

Unintended outcomes of university-community partnerships: Building organizational capacity with PACE International partners

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Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) at Macquarie University provides experiential opportunities for students and staff to contribute to more just, inclusive and sustainable societies by engaging in activities with partner organizations. PACE International offers a range of opportunities with partners overseas. Underpinning PACE is a commitment to mutually beneficial learning and engagement. To align with this commitment, PACE-related research engages partner perspectives and those of students and academics. The dearth of scholarly research on partner perspectives of community engagement (Bingle, Clayton & Price, 2009) underscores this imperative. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with partner representatives this article examines some of the apparently unexpected benefits of engagement with PACE that community partners report have contributed to their improved organizational capacity. We conclude by speculating that what can be perceived by universities as unexpected and unplanned by-products of student engagement, may actually be intended and strategically planned outcomes of community partners. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, Special Issue, 2015, 16(3), 163-173*)

Keywords: Capacity building, community partners, mutually beneficial learning, international service-learning

The dearth of research examining the objectives, motivations, and impacts of service-learning on community partners (Baker-Boosamra, Guevara & Balfour, 2006; Birdshall, 2005; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Bringle, Clayton and Price, 2009; Kiely & Hartman, 2011; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tonkin, 2011) and the “after-lives” of tangible products produced through such engagements (Oldfield, 2008) is well documented. In seeking to address this gap, this article presents empirical data about international partner perspectives of campus-community partnerships, focusing on partner motivations and outcomes which transcend project outputs and direct student engagement.

In the literature on service-learning, including international service-learning (ISL), there is invariably an assumption of mutual benefit and ethical engagement yet there is a lack of a clear definition of what that entails. Critics remain concerned that potential outcomes of engagement with community organizations are not necessarily prioritized and remain wary that the institutional strategies and ideologies supporting this movement may have little to do with the priorities and desires of community partners as defined by them (Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead, 2006). For example, Oldfield (2008, p. 270), states that much “[community-based] research proceeds with the assumption that projects can be mutually beneficial, but without an empirical or conceptual analysis of how this mutuality is constituted” (see also Butin, 2003; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Hammersley (2013, p. 177) points to the “lack of research to support claims that programs result in mutually beneficial learning and engagement” and attributes this “to the under-representation of community partner perspectives within academic research”.

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Similarly, Baker (2012) demonstrates that while the literature on partnerships acknowledges the need for ethical engagement with community partners, it does so by “focusing on ethical interactions between institutions and their partner organizations” from the institutions’ perspectives, rather than directly examining partners’ perspectives (see also Weston, Brooks, Gladman, Senior, & Denley, 2009; Flicker, Travers, Guta, McDonald, & Meagher 2007), and does so largely in a theoretical or anecdotal way. Moreover, scant attention has been given to international community partner perspectives (notable exceptions being Baker-Boosamra, et al., 2006; Camacho, 2004; Crabtree, 2013; Porter & Monard, 2001). This under representation has been variously attributed to a lack of clarity around the definition of “community” (Sandy & Holland, 2006); issues of methodology (Cruz & Giles, 2000); lack of institutional and financial support; and practical and logistical constraints that may prevent academics from being able to engage community partners in prolonged collaborative research, especially in international contexts (Crabtree, 2013; d’Arlach, Sánchez & Feuer, 2009). Dostilio et al. (2012, p. 17-18) call for a “deliberate examination” of the meanings behind the concept of reciprocity, arguing that “unexamined or unintentionally differing conceptualizations of reciprocity can lead to confusion in practice and can hinder research”. Their conceptual review offers three orientations to reciprocity that can inform scholars and practitioners in their efforts to clearly identify, organize, and articulate various forms of reciprocity within their own research and practice.

Where there is a focus on partnerships in the extant literature, as in Jacoby and Associates (2003), it is either largely theoretical, examining the principles of effective collaboration, or descriptive or anecdotal, focusing on program design and logistics (for example, Jones, 2003). Nascent empirical research primarily examines the impacts of international service-learning (ISL) programs from either a faculty or student perspective (Bringle, Hatcher & Jones, 2011; Crabtree, 2013). An exception is Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, (2003) who aim to “bring community perspectives into clearer focus” via empirical research on the “perspectives, experiences and voices of experienced community partners” (p. 2). Oldfield’s (2008, p. 270) research is also partner focused, identifying the need to pay attention to the complicated socio-political terrain between university and community and between the partner organizations and local identities and interests.

