

# COME TO THE TABLE: GUIDELINES FOR GRANT FUNDERS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Six rural partnerships were researched to identify requisite factors that support the development of effective community partnerships to maximize resources, minimize service duplications, and create opportunities to benefit rural communities. All partnerships were engaged in building the economic development for their rural communities, with assistance of local community college. This study was unique because it offered insight into economic development partnerships formed specifically in rural communities in the Southeast and, as a grant requirement, involved the local community college or university. There were significant emergent findings regarding partnership development, community colleges, and, specifically, the study revealed relevant information for grant funders.

## FINDINGS

Original emergent themes from this study for grant funders included:

- Neutrality
- Role of the Grant Fiscal Agent
- Organizational Driver
- Coaching
- Oversight and Accountability
- Contribution of Community Colleges

## NEUTRALITY

Neutrality emerged as a very important issue to partnerships, especially for those that have not worked together previously. The community colleges, in the sites studied, were often viewed as a neutral party and respected by all partners, which facilitated the progression of the partnerships' formation and sustainability.

## ROLE OF THE FISCAL AGENT AS TEAM LEADER

The person who serves as the fiscal agent for the grant funding should not serve in an active leadership role to protect team effectiveness. The balance of power, within the partnership, can become skewed, which negated the premise of shared leadership, and caused distrust and suspicion to interfere in the team's ability to function.

## ORGANIZATIONAL DRIVER

The organizational drivers of the partnerships were unanimously viewed by the interviewees as critical to partnership effectiveness or, in the case where a driver was absent for a long time, a contributing factor of why the partnership struggled to coalesce. A significant finding was that the organizational driver needed to receive a salary for the work that was done.

## COACHING

The role of the coaching services was to provide intervention strategies, accountability, and a "neutral outsider" to help partnerships overcome boundaries and challenges. The service received mixed reviews from the teams, but the value of the coaching service seemed to be high even if they did not acknowledge it. The issue of coaching, whether positive or negative, was important to the teams' formation or lack thereof.

## OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability, professionalism, and transparency of actions are important for partnership development. Grant funders reap benefits when funding requirements, reporting requirements, and tangible outcomes are clearly outlined and communicated as early in the process of team formation as possible.

## COMMUNITY COLLEGE CONTRIBUTION

Colleges provided internal resources, internal and external networks, respectability, and neutrality to their partnerships. The partnerships benefitted greatly from the presence of the colleges. The colleges benefitted from participation by obtaining additional grant funding; expanding the college's perception of their role from workforce development to economic development activities; and it demonstrated the importance of the outreach and inclusiveness in the communities by bringing non-traditional students to the college in locations that were not "on campus."

## CONCLUSIONS

Partnerships are complex given the individual and contextual background of the community, the skills of the people at the table, and the perceived need and benefits of working together, but understanding and improving the way partnerships form and develop offer significant benefits to communities who have limited resources to effectively address local issues, problems, or opportunities. Partnerships appear to be a strategy for rural communities to utilize to maximize resources and minimize singular perspectives.





THE PROGRAM FOR THE RURAL CAROLINAS:

GUIDELINES FOR GRANT FUNDERS

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*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.  
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*

*-- Margaret Mead*

### ***Introduction***

What images does the phrase “come to the table” or “at the table” evoke? A happy family gathering during the holidays or a business dinner with dissatisfied clients? The title of this study of six rural partnerships originated from the phrases “come to the table” and “at the table” used over 225 times by twenty-six people to include: hospital administrators, community college administrators and staff, agency heads, ministers, and concerned citizens to describe the partnerships they created, maintained, and in some cases, sustained to create economic development opportunities. All were engaged in building the economic development of their rural communities, with assistance of local community college, as a result of a grant program called Program for the Rural Carolinas (PRC) funded through The Duke Endowment (TDE) and managed by Manpower Development Corporation, (MDC), Inc., a consulting group that works with rural partnerships primarily in the South, from 2002-2006.

This study was made possible by The Duke Endowment and MDC, Inc. by granting permission to the researcher to conduct the research on one of their rural economic development projects and by providing access to former partnership members through a gatekeeper at MDC, Inc. This study was conducted as part of the researcher’s requirements to obtain a doctoral degree at The University of South Carolina. The only requirement placed on the researcher by TDE was to provide anonymity of the team members interviewed and their site location and to provide a complete copy of the dissertation to TDE.

