

Integrating Community Partnership Perspective in University Functions: A Strategic Approach to Strengthen University-Community Linkage

**(Theme: Community Development,
Sub-Theme: Innovative Ways to Knowledge Societies)**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is often argued that universities and academic institutions can not continue to be centre of knowledge excellence by isolating their entities from the society and community where they belong to. This is perhaps the reason why the university-community partnership has been one of the major areas of concern for the different higher education stake-holders during recent past. The trend shows that the universities are now increasingly looking for the innovative ways to develop and strengthen partnership with the society and community in view of the continuous pressure for being purpose-oriented and relevant. Traditionally the gap between the universities and community organizations has been wider and also not very cooperative. Historically, partnerships between universities and community organizations have been either non-existent or unconstructive; this state of affairs being the result of opposing philosophies and practices. This alienation has resulted in characterizations of the 'impractical and plodding' academic and the 'sloppy and impulsive' practitioner (Martin, Smith and Philips, 2003).

The analysis shows that the last two decades have witnessed a paradigm shift in the approach of how do the universities and community organizations view their relationship with each other. There have been many documented evidences in terms of reflections, surveys, interviews, case studies, content analyses, comparative frameworks, and databases, along with the methodological debates about how best to use these tools. The literature and work in progress on this subject can be roughly categorized into six types of projects including Self-study accounts by participants in partnerships; Local evaluations of partnerships; Proposals and discussions of methods for evaluation; Collections and comparative analyses of case studies; Creation of permanent data systems about multi-site programs; and National evaluations of programs that support local partnerships (Rubin, 2000). Analysis of the existing literature shows that most of the studies are focused at the 'cause and result analysis' rather than finding out the future looking models and approaches of university-community partnerships. One possible reason behind such skewed knowledge development might be the fact that the concept of 'university-community interface' is yet to find its natural place in the basic theories of university planning and management. This fact is also evident from the analysis of most of the emerging models of the 'university-community partnership,' as one can see that most of the success stories are more of emergent type than the planned one. This clearly reflects the need for 'future-oriented' literature development with focus on the present realities.

The analysis of the literature further indicates that there is a need to address the fundamental issues of how do we tailor the 'university-community partnership' under the influence of the given contextual factors for a university. This also necessitates the need for conceptualizing and envisioning the role of modern universities in the fast changing external environment, and then to analyze how best the role can be defined and performed by integrating the perspectives of the different stakeholders of the higher education system. In view of the 'highly variable contextual' organization situation, developing a generic model for 'community partnership' becomes a tough and challenging task but on the other hand availability of rich literature on experience-based analysis provide a good beginning point for the purpose.

The pressing society needs coupled with the ever increasing managerial challenges at institutional level have led to the growing application of the organization management concept and theories in the higher education institutions. This has been one of the major drivers towards shift in the traditional approaches and models of the university functioning. In addition to the other functions, the university-community interface has also been one of the areas that have experienced the wave of change. This calls for development of a sound management model that aims to facilitate the university-community partnership, suited for a particular organizational context and aimed towards accomplishing the fundamental organizational goals.

The evolution of the modern university organization, organized towards the different functions according to the purpose and type of the university, is another area of concern that triggers the need for developing a generic model that can be applied across the different types of universities, irrespective of their orientation, function and service-mix.

Looking into the complexities of the issue, the present paper has been conceptualized around the broader research question of 'how we can develop sustainable university-community partnership in the university organization?' In order to address this research issue, the paper aims to accomplish the following research objectives;

- To review the selected developments in the theory and practice of university-community partnerships;
- To analyze university functions using emerging approaches;
- To identify the possible functional areas of university-community partnership;
- To suggest a generic model for university-community partnership;and
- To analyze the possible application of the approach in open and distance learning systems.

The paper is conceptual in nature and is based on the secondary literature review and experience based observations into higher education management. The insights drawn from the interaction with the different higher education managers during training programmes have also been used in analysis of the issues. The paper aims to suggest a generic framework for developing university-community integration by incorporating the different stakeholder perspective under varying environmental conditions. An attempt has been made to identify and apply the possible application areas in open and distance learning systems. In broader terms, the paper addresses the issue of micro level university organization management and aims to contribute to the knowledge development in the area of 'strategic higher education management' in general, and community partnership strategic planning in particular.