In sum, there is a need for deeper engagement with partner perspectives in university-community partnerships, utilizing an approach which acknowledges: the motivations behind partner organizations’ involvement; the impact of the benefits; and the complexity of the relationship which may change over time and place. With the intention of adopting such an approach, this article presents evidence from the ‘PACE International: Partner Perspectives Project’ which draws on the perspectives of international partners of Macquarie University’s Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) program. Following a discussion of the vision and values which underpin the PACE initiative and the Partner Perspectives research project we outline the two-way paradigm of knowledge exchange and co-creation which guides the methods of this project. We then explore ‘expected’ and ‘unexpected’ benefits of the relationship with our partners focusing specifically on three key themes identified by partners: improved organizational management systems; predictability of revenue stream and participant quality enabling long-term planning; and organizational recognition and advocacy.

CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

PACE is a university-wide initiative designed to provide undergraduate students with a distinctive educational experience involving community-based experiential learning opportunities with a range of local, regional and international partners. Through PACE, students work on jointly conceived projects that both meet the partner's organizational goals and enable students to develop key graduate capabilities and learn through the process of engagement (see Rawlings-Sanaei & Sachs, 2014).

Partnerships based on reciprocity are one of the key values underpinning PACE. Reflecting on the need for partnerships to be ongoing and sustainable, principal architect of PACE and former Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost at Macquarie University, Professor Judyth Sachs, comments:

First and foremost it requires the development of a strong relationship between the partner organization and the University, usually among key stakeholders. The building of trust and recognition of the value to both parties then follows. Clearly this takes time, effort and effective communication from both sides. Importantly it also demands that expectations of what is possible be made explicitly up front. The external organizations and students need to be aligned especially since students' time constraints and assessment requirements are integral to the success of the partnership. There is no room for ambiguity and as these are formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding, clear contractual arrangements are set in place. (2013, p. 20)

A broader goal of PACE is to contribute to Macquarie University's aspiration to be a leading university of service and engagement (Macquarie University 2014b). PACE International, an integral part of the PACE Initiative, is jointly managed by Macquarie University and Australian Volunteers International (AVI). Consistent with the sustainability objectives of both institutions, projects are mutually beneficial to both partners and students and respond to community needs. PACE International in-country projects are currently operational with community-based partners in Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, India and Peru (see Table 1). As a marker of differentiation PACE International projects are often multidisciplinary (where feasible) allowing projects to draw upon a diversified skill-base. On-campus projects connecting students remotely with partners in Lebanon, India and the Philippines have also been conducted. Over 500 students have participated in the PACE International program since its inception in 2009.

An overall strategic intention of Macquarie University is to expand PACE as a signature transformative learning program that distinguishes the University (Macquarie University 2014a; 2014c). This involves a commitment to "mutually beneficial learning and activities and relationships" (Macquarie University, 2014c). Within this context, the PACE Research and Evaluation Strategy 2014-2016 (Macquarie University, 2014b) provides a strategic framework for PACE-related research and evaluation. Developed collaboratively in consultation with the Macquarie University community, the PACE Research and Evaluation Strategy sets out the parameters of PACE-related Research and Evaluation and seeks to enable the University to gauge the extent to which the program

