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Negotiated Issues in an Early College Partnership: Description and Understanding through Interorganizational Theory

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Early college high schools are one solution to the college readiness challenge, but school-university partnerships are complex and difficult to negotiate. This case study took a close look an early college program between a state community college and a suburban high school and asked what were the negotiable items and how could interorganizational theory help clarify the motives and positions of the negotiators in order to better understand the process? Data included transcription and notes from four years of bimonthly planning meetings among institutional leaders along with individual interviews. The results provide a road-map of negotiable "sticking points" for early college high school partnerships and a framework of seven theories to facilitate understanding and successful negotiations.

Keywords: college readiness; community colleges; early college high schools; interorganizational collaboration; secondary education; resources dependency theory; stakeholder theory; learning theory

In recent years, college readiness has emerged as a national priority, taking center stage in the President's blueprint for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) and in the research literature (Conley, 2005; Hoffman, 2009; Kazis, Vargas, & Hoffman, 2004). The boundary between high school and college, which is a complex construction of cognitive, social, psychological, and financial factors, is a challenge to college readiness and a threat to post-secondary access and success.

A traditional approach is to fortify students to leap the hurdle through rigorous coursework and college awareness activities. A newer approach is to lower the hurdle, which happens when institutions work together to create a seamless transition. Early college high schools employ the second strategy through one campus where high school and college faculty work together to introduce college coursework to students as early as ninth grade with ample time and support to ensure success. The idea is that the transition from high school to college will be no more traumatic than earlier transitions from elementary to middle to high school.

However, the obstacles to secondary-postsecondary partnerships are numerous and far more complex than the links between K-12 schools. Substantial differences in mission, organization, budgets, schedules, and stakeholders present many "sticking points;" each must be negotiated in order to create a seamless transition (Brabeck, Walsh, & Latta, 2003; Corrigan, 2000; Hoffman & Vargas, 2005; McCroskey, 2003; Selke, 1996; Walsh et al., 2000; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). For this reason, early college high schools remain small, few in number, and vulnerable. The idea for this paper derived from the author's design-based research engagement with a New England early college program. While examining student outcomes, parental engagement, teacher collaboration and the financial structure (Leonard, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013d), the author was struck continually by the many complex and diverse negotiations required for a successful partnership.

There is a need, among scholars and practitioners, for closer, fine-grained analysis of a successfully negotiated secondary-postsecondary partnership. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, the paper explains how interorganizational theory can offer a way to understand the manifold challenges and appropriate the promise of secondary-postsecondary partnerships. A narrow conceptualization of partnering often leads to assumptions that limit the design and prospects of collaboration. Secondly, the paper lists the negotiable "sticking points" of an early college partnership, as a guide for other partnerships, and explains how these were discovered.

Literature Review and Theoretical Perspective

Early college high schools show promise for college readiness (Berger et al., 2013; Struhl & Vargas, 2012). There are over 300 early college high schools in the United States, many of which were jump-started with funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in the past ten years (Zehr, 2010). Early college programs often target students who are underrepresented on college campuses (minority and low-income), yet they are more likely to graduate, attend and complete college than comparison groups (Berger et al., 2013).

Early college high schools are just one example of school-university partnerships, which come in many shapes and sizes (Ravid & Handler, 2001; Slater & Ravid, 2010). All such interorganizational partnerships face daunting challenges, which can include power imbalances (Corrigan, 2000; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008), differences in mission and goals (Walsh et al., 2000), governance (Walsh et al., 2000), structural barriers in organization and management (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008), cultural differences (Selke, 1996), communication barriers (Walsh et al., 2000), and unmatched resources (Corrigan, 2000) and time (McCroskey, 2003). Early college high schools present additional challenges due to key stakeholders; maturing students exercise greater agency and parents are often active participants, as in this case study.

Despite the challenges, institutions enter into partnerships for various reasons. Barringer and Harrison (2000) reviewed six theories to explain the motivation behind interorganizational partnerships on a continuum from economic to behavioral interests. While the authors were discussing business partnerships, the theories have application in the education world. Siegel (2010) offered a similar list, which focused narrowly on reasons for university partnerships. The combined list of seven addresses efficiency, resource dependence, leverage, learning, legitimacy, stakeholders, and domain focus.

Efficiency

The theories that focus on efficiency, such as transaction costs economics (TCE), have as a primary purpose the reduction of production and transaction costs. One company enters a joint venture with another company because the latter is able to provide a vital resource more efficiently. For example, while charter schools can provide their own meals and transportation independently, they sometimes ally with outside partners to save time and money. The limitation of this theory is that it overlooks other reasons for alliances (see below) and ignores the fact that sometimes institutional cultures and/or people just don't get along.

Resource Dependence

Resource dependency theory predicates the formation of partnerships on the critical need for resources, which are not available internally. No organization is self-sufficient and independent of the environment. In this case, schools cannot provide their own utilities, so they are dependent on outside providers. Similarly, they require partnerships for curriculum and technology. This creates a dependency, which companies try to reduce by gaining control over the resources. So, for example, schools are situated in district partnerships, which can command better prices. Large and small companies often form strategic partnerships to gain access to technology, distribution channels, or even "entrepreneurial energy" or to "bring together a larger brain trust than any one firm could muster" (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 373). With resource acquisition comes power and a competitive advantage in the market. This theory ignores other ways in which an organization might gain vital resources, such as simple purchase. The theory does not explain how partnerships are created and the theory also overlooks non-economic, human factors in partnering, such as friendships and trust.

Leverage

There are other reasons for interorganizational partnerships than just efficiency or resource acquisition. For example, strategic choice theory suggests that institutions may pursue alliances to penetrate new markets, share information, reduce risks or offer a unique service (Barringer & Harrison, 2000). These theories view organizations "as more entrepreneurial and oriented toward gaining some competitive advantage" (Siegel, 2010, p. 39). For example, some schools now offer online courses, giving them access to new students outside their catchment area, leading to larger budgets and greater prestige. This theory encompasses a host of strategic reasons for interorganizational alliances, which can increase market power, political power, internal efficiencies or product/service differentiation (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 375). The breadth of the theory is also its weakness, since the theory fails to differentiate between various motives.

