

## Managing Education and Research Partnerships: Tips from the trenches

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- ACSRC Network Leadership Symposium 2015 (September 22-24, 2015)
  - Networks as Interventions: Policy Tools or Panacea?
  - U of A, Lister Centre, Edmonton, AB
- The symposium objectives are to:
  - Explore how networks can function as interventions
  - Identify the characteristics of highly functioning networks
  - Share recent network development, research and practice innovations
  - Assess the value-add of networks as a policy tool
  - Share the lessons and realities of case studies from different sectors, venues and locations
- On Phone: Focus on How to do it- with comments on how it can affect policy, with examples.

## Outline

- ▶ Tips for managing partnerships
- ▶ How do partnerships affect policy and practice?

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- Focus on 2 topics
  - Tips for managing partnerships
  - How do partnerships affect policy and practice?
  - Point to examples
  - These slides and comments are available to you via <http://billreimer.ca/research>.

## Partnership background

- ▶ New Rural Economy Project
  - 11 years, 15 researchers, 32 rural communities
  - <http://nre.concordia.ca>
- ▶ The Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation
  - 26 years, 26 conferences, 27 workshops, 42 small towns
  - <http://crrf.ca>
- ▶ The Rural Policy Learning Commons
  - 2014 to 2021 (7 years) SSHRC funding
  - 30 institutional partners, 60 individual participants
  - Researchers, policy-makers, community members
  - <http://rplc-capr.ca>



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- New Rural Economy Project
  - 11 years, 15 researchers, 32 rural communities
  - ~ \$5 million
  - <http://nre.concordia.ca>
- The Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation
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- The Rural Policy Learning Commons
  - 2014 to 2021 (7 years) SSHRC funding
  - 30 institutional partners, 60 individual participants
  - Researchers, policy-makers, community members
  - Partnership project, not research
  - \$2.5 million from SSHRC, ~\$2.5 million from others (~\$5 million)
  - <http://rplc-capr.ca>
- All projects with the common objective to improve the conditions for rural and northern people and places.

## Good Practices

- ▶ It's a voluntary organization
- ▶ Create a buddy system
- ▶ Bear the partnership burden
- ▶ Gather intelligence (the Liaison Officer)
- ▶ Balance inclusion and exclusion
- ▶ Recognize institutional demands
- ▶ Use multiple communications
- ▶ Keep dual financial accounts
- ▶ Recognize accomplishments



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- I have a relatively lengthy list of things I have learned over my last 25 or so years.
- Don't have enough time to go through them all in detail, so I will briefly touch on them and invite you to follow up in the Q&A or take a look at the elaborations of them that I have posted on my website.
  - Consider this a 10 minute trailer to the full feature.
- (\*) Organize the project as you would a voluntary organization.
  - [This emerges from the *Things I would not do again* category: I would not organize as a business or government (market or bureaucratic: Reimer, Bill, Lyons, Tara, Ferguson, Nelson, and Polanco, Geraldina, (2008) "[Social capital as social relations: the contribution of normative structures](http://billreimer.ca/files/BillPapers/ReimerEtalSocialCapitalAsSocialRelationsPublicV01.pdf)" *Sociological Review*, 56:2, pp 256-274.)
  - <http://billreimer.ca/files/BillPapers/ReimerEtalSocialCapitalAsSocialRelationsPublicV01.pdf>
  - Instead: Treat the project as a voluntary organization (associative and occasionally communal)]
  - We all have our day jobs – and although research collaboration is often an important aspect of them, there are many competing demands and opportunities we can use to fulfill this mandate.
  - Needs co-optation and seduction as a motivator, not coercion or exploitation (money helps)
- (\*) Create a buddy system
  - There are many other demands on our lives.
  - Plan for this by establishing a lead person and an backup person for each task.
  - Backup is to keep up-to-day with the lead so they can step in when the lead person faces a deadline, a sick child, or an opportunity for a Mexican vacation.
  - I was pleasantly surprised by the other benefits that emerged from this approach
    - The demands on my time dropped (since the Lead and Backup worked out the minor issues themselves rather than come to me)
    - Innovative actions and solutions emerged – things I would not have thought of myself – because of the collaboration.
- (\*) Bear the partnership burden
  - We're all busy; Use any partnership funds available to support the mundane requirements of collaboration.
  - Especially important for tracking accomplishments (e.g. CVs)

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### •(\*)The Liaison Officer

- One of the best actions I fell into: hire one or two Liaison Officers
- They become the primary intelligence-gathering agents of the partnership.
- Regular contacts with each partner (by phone)
- Four questions:
  - What have you done?
  - What are you doing?
  - What are you planning to do?
  - What is most exciting?
  - What is the most challenging?
  - How can we help?
- Pass it on to key staff, look for opportunities, plan for potential crises.