This effort was unique because it offered insight into economic development partnerships formed specifically in rural communities in the Southeast and, as a grant requirement, involved the local community college or university. The purpose of the effort was to identify requisite factors that support the development of effective community partnerships to maximize resources, minimize service duplications, and create opportunities to benefit rural communities. There were significant emergent findings regarding partnership development, community colleges, and, specifically, the study revealed relevant information for grant funders.

### ***Methodology***

Six different PRC rural economic development partnerships agreed to speak candidly about what it takes to make or break that partnership. In addition, these stakeholders provided an unusual degree of access to team documents that revealed behind-the-scenes insights. A review of relevant websites and related literature rounded out the data collection process; together, these sources, when compared and combined, created a rich portrait of the life –and death – of rural economic partnerships. (Brown, Cotton, & O’Hara, 2006; Spradley, 1979).



The study utilized interviews from a minimum of three key partners at each PRC site. More than three interviews were needed at two sites. The researcher used site visits at all times to conduct interviews, except for two interviews where the interviewees did not want to be identified. Triangulation of the data proved critical in validating interview data because it had been three years since the partnerships had formally met, in some cases. The teams are identified as AAA, BBB, CCC, etc. and the interviewees were identified by their team coding with an "M" for "member" and a number designating the order they were interviewed. Team member AAAM2 was a member of Team AAA and the second member interviewed.

### ***Findings***

Original emergent themes from this study for grant funders included the important role neutrality plays in team development, the role of the grant fiscal agent on the team, if the partnership is formed as a grant requirement, the role of and compensation for the organizational driver, the impact of coaching, the importance of oversight and accountability from the grantors, and the contribution of community colleges on partnership development in small communities.

### ***Neutrality***

*"First...I don't live in any of these counties...second... the community college is a non-partisan agency...no favorite county amongst all three."* – community college dean

Neutrality emerged as a very important issue to partnerships, especially for those that have not worked together previously. It was important, for trust to build, that at least one person on the team, if not more, was perceived as "not having a vested interest," such as not being from the geographical area. This person could serve as a neutralizing agent and provide the foundation to allow trust to build. Interestingly, the community colleges, in the sites studied, were often viewed as a neutral party and respected by all partners, which facilitated the progression of the partnerships' formation and sustainability.

Sutherland et al (1998) states the need for neutrality in partnerships is important and often unspoken, especially in rural southern communities to "facilitate mutual cooperation between the races" (p.65). Trust was not mentioned as often by teams or people who had worked together before as opposed to those teams, such as teams AAA and FFF, who had rivalries and competing interests. Neutrality, however, entered into discussions even when trust did not.

Interestingly, in the case of the FFF partnership where trust eventually was eroded by the actions of some board members, a "neutral" agent was not on the board. There were people who cared and tried to work with the team, but they had a tie to a



competing group or entity that prevented them from being viewed as “neutral.” Additionally, the community college of this team was not a regular participant on the board and thus could not serve as a neutral agent. “You’ve got to get a director in here to handle it and move forward to work on it. I think this was the biggest problem that we had. I think sometimes, you can bring in anybody from the outside into a community and they can bring more people together than you can from somebody within sometimes.” (FFFM2, 10/09/08)

In the AAA Partnership, two members felt the fact that they were not from any of the three counties allowed them to be perceived by other members as impartial to the competitiveness among the counties. They were not viewed as threatening, especially in the early stages of relationship building. Additionally, the organizational driver for the EEE Partnership felt she gained acceptance from the other members more easily because she was not from EEE County. She stated she was perceived as trustworthy by the local residents because she was unaware, or not a part of, some of the cliques that had existed within the county. She also felt her neutrality allowed her to reach out to non-traditional partners because she had no preconceived ideas about who should or should not be included on the team.