Learning

Many organizations form partnerships to share technical knowledge that is not otherwise available (Barringer & Harrison, 2000). In addition, a primary motive for interorganizational partnering is to "control environmental turbulence" (Borthwick, 2001, p. 28) and reduce uncertainty; hence, the desire to learn. Information

is often considered a strategic resource, but in some cases organizations partner simply to learn. Healthy schools are learning organizations and the pursuit of knowledge comes naturally. Learning is facilitated through partnerships:

> Knowledge creation occurs in the context of a community, one that is fluid and evolving rather than tightly bound or static. The canonical formal organization with its bureaucratic rigidities is a poor vehicle for learning. Sources of innovation do not reside exclusively inside firms; instead they are commonly found in the interstices between firms, universities, research laboratories, suppliers and customers. (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 378, quoting Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996, p. 118)

Learning organizations often position themselves in the center of interorganizational networks, where learning and innovation abound. Thus, schools often join associations.

Learning theory implies that some organizations can learn better than others. This is termed "absorptive capacity" and is defined as an organization's ability "to recognize the value of new, external knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends" (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 379, quoting Cohen & Levinthal, 1990, p. 128). Absorptive capacity depends on "prior preparation, which is linked to such things as the quality of a firm's employees, its knowledge base, the quality of its management information systems, its organizational culture, and the presence of learning incentives" (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 379). Absorptive capacity can change; in effect, an institution can learn how to learn.

The criticism of learning theory, which one might anticipate from its distance from economics on the spectrum described in the beginning of this section, is that it ignores costs. A cost/benefit analysis is almost impossible to perform when embarking on a new learning curve.

Legitimacy

Institutional theory suggests that an organization will reach out and partner in order to gain legitimacy, to raise its public image, or to conform to social norms (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Siegel, 2010). For example, accreditation is a voluntary process, but most schools willingly partner with a qualified accrediting agency and accede to the standards. In a similar vein, many foundations and funding agencies convey preferences for collaboration or democratic behaviors and institutions readily comply. Municipalities expect businesses and educational institutions to contribute to the common good. Often, there are rewards attending when institutions meet social expectations.

Stakeholders

Stakeholder theory views organizations as situated in networks of relationships. As a result and, in contrast to the theories above where the focus is on economies and efficiency, the "organizations are inclined to form coalitions with stakeholders to achieve common objectives" (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 376). In this case, self-interest is subsumed in the collective interest. For example, the school site council is a mechanism to give voice to parental and community stakeholder interests. This theory has been a useful tool to understand the ethical obligations of organizations to various stakeholders. The criticism with stakeholder theory is that it is more descriptive than prescriptive, for it cannot predict what kind of alliance would work best. Furthermore, there has been little empirical testing of this theory; it just makes common and moral sense.

Domain Focus

Domain focus refers to large scale "meta-problems," which are larger than the institution and demand cooperation for resolution. Poverty is a typical example. Some would argue that the achievement gap is a meta-problem, which cannot be solved by the schools alone (Rothstein, 2004). Thus, schools partner with community agencies for health, housing, employment, and social services in a community school arrangement (Berg, Melaville, & Blank, 2007; Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003; Shah & Blank, 2004). The meta-problem becomes a "magnet" that draws partners' together (Siegel, 2010, p. 42).

These seven theories – efficiency, resource dependence, leverage, learning, legitimacy, stakeholders, and domain focus – outline the manifold reasons for interorganizational partnerships. They are not mutually exclusive, but overlapping. Together, they can help describe and predict effective school-university partnerships.

Methods

Case study methodology is useful for "how" and "why" questions, when contextual conditions are relevant to the phenomenon under study and the behavior of the participants cannot be manipulated (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). While generalizability is limited, case studies can offer fine-grained analysis of a phenomenon. The case for this paper was an early college program (described below); the units of analysis were the negotiations, which occurred primarily in bimonthly planning meetings during the design and implementation phase. The study was bound by setting (one early college program) and time (2009 to 2012). The study asked two questions:

a. What were the "sticking points," which required negotiation in the development of secondary-postsecondary early college partnership?
b. How can interorganizational theory clarify

the negotiation work?

This case study sheds light on how interorganizational theory can illuminate the negotiation work. A core proposition is that school-university partnerships are difficult but not impossible, presenting many barriers and challenges, which can be addressed through sound negotiations. The study also describes how the negotiation points were identified, addressed and organized; the final list is offered in the Appendix.

The Case

In early 2008, a few leaders from New England Community College (NECC), a public two-year institution, began meeting with the leaders of Agassiz High School (AHS), a nearby public suburban high school, to think about how to increase college readiness. Over many meetings, this planning team created an early college program that would offer college courses on the high school campus as part of the regular school day to academically average high school students in the tenth grade. The cost of the program was split between the college, high school and the parents (Leonard, 2013b) in a way that was affordable and sustainable.[1] Students earned as many as 34 transferable college credits. Meanwhile, the college began replicating the model in other urban and suburban high schools. The author was invited to join the planning team in early 2009, meeting twice monthly through 2013 (except summers), to provide design-based research services (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012).

Data Sources and Analysis

The information for this case study came from several sources. The bimonthly planning team meetings were attended by various representatives from the college (vice president, dean, director of strategic planning, coordinator, registrar, student advisor, college faculty) and the high school (superintendent, principal, vice principal, guidance counselors, teachers) as well as the author. The meetings were digitally recorded and observational notes were collected. The meetings also offered ample opportunity to ask clarifying questions and explore motives. Ten team members (administrators, guidance counselors and teachers) were individually interviewed at least once with a semi-structured interview protocol and a digital recorder, which allowed for deeper probing in regards to policy decisions. Over four years, close relationships developed, which allowed for countless, informal discussions in the meeting room, classroom, hallways and parking lot. Many of these were not recorded, but notes were reconstructed from memory as soon as possible.

The recordings were transcribed and all records were analyzed using Weft qualitative data analysis software. Initial passes through the many records yielded a deductive list of negotiable items, which were topics that required discussion, where differences arose, and contention was possible. These points were then used for a second review, inductively, this time looking for related thematic material (not using the same terminology) and contextual information. Then, the negotiation points were analyzed using the seven-part theoretical rubric described above. This exercise brought new negotiation points to light, which had been overlooked. These were also added to the list.

