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The Quest for Ubuntu: Water and Health in Limpopo (WHIL) Partnership

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Abstract

Internationally, efforts to improve health in under-resourced areas of the world frequently involve coalitions, often with at least one partner from the “outside,” such as when NGOs or universities from Europe or the US work with institutions and communities in Africa or Asia. Little has been written about applying successful principles to multinational university collaborations as the unit of analysis and where challenges may be magnified by cultural differences and resource imbalances. The purpose of this article is to share the findings from an evaluation of the multi-year interdisciplinary public health Water and Health in Limpopo (WHIL) collaboration between the University of Venda (South Africa) and the University of Virginia (United States). We believe the learnings described easily transfer to collaborative educational endeavors because at their root they speak to the practices that enhance respectful engagement and partnership sustainability.

Key terms

educational partnership; North and South; multi-university collaboration; health; lifelong learning; Ubuntu

Introduction

There are many terms that reflect the need to focus on educational partnerships to advance the capacity and understanding between and among nations. Whether the label is global education, ‘north and south’ or global partnerships, at their core there is a commitment to broaden participation in educational and research endeavors while enhancing the capacity of all involved. The call to embrace educational access and collaborations is being heralded by numerous international organizations to include the United Nations. As an example of the priority placed on learning, in 2012 the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon created the Global Education First Initiative whose aim is to raise the political profile of education. While this initiative has three aims, one in particular is relevant to this study. In a recent

address he noted, “Access to education is critical. But it is not enough. We must make sure that people acquire relevant skills to participate successfully in today’s knowledge-based society.” (Ban, 2013).

The Water and Health in Limpopo Partnership described in this article has sought for nearly a decade to advance knowledge and skill of both University of Virginia and University of Venda faculty, students and staff through matching US financial and technical resources and expertise with the disciplinary-specific and indigenous expertise of South African scholars and students to address a community-defined issue of concern, water quality and availability. While the partnering of a US and an African-based university is not novel, this collaboration has been productive for over a decade despite fluctuations in funding, changes in faculty and students and culturally-based misunderstandings. The question that prompted the program evaluation was, what makes this partnership sustainable? Evaluation of the tenets that have supported continued engagement, as well as areas in need of improvement are shared in an effort to provide lessons for others seeking to engage in similar collaborations supportive of widening educational participation.

Internationally, efforts to improve health in under-resourced areas of the world frequently involve coalitions, often with at least one partner from the “outside,” such as when Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) or universities from Europe or the US work with institutions and communities in Africa or Asia. The professed purpose of some partnerships is to build research, healthcare capacity, and to address urgent health education priorities. As an outgrowth of these initiatives a significant body of literature is being amassed regarding the creation and evaluation of multinational partnerships targeting community health promotion. More specifically, much empirical attention targets university or organizational relationships with communities and the importance of respectful and sustainable partnerships (Baum 2000; Granner and Sharpe 2004; Carlton, Whiting et al. 2009; Mayo, Tsey et al. 2009; McNall, Reed et al. 2009; Northmore and Hart 2011; VanDevanter, Kwon et al. 2011). There are valuable lessons to be learned from assessments of university-community collaborations, there are however fewer sources that evaluate these same tenets using the “north-south” university-to-university partnership as the unit of analysis (Vogel and Seifer 2011). This article pays particular attention to “north-south” university-community initiatives where historically indigenous people have been subjected to what has been labeled, “parachute research” or “annexed sites” (Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries 1998; Edejer 1999; Costello and Zumla 2000; Orori-Adjei and Gyapong 2000; Jentsch and Pilley 2003; Binka 2005; Volmink and Dare 2005; Tomlinson, Swartz et al. 2006; Mayo, Tsey et al. 2009; Wright, Williams et al. 2011).

