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Exploring University-Community Relations: The Case of Brandon University's Community Outreach Service

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Abstract

The role of universities in community activities is changing with university researchers increasingly engaged with community residents to collaboratively conduct research, provide services and provide community-based learning opportunities. This shift is largely a result of the university's expanding and flexible roles in contemporary society, but it is also driven by funding bodies who now advocate collaborate approaches to community development, particularly in research. This paper will examine the changing role of the university on what's being called the Research Activity Continuum, which spans from university driven activity to community-university partnerships to community driven activity. The Brandon University Community Outreach Service will be used as an illustration of a vehicle for facilitating community-university research activity. The service will be discussed in terms of its goals, approach and delivery. Lessons learned and recommendations for others interested in such a service will also be provided.

Introduction

Canadian Universities are changing. Aside from increased university commercialization (Grant, 2002) and a greater pressure to seek funding partnerships from the private sector (Drakich, Grant and Stewart, 2002), today's trends indicate the need for more active, direct community-university partnerships. While American literature has been focusing on the changing role of the university in the 21st century with reference to community-university partnerships (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; Gronski and Pigg, 2000), a Canadian body of literature on the same subject is less prevalent. This paper addresses the need for more examples of Canadian community-university collaboration literature and puts forth the Brandon University Community Outreach Service as a facilitator of such collaboration. The service, which has existed for over four years, is based on the principles of service-learning, community service and the collaborative process and aims to connect Brandon University to Manitoba in a way that is mutually beneficial for students, faculty and community residents.

This paper is divided into three main sections. Section one introduces the community outreach philosophy and the theoretical background to community-university collaboration with reference to American examples of service, community-based and experiential learning, as well as community outreach and extension services. The Canadian context is then provided as a segue to Brandon University's Community Outreach Service. Section two highlights the mission and mandate of the BU Community Outreach Service and the BU Outreach process. With the use of a Community-University Engagement Continuum model, this paper explores the ways in which partnerships are formed between Brandon University and the community through the Community Outreach Service. Concluding commentary in section three includes a discussion on best practices for collaboration, obstacles and future directions of the BU Community Outreach experience.

The Community Outreach Philosophy

In contrast to the past, when positivistic, often distanced approaches to the community prevailed, current trends in academic literature point toward the engaged university and a conscious effort to encourage student, faculty and community involvement in collaborative research efforts. Along with the acceptance of new research approaches, pressure from the decline of the Welfare State, economic restructuring and the impacts of economic change on communities, such as the loss of services has prompted a need for more university involvement at the local level.

Simultaneous to the decline of the public sector in community life, has been an increased emphasis on bottom-up, local action for community change, something often referred to as capacity in popular academic and political literature (Frank and Smith, 1999; Reimer, 2002). Given the recognition that a top-down philosophy has not worked to the benefit of peripheral areas (Savoie, 2000) and more locally-based action is needed (Luloff, 1990), it is not surprising that governments are driving the initiative for increased university engagement (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002), or in this case, outreach in the community.

For the purposes of this paper, outreach is defined as the engagement of an academic institution with a community(s) in a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship. The outreach philosophy is based on the tenets associated with service-learning, community service, building community-university relationships and a collaborative research process outlined above. In essence, outreach aligns the research, teaching and community service interests of faculty and students with community needs. These are the general ideas associated with Outreach as a vehicle for research endeavours, however an elaboration of the philosophical underpinnings of such an approach are needed before exploring Brandon University's Community Outreach Service in detail.

Service learning has received increased attention in recent years because of its commitment to linking the need for hands-on student learning experience to real situations. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) directors describe this instructional method as one that combines community service with academic instruction (Robinson, 1995). Essentially, students engage in the community to apply and learn concepts from their courses (Valerisu and Hamilton, 2001), as well as challenge some of the assumptions they have about social problems or community issues (Eyler, 2002:522).

Service learning also promotes civic engagement and community participation among students (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; Valerisu and Hamilton, 2001). Drawing upon the work of Robert Putnam and his contention that civic America is declining, Hodge et al. (2001) write that:

Institutions of higher education must accept the challenge to promote civic engagement and communal involvement through learning opportunities for students and with faculty members who are actively engaged and involved in civic life (2001: 676).