Results

The early college partnership was typical of many school partnerships. On the one hand, the partners had a history of collaboration so there was a foundation of familiarity and trust on which to build. For example, the college was already offering dual enrollment courses at the high school to students who could pay the tuition. The partners were comfortable together and could safely explore new ideas about what they would like to see for students. There was no outline to follow for the planning process; the team was not following a standard proposal format. For this reason, the planning proceeded in a somewhat chaotic fashion at times.

Most of this section is devoted to five major decisions, which were negotiated over many hours of discussion. Given the vast number of decisions that were made in designing an early college program, it would be impossible to apply theory to all the negotiation points. These five examples are presented as illustrations of how theory might inform and guide partnership work. Partnering presents many challenges for the adults who must learn to navigate the border between two institutions. Early college programs are particularly difficult because students, as well as adults, are engaged in border-crossing work. For this reason, a theoretical perspective offers a way to better understand and appreciate the needs and motives, which lie behind participant interests. The theory of interest-based bargaining suggests that negotiations are more likely to be successful when participants focus on common interests rather than conflicting positions (Ury & Fisher, 1991). The use of theory to guide negotiations could be particularly helpful in partnerships, such as the one in this case study, where grant funding and a proposal outline for guidance are lacking.

In reality, these theories were *not* employed in the design phase of the early college program for this case study. Instead, many of the meetings in the year before the first students entered the program, seemed almost chaotic, with conversations that jumped, rapid-fire, from

[1] Like all state colleges, NECC received state funds to support dual enrollment when the economy was strong, but the funds were inconsistent and unreliable. Hence, the development of a program that did not rely on state grants.

topic to topic. This reflected the high level of trust in the group, as well as the entrepreneurial nature of the core leaders who were comfortable with high levels of ambiguity and risk (Leonard, 2013c). In the early weeks, the investigator was often lost among the acronyms, abbreviations and colloquial language, but emailed inquiries based on the digital recordings and transcriptions filled in the gaps.

The leaders had already been meeting occasionally for a year when the investigator joined the team in January 2009. Hoping to begin classes in September, the team anticipated a parent recruitment meeting in the spring. Over the next three months, this meeting and the accompanying PowerPoint slide show became the focal point for decision-making. The leaders were desperate to nail down the outline of the program for at least the entering sophomores. The junior and senior years could be planned later. Over the course of many meetings, the principal investigator was continually impressed with the array and complexity of the items that had to be discussed in fashioning a working, sustainable early college program. In the beginning, the meetings raised numerous concerns related to curriculum, cost, student enrollments, student support, selection of instructors, scheduling and other issues. The discussion would move rapidly from one topic to another, often circling back. Many ideas were raised in meeting after meeting and slowly solidified as all the contextual details became clear. While the points for discussion and negotiation were not the primary focus of the research investigations, the sheer number and complexity made them an ever-present counterpoint to the main story.

Looking back over the transcribed minutes of the meetings, one can assemble these negotiation points in logical categories, such as goals, target population, curriculum, costs, staffing and evaluation. (The categorized list of negotiation points is available in the Appendix). However, the categories were not obvious in advance. In fact, they arose in an almost haphazard manner, rapidly, almost tumbling over one another, as the team struggled to finalize the design of the program. A short conversation on target students would turn into a discussion of costs and then veer over into student support, choice of instructors, union concerns or accreditation. Meeting-by-meeting, new layers of understanding were added to each decision area until everyone was satisfied that a final solution was achieved.

The seven theories presented in this paper are not related to the points of negotiation in a one-to-one relationship. In other words, one cannot create a table that lists the negotiation points in one column and the relevant theory in the next. Instead, the seven theories promoted a rich, balanced discussion around each negotiation point. Often one theory predicted the issue and then other theories offered a different perspective and raised new points of discussion.

For all these reasons, the pages below present five main decisions and show how theory informs the discussion. In some instances, quotations are lifted from the meeting notes to demonstrate a participant perspective or to simply indicate the turbulent discussions. In many cases, there was no one quotation that "nailed" the final decision. Some decisions were debated over four years of bimonthly meetings, an estimated 80 meetings of an average 90 minutes for a total of 120 hours of negotiation. This does not include telephone and email communications, which were not available to the author. However, the main issues and perspectives were reflected in the bimonthly planning meetings. The results which are presented below are the compilation of hundreds of communications, rather than a selection of individual quotations. The rest of this section uses the theoretical framework to analyze five main topics of negotiation by way of illustration.

The Decision to Have an Early College Program

The high school guidance director first imagined an early college program for her students after reading an article on the topic for a graduate course. Starting from a *resource dependency* perspective, she wanted to increase opportunities for college knowledge for her students. The high school already had a college partner and a dual enrollment program, so the director contacted a trusted college dean and floated her idea.

The college was motivated by a mix of concerns. To begin, college readiness was a meta-problem; this was a large-scale problem of national significance that was beyond the ability of anyone institution to solve. Thus, a *domain focus* was sufficient to bring the partners together in a new discussion knowing that they could not solve this problem on their own. Secondly, the state was calling on public community colleges to take proactive steps to address college readiness concerns. Thus, an early college program would enhance the *legitimacy* of the college.

Later, the vice president of academics joined the conversation and raised the *efficiency* issue. Far too many college applicants failed the college entrance exam and required remedial coursework, which was enormously expensive. The vice president remarked, "40 to 60% of students placed in developmental courses don't even take them. This is the 'dirty little secret' at NECC." The students dropped out before they even began. A focus on *efficiency* could threaten an early college innovation, since these tend to be expensive and sustainable funding is always a challenge (Webb, 2004). However, the vice president had a larger view, focusing instead on the mounting cost of testing, remedial coursework and student attrition.

Finally, this was a *learning opportunity* for the college. If handled correctly, the college could learn from the process, which might inform other high school partnerships as well as support programs for entering freshmen. Long before the first students were recruited

for the program, the college dean promulgated a request for outside evaluation by a university researcher. In this way, the author of this paper was first engaged.