The multi-year interdisciplinary public health Water and Health in Limpopo (WHIL) collaboration between the University of Venda (South Africa) and the University of Virginia (United States) is the focus of one such assessment. The purpose of this article is to share the evaluation findings and advance the strategies adopted to ensure the health and sustainability of the collaboration. Theoretical underpinnings informing the appraisal of this complex relationship can be found primarily in recommendations from the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and work of Frances Butterfoss (Swiss Commission for Research Partnership

with Developing Countries 1998; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2008; Butterfoss 2009). Restated the philosophical grounding for the work can be summed up in one South African word, Ubuntu. As described by Archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu, “Ubuntu is (being) open and available to others, affirming of others, (it) does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole... (Tutu 2000)” In the spirit of Ubuntu, we are uncomfortable with the use of “north-south” to describe the partnership, but have used the terms because of their prevalence in the cited literature, hence the use of quotation marks.

Tenets of sustainable international public health research partnerships

A frequently referenced foundation for partnership development with emerging nations was advanced by the Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries in 1998. The eleven principles designed to promote respectful and sustainable collaborations are;

1. Decide on the objective together;
2. Build up mutual trust;
3. Share information and develop networks;
4. Share responsibility;
5. Create transparency;
6. Monitor and evaluate the collaboration;
7. Disseminate the results;
8. Apply the results;
9. Share profits equitably;
10. Increase research capacity; and,
11. Build on the achievements (Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries, 1998).

Principles most relevant to this study of WHIL were trust, sharing information, monitoring and evaluation and collaborative goal setting. These four tenets were selected because they aligned with the universities’ definition of partnership. Drawing from numerous sources, a true partnership provides opportunities to combine diverse skills, expertise and resources to promote a commonly held goal, that in the absence of collaboration might not be possible (Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries 1998; Edejer 1999; Costello and Zumla 2000; World Economic Forum 2005). International partnership creation takes on added complexity, which can be managed with careful attention to shared planning, development, decision-making and implementation. Several hallmarks of successful collaboration include, shared vision and decision making, transparency, capacity to negotiate, trust, honoring commitments, and relationship building (Orori-Adjei and Gyapong

2000; Prins 2005; World Economic Forum 2005; Carlton, Whiting et al. 2009; McNall, Reed et al. 2009; Northmore and Hart 2011).

Another piece of the collaborative puzzle is the how. How do organizations create an environment supportive of innovative community health interventions when institutions are so different? As reflected in Figure 1, the process is not static but cyclical and dynamic requiring investments of time and a willingness to adjust as needs arise.

Of critical importance is a respect for individual, community and institutional cultures and the need to bridge differences through respectful engagement and mutually beneficial initiatives. This process begins with a commitment to develop and nurture relationships through dialogue, open mindedness and a willingness to compromise. When these principles are applied, the partnership can move toward crafting a shared vision and goals through innovative approaches drawing from the strengths of different sources of knowledge. The ultimate goals of such partnerships are measurable outcomes, mutual learning and sustainability. Sustainability for purposes of the WHIL project is defined as community-driven initiatives that integrate projects, institutions and people to create local ownership and to respond to a community-identified priority (Shea 2011).

A commitment to an evolved form of collaboration between “north and south” entities is not for the faint of heart. Threats to partnerships lurk in organizational capacity, power distribution, resource allocations, reward structures, divergent motivations, and stark differences in institutional and community-specific culture (Prins, 2005; Carlton, Whiting et al., 2009; White, 2009; Shea, 2011). The development and nurturing of relationships is additionally complicated when partners are separated by distance, language and time.

Edejer (1999) focuses on the inevitable funding inequities that exist between “north” and “south” partners and suggests that success be measured not only by health outcomes or scientific discovery but also by choices of research priorities, local sustainability, and local capacity building. Tomlinson (2006) notes that power differentials can also exist within the “emerging” country’s institution, increasing interaction complexity and the need for many layers of interaction (Tomlinson, Swartz et al., 2006).