They go on to argue that community colleges are the prime arenas for encouraging and undertaking such activity, a sentiment shared by Gronski and Pigg (2000).

While service learning is largely a student-focused approach, it also engages faculty and decentralizes knowledge from the university to the community (Valerisu and Hamilton, 2001). It also increases the partnership between the university and the community, which, as mentioned in the introduction, is becoming increasingly important among funders and policy-makers alike. According to Ward and Wendell (2000), this partnership must be reciprocal, rather than favour one group over the other. Service learning, community collaboration and community-based learning can be achieved through a real commitment to the community and the belief that communities play a fundamental role in the process (Ward and Wendell, 2000).

One of the few recent Canadian publications on community-university relationships classifies service learning as one of many approaches to community-based research (CBR) (Savan and Sider, 2003). Included as well is participatory action research, action research, the Netherlands based science shop concept and collaborative inquiry. In setting up the context for the Sustainable Toronto Project, a project designed to establish community-university collaboration in achieving greater community sustainability across a variety of sectors including: governments, researchers, educators, businesses, non-profits, and other community members. The Sustainable Toronto project employs a combination of action research and service learning to achieve this goal.

Community-University collaboration in practice

According to the above literature, community outreach and collaboration philosophies have appeared to be strong in the American college and university system, something that Weinburg (1999) indicates has largely emerged in the past 15 years. While there are numerous examples in the literature, this paper will highlight a few necessary to establishing the context for the current discussion.

Describing the Missouri University Interprofessional Initiative, Gronski and Pigg (2000) explain that with an abundance of professional programs at the university, a formalized vehicle for collaborative learning was necessary. Findings from a survey examining the degree of experiential learning already in place at the university indicate that one of the main obstacles to collaborative learning was the lack of coordination across departments and a general lack of communication between the university and the community (Gronski and Pigg, 2000). Proposing a new model for collaboration, Gronski and Pigg argue that a commitment to collaborative learning must occur within the institution and while both administrators and faculty may have good intentions to make this possible, “institutionally embedded difficulties” may make it difficult (2000:788). Despite this, they argue that academic institutions must rise to the task. They write:

As part of its larger civic role, the university needs to accept the responsibility for ingraining a dual capacity within its graduates (a) to

provide a competent technical service to others and (b) to involve themselves in constructive collaborative activities (Gronski and Pigg, 2000: 789)

While Gronski and Pigg's (2000) example is largely university driven in perspective, Ward and Wendell (2000) make the argument for more community-centered efforts. Using the example of special-focus colleges and universities (SFCUs), they contend that these institutions are more suited to serve their community than predominantly "white" institutions because of an embedded philosophy of community service and learning. They suggest that for institutions without this focus, campuses need to work with communities to: connect through their common experiences (i.e. matching the university and community's needs); blur boundaries and beware of power dynamics between the university and the community. Also, they argue for community feedback on service learning and more recognition of true community partnerships (Ward and Wendell, 2000).

Partnerships between the university and the community are needed. Forrant and Silka (1999) draw on examples from the University of Massachusetts Lowell and their federally-funded Community Outreach Partnership program (COPC) to illustrate the need for outreach activity in urban neighbourhoods. One of COPC's goals was to provide "near-term" rather than long-term resolution of community concerns (Forrant and Silka, 1999: 817). They cite three actions undertaken to increase the partnership between the university and community: A proposal solicitation through a Community Request for Partnership, the development of city leadership training courses offered through a university-city partnership, and a community breakfast series. In this case, faculty, community leaders and staff come together for presentations of mutual interest.

Whatever the example, it is clear that universities can play an active role in initiating and encouraging activities with the community. Referring to the community visioning process of community development, Weinburg (2000) argues that universities can play an important role in assisting communities to undergo visioning and development activities. In fact, he argues that universities are in a better position than state agents, nonprofit organizations and private consultants to work with communities because of student and faculty resources, as well as relevant expertise. Weinburg writes that:

By reaching out to the broader community, we can play an important role in community development...Our faculty contain repositories of expertise, and our students have enthusiasm and time. If we are to engage in community outreach, however, we need to do so in a systematic way (Weinburg, 2000: 811).