### •(\*)Balance inclusion and exclusion

- Embed the project in an inclusive organization or network as a pool for mutual assessment of new participants.
  - In my case we had CRRF to serve this purpose.
    - Potential partners could be invited to CRRF conferences and we could do the dance that lets us decide whether we wish to continue.

### •(\*)Recognize institutional demands

- We all live within context that create barriers to the accomplishment of our goals.
  - Researchers: careers and teaching demands
  - Policy-makers: Supervisors, accountability, fairness, the occasional election
  - Community partners: Family, talents and skills, social capital availability, safety
- These barriers can often be overcome if we build them into our planning.
- See my elaboration of this point via my website  
(<http://billreimer.ca/workshop/research/files/ReimerCRRFPrinceGeorgeKeynoteSep2014V09.pdf>)

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- (\*)Explore the use of multiple communication venues
  - Internet activities like e-mail, web meetings, websites, and social media need supplementation with face-to-face, telephone, forums to build trust and facilitate communication.
  - Connect frequently, with short meetings – to free time at the face-to-face encounters for big thinking and critical decisions.
- (\*)Keep dual financial records.
  - Lag times on our institutional financial accounts typically are too large and make it difficult to manage the complexities of partner commitments
    - Especially in-kind contributions.
- (\*)Recognize accomplishments
  - People need acknowledgement for their efforts and achievements.
  - Include traditional product counts, but also anecdotes
  - We kept an impacts file to record short, medium, and long term impacts.
  - Celebrate collectively.

## How do partnerships affect policy and practice?

- ▶ Add to momentum
- ▶ Build networks (social capital)
- ▶ Build capacity
- ▶ Inform
- ▶ Build trust
- ▶ Learn



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- How do partnerships affect policy and practice
  - This is a tricky question (if not a trick question) especially when it is asked of a partnership practitioner like me rather than a partnership researcher.
  - I will provide answers to it, but only with the recognition that they may be part of the noble lie:
    - Honorable beliefs that I maintain – in spite of little evidence to support them
    - Honourable because they serve to motivate me to continue to work under the assumption that my efforts affect policy and practice – and do so in a manner that improves it.
  - Here is my current list of processes and examples
- Partnerships add to the momentum for particular policies and practices.
  - It is rare when only one act is responsible for an important change.
  - Most often it is the accumulation of many efforts and related events
  - For example, in 1994 and 1996 CRRF appeared as a witness before federal parliament and senate committees regarding rural issues.
    - It was in the latter presentation that we proposed the establishment of a position at the Cabinet with the responsibility to examine existing and emerging policies and proposals through a “Rural Lens”.
    - The reports from those committees led to the establishment of the Rural Secretariat in 1998.
    - Ours was most likely only a minor contribution to the decision, but it provides a way for advocates to increase the credibility of their position by referring to ours.
- Build networks (social capital)
  - Partnerships also serve to build networks that can be used by policy-maker
  - My example here is the Senate report on rural poverty (Fairbairn, 2006, 2008).
    - When the Senate committee was looking for people and places to connect with for their report, they sent their policy researchers to our doorstep. We provided them with people, places, and advice about why they might be important and how to contact them.
    - Later, when their 2 reports emerged the list of witnesses, consultants, and site visits was filled with the names and places we had suggested.
    - It's impossible to know what it might have looked like if we had not been contacted, but the knowledge and networks we had built over the years basically ensured that our voices would be on the list.
    - Another example of this process can be found in the experience of Solidarité rurale and the development of the rural policy programs in Québec.

*[I like to believe that CRRF's promotion and our appearance as witnesses before the Joint Commons and Senate Standing Committee on Agriculture, Agri-Food and Forestry in 1994 and the House of Commons Standing Committee on Natural Resources in 1996 were important contributions to the establishment of the Rural Secretariat in 1998.*

*• Apedaile, L. Peter, Reimer, Bill, Frances Shaver, Jack Stabler. 1994. Agriculture Group, and Rural Restructuring. Towards a Whole Rural Policy for Canada. Brandon: The Rural Development Institute.*

*• Apedaile, L P, and Bill Reimer. 1996. Towards a Whole Rural Policy for Canada. Edited by The Agriculture Group and Rural Restructuring. Ottawa: The Canadian Rural Restructuring Foundation.]*

