
CREATING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

A Tip Sheet from REvolutionizing engineering and computer science Departments (RED) Participatory Action Research

Creating strategic partnerships with stakeholders, supporters, and collaborators is a key tactic for change management. This tip sheet presents approaches used to create successful partnerships, using research findings resulting from focus group discussions and conference calls with NSF's RED grantees. The quotes from research participants highlight these findings. For more information, contact us at redpar@rose-hulman.edu.

Identify the Motivation for Partnerships*

Teams emphasize a broad range of possible motivations for engaging in partnerships: proactively building connections, diversifying or supplementing the team's skills, finding and cultivating advocates, attracting resources, increasing impact on- and off-campus, and more. Unclear or opaque partnership motivations lead potential partners to wonder at the value and merits of a relationship. By clearly identifying the motivation for the partnership, all potential partners can evaluate that motivation relative to their own needs and abilities to contribute.

➔ **TIP:** Engage in project soul-seeking to identify the meritorious reasons for partnering on an effort and inquire about the motivations of the potential partner; being explicit and open is an advantage and helps avoid operating with an unstated agenda.

One team's work involved fitting into institutional requirements, an area with which they were unfamiliar. To advance their work, "We met with our legal counsel. So when we draft language on admissions, and when we are revising admissions standards in future years, [we know] what is or not allowable by law, and what we can articulate or not articulate. Also, [we went to] our publicity office on campus to see about how do we market or what kind of logo we can use, what kind of acronym we can use."

Align and Leverage Social Capital and Institutional Capital

Strategic partnerships begin with relationships among people, not groups. Effective change agents take advantage of opportunities to invest in relationships. From the institutional perspective, resources including technology, information access, expertise, control over decision-making, and space comprise capital that can be contributed to or requested from partnerships. Bringing the interests of the partners into alignment, along with the capital they can contribute, generates forward progress in change efforts.

➔ **TIP:** Create a catalogue of the personal and institutional capital and networks "owned" by members of the potential partnership, including that of various team members; this catalogue can reveal possibilities for aligning interests among partners.

While examining ways that existing relationships could support the current project, one team discovered, "One of our research questions has to do with scalable assessment. So through another project we've gotten to know the people at an online grading platform. We're gearing up to use them on a pilot basis. They've been responsive and that has been a good collaboration so far."

Establish Partnership Goals and Governance

Change efforts involving partnerships must serve the interests of all parties, both institutionally and individually. Communication about the goals of the partnership and how the partnership operates allows all parties to remain clear on how their goals will be met. Points to consider include: what formal and informal communication channels will be used, what activities can lead to early and obvious wins for all participants in the partnership, what are the clear metrics for short-term and long-term success for all partners, and what will be the meeting schedule.

➔ **TIP:** Leave no feature of the partnership unstated or assumed; although conflict is inevitable, the more specific partners are about who does what, when, to what ends, and how, the more likely conflict can be productive rather than relationship ending.

When describing the developing relationship with their university's teaching and learning center, one team stated "We had the conversation with them: how are you planning to do this? What is your timeline? What logistics are involved? We are using them to think about what parts of the courses we can flip, how to do more active types of teaching, and using different types of assessment. They're going to come back to us with some ideas and get together with junior instructor and discuss what they can do: what can you teach in a different way? How can we help you link information from one module to a different module? What does that mean? What will that look like? What can you demonstrate that shows those concepts?"

Address Struggles with Maintaining Successful Partnerships

Successful change projects invest in work of creating a shared vision for change, identifying the contributions to and impact for each partner, and re-negotiating as circumstances (e.g., institutional priorities or team membership) shift. Work styles, goals, and membership of partner groups change over time, as do the institutional pressures and responsibilities of partner organizations.

➔ **TIP:** Practice the approach of "assume positive intent" on the part of partners, and use an attitude of inquiry to query the situation to discover how partners are experiencing the struggle.

In working to impact the composition of the incoming class, one team experienced challenges with their partners. They said, "Our biggest pushback is from the admissions people regarding the rules of what we can try to extract from students using survey tools, and also how to understand how to keep students. We try to get scholarships and money, but we're running into state ordinances, if they are from the state we have to take them and we can't have targeted scholarships. That's not to say we can't solicit an outside group to offer scholarships to students who are underrepresented in engineering. So how do we get past the challenges of admissions and how do we work with them...there is a staff member in admissions who was listed as a collaborator on the grant, but we try not to overly rely on him due to how busy he is. So we're trying to identify people who can work with us. If we get caught up in bureaucracy, we won't be able to meet deadlines."

*We used the partnership framework of Pamela Eddy in organizing these results.

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