Several themes emerge from these examples. First, community-university collaboration is possible and occurs in a number of different ways. Second, there appears to be a need for a legitimate institutional vehicle to achieve this goal, however, this may not always be easy from an institutional perspective.

Collaboration: The Canadian Context

In Canada, practice and discussion around university-community collaboration is gaining momentum. One of the clearest indications of these trends can be seen in the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) emphasis on increased research partnerships across disciplines, universities and between the university and the community. In fact, SSHRC launched a new funding program in 1999, the Community University Research Alliance (CURA), to address the need for greater partnerships among universities, communities and the private sector, and to recognize that challenges faced by communities are best dealt with at the local level and by researchers working in these communities (SSHRC, 2003).

Since 1999, 37 CURA projects have been funded across the country, based on the premise of community-university partnerships. Each CURA addresses a specific need for increased community-university collaboration in the areas of research activities, policy-making processes and research dissemination activities. One example of a CURA funded initiative is the Sustainable Toronto Project cited previously (www.sustainabletoronto.ca). Through CURAs, research partners and community organizations can design and develop their own research projects. Currently, Sustainable Toronto has 10 projects operating under its mandate.

Similarly, the CURA funded Community-University Institute for Social Research based out of the University of Saskatchewan (www.usask.ca/cuisr/index.html) connects community based organizations to the community through research. As of 2003, 63 community-based research projects were funded through CUISR's program. As part of the project's mandate, a conference entitled CUExpo: Community-University Research: Partnerships, Policy and Progress also hosted 350 researchers, community members and policy makers in May 2003 to discuss issues, obstacles and learning experiences from community-university collaborations. The conference also aimed to explore new ways of gathering and disseminating research in a community-university context, and included a specific focus on community-based research (Waygood, 2003).

The CURA funding is one method to encourage and support collaborative research efforts in Canada, however, other vehicles for collaborative work have already been operating on similar CURA premises. For example, the U-Links Centre for Community-Based Research in Haliburton County, Ontario, and the Trent Centre for Community Based Education (TCCBE), based out of Trent University work to connect students, faculty and community organizations in community-based research efforts. In the case of TCCBE, projects are solicited annually from community organizations based on their needs and then entered into a web database for student viewing. Through an experiential learning approach, students are encouraged to work with faculty on Community Research Placement courses in their respective disciplines on an available community project of interest and relevance. In this way, they are simultaneously completing course requirements and responding to community requests. For more information, see www.trentu.ca/tccbe/index.htm.

University-based extension services act as a vehicle of community-university collaboration. At the University of Saskatchewan, the Extension Division provides distance, adult and continuing education opportunities and community-university collaborative research opportunities. The Division's mission to address individual, organization and community learning needs is carried out through course offerings, seminars, workshops, conferences as well as through information dissemination through the University Extension Press. The Extension Division can be found online at <http://www.extension.usask.ca/ExtensionDivision/about/index.html>.

In a slightly different manner, the University of Guelph's School of Rural Extension Studies also works to address community-based research needs. Originally opened as the Department of Extension Education in 1959, it addressed agricultural issues through research and information dissemination. Through its mission of providing education opportunities, research and community outreach, the School of Rural Extension Studies is engaged in a number of collaborative projects with students, faculty and the community of mutual interest and benefit. For more information on the School of Rural Extension Studies, see www.uoguelph.ca/~res/index.html.

Brandon University Community Outreach Service: History, Mission and Mandate

The Brandon University Community Outreach Service, the topic of current discussion, is another Canadian example of a community-university collaboration vehicle (<http://outreach.brandonu.ca>). In 1997, David Douglas, a visiting professor from the University of Guelph's School of Rural Planning and Development prepared a report on Rural Development at Brandon University. One of the recommendations contained in the report was the establishment of a community outreach service.

