PROGRAMMING

The LINC Project: An Intergenerational Statewide Collaborative Project

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ABSTRACT. The Linking Intergenerational Networks in Communities (LINC) Project, a statewide, collaborative, intergenerational program, funded in 1995 by the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation, included Clemson University, the Bureau of Senior Services for South Carolina, the South Carolina Department of Education, and the United Way of South Carolina. In this paper, the author focuses on what the partnering groups learned during the five-year project about the process of creating and implementing a collaborative statewide intergenerational program that included a public university, the state offices of aging and education, and a private fundraising and public service agency. The author, who during part of the project was the evaluator at Generations Together at the University of Pittsburgh and who consulted with the LINC project on the project evaluation from 1998 to 2000, uses the literature on collabo-
ration to describe how the four partners worked together to form an intergenerational collaborative organization in South Carolina.

KEYWORDS. Intergenerational programs, statewide collaboratives, keys to success

INTRODUCTION

The LINC Project as an Organization

In 1995, with funding from the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation of South Carolina, Clemson University, the Bureau of Senior Services for South Carolina, the South Carolina Department of Education, and the United Way of South Carolina formed a statewide intergenerational collaboration called the Linking Intergenerational Networks in Communities (LINC) Project. The goal of this collaborative initiative was to create programs for children, youth, and older adults in schools, senior centers, and other community groups throughout South Carolina. Over the five years of the project, the partners helped 12 local sites establish intergenerational projects in their communities.

The LINC Steering Committee, comprised of a top administrator and a staff level person from each organization, managed the project. The Steering Committee provided training and technical assistance to the community directors, regularly reported to the funding agency, and evaluated community LINC projects (LINC Project Semi-Annual Report, June 1996). Each partner took on one or more major tasks. The United Way of South Carolina oversaw the fiscal management of the project and acted as liaison between the Steering Committee and the funding agency. The Clemson University team selected and/or developed evaluation instruments that measured changes in attitudes, behaviors, and community pride, as well as overall program effectiveness. The South Carolina Department of Education linked the project to the South Carolina school system and provided training to the community directors. Over time, the South Carolina Department of Education became the main connection between the LINC Project and the community directors. The South Carolina Bureau of Senior Services assisted community directors in recruiting older adults. The intergenerational coordinator at the Bureau of Senior Services trained the
community directors to determine the needs of older adults and to access the resources in the state.

Besides the four partnering groups, two other entities played a major role in the LINC Project: community directors and the staff at Generations Together at the University of Pittsburgh (GT). Each of the 12 sites hired a part-time community director. In addition to performing duties related to coordinating local intergenerational projects, the community directors provided information about site activities to the LINC Steering Committee and contacted the Steering Committee’s point persons if problems arose (LINC Project Semi-Annual Report, 1996). Evaluators from GT assisted the Clemson University team with designing an impact evaluation strategy. They also conducted a process evaluation of the collaborative project that included regular annual site visits to all of the community sites and meetings with the Steering Committee. The GT evaluator submitted in-depth reports about the progress of the LINC Project. Other GT staff trained community coordinators, older adults, and youth to develop intergenerational projects.

The LINC Project as a Statewide Collaborative Intergenerational Program

Although each of the partners in the LINC project had its own specific responsibilities, much of the success of the project can be attributed to the collaboration between the four partnering groups. In this paper, the author will outline some benefits, barriers, and recommendations for successful collaboration and will describe how the LINC project implemented a management and oversight protocol, identified collaborative tasks, and integrated each organization’s mission, outlook, and culture. The reader will see how this collaborative statewide intergenerational project established both individual and collaborative roles and responsibilities, developed a complex communication system, and utilized the resources and expertise of each partner in the collaborative effort.

RATIONALE

Intergenerational Statewide Collaborative Programs

Intergenerational programs, by their very nature, are collaborative. Except for serendipitous events, each planned intergenerational program brings together organizations that work with children and youth with those that work with older adults. Few intergenerational programs, however, attempt to bring together statewide organizations with different missions and agendas into one organized group to jointly serve children and older adults. Examples of regional or statewide collaborative intergenerational initiatives are difficult to
find in the literature, but do include a Pennsylvania project that helped aging and child care networks implement state intergenerational programs (Lyons et al., 1985); a collaborative project with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Office on Aging, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Community Education to incorporate concepts of aging into the curriculum, promote understanding between the generations, and open up school facilities to older persons (Intergenerational Programs in Wisconsin Schools, 1983); the Austin Groups for the Elderly (AGE), a conglomerate of service agencies serving older adults and children in Austin, TX (Smith, 1990); and the Florida state school volunteer program, a program supported by legislation and state appropriation that utilized older adults as school volunteers (Intergenerational Educational Partnerships, 1989). Other programs known through reputation, but not documented in the literature, include intergenerational program development networks in Illinois, Massachusetts, and New York.