Learning theory describes the "absorptive capacity" of organizations, which is defined as the ability "to recognize the value of new, external knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends" (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 379, quoting Cohen & Levinthal, 1990, p. 128). Clearly, the initial players in the early college program had high absorptive capacity. The district superintendent soon joined the planning meetings. The superintendent and the college vice president actually protected the other team members from competing distractions (institutional crises, accreditation concerns, competing reform initiatives), thus increasing their absorptive capacity. The next section will demonstrate how absorptive capacity was preserved and guarded early in the innovation.

The Planning and Development Team

The assembly of the planning and development team, which would take the initial idea of an early college program to full implementation, can best be understood from a *leverage* perspective. The initial team of two (guidance counselor and college dean) began to engage more members strategically in a way that would balance the need to gain support while avoiding impediments. They turned to the principal, who would be indispensable for the success of the program because of his position and power. He had an entrepreneurial mind (he and his wife ran a chocolate business in their spare time), so he was inclined to think imaginatively. The dean was an accomplished business entrepreneur, now working in the public sector, and she had a good command of strategic planning. *Resource dependency* theory suggests that organizations may sometimes partner to capitalize on "entrepreneurial energy" (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 373). This was a likely motivation. The dean also called in the college vice president of academics, who was the voice of authority on both financials and curriculum, and also a creative mind. At this point, everyone at the table was entrepreneurially minded, which guaranteed ownership and investment along with a high tolerance for risk and ambiguity.

The next team members were also chosen for their positions. The director of curriculum for the district was an indispensable member, since she oversaw any new curricular project. She was not a risk-taker and a possible impediment, but she brought crucial information on budgets, staffing, scheduling, and student support. They invited the superintendent, who proved to be an early supporter, and they also invited the author of this paper.[2] The request for on-going documentation and evaluation reflected a *learning* perspective, as well as a desire to gain *leverage* through documented outcomes. This team understood well that the only route to sustainable funding was through documented, positive outcomes.

Lastly, the team invited select teachers, in small numbers, to review the plans for the early college program. The goal of *leverage* was always in the background as they called in certain teachers – such as the chair of the English department – and avoided others who were perceived as "negative." At no time was the plan presented to the entire faculty or held up for a vote. In the beginning, teachers were not invited to permanent positions on the planning team.

Leverage interests often intersect with *efficiency* and *stakeholder* interests. As noted above, there were other competing reform initiatives in the high school. For example, the social studies department had been slowly writing a new, two-year American Studies curriculum. However, the early college curriculum called for a college course on U.S. History for the sophomores, which would be different. How could the planning team reconcile the two competing curricula? The Director of Curriculum pointed out, "We need to honor their hard work for two years to pull this American Studies together. We don't want to undo that." And the guidance counselor (a member of the same union) voiced the concerns of the social studies teachers:

> If this is a true professional learning community [between AHS and NECC], then they would like more than just a week in the summer to get all this ready. They want a true community. "We are the players; why can't we have a year to get to know NECC…Why rush? Can we teach these courses?" They are excited, but they wonder why there is such a rush.

In other words, the engagement of the social studies teachers would delay the start of the early college program by a full year. Other members of the planning team overruled. The principal retorted, "You can't give these people enough time. We can give them time during the year; we can give half days if necessary." and another teacher added, "You don't develop relationships by talking about it; you do it." In the end, the social studies teachers were free to continue their re-design of the American Studies curriculum, but they would not be consulted on the early college program, which would develop independently. In this way, momentum was not lost; the early college program would begin in September.

This was the planning team for two years, through the design phases and early cohorts of students. The team, which met bimonthly, did not include teachers, parents or students. This was a strategic team

[2]The author was a former high school principal who promoted community partnerships in every conceivable way in that position. His particular interest was entrepreneurial leadership.

designed to work quickly and efficiently. As the program matured, however, new *stakeholders* emerged. The students of the first cohort had a very difficult junior year because of some poor staffing choices, so they found ways to make their voices heard. As a result, they gained a formal audience with the planning team, which resulted in significant changes in hiring and staffing the following year. The evaluator interviewed students, parents and instructors and brought their opinions to the attention of the planning team through verbal and written reports. Parents grew in their understanding of the program and began to ask critical questions. Most significantly, teachers gained experience in the early college classroom and insisted they had important lessons to share with the design team. The high school and college instructors also belonged to unions, which took interest in the project. As a result, in the third year of the program, the teachers were invited to join the planning team on alternate meeting dates to share their ideas and voice their concerns. In effect, as the early college program solidified, the concerns for *leverage* were replaced by an emphasis on *stakeholders*. In addition, the attention from the teachers' unions forced a concern for *legitimacy*.

Which Students Should Be Recruited

The high school already offered a broad array of Advanced Placement courses and honors-level courses for students in the top academic quartile. The principal argued that students in the two middle academic quartiles lacked special services and were easily overlooked. As he said, "In reality, only 25 to 35% of students are really taking advantage of what is here; we want to raise that number." He presented himself as a case study of a student who had mediocre grades in high school and needed someone to see his potential. In this way, he adopted a *stakeholder* approach, which facilitates an ethical perspective. As a result, a decision was made to deliberately target the "middle" students through selective one-on-one recruitment through the guidance office. The superintendent, who attended most of the early meetings, was confident this stance would earn *legitimacy* with the school committee, which would have to approve the final program design.

The high school honors program presented a threat to the early college program. First, select parents were deeply invested in the honors program and would resent any competition for resources. More importantly, it was quite possible that honors students would want to sign up for the early college courses, thereby intimidating and crowding out the middle students. This was an internal *resource dependency* issue; in effect, various groups of students would be competing for control of the same resources. The planning team had to figure out how to distribute the resources more equitably.

One stakeholder asked, "How do we say 'no' to the high flyers?" The high school had a complex formula for computing grade point averages, which gave greater weight to honors courses. Surely, the early college courses deserved greater weight also, but this would invite academically ambitious honors students who wanted to boost their GPA. In the end, the team decided to award a weight which was higher than normal, but less than the honors courses. In this way, early college students would be rewarded, but honors students would be less inclined to join something that could potentially lower their GPA. By carefully determining the weight of the early college courses, the planning team was able to *leverage* the program to favor the middle students and solve the *resource dependency* issue successfully.