Brandon University has a special responsibility to its community: the city of Brandon and rural Manitoba. Originally developed as a liberal arts college in 1899, Brandon University supported studies in theology, high school education, business and later music, and addressed the need for the establishment of a western Manitoba educational institution. At the onset, the Baptist Church provided financial support for the college, but later when this funding ceased, residents of western Manitoba worked to generate funds to keep the college open. Clearly, the community and the university have been connected, and while the size of the university (over 3000 full and part-time students) could be considered as a hindrance to intensive community engagement, Brandon University continues to serve communities in southwestern and increasingly northern Manitoba through its six academic faculties and a multitude of departments and disciplines.

Of particular importance is Brandon University's commitment to rural Manitoba. The establishment of the Rural Development Institute (www.brandonu.ca/organizations/RDI/) in 1989 as a centre for multi-disciplinary academic and applied rural research as well as the Academic Department of Rural Development (www.brandonu.ca/Academic/RuralDevelopment/) in 1999 marks an institutional commitment to university-community relations. In April 1998, Brandon University and the Rural Development Institute further solidified this commitment and made it university-wide by launching the Brandon University Community Outreach Service at

Rural Forum '98, an annual conference that brings academics, policy-makers, and community residents together to discuss their common concerns and showcase their achievements.

BU's Community Outreach Service mandate is to assist in matching the needs of community organizations with the learning and research interests of university students and faculty. The role of the Outreach Service is to coordinate and facilitate the initiation of projects. The Outreach Service does not itself design, manage or undertake specific projects. Faculty and/or students undertake projects in partnership with community organizations.

The goals of the Brandon University Community Outreach Service are:

To coordinate and encourage Brandon University outreach activity by:

- ◆ providing a vehicle for faculty to garner connections for research interests;
- ◆ offering positive learning opportunities for students in an applied environment; and
- ◆ Identifying a clear path of access to Brandon University resources to communities in need of assistance.

To serve as a formalized vehicle for Brandon University's service mission by:

- ◆ raising the profile of Brandon University, its departments, and its faculty in the community;
- ◆ demonstrating Brandon University's commitment to the community it serves;
- ◆ encouraging a greater collaboration and mutual knowledge transfer between the university and community-based organizations; and
- ◆ Facilitating exchanges so that communities can more easily access university resources/knowledge when addressing their social, economic and cultural challenges.

The BU Community Outreach Process: Flexibility on the Community-University Engagement Continuum

The Outreach Service is available to students, faculty and communities and it equally recognizes the role of each of these groups as part of the Outreach Triad. Since January 1999, the Outreach Service has responded to over 100 requests from faculty, students and the community; and assisted in facilitating over fifty projects, initiated by various faculty and community members. Projects normally occur on a volunteer basis, through coursework or available faculty time, however, the Service does have small amounts of funding for an Annual and Open Call for Research Projects.

Administratively, the Community Outreach Service is housed in and facilitated through Brandon University's Rural Development Institute, and while it does serve the entire

university, it is closely affiliated with faculty and students in the Department of Rural Development. An Advisory Committee, composed of representatives from the university's faculties, school and administration oversees the Service, provides suggestions on requests, and adjudicates research proposals submitted in both the Open and Annual Call for Proposals. An Outreach Coordinator works with community organizations, faculty and students on behalf of the Advisory Committee. The core responsibilities of the coordinator are to: respond to requests, promote the service and engage in communication with triad members.

The Outreach process is based primarily on an initial request from one source of the outreach triad (students, faculty or a community resident/organization). Requests from communities include: Literature searches, questionnaire development; data analysis; faculty presentations and facilitations; strategic planning assistance; student assistance for community-based projects. Faculty requests are wide-ranging and can include: seeking community group/organization partners for project development; and engaging students interested in gaining practical experience through community based work and research. As an integral aspect of the outreach triad, student interest in outreach activities remains strong. Students contact the outreach desk to: seek employment and volunteer opportunities in relevant disciplinary fields; to request information about the university and its programs; to engage in research projects; and to obtain assistance with course related concerns (See vignettes 1 and 2 for sample Community Outreach projects)