The concept of neutrality, as it applied to the college, was discussed by several of the college representatives and even partner members. This supports findings from the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) project which found that colleges were considered “neutral places for building community confidence, trust, and cooperation...” (RCCI, 2003, p.72). All three interviewees from the AAA Partnership said neutrality was critical to their team because of the history of deep-seated competitiveness and mistrust. The community college was viewed as neutral, because it was located, through the main campus and satellite campuses, in all three counties. Community college representatives from the BBB Partnership and the DDD Partnerships also discussed inter-county and community rivalries and how the college or university, with its access throughout the county, is viewed as “non-threatening” or “neutral.” The DDD university representative added a nuance to the discussion of neutrality by mentioning when the university (or college) goes out into the community to the citizens on their “turf,” the citizens feel comfortable and less threatened by the organization, which can allow trust to build. The willingness of the college or university to leave its campus to serve local residents was a theme that was present at five out of six sites, as well.

It is significant to note that neutrality was discussed regarding team leaders, organizational drivers, coaches, and community colleges. It was important to the interviewees that those individuals or organization have some degree of impartiality to allow trust to build. Other strategies employed to maintain neutrality were to meet in a different county each month, not name people in formal roles on the team, and to give everyone at the table plenty of time to discuss their issues and concerns.



### **Role of the Fiscal Agent as Team Leader**

*"I really had a back seat." – hospital administrator and team leader*

An important finding from this study, specifically focused on partnerships funded through a grant, was when the person who served as the fiscal agent for the grant funding also served in an active leadership role, the team did not perform as effectively. The balance of power, within the partnership, became skewed, which negated the premise of shared leadership, and caused distrust and suspicion to interfere in the team's ability to function.

Three partnerships had their fiscal agent at the hospital serve as team leader; however, one of those team leaders made the conscious decision to take a backseat role. This proved to be a sound decision. The other two teams, whose leaders took an active leadership role, did not accomplish all of the goals they originally submitted to TDE. Frustration, apathy, and concern were expressed by both partnership's interviewees about the lack of progress made by the teams, although one team's issues were milder compared to the other.

Coincidentally, the members interviewed on those partnerships described both men's leadership style as "in control" and "unable to delegate." A BBB interviewee said few would question the partnership leader because he was clearly in charge of the process and, ultimately, the money. The same thing apparently occurred with the FFF Partnership. One interviewee said it took about two months before community leaders started "bailing out" of team meetings and sending representatives. One FFF interviewee said all the leader did was "talk, talk, talk." Interviewees from both partnerships felt the lack of involvement, or "inertia" as the BBB team leader referred to it, was a contributing factor to the team's inability to achieve all the goals it set for itself.

Two other teams, funded through their respective hospitals, did not have an administrator serve on the team at all, although they did have a dedicated hospital employee serve in the administrator role. This served both of those teams very well and leadership imbalance was not perceived as an issue.

### **Organizational Driver**

*"She was...the glue. She was the stabilizing force; we needed that person. The program needed staffing all the time. Volunteers just don't cut it." – hospital administrator and PRC team leader*

The organizational drivers of the partnerships were unanimously viewed by the interviewees as critical to partnership effectiveness or, in the case where a driver was absent for a long time, a contributing factor of why the partnership struggled to coalesce. A significant finding that emerged from the study of each partnership was that the organizational driver needed to receive a salary for the work that was done. Each



partnership found creative ways to accomplish this task, such as donating a certain percentage of that person's time from their "regular" job or providing direct compensation. This is an important finding because most sites noted that compensation for a team administrator was not allowed by TDE, Inc. initially, but that in several cases, they allowed someone to be paid later in the partnership.

Salaries were covered in a variety of ways. Three sites hired full-time drivers, paid for by grant funding. Two sites had drivers that were assigned to work "part-time" and a portion of one's salary was covered by the grant back to the hiring organization. The other driver's hiring organization donated her time as an "in-kind" contribution toward the initiative. One other site hired their driver to work full time, paid half of her salary back to her hiring organization, and her hiring organization donated the balance of her time as an "in-kind" contribution. This appears to have made an impact on MDC Inc. because some of the interviewees stated MDC Inc stipulated grant funds could not be used to pay for assistance at the beginning of the grant, but they eventually acquiesced, when some of the sites made the case that the administration of a grant this large in scope required a committed staff person. The key finding was every organizational driver had a full-time salary with benefits, whether funded through TDE or their host organization.