**Benefits and Barriers of Collaborative Projects**

The benefits of collaborative approaches to program implementation have been documented (Beder, 1986; Mattessich, 1992; Murk, 1990; Nyden, 1998; Yore, 1983) and include prevention of duplication of effort by organizational personnel; prevention of multiplication of services and facilities in municipalities, regions, or states; provision of resources and expertise to a group that may not have been available to a single organization; and additional public support for all agencies involved. However, collaborative approaches are not without problems (Beder, 1984; Bogo & Globerman, 1999; Lesage, 1988; Schmitz, 1999; Vallette, 1999). Some potential problems include an increase in the amount of time it takes to complete the project because of demands on each organization; internal politics within one organization that can have a negative effect on the efforts of the collaboration; differing organizational missions, outlooks and cultures that can hinder or change the operation of the collaborative program; difficulty in obtaining funding; lack of informed evaluation; and failure to consummate the collaboration with a formal agreement which often leads to misunderstandings or even failure to complete the project.

Recommendations on how to avoid some of the pitfalls of collaborative work and reap the benefits are documented in the literature. Writers suggest that collaborative projects implement a management and oversight protocol (Okamoto, 2001; Walter & Petr, 2001), identify collaborative tasks (Bogo & Globerman, 1999), and integrate each organization’s mission, outlook, and culture into the collaboration. Over the course of the five-year project, the partner organizations in the LINC project attempted to complete all three of these tasks.
DEVELOPMENT OF LINC
AS A STATEWIDE COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

Implementation of a Management and Oversight Protocol

There are some areas of administrative practice that may be implemented differently and sometimes more effectively in a collaborative rather than in a single-organization project. The themes that describe these differences include relationship building, participatory planning, collective decision-making, coordinating and sharing of tasks, problem solving/conflict resolution, and facilitative leadership (Gill de Gibaja, 2001). At the start of the LINC Project, the partner representatives attempted to organize themselves into a new organization and addressed many of the themes listed above. Initially, a group of representatives of the partners met on an ad hoc basis to make decisions. The composition of the group changed from month to month, resulting in lack of clarity about decisions. In the December 1996 report the GT evaluator writes, “It has become evident that the project faces communication challenges because of the large number of persons and agencies involved in LINC.” In 1998, the intergenerational coordinator from the South Carolina Department of Education assumed the coordination function of the collaborative, thus improving and simplifying communication among the partners.

Early in the LINC Project, the partners also struggled to define their strategy for working with the project’s community sites. Several questions emerged, including: Who will work directly with the sites on project development to provide technical assistance and assist with the design of intergenerational activities? Who will provide training to site coordinators and what will be the content of that training? What will be the financial support strategy? Who will determine if service learning or other volunteer/service models are relevant or appropriate to each of the sites? To what degree should the LINC partners mandate desired procedures and outcomes to the sites and to what degree should sites be autonomous?

Each of the first five sites signed contractual agreements by 1996. The agreement stated that, “The Provider (host community organizations, i.e., school system, senior center, United Way Office) will work collaboratively with other organizations to establish and maintain an intergenerational program that partners youth and older adult mentors to perform community service projects.” The agreement also contained statements on staff training, project implementation, documentation of community activities, evaluation, collaboration, quality assurance, public awareness, and finance. The 1996 “Keys to Success: Local LINC Project Requirements” stated that the local LINC community directors must meet together at least quarterly to discuss
their projects “to prevent disconnectedness and to learn from each other.” The requirement set a standard that the community directors would meet at least monthly with their project mentor (a member of the Steering Committee) to review past events and project progress and to be part of the planning for future activities.