Vignette 1: The Development of a Public Service Video on Dating Violence

Project Partners: YWCA Westman Women's Shelter, Professor Renée Robinson, students Candice Waddell, Keri Sansom, and Robin Walter, School of Health Studies, Brandon University

Approached by students and faculty in the psychiatric nursing program at Brandon University. Three psychiatric nursing students, with assistance from Professor Renée Robinson, collaborated with Brandon YWCA and Assiniboine Community College to develop a public service video on dating violence. Through its Open Call for Proposals, Community Outreach granted \$575 in funding to be used for video production materials, video development, editing and acting honoraria.

In the video, Martina McBride's "Concrete Angel" forms the backdrop for statistics on domestic violence and the story of Cory Dawn Lepp, a local victim of dating violence. The primary message is that victims of violence should speak up. Contact information for the Manitoba violence crisis line is provided. The video will be broadcasted locally to raise awareness of the extent and potential consequences of dating violence. The students developed the video as part of the requirements for Psychiatric Nursing in Communities, a course offered in the School of Health Studies. The course requires that students work with a community organization to assess, plan, implement or evaluate a community health program.

Vignette 2: Community Outreach assists with Volunteer Recruitment

In December 2002, Arlene Wachs, coordinator of the Brandon Literacy Council (BLC), contacted the Community Outreach Service for assistance with volunteer recruitment. While BLC recruits volunteers in other ways as well, its relationship with the outreach service over the past several years has proven successful.

As a non-profit community-based organization, BLC has only three paid staff and with the number of people requiring literacy assistance on the rise, volunteers are a very integral and important element of BLC program delivery. BLC was looking specifically for classroom volunteers to assist learners. There is a diverse client base in the program that includes individuals with learning disabilities, ESL learners and youth at risk. BLC also likes to target education students as volunteers because they have some background. This also offers education students the opportunity for practical work experience with learners who did not necessarily fare very well in a traditional classroom.

Offering both undergraduate and graduate programs in education, Brandon University was a prime venue for seeking volunteers. The Outreach Service assisted BLC with volunteer recruitment by placing posters around BU, making contact with specific faculties such as Education and posting an article on the Outreach Web site to highlight BLC's volunteer need (outreach.brandonu.ca/Outreach/Literacy.html). The collaboration was successful. As a result of Outreach's efforts, BLC recruited new volunteers and maintains a connection to Brandon University.

These are only some examples of requests that may come to the Outreach desk. The Outreach Coordinator is responsible for determining the nature of the request and responding to it accordingly. Requests usually falls under three main categories: projects, services or other. Below is a brief synopsis of the Community Outreach request-response process (Figure 1)