In order to have an impact on public health, partnerships must be durable and sustained (Butterfoss, Goodman et al., 1993; Hemphill, Mcgreal et al., 2006). Ideally, each partner in a collaboration contributes important elements and as a result, the target initiative is more effective than the sum of its parts. However, partnerships do not succeed spontaneously; they must be carefully built and nurtured perpetually. The need for mutual trust, respect, and benefit are recurring precursors to success and sustainability (Edejer, 1999; Jentsch and Pilley, 2003; Tomlinson, Swartz et al., 2006; McNall, Reed et al., 2009; Northmore and Hart, 2011; Shea, 2011).

One way to ensure movement toward common goals is to build evaluation into all phases, which allows for mid-course correction and diffusing threats to the partnership. Of particular interest to the WHIL collaborative is the desire to use evaluation data to improve the functioning and productivity of the partnership by engaging implementers of relevant initiatives (students, faculty and administrators at both institutions). As a result, Frances

Butterfoss' extension of the CDC's public health program evaluation framework has six steps informing the University of Venda and the University of Virginia assessment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). The evaluation steps are;

1. Engage the stakeholders;
2. Describe the partnership;
3. Focus the evaluation design;
4. Gather credible evidence;
5. Justify conclusions; and,
6. Ensure use and share lessons learned (Butterfoss, Goodman et al., 1993; Butterfoss and Francisco, 2004).

University of Virginia-University of Venda WHIL partnership

The University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA (UVa) and the University of Venda in Thohoyandou, Limpopo Province, South Africa (Univen) have been involved in a variety of collaborative initiatives since 2001. Activities to date have included research training fellowships for Univen faculty at UVa, joint Univen-UVa student projects in South Africa, study abroad courses in South Africa, January term courses at UVa, and other short term visits and exchanges. In 2008, a group of faculty, staff, and students from several departments and disciplines at both universities embarked on a community-based research project to assess and improve water, sanitation, and health in two rural communities near the University of Venda. The project is called Water and Health in Limpopo (WHIL).

The Limpopo Province, in northeast South Africa, shares borders with Botswana, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. Statistics South Africa (2004) reports that the Limpopo province is one of the country's poorest, with only 28% of the working age population employed, and literacy levels (59%) lower than all other South African provinces. Only 10% of households have piped water inside their dwelling and water-borne diseases are common. In 2009, the incidence of diarrhea in children under 5 years old in Limpopo was second highest in South Africa and nearly 1½ times the national average. A likely contributor to the heavy toll of diarrheal disease is the fact that about 90% of the province's population lives in rural areas with limited access to potable water and sanitation. Furthermore, many community leaders in Limpopo Province identify poor access to water as their number one concern (Lehohla, 2004; Sello, 2009).

The WHIL project envisioned several phases of research and initiatives designed to improve water and sanitation. The two villages selected for the project have a combined population of about 3800 and are located adjacent to each other and are approximately 45 minutes by car from the University of Venda. The two communities were selected both because of their needs and their interest in working with Univen and UVa to achieve improvements in water and sanitation.

While beyond the scope of this evaluation, it is worth noting that efforts are financially supported by diverse funding sources. UVa student groups annually submit project

proposals for competitive grants such as the Jefferson Public Scholars and Center for Global Health fellowships. It is rare for students to remain involved for more than one year. Faculty from both institutions also regularly submit grants with principal investigators and project contributors coming from both Univen and UVa. Faculty, staff and administrators at both institutions tend to have participated in the collaboration for multiple years.

The partnership embraces a multi-disciplinary approach as noted in Figure 2.

Collaboration within and between the universities demands faculty, staff, administrators and students learn to ‘speak each other’s disciplinary languages’ and discover how each contributes to understanding and solving the complicated problems related to water and health.

The WHIL project is also committed to undertaking comprehensive assessments that identify root problems, as well as, feasibility and sustainability issues in order to design interventions that will work in both the short- and the long-term and will respond to community priorities, needs, and resources. Activities and interventions so far include conducting a village census, testing the quality of existing drinking water sources, eliciting community perceptions and concerns through several Photovoice projects and focus groups, designing and beginning to install a community water filtration system, developing computer-based models and developing and implementing a water knowledge curricula for a local primary school and adults.