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- Build capacity (share skills and capacities)
  - This process can occur in two significant ways: for those within the partnership and for others
  - Within the partnership
    - This is what it can be all about.
      - In the RPLC, for example, a basic principle of our network is to avoid duplicating work that is already being done. Instead, use our resources to find out who is already the expert then support them in ways that will benefit both their agendas and ours.
      - In this way, we are supporting the strength of the established publishing capacity at RDI, the collaboration software of Yaffle, and the Distance Learning experience at Oregon State.
  - With respect to building others' capacity, we have many examples of the way in which CRRF has had significant impacts on the policies and programs of the communities in which we have met.
    - We decided early on to meet in rural places wherever possible.
    - This means partnering with people in those places, bringing them on as key planners and actors.
    - This means that we learn and they learn
      - E.g. Tweed: When the town of Tweed agreed to host our 2004 National Conference they soon realized they were not going to be able to do it on their own. In desperation, they asked for the help of neighbouring communities – some which had been regional rivals for many years. The collaboration was such a success that after the conference, they marketed the region as “Comfort Country” thereby increasing the critical mass to a point where they could collectively be seen a tourist destination.
      - This pattern has been replicated in many of the places we held our conferences: Coaticook, Nelson, and Twillingate, for example.
- Partnerships are an excellent way to inform and mobilize knowledge (others as well as partners)
  - It is a well known principle of knowledge sharing that early and regular engagement of individuals and groups is the best way to ensure the passing of relevant and useful knowledge. People pay attention to those things in which they are directly involved and where their contributions are respected.
    - The Leslie Harris Centre is an institutional example of this feature of partnerships – one where the rural communities and provincial government is engaged in most programs of the Centre.
    - The town of Seguin, ON (one of the partner communities in the NRE Rural Observatory) learned this when they overcame the resistance to tax increases by the seasonal residents. They put those residents on their municipal committees – and the resistance to tax increases disappeared as the seasonal residents learned of the challenges faced by the town and the way that their taxes ensured that the roads were cleared in winter, the garbage was properly treated, and their properties were protected.
    - The town also discovered that these seasonal residents became valuable assets since they were well connected with the provincial policy circles and could leverage additional funds for local projects.

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- Partnerships also affect policy and practice by building trust.
  - Working together provides opportunities to understand the other people around the table, know where their strengths lie, and where their limits are. These are essential ingredients to building trust – and knowing the limits of that trust.
    - Cap-St-Ignace knew how to do this very effectively.
      - About 3 weeks after my family moved to the village on my sabbatical, we were visited by a local couple who introduced themselves as our community-appointed godparents. We spent a lovely hour with them discussing who we were, what the town was like, and what opportunities there were. When they left, our newly appointed godparents invited us to the community supper that was held each month.
      - On the evening of the dinner, they picked us up and took us to the municipal hall, introduced us to the others at our table, and ensured we were comfortably settled.
      - Part-way through the evening, the music stopped, the mayor came to the microphone, and invited us to the front with our godparents.
      - Our godparents introduced us to the village people and passed on many of the things they had learned about us to the people at the dinner. We were presented by the mayor with a certificate of welcome to the community.
      - It was only later that I realized how clever this procedure was for the process of trust-building in the community. By proactively engaging newcomers like us in this way, not only did we willingly inform the community about ourselves, but our confidence and trust of the local people was dramatically increased. It made our many subsequent encounters with the community both easier and more enjoyable, just as it must have lowered the collective anxiety and concerns of the local townspeople.
- As illustrated by this story, partnerships are also excellent ways to learn
  - This is especially important when we consider policies and practice since they both require us to get it right.
  - Since partnerships imply regular and long-term relationships this means that there are plenty of occasions to revise and get the policies and practice right – or closer to “right” than one-time engagements allow.
  - It also means that more time is available for making the previous advantages possible: building trust, transferring knowledge, learning skills, building networks, and increasing momentum.
  - It’s what has got us in CRRF to the position we are currently at and it is what we count on in the RPLC to confidently claim that the primary outcomes of our partnership will be better rural and northern policy and practice.

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### •Comments for Leadership Summit

- Tell us one thing that you know about how interorganizational networks are useful (or not) as policy tools.
- Organizations excel at coordinating the attention and energy of many people to get things done. The objectives may vary, from accumulating profit, beautifying a park, recovering from a tsunami, or even getting to the moon. They are the manifestations of policy. However, their ability to focus resources on specific goals can be disastrous in a world where complexity reigns.
- Partnerships with other organizations force each of them to confront the limitations of their policies and practices. They do this where one partner fills a gap in the other's goals, where negotiations reveal the limits of each partner's competencies, and when partnerships lead to tension and even failure. In the language of social capital – organizations excel in bonding, cohesion, and exclusion but partnerships provide the bridging and linking relationships that foster innovation, accommodation, inclusion, and resiliency.

### •References

- Reimer, Bill, Lyons, Tara, Ferguson, Nelson, and Polanco, Geraldina, (2008) "[Social capital as social relations: the contribution of normative structures](#)" *Sociological Review*, 56:2, pp 256-274. <http://billreimer.ca/files/BillPapers/ReimerEtalSocialCapitalAsSocialRelationsPublicV01.pdf>
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- Reimer, Bill (2014) "[Facilitating Collaboration for New Rural Realities](#)" Keynote presentation at the CRRF Annual Meeting: New Realities, New Relationships, Prince George, BC, September 26. <http://billreimer.ca/research/files/ReimerPrinceGeorgeCRRFKeynoteSept2014V09.pdf>