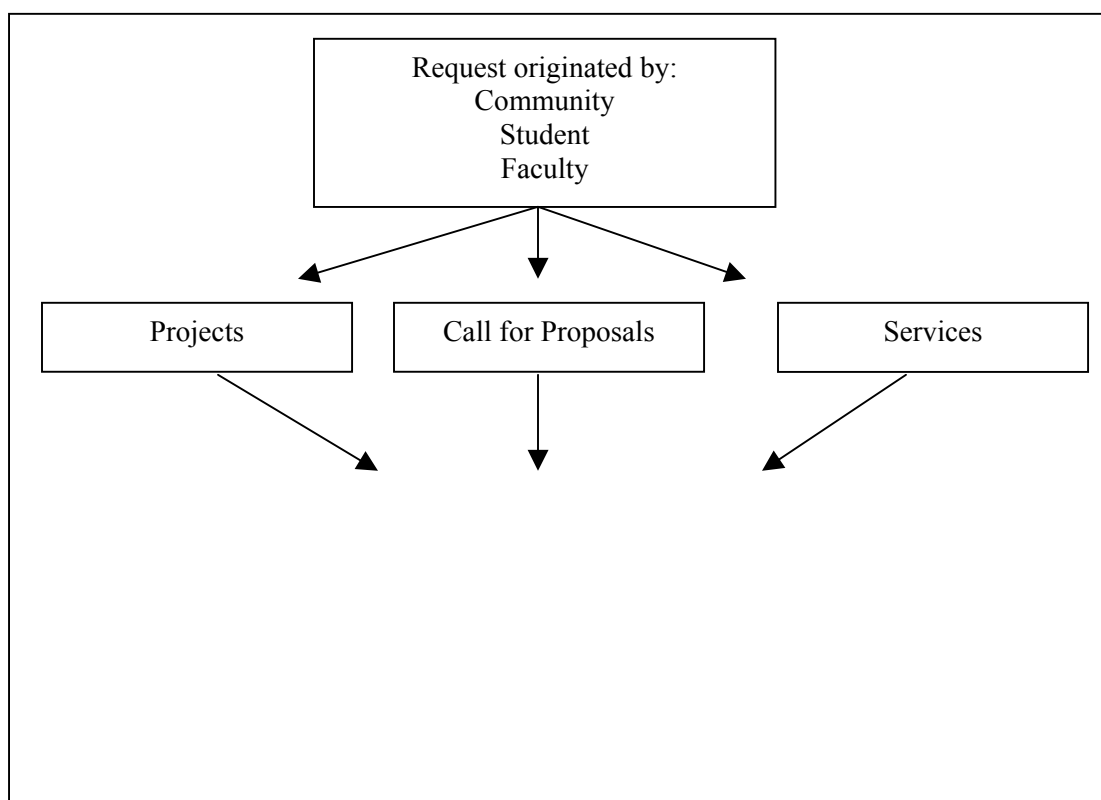
If a project request arises, the requester is required to complete a project request form. Upon receipt of the completed form, the coordinator identifies members of the triad who could potentially participate in the project and then forwards the request form to that person(s). If a match is made, the coordinator is responsible for arranging the completion of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the parties involved. The coordinator should also identify if the project requires ethics approval. Once the project is completed, the coordinator is responsible for writing a promotional project synopsis in conjunction with the requester. The coordinator also conducts a follow-up by contacting the requester and faculty for project information, as well as distributes thank-you letters to involved faculty, copied to respective faculty Dean(s), in recognition of faculty involvement in the Outreach process. If the project remains unmatched, the coordinator directs the community organization on to another group, funding agency, academic, etc. external to the university who may be of assistance.

The Outreach Service also provides services and facilitates services for certain requests. Students, faculty and/or community organizations may be seeking university services or direct assistance from the coordinator. For example, a student may request assistance with resume writing. In this case, the coordinator can provide assistance, if it is within his/her expertise area, or direct the student on to Student Services or other Faculty. A community organization may also be looking for a faculty member to help with a workshop, questionnaire development or data analysis. In this case, the request is not

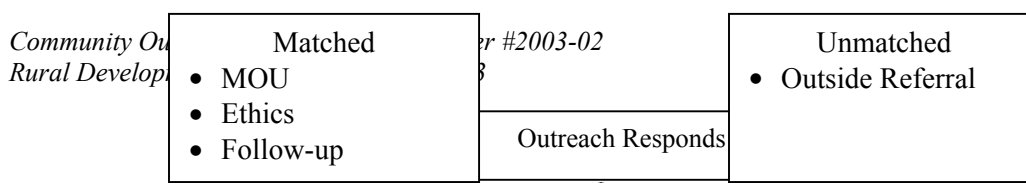
actually for project completion but for a specific service. The coordinator must try to match this request. Again, the coordinator must arrange for MOU completion, if warranted.

As with any service, especially one that has a toll-free number, a number of requests may not fall under these categories. These types of request can include anything from students seeking information about the university, course assistance, or faculty seeking help with any number of activities. In these cases, it is at the coordinator's discretion to respond accordingly.