TABLE 1: PACE international partners

Country and Organization	Description
Cambodia	
Arbitration Council Foundation (ACF)	An independent, national institution with quasi-judicial authority derived from the Labour Law of Cambodia. The Arbitration Council is empowered to assist parties in resolving collective labor disputes in Cambodia.
Asian International Justice Initiative (AIJI)	Focuses on projects and partnerships related to international justice, judicial reform, the rule of law, and human rights in ASEAN and other Asia-Pacific countries. In Cambodia, AIJI deliver a Khmer Rouge Tribunal Trial Monitoring and Community Outreach Program.
Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC)	A coalition of 21 NGO members working for the promotion and the respect of human rights, democracy and rule of law in Cambodia.
Deaf Development Program (DDP)	Works to remove the barriers preventing deaf people in Cambodia from achieving equality by providing Cambodian Sign Language research and development, education and job training courses, community development activities, interpreting services and social services.
Legal Aid Cambodia (LAC)	A Khmer-run non-governmental organization which provides Cambodia's poor with a quality legal service free of charge.
NGO Forum of Cambodia (NGOF)	Works to improve life for poor and vulnerable people in Cambodia. It is a membership organization that builds NGO cooperation and capacity, supporting NGO networks and other civil society organizations to engage in policy dialogue, debate and advocacy.
Persons with a Disability Foundation (PWDF)	Seeks to ensure the rights of persons with disabilities to gain access to rehabilitation services and participate fully in society.
India	
Pravah	Works directly with youth initiatives to impact social justice issues.
Restless Development	A youth-led development agency placing young people at the forefront of charitable development in India.
Malaysia	
PACOS Trust	Dedicated to supporting indigenous communities in Sabah, Borneo. Works to empower indigenous communities by building a self-supporting network that helps them assert rights over community resources and revitalize indigenous systems.
Peru	
Peru's Challenge	Dedicated to developing sustainable schools and communities in impoverished mountain villages surrounding Cusco, Peru.
Philippines	
Bahay Tuluyan	Aims to prevent and respond to abuse and exploitation of children in the Philippines.
Vietnam	
KOTO ("Know One, Teach One")	A social enterprise with training centers in hospitality for at-risk street youth.

is achieving its stated goals. The PACE Research and Evaluation Strategy (Macquarie University, 2014b, p.10) is undergirded by a number of principles which uphold the importance of equity and fair conduct including:

1. The centrality of the co-production of knowledge involving students, partners, the university and the community
2. The need to ensure that research is conducted in accordance with ethical protocols
3. The need for democratic practices of research and evaluation
4. The benefits of collaborative agreement on strategic priorities for areas of focus for research and evaluation
5. The desirability of planning, coordinating and consolidating research and evaluation activities among stakeholders to maximize impact and minimize survey fatigue.

Clearly, to be true to its commitment to mutually beneficial outcomes, PACE-related research and evaluation must by definition engage partner perspectives as well as those of students and university staff. The dearth of scholarly research on partner perspectives of community engagement discussed above strengthens this imperative. It is in this context that the 'PACE International: Partner Perspectives Project' has been established. The PACE International: Partner Perspectives Project has twofold aims:

1. to assess the extent to which the PACE International Program is currently meeting the needs of PACE International partners; and
2. to recommend ways in which the Program might be improved to better assist PACE International partners to achieve their community-based and organizational objectives.

The PACE International Partner Perspectives Project is informed by 'knowledge-flow theory' (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008, p. 77) which posits a two-way paradigm of knowledge exchange in which knowledge is viewed as developmental resulting in new learning; where learning occurs within the context in which knowledge is applied and is embedded in a group of learners (the community and the university); and in which community and university are equal partners. This project also seeks to co-create new knowledge related to curricular and pedagogical approaches to student learning in the context of community engagement. In summary, the project seeks to exemplify the characteristics of an 'engaged campus' (Furco, 2010, p. 375) namely 'authenticity' and 'genuineness' insofar as it seeks to raise capacity and effectiveness of both the university and community partners; and upholds the values and norms that "honour the expertise, experience and talents that each partner brings to the collaboration" (Furco, 2010, p. 387). The project has Macquarie University Ethics Committee approval (Ref: 5201300051).

METHODS

A partner organization workshop for PACE International Partners, hosted by Australian Volunteers International in Bangkok (22-24 April 2013), provided the research setting for the first stage of data collection. The workshop provided an opportunity for partners to learn from each other in relation to engaging with PACE and exchange information around their work as civil society actors more broadly. The research team, members of which have been involved in the design and ongoing development of the PACE program since its inception, conducted interviews and focus groups with nine international partners at

this workshop and during partner visits to the university campus during 2013 and 2014. Data in the focus groups was collected using participatory methods and focused on using partner insights and feedback to improve program effectiveness with the ultimate goal of leading to improved outcomes for the communities in which it operates. The guiding principles informing this research are molded methodologically around an ethics of reciprocity. Qualitative data analysis was undertaken using NVIVO 10 which assisted in the identification and analysis of key themes as discussed below.