Another finding was related to the organizational drivers who had other job duties, in addition to the part-time PRC assignment. Those two interviewees said the PRC job requirements were more than part-time, which created very long hours. The work associated with the PRC grant was labor intensive and could have influenced that perception, but Lasker et al. (2001) notes that effective partnerships are more demanding than bureaucratic management structures with diverse groups represented and activities being implemented and full-time staff can positively influence partnership effectiveness. The added job duties created burnout, fatigue, and turnover, in some cases. The BBB organizational driver left the team to pursue another job opportunity and the other members said that was a negative turning point for their team.

Coordinating and working for community leaders is complex and difficult and beyond the scope of a volunteer, who may also be a leader. These partnerships utilized creative ways to ensure their driver was paid a salary with benefits, either through release time, in-kind contributions, or paid fully from the grant. The important thing is that if a partnership is not funded, they should consider who the driver will be and how that person can be compensated.



### **Coaching**

*“They (MDC) would call to check on us, they came down to check, but it was never anything major. If I need anything, no matter who my team leader from MDC was, all we had to do was call.” – team leader for PRC partnership*

The role of the coaching services provided by MDC Inc. was to provide intervention strategies, accountability, and a “neutral outsider” (RCCI, 2003, p.54) to help partnerships overcome boundaries and challenges. The service received mixed reviews from the teams, but the value of the coaching service seemed to be high even if they did not acknowledge it. The DDD partnership said they appreciated their coaches, because they had more than one, but that they were all nice and helpful. Two teams described the coaching interventions, which they viewed negatively, as pivotal in their partnership’s formation, so the question becomes, was the coaching such a bad thing if it united the team? One team felt the coaching was inappropriate and was a contributing factor to its inability to accomplish its goals. That coach was not an employee of MDC Inc., but a contractor.

Regardless, the issue of coaching, whether positive or negative was important to the teams’ formation or lack thereof. Coaches were used in the RCCI (2003) project, which also used MDC, Inc. as its managing partner in order to serve as a neutralizing agent, to motivate and challenge the teams to be creative, and to see things from an “outsider’s perspective.” The coaching in the RCCI project was to help the partnerships think more strategically and from a perspective of change versus the status quo. It also provided, whether intended or not, because nothing appears in the RCCI literature, an accountability mechanism that forced the teams to implement their initiatives and evaluate their effectiveness (RCCI, 2003).

Given the importance of neutrality to partnership formation, especially with regard to building trust, the role of coaching can be very important, especially if community colleges or universities are unable to serve in that role. It also appeared that MDC, Inc. employees were regarded more positively than the teams whose coach was a “contract” employee. One of the partnerships studied had coaches whose services were contracted by MDC, Inc. The interviewees from that team were unanimous in expressing their discontent with the contracted coaches. This is a consideration for funders utilizing coaching services.



### **Oversight and Accountability**

*"I think it (coaching) does make a difference because accountability in any type of work that you do is critical. And staying on task with goals is certainly part of overall accountability." – community college employee*

Accountability, professionalism, and transparency of actions are important for partnership development (Billet et al., 2005; Johns et al., 2007). The grant had very exacting reporting requirements, including budget reports, for each team and regular visits from outside coaches provided by MDC, Inc.; however, that does not always mean mismanagement cannot occur. Two of the six partnerships studied did not feel they accomplished as much as they should or could have done. Two interviewees from the BBB Partnership felt accountable from the perspective they did not do as much as they could have done to benefit the citizens of BBB County. The FFF Partnership interviewees struggled with accountability and trust to one another. The first team leader did not provide budget reports to the board. Some interviewees felt money was not used as it should have been and this was troubling for them. Team members interviewed expressed dismay that they did not know how the grant money was used in FFF County to benefit those left behind.

Two FFF interviewees stated there appeared to be misperceptions that grant funding was to be spent on board members and their friends or family. One interviewee said it was obvious that people had their own motivations for being there and she felt there were perceptions that "grant" means "free money." She questioned whether the members of the board understood the terms of the grant and how it was intended to be used (01/15/09). This may be an opportunity for grant funders to include parameters and guidelines for fund use among the board in other grants.

FFF PRC interviewees felt the coaching services and reporting practices provided and required by MDC, Inc. were not effective in dealing with the issues this team faced regarding accountability. This site was the exception regarding oversight and accountability from all the sites studied, however. One member of the DDD Partnership stated the oversight of TDE through MDC, Inc. was among the most rigorous he had encountered through TDE grants. Almost everyone interviewed mentioned this as important, not only from the team's accountability to itself and TDE, but also to the community.