Figure 1: BU Community Outreach Request-Response Process



The strength of the BU Community Outreach Service is its flexibility. Research facilitation is one aspect of the Service, however requests can be wide ranging and are not just research focused as in the case of CURA projects, or even TCCBE and Guelph's Rural Extension Service cited above. BU Community Outreach is a progressive, formalized vehicle to facilitate community-university relations operating on what we term the Community-University Engagement Continuum (Figure 2). The continuum recognizes that collaboration can be university driven, community driven or operate somewhere in between. The BU Community Outreach Service operates along the

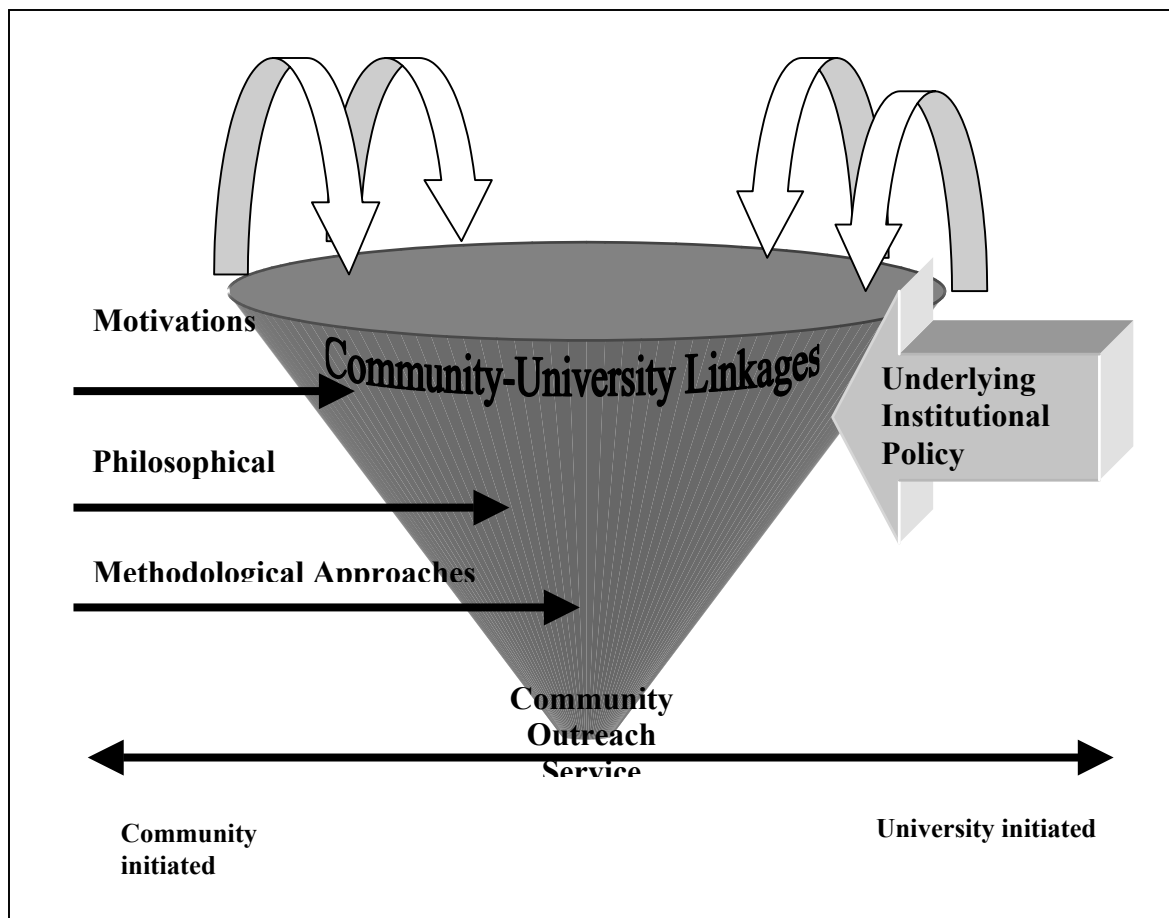


continuum, facilitating a request-response process to connect the university and the community. It works because it recognizes that a continuum of activity does exist and that requests can originate from any one of the triad members; they can be wide-ranging, simple or complex. Rather than applying a rigid model, BU Outreach is flexible, interdisciplinary and operates on a case-by-case basis.