BENEFITS TO PARTNERS

Table 2 and Table 3 summarize the benefits of engagement that flow to partners as reported by PACE International community-based partners. These benefits are categorized as either 'expected' or 'unexpected', as viewed from the research team's perspective. Expected benefits (Table 2) are defined as those that were intentional outcomes of PACE program design and either previously reported in the literature and/or by Australian partners of the program. Reported benefits that did not satisfy both these conditions are categorized in Table 3 as 'unexpected'.

TABLE 2: Expected benefits for partners in the PACE program

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality outputs of the student projects • Partner needs foregrounded in project design • Well supported and prepared participants enable them to make contributions more quickly • Building relationships • Cultural exchange • Establishing social networks and having fun together (e.g. playing sports, street theatre, dancing and sharing meals) • Knowledge exchange • Personal development • Building institutional relationships • Motivational boost • Peer to peer exchange between students and partner's youthful workforce and their clients • Students' skills, knowledge and attributes

TABLE 3: Unexpected benefits for partners in the PACE program

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved organizational management systems* • Predictable revenue stream * • Predictable timing, numbers and quality of participants enables longer term planning* • Building confidence of community and staff in interacting with foreigners * • Network of advocates/international awareness raising* • Validation of community, organizational and local knowledge * • Positive outcomes for students • Intercultural competence through contact with International students

* These unexpected partner benefits are discussed in the text.

The following section will explore unexpected partner benefits highlighted in Table 3 under three themes. These particular benefits were identified for more detailed

discussion because the majority of partners noted the importance of these benefits to their organization.

Theme 1: Improved Organizational Management Systems

'Organizational management systems' are the policies and procedures associated with financial, risk and volunteer management introduced or enhanced at the partner organization as a direct result of engaging with the PACE International program. Each of these elements is encountered by partner organizations at a project level, but their impact extends well beyond that of individual projects. For example, one partner reported that the experience gained by working with PACE:

... flows through too, so a lot of the systems and things that we've put in place to manage this program [PACE] now flow out across the other volunteers that we work with. It improves the way we manage them and the risks that we're able to mitigate as a result. (PACE Partner S, personal communication, April 2013).

Another partner specifically requested a briefing about the volunteer recruitment cycle used by Macquarie University and AVI to recruit students to the PACE International program so as to make use of the principles and procedures involved to recruit staff and other volunteers to the organization.

Theme 2: Predictability of Revenue Stream and Participant Quality Enabling Long-Term Planning

Another set of benefits identified by partners of the PACE International program relates to the stability, predictability and assurance of quality that the long-term nature of the partnership provides them. There are a number of dimensions to this, particularly the value partners place on having a reliable supply of quality volunteers, as the following quote attests:

... we do get a lot of applications [from] people that want to come and volunteer with us but they're ad hoc - some are good, some are bad. It's difficult to manage The benefit of [the PACE International] program is that we get [a] reliable, predictable, stream of volunteers that are screened and processed for us ... It's much easier to incorporate that into our organizational planning and to make it translate into real benefits. (PACE Partner focus group K, personal communication, April 2013).

In a similar vein, another partner commented:

Our high quality students [is] because there is a screening process in between which works very well.... The acclimatization happens very quickly, fast. They're ready. They are very focused in deliverables and I mean much better than any of the international volunteers we see. (PACE Partner N, personal communication, April 2013.)

A related benefit mentioned by many partners was the certainty provided by the predictable revenue stream that the PACE International program provides. These human and financial dimensions of program predictability enabled partners to plan for the longer term, giving them the capability and confidence to make commitments to the communities in which they worked. As one partner commented:

... with this ... participation program plan, it gave us a three year direction. That helped us because we can plan and know where we're trying to head with our type of organization. The work we do in the country that we do it, it's very hard to stick to that plan without a lot of movement. We've got a three year commitment from the organization, from the PACE Program, let's now plan out what we're doing for this community. It gave us the absolute confidence to then say to the community, we are here. We are not letting you down. We're getting this work done and we're going to go to this timeframe. (PACE Partner P, personal communication, April 2013)