The high school and college had distinctly different stances in regards to student *stakeholders*. The high school operated under an inclusive perspective that they should educate every student that enrolled, regardless of academic qualifications. The principal wanted to start small, but he was thinking big: "I can see us starting with 30 to 40 students and, in the future, putting the entire sophomore class through this sequence." In contrast, the college had entrance requirements, which included a placement exam. Students who failed the exam were required to take non-credit-bearing remedial courses to meet the benchmarks.

Everyone knew the target freshmen, who would be recruited in the coming months, would struggle. The Director of Curriculum asked, "How realistic is it that ninth graders will pass this?" and the principal stated the obvious: "They will not do well." The dean responded,

> If 60 students show up and nobody passes the test, we may still enroll them, since we have twice the normal class time allotted for each course. We don't know what's going to happen. The option is for the faculty members to decide if these scores are okay.

So, the college lowered the exam benchmark so that academically average ninth graders would be eligible for coursework. They had to be careful, as the dean explained, "We don't want to set kids up for failure. If we have any reason to believe that kids want to do this but can't do this, then we need to say 'no,' kindly, but we need to say no." Widespread student failure in the first year of classes might convince these vulnerable students that they were not destined for college and would furthermore undermine the *legitimacy* of the program, so it would perish before it got off the ground. As a result, each year, the guidance counselor met with college representatives to carefully review student portfolios, which included report cards, student writing, teacher recommendations, scores on reading tests and the college placement exam.

A college might be hesitant to welcome students who are academic under-achievers, but NECC was fully aware that the top quartile students at AHS would be going to other, more prestigious four-year universities. The target students for the early college program were

their customers, but no one could force the early college graduates to attend NECC. For this reason, a *resource dependency* perspective argued against their investment in this program since they could not truly depend on these customers. However, from a *learning* perspective, NECC lacked access to customer information prior to matriculation. The early college program offered them a first-hand opportunity to explore the attitudes, aspirations, study habits, and college readiness of their customers on the trajectory to college matriculation, even if the students never attended NECC.

The college offered special support services for students with disabilities, but expressed no particular obligation to recruit them. As a result, in the formative years, they declined to accept students with disabilities into the early college program. The high school, however, operated under a federal imperative to provide equal access to all students. Again, this difference in *stakeholder* perspective had to be carefully negotiated. In time, students with disabilities were accepted into the program. This then presented new challenges. High school teachers are required by law to provide accommodations whereas college faculty are often unaware of accommodations and usually refer such students to an academic support center. When a college faculty member is teaching a college course to tenth graders on a high school campus, what does the law require? *Legitimacy* concerns with state regulations then took the forefront.

The Decisions about Curriculum

In the beginning, the early college program was modeled after the literature, which described under-achieving students earning an associate of arts degree by the fourth or fifth year of high school. As late as one month before the first parent presentation, the principal stated, "we want to make sure they get the courses they need to the AA requirements." For this reason, the high school leaders hoped to link subject concentrations, which already existed within the high school – music and early childhood education – with known majors at NECC. Students could choose their "major" at AHS and then pursue this right through the associate's degree at NECC.

In short, the process of designing a program, which would be unique to the needs of this high school and college, was still not complete. This process was a balance between *stakeholder* interests (what the students could absorb), *efficiency* costs and the desire of both institutions to manage resources (*resource dependency theory*). The college was concerned about enrollments, which would impact income. One participant stated, "You won't get 30 students who want music or early childhood education." Gradually, the curriculum shifted to a generic emphasis on American Literature and U.S. History for the sophomores, along with a College Success Seminar, which was a campus requirement for all students who failed the Accuplacer, totaling nine college credits. The principal was particularly interested in bringing the college success course to the high school. This combination seemed more promising; the principal stated, "We know can get 30 to 40 students to sign up for the American Studies and College Success and, hopefully, more from this group will choose the early college high school options in the future." In short, student *stakeholder* interests shaped the final curriculum. The planning team decided to avoid Math courses, since students advanced at different rates, and science, which required expensive lab facilities (an *efficiency* perspective).

The team still worried about student success. One member spoke for the *stakeholders*: "I'm worried that we're setting these kids up with nine credits without giving them the time to build relationships, gain confidence, and learn the skills." The principal offered to double the time blocks, but the college vice president spoke from an *efficiency* standpoint, thinking about the cost of employing adjunct instructors for double blocks all year long: "From our point of view, it's 83 minutes every day, which seems like a lot to us. We're going to be challenged on our end to stretch this out over an entire year."

With ample time and supports built into the sophomore year, the design team began planning the junior year in the fall of 2009. At this time, they still believed that sophomores would be capable of taking college courses on the NECC campus over the summer. As the dean stated, "Nine college credits per year, with six credits per summer after grade 10, 11 and 12. That's a lot of credits!" They also hoped students would sign up for AP courses in their junior year. These assumptions proved ambitious. While all students succeeded on the sophomore college courses (some barely), everyone knew they were not ready for summer college courses and AP courses yet. The program did not turn underachieving students into academic all-stars overnight. They simply were not ready for these additional challenges.

Within the first year, the design team abandoned the goal of an associate's degree in favor of a goal that would be more practical to the *stakeholders*. The Mass Transfer program of Massachusetts guaranteed that any student who completed 34 credits within a designated block of courses could transfer them automatically, without question, into any state university or college. This gave students *leverage* and became the goal of the early college program. Some students could complete the 34 credits while still in high school and others would complete in their first year at college. The Mass Transfer block replaced the associate's degree as the target.

How to Finance the Program

One would expect the negotiations around the cost of the early college program to raise theoretical perspectives at the economic end of the spectrum (*efficiency, resource dependency*). Certainly, the high school was looking for some services for the "middle"

students, but this was not a driving concern once the planning team was assembled. In fact, for two years the cost structure remained flexible. The planning team was driven forward by a *domain focus* – "this is a complex and important societal problem which must be solved" – and concerns for *legitimacy*. As public sector institutions, the college felt an obligation to the state and surrounding community to find creative ways to increase student persistence and the high school felt an obligation to parents, the community and the school committee to address the needs of all children, including the middle students.