Methods and Findings

The evaluation took the form of a confidential web-based survey disseminated in March 2010 to UVa and UNIVEN faculty, staff, and student participants. It should be reiterated that while the research and initiatives associated with WHIL are informed by indigenous community input and partnerships, the focus of this assessment was the inter-institutional collaboration. The instrument and delivery method were informed by interviews with parties from both institutions who have participated in the collaboration first-hand (conducted between May-November 2009). Care was taken to ensure confidentiality and convenience for participants given the geographical and time differences between the universities, as well the literature based tenets that are predictive (or detractors) of sustainable global partnerships.

The UVa-Univen survey sought information about: member characteristics (university role, length of time involved in the partnership, perceived significance to education and career); organizational characteristics and climate (level of internal home institution trust and strengths trust, strengths of each institution); and inter-organizational processes (communication, decision-making, clarity of individual roles, perception of goals). Additional questions were loosely grouped into sections on goals and benefits (rating importance of various partnership goals and benefits), coordination (clarity of goals and roles, decision-making), communication (rating satisfaction with communication and potential barriers to communication), and partner characteristics and sustainability (strengths of each partner, level of trust, level of satisfaction, challenges, hope for the future). Most of

the multiple choice questions used a 5-point Likert scale to rate the importance of goals and benefits, and satisfaction with communication and coordination.

A total of 34 respondents from a total population of 53 completed the survey (a 68% response rate).

The four categories articulated in the Swiss Commission (1998) that emerged as the most relevant to this partnership were, trust, sharing of information (communications), collaborative goal setting and in addition, perceived benefits of the collaboration. Questions coded as relevant to trust are noted in Table 2 below.

Moderate and high to very high trust reversed when considering participants' home institution to the partner university (22.9 versus 54.3 and 57.1 versus 28.6 respectively). Comments indicating the level of trust that exist pervade the survey in virtually every comment section, as does the need to improve trust as a partnership goal. For example, one respondent noted, on the best things about the collaboration was the "hugely synergistic collaborations growing from these trusting collaborations across disciplines". Two others wrote, "Mutual respect and trust" were the best characteristic of the partnership and the model of trusting collaborations was possible because of the guiding principal of Ubuntu, "my success is your success".

Trust *within* a participant's university team was rated significantly higher by UVa respondents (78% high or very high) than Univen respondents (33% high or very high). Students more often rated the level of trust *within* their university lower than faculty/staff, and this difference was most striking among Univen respondents where 63% of Univen students rated it low (0% very low) while 10% of Univen faculty/staff rated it very low (and 0% low). Likewise trust *between* UVa and Univen was rated lower by students than faculty/staff: 38% of Univen students and 17% of UVa students rated it low or very low, while no Univen faculty/staff rated trust between the institutions as either low or very low, and 8% of UVa faculty/staff rated it very low.

Building sustainable trust, as noted in Figure 1, was reflected in suggestions that developing trust was an ongoing process. Trust was noted by two respondents as the biggest challenge facing the collaboration with suggestions for more transparency between students and faculty.

Communication

Communication challenges were the most often noted threat to the collaboration across every question. Questions specific to communication and the responses are noted in Table 3.

Communication and coordination were perceived as challenges and represented areas of dissatisfaction for some. Overall, only about half the respondents were satisfied with shared decision-making processes within and between the two university teams and somewhat fewer were satisfied with communication. When these responses are stratified by university, we see that UVa respondents were less satisfied than Univen respondents with both shared decision-making and with communication. Students at both universities tended to be less

satisfied than faculty with decision-making within their own universities: 43% of students were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied vs. 10% of faculty.