The BU Community Outreach Service is its campus-wide, interdisciplinary and one-stop contact point for collaborative activity, something deemed important in the literature (Brisbin and Hunter, 2003; Gronski and Pigg, 2000). Organizers of the service also realize that to achieve its mandate and mission, it must recognize that triad motivations are wide-ranging and operating simultaneously to contribute to service functioning. At Brandon University, these motivations include, but are not limited to: faculty drive for personal research on and in the community, enhancement of publication records or engagement in research identified by community residents as meaningful and necessary; student motivations to gain relevant work experience for future careers or to contribute time and effort to aid community organizations; and community motivations to aid personal or collective agendas, aid students and faculties or establish stronger connections with the university.

Using Batson, Ahmad and Tsang's (2002) four motivations for community involvement: these can be classified as egoism, altruism, collectivism and principalism. Essentially, egoism increases one's own welfare; altruism increases the welfare of individual(s); collectivism increases group welfare and principalism upholds moral principles, which can also be egoistic in certain circumstances. However, whether the motivation for engaging in community-university collaboration is egotistical, altruistic, collectivist or based on moral principals, the lessons learned from the Brandon University is that an Outreach Service cannot operate based only on one motivation. They must all feed into the service to ensure its successful operation, and there should be an institutional recognition that the service is based on a fundamental commitment to greater community-university communication that is mutually beneficial for all involved parties.

Figure 2: The Community-University Engagement Continuum



Lessons Learned and Review of the Landscape

At a time when the role of the university is changing in society, the above discussion indicates a wide range of vehicles, approaches and methodologies to achieve greater community-university collaboration. As a Canadian example of one such vehicle and a facilitator of the community-university engagement continuum, the Brandon University Community Outreach Service permits the recognition and inclusion of all forms of collaboration.

While the Brandon University Community Outreach Service prides itself on flexibility and openness, it has faced and continues to encounter several obstacles worth citing:

1. The need for an operations guidelines document. The presence of a student coordinator often leads to frequent employment turnover since students' employment and academic circumstances often change. A lack of service operation guidelines, day-to-day activities and a clear delineation of coordinator responsibilities can mean ambiguity and frustration around the service and its

functioning.

2. The need for a communications/public relations strategy. To properly facilitate community-university collaboration on the engagement continuum, BU's Community Outreach Service relies heavily on internal institutional communication with faculty and students, as well as external communication with the communities it serves. Without a clearly written strategy, important communication, media and public engagement opportunities necessary for service awareness can be missed.
3. The need for a declaration by senior university administrators and senate of an embedded outreach philosophy and commitment to the BU Community Outreach Service. Brisbin and Hunter (2003) in a long list of recommendations on how to promote stronger university in the engagement, cite the importance of administrative presence in planning, policymaking and community involvement. In fact, the prescribed role of the institution and its administration is cited across the community-university collaborative literature (Forrant and Silka, 1999; Ward and Wendel, 2000). University senior administrators have a vested interest in community outreach activity, particularly if they want to promote their respective campuses as proponents of community-university collaboration.

Brandon University Community Outreach Service has addressed two of these three obstacles. This year, an Operations Guidelines document was developed in conjunction with the Outreach Advisory Committee. Likewise, a communications strategy document was development highlighting important actions for effective external and internal communications. The last barrier has yet to be acted upon, however it is argued here that the development of an university policy articulated by senior administration and senate can assist in addressing other obstacles that have arisen as a result of it, both in the Brandon University Community Outreach Service experience and others found in the literature, including: the recognition of faculty involvement in outreach as part of tenure and promotions activity, faculty endorsement of outreach in class by promoting service-learning and student involvement in community-based research projects, student support for community-based research, collaboration and civic engagement, as well as community support for such a service. Furthermore, a clear articulation of institutional support for Community Outreach can lead to a stronger argument for more institutional, provincial and federal funding opportunities for such activity. This is not to say that all the responsibility for successful community outreach activity rests on an institution's senior administration. However, the quality of the service and its ability to fulfill its mandate will be strengthened with articulated senior administration support and implemented institutional policy.

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