Partnership acknowledge the benefits arising from this project for students and faculty, making it likely that there will be motivation to continue the partnership after external funding ends in 2020.

References