Participants provided a list of particular issues causing problems in UVa-Univen communication. “Email access” (internet or computer availability) was cited by 86% of respondents as causing either “some problems” or “big problems”, closely followed by “understanding all parts of the project” and “cultural differences” (both rated by 83% as causing some problems or big problems). Regarding knowledge of the partnership’s budget and allocation of resources, levels of satisfaction were not high, but varied across a position range, reflecting the fact that budgeting issues are handled by a small subset of partnership participants.

Coordination issues were also commonly cited among the problems and challenges of the partnership, as was the need for better dissemination of information. The open-ended questions gave space for participants to express concern with the imbalance of power between the two universities, mistrust, and frustration with being left out of decision-making (particularly on the part of students) or not being acknowledged for one’s contributions.

Students from both universities complained of not having been provided sufficient background on the history and multiple components of the WHIL project and of not being kept informed of developments. Some faculty expressed frustration with disorganization during limited time together “on the ground” or difficulties in coordinating communication and decision-making while planning the various parts of the project. Beyond the partnership itself, several respondents expressed concern with living up to the nature of community-based research and ensuring that community members were both informed of and understood the meaning of research results.

Collaborative Goal Setting

Collaborative goal setting is the third focus of this evaluation. When asked how clear respondents were of the Univen-UVa collaboration goals; 11% were unclear and very unclear, 17% were neither clear nor unclear and 72% were clear and very clear. This provides a context for markers of collaborative goal setting, decision making, acceptance of ideas, and understanding of budgets.

As reflected in Table 4, when combined over ½ of the respondents are satisfied and very satisfied with existing decision making processes, though this is less than the same assessment at home institutions (62%). Key to the decision and goal setting of the partnership is the sense that collaborators’ opinions are valued. Both home institutions and partner institution ratings are very similar (58% versus 53% respectively for satisfied and very satisfied. However, fiscal knowledge relative to projects earns the lowest ratings in this category of questions (33% being satisfied and very satisfied).

Regarding the institutional and personal importance of various partnership goals and benefits, there was fairly broad agreement and support. The highest rated goals were “improving life in the communities we work with” and “conducting good research on important questions,” (94% rated these as very or extremely important), while “developing

new curricula” received relatively less support (57% rated as very or extremely important). There were few differences between the goals seen as important for the partner institutions and the potential benefits seen as important to participants on a personal level. As an example one respondent stated, the goals of the Univen-UVa collaboration is) “to develop trusting friendships and identify shared goals with collaborators across our very different cultures; i.e. a win-win for both individuals and institutions...”

Most participants felt that the goals of the collaboration and their individual roles within it were clear, although responses differed somewhat between participants from the two institutions. More Univen respondents (84%) perceived the goals to be clear or very clear than did UVa respondents (66%). Participating in the collaboration was rated by 79% of respondents to be significantly or very significantly helpful to their education or careers.

When polled about the goals that should be important to both universities the following list of topics were all rated as very or extremely important by all participants:

- Developing multidisciplinary projects
- Improving the life in the South African communities we work
- Empowering community members
- Learning about other cultures
- Conducting good research on important questions
- Providing learning opportunities for students
- Providing opportunities for faculty/staff research
- Providing opportunities for student faculty exchange
- Attracting funding for research
- Publishing collaborative papers
- Developing processes for universities to engage with communities
- Developing processes for distant universities to engage beneficially with each other.

Collaboration Benefits

Given the noted challenges to trust, collaborative goal setting and most notably communications one might assume the benefits of continuing to work together might be in jeopardy. However, responses seem to indicate the contrary. As for satisfaction with the collaboration overall, 63% of respondents were satisfied and all expressed some level of hope for the future of the collaboration with 72% indicating they were very hopeful. Building trusting, sustainable relationships and making a difference in communities were frequently mentioned themes both as goals for the partnership and as the best thing about it. In the words of two participants, “the expansion of our perspectives on human need, shared values, relevant research; with hugely synergistic collaborations” and “learning about each

other's cultures while also learning how to help/improve communities with special needs" were exemplars of the best things about the collaboration.

