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A look into Brown's Contacts with Community Partners

To fulfill the research requirements of the Laidlaw Scholars research this summer, I completed research with the Brown University Swearer Center for Public Service. I worked on a project titled *Campus Contacts with Community Partners* that looked into other engagement offices at Brown to collect and analyze data about priorities collected from community partners in Providence and Rhode Island. This project was created and led by Dean Mary Jo Callan, Vice President for Community Engagement and Stark Family Executive Director of the Swearer Center, and graduate student Aaron Castillo. I was very fortunate to work with both Dean Callan and Aaron Castillo who were very supportive and available to answer questions all through my research. My work was a component of a larger initiative to develop an overview and recommendations for Brown's future in public service, which would be given to the university president and potentially members of the local community. Over the course of five weeks, I conducted six interviews with various engagement offices at Brown. My takeaway from my research is that Brown should continue to implement programs and initiatives to foster community and deepen trust with Providence and its local communities.

Interview Methods and Questions

I was new to the interview process, and I was so grateful for Aaron Castillo's help and guidance to prepare me. I used an interview script as a guideline and a set of pre-identified

questions that I asked each interviewee to gain an understanding of their work and engagements with local partners. To this end, I asked questions about the projects they have or hope to work with in the community. I also asked questions about the organizations and partners they have engaged with as well as the partners and relationships they aim to cultivate more. In addition, I also inquired about challenges and takeaways in their work.

Two of the five interviews were conducted in person on campus and the rest were virtually via zoom. The interview goals were to understand more about community-engaged work, appreciate and identify that they (departments at Brown) are doing community-engaged work, learn about their interest in the project and what led to it, learn about the needs of communities (urgent, non-urgent needs), collect data and learn of methods that were used to connect/engage with partner organizations in the past.

I knew I would need to give my undivided attention and listen carefully to ask to follow up questions and typing while listening would distract me, therefore I decided to record each interview and transcribe it later. During the interview, however, I took handwritten notes of the important points. I used an online website to get the recordings transcribed and later used it to write summaries of the interviews.

The interview script and questions helped me stick to the main goals; however, I went with the flow and adjusted my questions according to the situation. Dean Callan and Aaron introduced me to the interviewees via email and Aaron took charge of further communication and scheduling. Aaron accompanied me to the first interview to provide support, if needed. Each interview was scheduled for a one-hour time slot, and I did not need to schedule a follow up interview as one hour was sufficient to collect critical information.

Findings

I learned that each department is making great efforts to engage with the local community and remain in collaboration with different departments at Brown. There have been inter-departmental collaborations where departments have been working together on different events. For example, I learned that College Day¹ at Brown is held by the Annenberg Institute². However, the Library and School of Public Health take part in planning and overseeing. Each interviewee discussed their work, different projects, and organizations they have partnered with as well as those they plan to partner with in the near future.

For example, I learned that the office of Office of Government & Community Relations creates the Institutional Master Plan (IMP) annually, where the University informs the community about Brown's physical campus and any new infrastructure developments. I believe this is a great way to keep the community informed. Since building trust and substantive reciprocal relationships with the community are key goals, the Office also holds monthly meetings to meet with local members and neighborhood associations to discuss the IMP.

While research has found that that institutions are not really set up to engage with communities in a way that truly shares power, despite their best intentions (White, 2009), I believe it is still possible for Brown to continue to improve its public image and reputation as a hierarchical institute. During my research, the need for breaking the silos and increasing communication stood out to me. It is further supported by the literature that community-engaged scholarship requires high levels of commitment not only by individual students and faculty, but

¹ College Day at Brown is an immersive day-long experience for high school students in Providence and other Rhode Island communities. The programming is designed to introduce and further expose students to the world of higher education by facilitating pathways and creating familiarity and excitement about the pursuit of post-secondary education at Brown, as well as other colleges and universities.

² The Annenberg Institute's mission is to understand the causes and consequences of educational inequality, and to this end, conducts research on education policy, particularly around school reform, and in K-12 school districts, and tries to get it into the hands of policy makers to make changes.

also at the level of institutional systems (Curwood, et al, 2011). I believe if Brown continues its commitment to community-engagement, it will keep things flowing even if it's at a slower pace.

Moreover, White (2009) writes that it is virtually impossible for citizens to realize sustained and systemic success in transforming their communities without some cooperation from institutions. Therefore, I believe it is as crucial for the communities/organizations in Providence as it is for Brown to initiate extending resources and hosting student interns. In short, it is important to recognize organizational and communal needs and seek help.

Research has further shown that when considering a community-university partnership, it is necessary to consider what steps will be taken in case of resistance by staff at the institution as well as the communities (Curwood, et al, 2011). Thus, it is important that Brown engages in self-assessment not only prior to partnership formation, but also throughout the partnership and question its commitment to community-engaged scholarship and the type of resources that are available for partnership formation and for the work of the partnership such as financial, space, and human resources. I also further believe that Brown should continue to consider the question of how it will share power, responsibility, and authority.

Conclusion

I found the interview process to be easy as well as requiring presence, open mindedness and focused listening. In my interviewing approach, I tried to present myself in a friendly manner and tried to make it sound less formal and more of a friendly conversation. I have learned, throughout my life experiences, that trust and communication are essential pillars in holding a relationship. It was thus critical to me that I establish my interview on these two pillars. I would ask follow up questions explicitly to make sure I understood information clearly and ask the interviewee if there were things they did not want me to include in my notes. I believe it helped

establish trust. I later sent my interview summaries to each interviewee to make sure I summarized everything accurately and did not misrepresent any information.

Finally, all throughout this research, I found myself reflecting on my personal values, what leadership means to me and my responsibilities as a student and Laidlaw Scholar. I learned through this process that as a leader it is paramount to me that I am trustworthy, and people feel comfortable around me. I learned that I would make mistakes and it is important that I am honest, learn from my mistakes, and change behaviors/action to not repeat them. I thoroughly enjoyed my research and hope to remain involved as it's an ongoing project.

Works Cited

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