The role of the community coordinator evolved during the course of the project. The Steering Committee realized the importance of having the community coordinators become a part of the administrative team. In the 1997 Annual Report, the Clemson evaluation team wrote, “With regard to community coordinators and the administration of the project, community directors (1) should be actively involved and accessible to LINC partners, (2) should be involved in writing annual proposals and contracts, (3) should be willing to seek additional funds, and (4) should contribute to programming and project continuation.”

Identification of Collaborative Tasks

In order for a group of organizations to emerge as a new collaborative organization, they must identify tasks that they can do collaboratively. These tasks must be ones that each group could not have done as well as a single entity. Over the five years of the project, collaborative tasks became the focus of the new relationship. Some of these tasks include:

Training

The LINC partners worked together to provide training for program coordinators, youth, and older adults in the project. One of the earliest of these training sessions was the Community Directors Training Institute held on August 28, 1995, at the Outdoor Recreation Laboratory in Clemson, SC. Dr. Sally Newman, Executive Director of Generations Together, was the keynote speaker and participants included representatives from all the LINC partners and from the community sites. The presentation topics included service learning; media relations; leadership development; working with children, youth, and older adults; community needs assessment; recruiting and retaining volunteers; risk management; and evaluation. The LINC Project partners held a second Community Directors Training on December 5, 1995. In 1997, GT staff conducted a day-long training workshop for the five community directors. In 1998, all of the new community directors attended the Intergenerational Training Institute in Pittsburgh. The staff from the Bureau of Senior Services frequently held training sessions for community directors on how to recruit and train older adults. The staff from the Department of Education held workshops on service learning and other educational topics. The Clemson University team con-
ducted orientation sessions on the goals and mission of the LINC Project for school teachers.

Celebrations

In the fall of 1996 the LINC project held a celebration that included participants from all of the sites and LINC partners. The celebration was a kick-off for the upcoming school year. Young people in the LINC projects shared some of their thoughts and experiences. It then became a tradition to end each year of the LINC Project with a celebration. The final LINC celebration, held in Irmo, South Carolina, in June 2000 brought together 600 students, older adults, teachers, and community directors.

Public Relations

The LINC partners formally discussed publicity efforts for the first time in December 1996. The Steering Committee members discussed creating a report with pictures and text that could be distributed in the communities to members of aging networks, United Way member organizations, school boards, and business organizations. The LINC coordinator from the Bureau of Aging created a LINC mailing list and by April of 1996 it contained 750 names.

Often, the partners joined together to promote the LINC Project in public arenas. The partners attended the 1996 Association of Rural Educators Conference and represented the LINC Project on an intergenerational roundtable discussion. The LINC Project partners set up a display at the Showcase on Education in South Carolina, January 29-30, 1997. The partners manned the display, answered questions, and distributed information. A team of community directors and representatives from several of the partners held a workshop at the Generations Together International Intergenerational Institute in Pittsburgh in 1998. Representatives from Clemson University and Generations Together presented a LINC workshop at the Generations United Annual Conference in June of 1999. In all, the partners collaborated in the preparation of reports, a book, several videotapes, brochures, T-shirts and other memorabilia that promoted the LINC Project to the community and nationally.

Site Visits

A team representing the partners visited the LINC community sites annually. Each year, the Department of Education Intergenerational Coordinator made regular site visits and each fall, the GT Evaluator, sometimes in the company of a representative from one of the partners, visited the sites. The partners
met regularly to hear reports from the communities and to participate in helping community directors improve their programs.

**Mentoring Community Coordinators**

A member of the Steering Committee became a mentor to each of the community sites. The mentors maintained regular contact with their assigned community director to provide assistance to the community director as requested, to assist the community director in identifying techniques for developing and implementing intergenerational service-learning projects, to share resources, to keep the Steering Committee informed about community activities, to involve the Steering Committee in decisions that would alter policy, and to facilitate semi-annual visits of the partners. During the early years, the mentors reported on their sites at the LINC Board meetings.

**Electronic Linkages**

In the December 1996 report, the GT evaluator recommended that the project should complete electronic linkages among the sites and the four partners and should utilize these linkages for regular communication. The Clemson University team designed a Website to “become a focal point for the project within South Carolina and elsewhere” (LINC Project Semi-Annual Report, 1996). All participants in the LINC Project communicated regularly through a listserv. In 1999, the United Way of South Carolina began work on SCAN21, a database for South Carolina that would assist United Way directors (and others in the State) in designing intergenerational programs and coordinating training and disseminating information. SCAN21 brings together, on one Internet site, all of the organizational assets of South Carolina communities.