As stated earlier, benefits were perceived as accruing both on an individual and institutional level. As was the case with articulating institutional goal priorities, those same goals were ranked very or extremely important to every respondent's assessment of the personal benefits of participation. When asked to list the strengths that each university brings to the partnership, survey respondents were relatively consistent in what they listed for each partner, regardless of their own institutional affiliation. Univen and UVa were shown to add different elements to the partnership confirming the sense that the sum of contributions were greater than individual institutional contributions. The University of Venda was seen to contribute, "unparalleled community engagement skills and knowledge; local cultural, geographic, social, etc., knowledge; technical nursing, microbiology, chemistry etc. skills; commitment and enthusiasm" and Univen bring(s) local indigenous knowledge doing community work in these areas. The people at Univen are much closer to the community and can keep in contact with the community at all times". The University of Virginia was seen to bring funding and research methodology to the partnership as well as, "a US style of working on projects. They bring deadlines and efficiency which is good" and "diverse interested individuals with expertise and interests in administration, microbiology, infectious disease, child development, community engagement, water treatment, engineering, modeling and a Center for Global Health (UVa) structure to support student and faculty exchanges".

Conclusions

In broad terms, survey results indicate that participants in the UVa-Univen partnership share enthusiasm for an array of goals but find that communication and coordination mechanisms are not fully satisfactory for the optimal functioning of the partnership. In terms of goals, participants appear to agree in their desire to achieve multiple purposes simultaneously: to build a sustainable relationship in which they share and learn from each other; to engage in projects that empower communities and make a difference in their lives; to provide opportunities for learning and collaboration for students from both institutions; and, to conduct good research on important questions. To achieve these ambitious goals, participants have formed a complex partnership with many stakeholders and layers of collaboration. Each of these strengths are critical to partnership success as previously noted in existing literature (Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries 1998; World Economic Forum 2005; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2008; Carlton, Whiting et al. 2009; Northmore and Hart 2011).

The very nature of the partnership and its activities make it challenging to develop communication and coordination protocols that suit all circumstances. There are many "moving parts" involved when trying to achieve the partnership's goals. Faculty and staff members at each university must cross the traditional borders of departments and schools to interact with team members within their institution and also to co-direct projects with colleagues from another university. Students at each university are eager to contribute, plan their own elements of the project, partner with students at the other university, and stretch their research acumen. At UVa particularly, students tend to participate for part of a year

only and then are replaced by new ones who seek funding to join in the following summer. At Univen there is more continuity from year to year and students may remain involved and serve as liaisons with the community during September to May when there is little or no UVa presence in South Africa. Student participation is guided (even at times constrained) by their institutions, by the faculty mentors, and by the overall need for the partnership to engage collectively and cohesively with the indigenous communities. Plans must constantly be revised according to input from UVa and Univen team members, community responses and needs, local and tribal governance at both universities), as well as logistical circumstances.

Some of the poor or insufficient communication appears inadvertent the result of busy team members with competing responsibilities and a lack of attention paid to the collaboration itself. Particularly in preparing for and engaging in the intense June–July season of activity, it is easy to focus on specific activities, while neglecting the importance of ensuring that all participants and stakeholders are prepared, given opportunities for input, and informed of progress. As an important aside, the funds available for WHIL have not adequately supported the time committed by UVa and Univen faculty and staff who are participating in the collaboration, which places further stress on the amount of time available for ensuring good communication and coordination. Ongoing participation demonstrates a substantive personal commitment to WHIL.

Another significant dimension of communication is its propensity to support or erode trust. Not having comprehensive information about historical projects and current plans can reduce faculty, staff, student and administrator's sense of full participation. Because members of the partnership are seldom all physically in one place, email is the most common form of contact, yet email access was rated as the most problematic among several obstacles to communication. Cultural differences were also cited as causing problems and may compound other communication challenges if misunderstandings ensue. For all these reasons, this partnership must work especially hard at communication. It needs to keep asking "how are we doing?" and to provide the means and space for feedback to be heard.