Three decisions dominated the early negotiations. The team determined that sustainability was essential. Past experience with state dual enrollment funding demonstrated that government *resources were not dependent*. A felt obligation to student and parent *stakeholders* demanded a long-term sustainable program design. Team members did not want to invite students into an early college program that could not be sustained from year to year. Thus, the entire project would have to be funded locally.

They also debated whether parents should share in the costs. The superintendent confessed, "I am disgustingly kid-centered, but I would not let any parents go entirely free. They need to be committed. It makes this more valuable to them and harder to drop out." The principal, however, objected: "But we have kids who can't pay for lunch or the bus. These kids get everything for free and they may ask why this isn't free either? I don't think they'll step up to the plate. We'll lose them." Finally, the team decided that parent and student *stakeholders* would have greater investment in the program if they were required to pay something. (This eventually turned out to be a critical element for the success of the program. Students were less likely to drop out, since the funds were non-returnable and parents were more likely to pressure their children to complete homework assignments and succeed for the same reason). Parents would be attracted by the opportunity to save money on the cost of college. The high school and college would make up the difference, which was still unclear. The high school would pick up the cost of books and materials.

Of course, student enrollments were an important third factor. Early estimates suggested a cost $250 per family, but this was when the committee hoped for 60 or more students in the first cohort. The vice president said,

> We costed out the integrated model…. My original proposal was based on how we normally pay adjunct faculty. This model is three to four times the normal time commitment for each faculty member. We need a minimum 45 students to just cover the costs to our instructors. If the number is less, we will still stand behind this because this is a pilot.

Gradually, the team settled on smaller enrollments and a higher tuition payment. Parents were asked to pay $600 per year for nine to twelve credits and the local educational foundation would support low-income families.

The first cohort of 31 students entered the program in September 2009. By spring 2010, the college finally offered a formal memorandum of agreement, whereby the cost of coursework was set at 65% of normal tuition. The high school would pay remaining costs, which would vary according to student enrollments. Incidental costs (testing, training, materials, transportation, food) would be split between the two institutions (Leonard, 2013b). In effect, economic interests (*efficiency* and *resource dependency*) were important, but they were not allowed to dominate the early planning, which concentrated instead on the *stakeholders* and a larger *domain focus*.

Discussion

This study began as the author worked alongside the planning team for an early college program. Over the course of four years, the PI was impressed with the number and complexity of small decisions which the committee addressed during the design and development process. The college was already replicating the program in other high schools, with varying success, since each site presented unique challenges. A core proposition of this study is that school-university partnerships are difficult but not impossible, presenting many barriers and challenges, which can be addressed through sound negotiations. For this reason, a more universal, all-inclusive way to think about the "sticking points" of secondary-postsecondary partnership negotiations was recommended.

The first step was to look back over four years of notes to create a list of the many decisions required for a sound program. The second step was to explore a conceptual framework. The use of seven theories, which cover the gamut of motivation for school-university partnerships, provided a way to frame and understand the complex negotiations required. The theoretical perspectives offer scholars a means to analyze and understand all kinds of school-university partnerships, such as those that provide internships, precollegiate activities or professional development schools, for example. This approach may also help practitioners understand and appreciate the differing viewpoints at the negotiation table. Often, in the heat of the moment, one's personal point-of-view can seem like the only sensible opinion. The array of theories highlights competing concerns.

The results offered here focused on the early decision to invent an early college program, the assembly of the design team, decisions around student selection,

choice of curriculum and how to finance the program. The theories have equal application to other sets of decisions addressing staffing, pedagogy, parental engagement, marketing and so on.

In some cases, one theory was sufficient to understand a set of decisions. The assembly of the planning team seemed to be dominated by concerns for *leverage*. Thus, there were mutually agreeable decisions to invite some members and exclude others. However, a common theory does not guarantee agreeableness, since participants could have differing interpretations of *leverage*. The college dean was concerned with *team leverage*, carefully selecting participants to ensure the viability of the innovation. There were three different district superintendents during the four-year history of this case. At least one superintendent attended the meetings to give the district more *individual leverage* in the financial negotiations. He knew that the costs would be shared and he wanted to make sure the district was well represented. In effect, the participants were striving for *leverage* with each other also.

In a similar way, the high school and the college had different interpretations of *stakeholder* interests in the discussion around student selection. The high school emphasized the inclusion of all children. The college negotiators were concerned about faculty *stakeholders* who might be unfamiliar with accommodations. A shared theoretical perspective was not sufficient to guarantee agreeableness. The definition of stakeholder can even vary with one's hierarchical position in the institution. For the guidance counselor, *stakeholder* meant children and parents. In contrast, the college dean believed she was attentive to stakeholders when she invited the district curriculum director. The author pushed for teachers to be included in the planning meetings after interviews with each teacher demonstrated that they had vital *stakeholder* positions.

The negotiation table was also the scene of competing theoretical perspectives. For two years, economic questions rose up again and again as the design work continued. The college had short-term *efficiency* concerns (how much will this cost?), which were balanced by long-term *efficiency* concerns (how can we reduce the cost of testing, remedial coursework and student attrition?). The high school was *resource dependent*; they could not afford to address the college readiness needs of the "middle" students. Most of all, they were concerned to address the needs of these under-resourced *stakeholders*. Over time, an acceptable balance was found between these competing perspectives.

In this case, all seven theories came into play at some point. While this might be true of all early college programs, the same might not be true of other school-university partnerships. Some partnering activities might not have a domain focus for example, since they do not address large-scale, complex societal problems. Other activities might be relatively inexpensive so the theories at the economic end of the spectrum would be less important. For example, colleges place student teachers in public schools all the time with little expense involved. Again, the array of theories provides a way to understand the dimensions of the partnership and the various perspectives that will be encountered in negotiations.

Theories come with strengths and limitations. Each theory is a lens, which brings certain aspects of the negotiation into sharp focus and yet obscures other aspects. When participants enter negotiations with a particular theoretical perspective, they are sharply focused on one concern, but may have blind spots in regards to competing concerns. Taken together, the theories offer a means to understand the larger picture of competing concerns. An appreciation of the seven theories can save a negotiator from becoming entrenched in one position.