The proposed model is based on the tested concepts of the management, applicable across different organizational settings. However, being conceptual in nature, it suffers from the usual weaknesses associated with such frameworks. The framework requires significant improvements based on testing and implementation in the real university management situation.

2.0 SOME REFLECTIONS ON UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Historically, the universities were separated from their communities due to number of reasons including geographical and social boundaries. This separation is captured in the often invoked expression: 'town and gown' (Martin et. al., 2003). The initial focus of the university organization was mainly on fostering the activities of teaching and research and in order to accomplish their conventional purpose of very existence, the universities separated their activities and this resulted into gradual confinement of the universities in their own defined boundaries.

Usually, in most of the studies, the first eight decades of 20th century can be characterized by the era of isolation in terms of community participation in the university functions (Martin et. al., 2003,

Harkavy, 1998). However, this can not be considered as a universally acceptable timeframe for the purpose as the studies have been specific to the American higher education context. In addition, the stage of socio-economic development also impacts greatly the way the higher education institutions approach their management priorities and therefore, considering the development stages in the other societies if we also incorporate the allowance for this factor by two decades, we can conclude that in most of the 20th century, the direction of the universities functioning was less encouraging in terms of community partnership.

Kysiak (1986, as cited by Martin et. al., 2003) while describing the status of university-community relations at Yale University and Northwestern University, commented that “although universities bring great prestige to a community, many citizens perceive them solely as large, powerful, non-taxpaying entities that soak up city services and provide little in return. This perception, combined with the universities’ penchant for making unilateral decisions without city consultation, made the relationship between the two entities more and more acerbic as time went on” (p. 50). This clearly reflects the way how universities believed to operate, even in one of the most affluent economies of the time.

Martin et. al. (2003) in their article attempted to address the issue by examining the traditional disconnect between universities and communities. Based on the logical premises and real cases, the authors advocated the need for innovative partnerships to bridge the gap. While identifying the possible areas of partnerships, the authors suggest that factors critical to successful innovative university-community partnerships can be summarized as (1) funding, (2) communication, (3) synergy, (4) measurable outcomes, (5) visibility and dissemination of findings, (6) organizational compatibility and (7) simplicity. According to the study, innovation may be viewed as the necessary tool in each factor.

There have been many studies touching the subject from the different perspectives. In a paper based on the partnership in social work education between the University of Ulster and external social work organizations between 1990-1995, Bramford (1996) explains key issues associated with this collaborative process. The paper refers to a particular context in terms of its’ scope and applicability, yet provide some useful insights on the subject.

(Clarke and Hermens, 2001) in their article propose the creation of knowledge communities based on the technological applications. Although, the study is not directly related to the theme, yet offers some valuable insights on possible innovative e-learning application in developing partnerships across the different groups. Recognizing the role of technological development, Kodoma (2002) envisions the importance of strategic community creation as a new management style. The study describes how knowledge and competencies within strategic communities comprising “industry, government, and academia” are enhanced, how the new virtual methods of telemedicine and distance learning are incorporated into the business process, and how “concepts of regionally linked cooperative bodies” are realized. (Macpherson, Homan and Wilkinson 2005) in another study based on e-learning application, justifies the potential of e-learning as a key learning and development strategy within corporate universities.

The experience shows that there has been no limit to the innovation in this field. In addition to the technology and economy, the success of any university-community partnership approach lies mainly on how well it’s rooted into the university’s management philosophy. The recent experience in Alagappa University (Karaikudi, India) shows how well a number of factors have been integrated to make the community partnership programme successful (Tripathi, 2010).

Based on the brief review, some of the observations may be summarized as under;