Survey respondents' lists of the strengths and contributions of each university begin to get at the heart of some of the challenges inherent in so-called "north-south" research partnerships. Simplistically put, Univen is seen to bring expertise and access in community engagement and UVa is seen to bring funding and research methodologies. Although the partners may not have equal roles, it is crucial that the distribution of responsibilities and benefits be perceived as equitable (Jentsch 2003; Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries 1998). For this to happen transparency is required and roles and contributions must be articulated. As described in the literature and echoed in the survey responses, transparency in issues of allocation of resources is particularly critical to a partnership's success and longevity.

The fact that UVa has raised most of the funding for the project has the potential to cause a power differential between the two partners. On the other hand, Univen was consistently cited as the stronger partner in terms of community engagement, and making a difference in communities was one of the goals and aspirations most often mentioned in the open-ended

questions by respondents from both universities. Thus, both partners have strengths that are essential to achieving the goals of the partnership. Furthermore, what emerges from the data is verification that though there is room for improvement in communication, collaborative goal setting and trust, enough goodwill has been established to sustain the willingness of individuals at each institution to remain engaged with one another.

The Quest for Ubuntu

One might wonder how an evaluation of a public health collaboration might inform higher educational initiatives seeking to broaden participation and reduce social exclusion. We believe that the learning described here easily transfer to collaborative educational endeavors because at their root they speak to the practices that enhance respectful engagement and partnership sustainability. Furthermore, it is our experience that commitment to pragmatic respectful practices that create and sustain trust increase the willingness of historically disenfranchised persons to partner with us, thus increasing participation and decreasing social and educational exclusion.

The findings of this evaluation support the tenets espoused in the cited literature as critical to a healthy and sustainable partnership. While perhaps not surprising, the literature lacks specificity on practices supportive of mutual trust and information sharing, which we hope to begin to address in this study. As discussed in the introduction, WHIL's intent has been to use assessments to inform modifications in practice and procedures. Responses highlighted two areas of note that have informed new practices; they were mutual trust (mutual benefits, relationship building, and transparency) and sharing information, goals (individual and institutional) and decisions.

It was anticipated that communication and knowledge about all parts of the WHIL would emerge as challenges. In addition, the survey revealed these issues seemed more poignant at the student level of the collaboration. Specific interventions were designed to address areas in need of improvement. First, workshops were developed for UVa and Univen students to enhance their understanding of all parts of the collaboration and the cultural differences that might impact work plan implementation prior to their working together in Limpopo villages. These sessions include language, dress and other Charlottesville and Limpopo cultural traditions that facilitate realistic expectations between students. This is of significant importance given the accountability U.S. students have associated with their funding sources and Institutional Review Board (IRB) limitations.

Secondly, to address concerns about decision making, a "Logistics" workshop is held when both sets of students are at Univen. UVa students present their "Draft" scope of work proposals and then co-create with their Univen colleagues the work plans to be implemented in the June–August season. Any substantive changes are submitted to the UVa IRB committee who expedite approval of plan adjustments. This strategy was intended to diffuse practices that made some Univen students feel more like "helpers" than peer collaborators. Thirdly, a communications protocol tree was established to ensure a flow of information about projects and analysis, as well as using available technology to connect students and faculty before arrival in country through Skype, conference calling, Facebook, and the

University of Virginia's Collab system that allows for information storage and sharing. Finally, all of the aforementioned workshops, as well as the explicit communication protocol between and among all participants were collaboratively developed by Univen and UVa professors and staff.

The transferable lessons for other educational institutions are the benefits that can accrue to all parties if time is devoted to crafting sessions, practices and materials supportive of decision making transparency, open and regular communication and setting realistic expectations through a well-established explanation of the scope and context of the proposed work. Educational institutions seeking to develop or strengthen relationships with similar enterprises in emerging nations could find as we have that the additional time spend on such endeavors will be well worth the investment.