Some of the strategies utilized for providing accountability and transparency were making efforts to report out through the newspapers, community meetings, county council meetings, and any medium that provided the opportunity to promote partnership activities. Another way the partners made themselves transparent was by holding open and public meetings. Every partnership noted their meetings were open to anyone who wanted to come.



The teams held themselves accountable to one another and MDC, Inc. through committee reports and budget management. They implemented a system of “checks and balances” with the committee structure on the CCC and DDD Partnerships. Another method employed was to have executive board members serve as committee chairs on sub-committees or to serve on auxiliary boards that might have formed as a result of grant activity, such as the manufacturing consortium.

Grant funders reap benefits when funding requirements, reporting requirements, and tangible outcomes are clearly outlined and communicated as early in the process of team formation as possible. It is critical to hold the partnership accountable during every stage of partnership formation, to include strong interventions, if not ceasing funds, if the partnership is not accomplishing the strategic objectives of the grant.

### ***Community College Contribution***

*“...because we are the hub and can, if we don't have the expertise, then we can help find the expertise.” - community college satellite campus director*

Colleges provided personnel, training programs, curriculum, facilities, equipment, public relations and marketing services to the partnerships they served. They provided internal and external networks, respectability, and neutrality to their partnerships. The colleges in this study were highly respected by the members of the partnership. Their representatives were viewed as knowledgeable and hard working. Their representatives came from non-credit areas of the college. The partnerships benefited greatly from the presence of the colleges. The colleges implemented leadership programs, the manufacturing consortium, provided training, implemented WorkKeys, promoted the partnership programs on the television program, and provided administrative and grant writing assistance.

The colleges benefited from participation by using their efforts on the PRC grant to serve as a spring board to obtain additional grant funding for their colleges; it expanded the college's perception of their role from workforce development to economic development activities that positively impact the community; and it demonstrated the importance of the outreach and inclusiveness in the communities by bringing non-traditional students to the college in locations that were not “on campus”. Additionally, they extended their networks to enhance their capacity to better serve their communities. The ability of the colleges to participate in partnerships like these studied is largely dependent on the leadership of the president and resources of the college.

Community colleges are a resource that should be utilized for future grants requiring partnerships or collaborations within a rural community. There were never less than two college or university employees, and up to six employees on one team, represented on partnerships that had a community college or local university involved in the operations of the group. Colleges can provide much needed neutrality, possible



coaching/facilitation services, and resources to support partnership formation, provided their leadership is supportive of such endeavors.

### ***Conclusions***

The intent of the researcher was to determine how rural community partnerships effectively form and sustain themselves for the purpose of rural community economic development, with specific emphasis given to the role of the community college in such partnerships. This study was limited to six sites out of twenty from the PRC Initiative and may not reflect all of those partnerships or partnerships in general; therefore, some of the conclusions drawn from this study may not apply to all partnerships. Nonetheless, the findings do lead the researcher to some important conclusions.

The partnerships in this study learned a lot about their experiences in the PRC Initiative. Even the teams that may not have achieved all the goals they submitted to MDC Inc. and TDE still gained insight into how they might do things differently, if given a chance to work for community change again. No partnership interviewee said they would never work on a partnership again, regardless of the outcome of their particular team. Indeed, some of them were still working with their PRC partnership or the partnerships that developed as a result of team activity. Many of the interviewees were involved in other partnerships within their communities, as well, with richer insight into how the process works.

Partnerships are complex given the individual and contextual background of the community, the skills of the people at the table, and the perceived need and benefits to work together, but understanding and improving the way partnerships form and develop offer significant benefits to communities who have limited resources to effectively address local issues, problems, or opportunities. Partnerships appear to be a strategy for rural communities to utilize to maximize resources and minimize singular perspectives.

This study provides probing insight in the actual functioning of teams so that patterns and commonalities are revealed for the purpose of creating economic development opportunities for rural communities. Just like any culinary experience, the components – table, place settings, diners – are the same. What creates the difference between dining experiences are how those components are used. The same analogy applies to partnerships. The components are universal, but it is up to each team and their funders to determine how to use those components within the context of their community, local organizations, and the community college.



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