The use of *learning* theory, in particular, might be expected in a partnership between two educational institutions. However, the history of school reform suggests that schools are no more inclined to be learning organizations than any other kind of institution (Hess, 2010; Senge, 2006; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In this partnership, the opportunity to learn was a constant motivation and a consolation. As a result, the leaders were not threatened by setbacks, but used them as opportunities to gain understanding. Over the course of four years, there were numerous mistakes both large and small. Parents were placed on a payment plan, which the college sometimes forgot, resulting in threatening letters. One year, the team made poor staffing choices, so the junior students suffered all year. An integrated learning community model meant that students received one grade for all their work on a permanent college transcript, which would threaten their ability to receive financial aid once in college if they did poorly. The planning team intervened to address the mistakes, but also embraced them as a *learning* opportunity. Barringer and Harrison (2000) wrote in their discussion of learning theory, "Sources of innovation do not reside exclusively inside firms; instead they are commonly found in the interstices between firms, universities, research laboratories, suppliers and customers" (p. 378; quoting Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996, p. 118). In this partnership, the participants seemed to be highly attracted to these interstices, which provided an opportunity to learn.

Curiosity, the opportunity to learn, boundary-spanning and a readiness to bounce back from setbacks are common characteristics of entrepreneurial leaders (Leonard, 2013c). Entrepreneurial leadership was evident throughout this case study, which is not surprising since these leaders were attracted to innovation. Earlier, this paper drew attention to the gradual shift from a *leverage* perspective to a *stakeholder* perspective in the assembly of the planning team. This is typical with entrepreneurial start-ups. Entrepreneurial leaders work hard to maintain

leverage over the budding innovation to ensure that naysayers don't kill the idea before it can get off the ground. Later, an openness to a broader representation of *stakeholders* is important to ensure assimilation and sustainability.

Conclusion

This case study listed the "sticking points," which were negotiated in an innovative early college partnership and used interorganizational theory to clarify the motives and positions of the negotiators in order to better understand the process. This information will be helpful to scholars and practitioners in the field of school-university partnerships. Nevertheless, this information alone does not guarantee success in partnership negotiations, which are complex and demanding. Other factors are also important. For example, the participants must have decision-making authority or little will be accomplished. One replication of this program was less successful in the initial years because top-level administrators failed to attend the meetings. Other skills, related to communication and trust-building, are also important. Some scholars recommend a designated boundary-spanner (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008).

Case studies have inherent limitations such as limited external validity. However, when it comes to understanding the particular dynamics of one kind of interorganizational collaboration, there is no substitute. A second possible limitation was the author's role as a participant-observer, which, particularly in successful ventures such as this one, can invite cheerleading rather than scholarly investigation. To balance this tendency, data was collected over a period of four years, which allowed for ample triangulation. Research results were always shared with the planning team.

Early college high schools now exist in 43 states and more are under development ("JFF: About us," 2012). They are an important component in addressing college readiness. Inter-organizational partnerships are a fruitful source of innovation for such complex meta-problems. However, innovation requires leaders to move into unexplored territory, which can seem like a haphazard and chaotic journey. The use of theory, which enlightens motives and interests, offers a superstructure for understanding and mutual respect. The theories outlined in this paper may smooth the pathway for other innovative inter-organizational partnerships.

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Appendix

Negotiable items in secondary-postsecondary early college program

The first research question is addressed by means of a list, which includes all the major questions that arose over a four-year period of negotiations. The list is not exhaustive, but illustrative of the wide range and variety of negotiable "sticking points." There are no absolute answers to these negotiable points. Some invite a yes-no response, while others invited multiple solutions.

1. Planning team
    a. Who are the members of the planning team? Who decides? Have you included all the important stakeholders?
    b. To what degree are top institutional leaders expected to be engaged?
    c. How often will you meet? Who calls everyone together?
    d. How will you facilitate the meetings? Do you need norms? Protocols? Memorandums of agreement? How do you plan to develop trust among the members?
    e. Who are the boundary spanners?
    f. Will you record the minutes of the meeting? Are the meetings public?
2. Goals
    a. What are the goals of your program? Who decides?
    b. Are they written? Are they public? Are they flexible?
    c. What are the measurable outcomes?
3. Theory of change
    a. What is your vision for the program?
    b. What common assumptions do you bring to the planning meetings?
    c. What beliefs do you hold in common in regards to the program?
    d. What are your non-negotiables? What is the bottom line? What values will not be compromised?
4. Evaluation
    a. How will you evaluate your program? What are the evaluation criteria?
    b. What are the standards for success? (graduation; credit accumulation; student behaviors)
    c. Who will conduct the evaluation? How often? How much will this cost?
5. Admissions
    a. Who will be invited to apply to the program? Who are the target students? Who will be accepted? What are the criteria (academic, behavioral, parental, financial)?
    b. Will you recruit and accept students with disabilities and English language learners?
    c. Will you accept students in the top quartile, the honors students for example?
    d. What testing is required? Will you use the college placement exams? Who will pay for this? Who will administer and score the tests? What is the eligibility benchmark?
    e. How will you attract students who do not have an advocate?
    f. What is the maximum number of students you can accommodate? What is the minimum number for program viability?
6. Course selections
    a. What courses will you require in the first year? In subsequent years?
    b. How are students at multiple levels in Math achievement best served? What courses do they take?
    c. Are the high school Science laboratories adequate for college coursework?
    d. How will you address academic behaviors and contextual skills and knowledge appropriate for college (Conley, 2008, p. 1)? What is the advisability of a college skills course in the first year? How are college skills strategies incorporated in subsequent years?
    e. How will you address the need to prepare students for high-stakes state assessments?
    f. What is the role of summer dual enrollment courses, online dual enrollment courses, Advanced Placement courses, and articulation agreements in the overall plan for credit accumulation? What about dual enrollment courses from other, competing colleges?