**Fundraising**

The Department of Education intergenerational coordinator helped site coordinators apply for $5,000 grants from the Department of Education for service-learning activities. The Steering Committee discussed other ways to provide funds for the continuation of the LINC Project. One idea, proposed in 1999, would place a check-off box on the South Carolina income tax form for citizens to donate money to intergenerational programming. The Steering Committee also recommended applying for continuation funds from the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation to support an intergenerational coordinator for the state of South Carolina. In the last year of the project, the South Carolina Department of Education successfully obtained funding from the Corporation
for National Service for intergenerational community projects in the public schools.

Annual Reports

Each year, the four partners collaborated on an annual report to the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation. Each of the partners contributed information including a yearly impact evaluation, a financial report, summaries of site activities, and a process evaluation.

Integrating Each Organization’s Mission, Outlook, and Culture into the Collaboration

In all collaborative projects, each partner brings its own organizational agenda and that agenda has an effect on how the new organization develops. This is a necessary process, and if handled well, strengthens the collaboration. Over the course of the five years of the LINC Project, elements from the mission or culture of each of the four partners emerged and affected the partnership.

Service Learning

In 1995, many K-12 and higher education educators incorporated service-learning activities into their curriculum. Within the LINC Project, the South Carolina Department of Education promoted the idea of using service learning as a vehicle for implementing and funding intergenerational activities. This idea was, at first, controversial with some of the partners. In 1995 the GT evaluator stated, “The sites are being pushed in particular directions. For example, they all will implement service learning and will be invited to the service-learning training.” In 1996, one of the sites, Florence, voted to decline the service-learning award, stating that too many “strings were attached.” Although controversial, service learning survived and flourished in the LINC project. Service-learning grants partially funded activities at all sites except Florence.

Diversity

The presence of public institutions within the collaborative brought to the forefront the need for racial diversity among the participants of the project, and, in particular, the leadership. As early as 1995, the GT evaluator recommended that the LINC Project partners develop a plan by the spring of 1996 “to work collaboratively with the sites to increase local Black leadership.” African
American children and youth participated in the programs, but the partners felt that there needed to be a greater representation of minorities among the older adults and among the project coordinators. The GT evaluator, in the 1996 report, writes that the LINC Project addressed all of the recommendations made in the first year except the recommendation about increasing the Black leadership. He suggests that the coordinators recruit Black role models from Black churches (LINC Semi-Annual Report, 1996). Again in the August 1997 report to the LINC Project, the GT evaluator recommends that each of the seven new sites submit a work plan that, among other things, explains how the project will recruit a racially diverse group of male and female older adults and a diverse advisory board. The problem of diversity continued to be a challenge for the project, although the situation improved each year.

Evaluation

The impact evaluation plans, created by the Clemson University evaluation team with the assistance of the GT evaluator created some “town and gown” issues. Grant funding requires evaluation, and the two university groups wanted to create an evaluation strategy that would demonstrate the effectiveness of the project in creating communities where intergenerational activities generate benefits to its young and old citizens. The two university groups also wanted to publish the results of the evaluation for use by other organizations. The first evaluation strategy included a total of 17 assessment tools administered to youth and older adults and teachers. In addition, community coordinators sent monthly status reports to Clemson University to document the number and characteristics of their participants. Evaluation instruments created a lot of additional paperwork for community directors, and they reported feeling overwhelmed. Collection of information from the sites became a problem for all concerned. In a 1995 report the evaluator says, “The LINC Project partners should review the information that they plan to collect from the sites and attempt to reduce the number and length of the forms. The partners should conduct a training session with the project coordinators to review the completion of all forms, reports, and evaluation instruments.” Many community coordinators echoed these feelings. One said, “I feel overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork and have no clerical help to assist me.”

The Clemson team made at least two major changes to their strategy for evaluating the impact of the LINC Project on participants and individuals. The GT evaluator, in December 1996, said that the focus of the evaluation had switched to a greater use of focus groups and a reduction in forms that needed to be completed. Again in 1998, the LINC partners altered the evaluation strategy. The Clemson team adapted a smaller number of user-friendly assessment forms created by Generations Together for their Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program. The result of these changes was an evaluation process that satisfied the community and the partners.
At-Risk Kids

Originally, the LINC Project focused on the needs of children designated by their school systems as “at risk.” However, as the program progressed, it became more and more difficult for community coordinators to identify at-risk children. In the report from the GT evaluator dated December 1996, the evaluator asked the Steering Committee to consider certain issues that had arisen over the first year, including whether the project should serve at-risk children or all children. The Steering Committee decided to eliminate the term “at risk” from the mission statements of the LINC Program.