WHIL has not “arrived” but rather as depicted in Figure 1 considers itself an evolving dynamic initiative. From the stumbles and successes of WHIL the most poignant lesson is found under the surface of the responses, that is, the power of nurtured relationships. The fact that participants of all ranks felt safe enough to judge the partnership speaks to the commitment of all involved to maintain mutual respect, compromise and keeping community well-being at the forefront of all efforts. This has created the space to reflect on *faux pas*, as well as accomplishments and deal immediately and directly with threats to the vision. Furthermore, one could speculate that it is also the consensus on the goals of the partnership that provides glue enabling the partnership to weather deficiencies. It is the trust that WHIL participants (particularly faculty and staff) have built and earned through years of sustained engagement that has and continues to guide the ongoing collaborative efforts. This principle was echoed by a participant who wrote, “This is a model of productive, trusting collaborations with advantages to both sides (individuals and institutions), built upon specific interests of individuals who are deeply committed to making this work, envisioning that your success is my success” ...Ubuntu.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to our dear colleague and friend Jane “Joy” Boissevain whose commitment to this work continues to serve as our compass. Our thanks also extend to the administrators, staff, faculty and students who have devote their time and expertise to WHIL.

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Figure 1.

Toward Sustainable Partnerships

[Adapted from: Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries 1998; World Economic Forum 2005; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2008; Carlton, Whiting et al. 2009; Northmore and Hart 2011]

Figure 2.
WHIL's Multidisciplinary Approach

Table 1

Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	All Survey Recipients	Respondents
Total	53	34 (64%)
UVa	28 (53%)	18 (53%)
UNIVEN *	25 (47%)	16 (47%)
Faculty/Staff	32 (60%)	21 (62%)
Students	21 (40%)	13 (38%)
Male	22 (42%)	15 (44%)
Female	31 (58%)	19 (56%)
Involved since 2009 **	16 (30%)	9 (26%)
Involved since 2008 or earlier **	37 (70%)	24 (71%)

* 4 additional UNIVEN personnel were sent the survey, but emails were returned as undeliverable and were never received. These potential survey recipients are not included in this table.

** One respondent did not answer this question

Table 2

Gauging Trust

Survey Question	Very Low and Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High and Very High (%)
How would you rate the level of Trust between UVa and UNIVEN participants in this collaboration	14.28	57.14	28.58
How would you rate the level of trust among team members within your own university	22.85	22.87	54.28
How often do you feel that team members at the other university listen to your opinions and ideas	0	46.88	53.12
How often do you feel that members within your university listen to your opinions and ideas	3.04	39.39	57.57

Table 3

Communication between and within institutions

Survey Question	Very Dissatisfied and Dissatisfied (%)	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied (%)	Satisfied and Very Satisfied (%)
How satisfied are you with the frequency of communication between UNIVEN and UVa	18	42	39
How satisfied are you with the frequency of communication within your home institution	14	24	62
How satisfied are you with the content of communication between UNIVEN and UVa	24	24	51
How satisfied are you with the content of communication within your home institution	22	28	50
How satisfied are you overall with the communication regarding UNIVEN-UVa project planning and implementation	23	31	46

Table 4

Collaborative Goal Setting

Survey Question	Very Dissatisfied and dissatisfied (%)	Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied (%)	Satisfied and very satisfied (%)
How satisfied are you with the process of shared decision making between UNIVEN and UVA on project activities	26	23	51
How satisfied are you with the process of shared decision making within your home institution on project activities	23	15	62
How often do you feel that team members at the other university listen to your opinions and ideas	0	47	53
How often do you feel that members within your university listen to your opinions and ideas	3	39	58
How satisfied are you with your knowledge of the budget for UVA-UNIVEN projects and how resources are allocated	31	36	33