   g. What is the target for credit accumulation? What about opportunities such as the Mass Transfer option?[1]
7. Facilities, room space
   a. Designated space or shared space?
   b. Classroom size, to accommodate a co-teaching methodology.
   c. At what grade do students begin to attend classes on the college campus?
8. Curriculum, materials and technology
   a. Have the instructors created college-type syllabi for each course?
   b. What textbooks are required? Who will pay for these? Do students buy their own books and resell them at the end of the year? Do students need their own books so they can mark them up?
   c. What other materials are required? Who will pay for these?
   d. What technology will be needed, both for instructional purposes and for online access to electronic databases, college email or online academic learning platforms?
9. Staffing
   a. What mix of high school and college faculty will teach the courses?
   b. How are the teachers selected? Who interviews? Who chooses?
   c. What will you pay the college faculty? What about extra hours for professional development, parent meetings, and student support? What will you pay the high school faculty?
   d. Who evaluates the teachers, both high school and college?
   e. What are the implications for contractual bargaining units at both the high school and the college? What is the potential for a high school teacher to be replaced by a college faculty member – or vice versa?
   f. How do you handle faculty concerns? Is there a grievance process in place?
10. Faculty support
   a. How will you schedule the time for the high school and college faculty to learn to work together? Who will lead this effort? Will you pay the faculty for this time?
   b. What time is required for course integration or alignment or the development of college-level syllabi?
   c. Will you schedule time for regular common planning time throughout the year?
   d. What methods or strategies will you use to help teachers learn to work together?
11. Teaching
   a. Will the courses be taught individually or integrated, as in the college learning community model?[2]
   b. Co-teaching or team teaching? (Murata, 2002)
   c. What is the preferred pedagogy for high school students taking college courses?
   d. What is the optimal level of rigor and expectations?
12. Scheduling
   a. How many hours are required for each course to meet high school and college standards? How many extra hours are needed for student success?
   b. What is the optimal schedule for student success – short periods, block schedule?
   c. What is the best time of the day to offer the courses for maximum success?
   d. What are the implications for the rest of the high school schedule? Where do students go next; do they stay together as a cohort for the entire day?
   e. What are the implications for the college faculty, who usually work on a semester basis and may teach only once or twice a week?
   f. How is common planning time scheduled?
13. What supports are in place to ensure student success?
   a. Tutors, before school and after school?
   b. Time allotted for consultations with high school and college faculty?
   c. Guidance supports – what procedures are in place to address a failing student?
14. Student performance
   a. How do you measure student performance (grades, portfolio?)
   b. What constitutes passing or failure – for HS credit; for college credit?
   c. What is the nature of the transcript at the HS; at the college?

[1] Mass Transfer is a state program whereby any student who accumulated 34 credits in a tightly prescribed sequence of Math, Science, Social Studies, Humanities and technology courses would be granted automatic credit transfer rights to any state college or university (MA Dept. of Higher Education, 2010).

[2] Learning community is a well-known community college strategy involving co-teaching and an integrated curriculum to increase student success (Sperling, 2009).

   d. When should a student be removed from the program?
   e. How are parents involved; when are they involved in student performance?
15. Student activities
   a. What access do students have to all the regular high school activities: sports, clubs, games, social gatherings, electives, travel, summer activities?
   b. What access do students have to regular college student options: sports, clubs, games, social gatherings, electives?
16. Student voice
   a. What is the place and importance of student voice?
   b. How is student voice engaged in program design, student selection, teaching, counseling, marketing and promotion?
17. Finances
   a. What is the total per student cost of the program?
   b. What is the college contribution? Will there be a reduction in tuition and fees? How is this defensible?
   c. What is the high school (district) contribution? Is this sustainable? How will you justify this in light of the needs of other students?
   d. What is the family contribution? How will you handle families with financial needs? Who decides who has a need?
   e. What happens if a family fails to pay?
   f. Who handles invoicing and collections (high school or college; what person)?
   g. Are there other community supporters who can underwrite this program?
   h. How will you handle unanticipated costs?
18. College knowledge
   a. Will students receive ID cards? Full access to campus-based services for students, such as tutoring, writing centers, the library, electronic resources, the academic learning platform (such as Blackboard), and student email accounts?
   b. When will students visit the campus? Will they visit classes? Who will arrange this? Will you feed them?
   c. Visits to other college campuses?
   d. When will students take classes on the college campus? Will they be in designated cohort classes or will they mix with regular adult students? Will you inform the faculty?
   e. When do students learn about the college schedule, registration, academic advising, the bursar, and other regular aspects of the college environment?
   f. Will students receive authentic, indistinguishable college transcripts? What is the passing grade? What grade is required for college credit? What grade is required for the transfer of credits?
   g. College advising; what assistance is provided with college selection and applications?
   h. Financial aid advising
19. Career counseling
   a. How are students exposed to career alternatives (and possible postsecondary requirements)?
   b. Who assists student in selecting postsecondary options: technical school vs. two- or four-year college; military service; world of work.
20. Marketing
   a. What means will be used to promote the program among your students and parents and who will be responsible for this?
   b. How do you plan to share the program with the rest of the high school faculty?
   c. What need do you foresee to share the program with the larger college community, including the faculty, registrar, bursar, librarian, IT people, public relations, board of trustees and so on?
   d. What is your plan to present the program to the school committee?
   e. What is your plan to present the program to the media?
21. Communication
   a. How will you communicate with families, college faculty and high school faculty regarding holidays, special assemblies, guest speakers, MCAS testing days, parent nights and other special events? Who will remember to do this?
22. Parental engagement
   a. What mechanisms are available for parents to learn about the program, to apply, and to enroll their children?
   b. What mechanisms are available to monitor a child's progress, to communicate with faculty, guidance and administrators (high school and college)?

c. How do faculty and the school share student performance (academic, behavioral)? How often?
d. Will you require college faculty to attend parent-teacher meetings?
e. How are parents engaged in college and career counseling; financial aid advisement?
f. What is the place of parents in program design and development, marketing, and public relations?
g. What voice do parents have in the program? How is their voice solicited; how often?

23. Growth and development
    a. Who are your stakeholders? Who are your allies? Who are potential opponents? Who will be helped by the program? Who is likely to resist the program? Who will be threatened? Who will be harmed? Who will be asked to give more, work harder or make sacrifices?
    b. What is your vision for the future? How will you get there?
    c. What will be the impact of a growing program on the rest of the school community? Will there be a competition for resources?
    d. How will this affect other school-community partnerships?

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