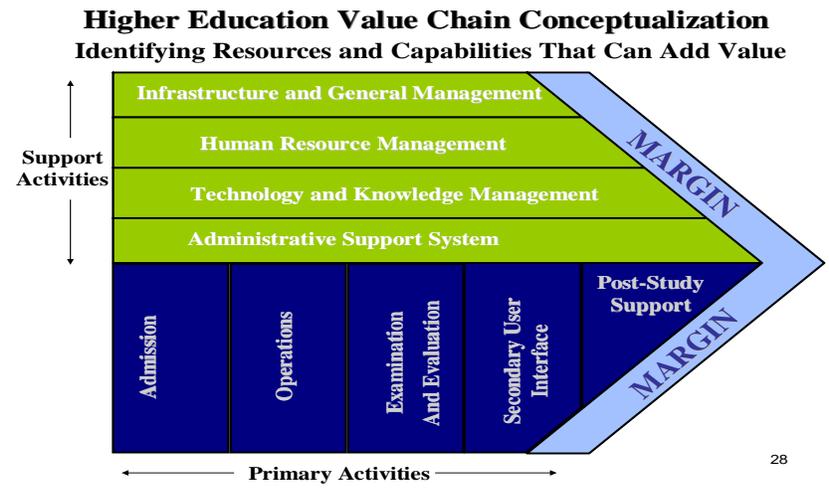
- There is strong need for the university-community partnership;
- Technology can be one of the pivotal factors to make the partnership sustainable;
- The innovation can be the key to implementing the partnership strategy; and
- The integrated approach is required for effective community partnership management

3.0 THE UNIVERSITY VALUE CHAIN AND AREAS FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

The teaching, research and extension can be considered as the three major functions of any higher education system. These functions relate to the activities of knowledge dissemination creation, and application. Teaching and Research can be considered as the traditional functions whereas the 'Extension', which is also referred by the third dimension of the higher education, is relatively a newer addition. The analysis shows that the need for inclusion of extension activities is mainly justified on the premise that universities should be active partner in the Community development.

Interestingly, the nature of university organization suggests that the socio-economic purpose should be its guiding principle however; evolution of the community partnership has been more as the programme based approach rather than incorporating it into basic university management philosophy and policy. In order to orient the overall university functions towards its social objectives, it becomes necessary to identify the areas where we can integrate the community partnership dimension, irrespective of the nature and magnitude of the community partnership activities.

The potential areas can be identified on basis of the application of the analytical higher education value chain as presented in the Figure 1. The framework suggests that entire activities of the higher educations institutions can be categorized into two broader categories: primary activities which are responsible for the direct service delivery areas whereas secondary activities support the primary activities



(Figure 1: Higher Education Value Chain Conceptualization)

Adopted from Saraswat R. C. and Tripathi S.K. (2009), 'Analysis of Emerging Environment and Quality Challenges in Indian Higher Education: A Value-Chain Approach' Association of Indian Universities Journal 'University News', JAN 19 -25, 2007, pp. 01 – 06. The value Chain conceptualization presented on the basis of the original value chain proposed by Michael Porter.

Contrary to the traditional view of placing the 'Extension and Community Partnership' as one of the primary activities, the modified value chain proposes to integrate it across the different value-chain linkages among both the primary and secondary activities depending on a number of context specific factors. Therefore, instead of providing any list of the potential areas, the framework can be applied to identify the areas as per the need of the organization in a particular socio-cultural setting.

4.0 STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT MODEL FOR UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

The continuous community partnership management approach requires not only the identification of the potential areas but also a generic framework that can be used to guide the overall management system in the university organization. A strategic community partnership model is conceptualized below in Figure 2.