Theme 3: Organizational recognition and advocacy

The final set of benefits relate to the increased reputation of partners (both at home and abroad), and a greater sense of organizational confidence in communicating their objectives and achievements to diverse audiences. Greater international exposure of partners, for example, occurs as a growing network of student advocates return home and share their experiences with family and friends through social and conventional media networks. As one partner noted, "it's the positive PR that comes from it. They spread it, they talk about it, and that really helps us." (PACE Partner focus group K, personal communication, April 2013). Another attested: "... there are more people now who are aware of what's happening with children in the Philippines, and that gives us more ... influence or more possibility to react when something really bad happens". (PACE Partner M, personal communication, April 2013). They further added that:

Increased international exposure can also increase the organization's potential influence in-country. For example, partnering with an international university has enhanced the organizational credibility of some PACE partners with other agencies: "It sometimes goes a long way in the Philippines, and [you] say this is [a] partnership with Macquarie University, and all of a sudden you get taken a bit more notice of" (PACE Partner M, personal communication, April 2013).

Another one of our partners commented:

The PACE students have worked with our monitoring, evaluation and research team and very recently we have also involved them in our organizational communications, where they have developed youth friendly communication materials. They have helped us create a lot of online material, which we can use to reach out to young people who are tech savvy. (cited in Noonan, 2013, p.18)

In addition to greater external recognition, an Indigenous rights-based organization expressed the benefits of student engagement as increasing the self-confidence of its staff to communicate organizational initiatives to the communities in which they work to government, international institutions, and non-government organizations locally and internationally:

... they [staff] mention that they are not afraid of interacting with people...it's a big asset because if you want to negotiate, if you want to say something, present an idea to any[body], for instance if you are fighting for your land rights...you need to have that confidence. (PACE Partner S, personal communication, April 2013)

Engaging with "outsiders" in particular was perceived by partners as enhancing lobbying efforts and raising the profile of their cause. Another partner talked about the PACE relationship as empowering them to stand by their original values:

What it's also done is the recognition that we have because you are putting your name behind our organization. It's given us the power and the confidence to now go out to other organizations to find other partners and say, this is how it is. Because when we first started we were just trying to get whatever we could, so the integrity of what we were trying to offer didn't exist. It was like, okay you want to come and volunteer for five days, come. You want to do this program, even if it doesn't fit in, yes, let's do it. We were creating things for the volunteers rather than the other way round and that's what we did at the beginning to get the volunteers and now we don't do that at all. It's about - this is our program, this is what we offer, this is where you fit in, you either come or you don't come...It's really good because we are respected now. You are respecting us as the reason why this program operates and that's what we love. No one's trying to change our program, no one's trying to tell us how to do it and we have the absolute confidence if something has to change in the program. (PACE Partner P, personal communication, April 2013)

CONCLUSION

As documented in this article international community partners report a range of apparently unexpected benefits of student engagement. These include the following three themes: 1) improved organizational management systems; 2) predictability of revenue stream and participant quality enabling long-term planning; and 3) organizational recognition and advocacy. While the research team has defined these benefits as 'unexpected', it may be that this nomenclature mirrors the perceptions of university researchers rather than those of community partners, as what is perceived by universities as unexpected and unplanned by-products of student engagement may actually be intended and strategically-planned outcomes for community partners. Anecdotal evidence from ongoing dialogue with PACE partners and preliminary research data collected around partner motivations for engagement suggests that this is indeed the case. Further investigation is required, however, as it could be that partners' actual experience of the program is driving their *post hoc* attribution of motivations for engaging with it. Irrespective of this, the proposition points to the need for ongoing dialogue with community partners as their motivations for involvement may shift over time, for example in response to evolving organizational objectives. The research team is also aware that it is not possible to distil from the diverse partner experiences a common attribution: the findings reported here are context dependent and may not be generalizable to all international community partners, nor their participation in all forms of student engagement, at all times. This further highlights the importance of obtaining partner perspectives on desired (and actual) outcomes in the initial design and ongoing review and development of ISL programs as their effectiveness may to a certain extent derive from the university's ability to respond to the motivations of community partners. We thus argue that universities need to develop a deeper understanding of the organizational objectives of community partners and their broader motivations for developing institutional relationships in order to ensure the nurturing and facilitation of such highly-valued outcomes.

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