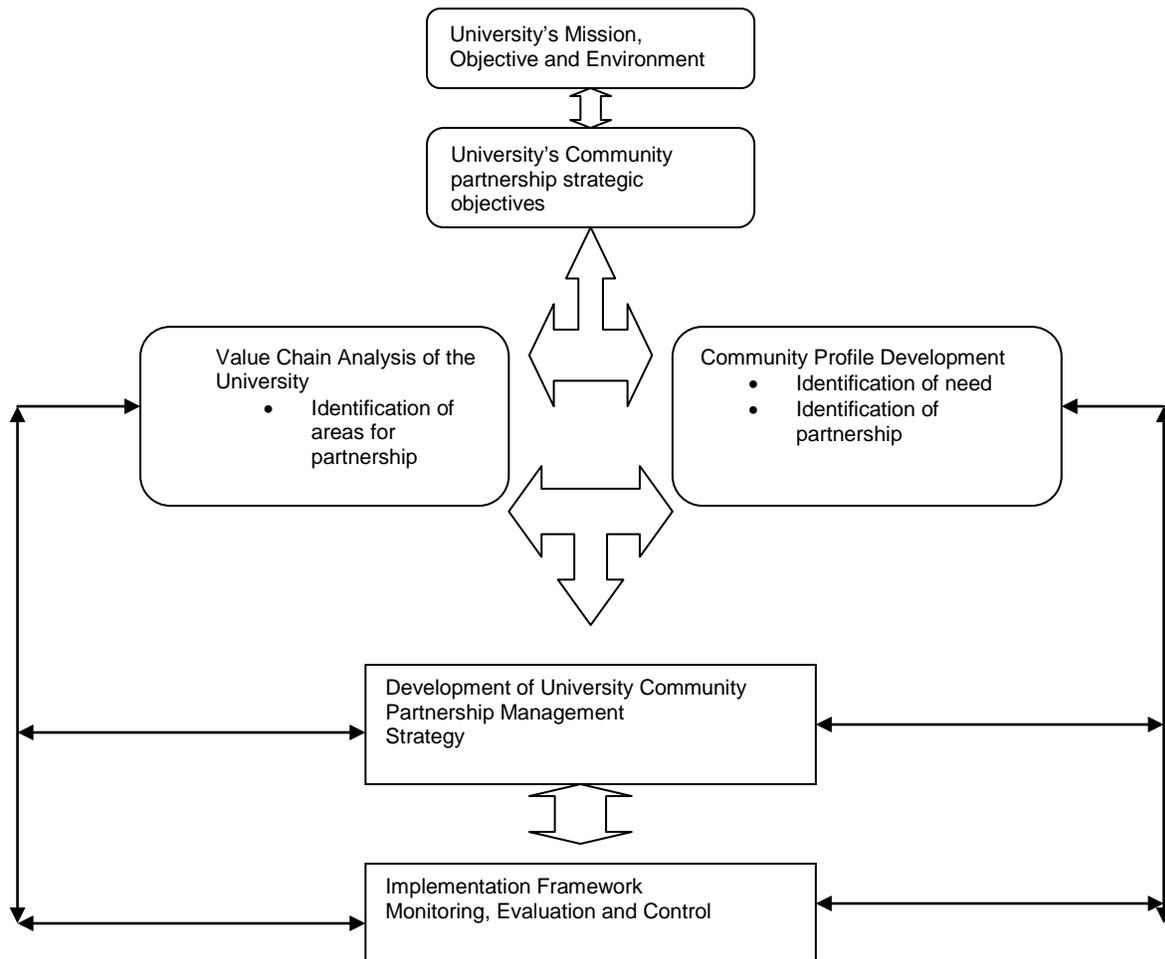


Figure 2: Generic Strategic Community Partnership Management Model

As discussed above, the proposed model links the university's strategic management process to the community partnership activities and conceptualized this activity as one of the strategic functions of the university's. The university's community partnership objectives, as linked its mission, will involve the consideration of the different stakeholder perspectives under the given situational factors. The strategic process will further enable the institutions to come up with innovative approaches as at the next level it requires careful consideration of realistic matching between different internally analyzed value chain linkages with the different community partnership areas. Based on the compatibility of these two dimensions, the University community partnership management strategy can be planned at the functional level. Supported by strong implementation system and regular monitoring and control mechanism, the system will continue to work as on-going process integrated to the overall university management system. The feedback / feed-forward line would always act as the triggering point for any variation or change during the process.

5.0 APPLICATIONS IN OPEN LEARNING SYSTEMS

The open and distance-learning systems, which are evolving as one of the most cost-effective and high-performance oriented approach for promoting the community development can make use of this model to identify and tailor their programmes / service outputs to meet their community development agenda. The application can take place at two levels;

A. Operational:

At this level the application of the model would mainly be in identifying the programme and services of the university for community development. This will mainly be focused around the primary distance education functions of teaching, research and short-term training programmes.

B. Strategic

At this level, the model can be applied in identifying the possible areas of collaboration between the University and the community to facilitate the synergistic integration in performing the different open and distance learning functions effectively and efficiently. For example; such partnerships may also include the areas like resource sharing, joint teaching and research activities, etc.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

The recent past has witnessed significant increase in the concern towards the University-Community partnership dimension. It has been recognized that such partnerships have great potential to not only helping the universities in fulfilling its social objectives but may also facilitate the development of strategic competencies. With the emerging potential of open and distance learning medium to effectively address the community development objectives in a cost effective manner, the relevance of the concept increases. However, the effective management of the partnership requires its integration with the overall strategic management function of the university. Application of value chain analysis concept and the proposed generic framework may help to facilitate the effective community partnership management for benefit of all the stakeholders of the system.

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