Older Adult Involvement

The Steering Committee wanted to utilize the Bureau of Senior Services’ expertise about older adults in the development of the local sites. In an early evaluation document (LINC Project Year-End Report, 1995), the evaluator reported that sites had difficulty recruiting older adults. One community director reportedly said, “Recruiting seniors for the new project at Starr Elementary may be a challenge.” The GT evaluator advised, “The partners should work with the sites on recruiting older adults. The site’s primary challenges are recruiting, development, and the orientation and training of volunteers.” Still, two years later, in the 1997 annual report, Clemson University reports that several of the LINC community directors had difficulty recruiting senior volunteers and were unfamiliar with potential recruitment locations, recruitment methods, and volunteer management practices. In 1998, the Bureau of Senior Services appointed a new intergenerational coordinator who had a long history in aging services and in intergenerational initiatives in Illinois. At this point, the involvement of the aging partner in the LINC Project increased greatly and community directors began indicating that the help they received in recruiting older adults to their projects was effective.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of the LINC Project teaches us much about building intergenerational statewide collaborative projects. The following descriptions highlight what we have learned.

Establish Individual and Collaborative Roles and Responsibilities

It took time and a lot of effort for each LINC partner to find a comfortable “fit” within the new organization. The partners exchanged and adjusted their roles more than once before the project officially ended in June of 2000. For example, the United Way of South Carolina initially had the responsibility
for communicating with the community coordinators. However, as time went on, the intergenerational coordinator at the Department of Education took over this and other coordination activities. Similarly, the Clemson University team initially took responsibility for education and training, but by the end of the project it focused its attention primarily on evaluation. Training responsibilities shifted to the Department of Education and the Bureau of Senior Services.

**Develop an Effective Communication Strategy**

*Centralizing Communication Efforts*

The organizational structure of the LINC Project was complicated and contained many intersecting components. It took a couple of years for LINC to develop an effective communication strategy that included the partners, the community coordinators, the funding agency, and other interested groups. The Steering Committee wrote and monitored communication protocols. The partners learned that communication with the community coordinators was more efficient if one partner served as a mediator rather than if all the partners communicated with the coordinators on their own.

*Using New Technologies*

The LINC Project took advantage of new technologies as it created its collaborative organization. A listserv greatly enhanced communication between the partners and the community coordinators. Each group in the LINC Project read the weekly reports from the community coordinators in order to keep in touch with what was happening at each site. At the end of the project, the United Way of South Carolina connected LINC with SCAN21, a database of services for South Carolina.

**Utilize the Resources and Expertise of Each Partner in the New Collaborative**

*Combining Target Populations*

The groups that worked together in the LINC Project traditionally served different populations and often competed with one another for scarce resources. The LINC Project partners learned to recognize the strengths of other competing groups and effectively use the combined organizational assets to strengthen the project and impact the children, youth, and older adults in South Carolina. The inclusion of the United Way of South Carolina, a group that services all ages, greatly strengthened the LINC Project’s ability to meet the needs of all age groups.
Working Together to Meet Each Other's Individual Goals

The LINC Project brought together university and community groups. University groups are interested in doing evaluation and research, while community groups are primarily interested in providing a service. The Clemson University team often had difficulty persuading community coordinators to complete assessment forms and to comply with research protocols. To solve this problem, the Clemson team called upon the assistance of the intergenerational coordinators from the Department of Education and the Bureau of Senior Services. These individuals underscored the importance of evaluation to program success at the community level.

Employing Outside Groups to Evaluate to Enhance the Resources or Expertise of the Partners

Staff from Generations Together monitored progress, provided an objective voice when issues arose, advised about evaluation, and provided expert training and technical assistance. The addition of an outside evaluation consultant is one way of keeping a collaborative group on track and lessening tensions between partnering groups.

Intergenerational programming has become a permanent part of life in South Carolina through the efforts of the LINC Project. Two of the partners, the Department of Education and the Bureau of Senior Services have established permanent intergenerational coordinator positions. The efforts of the LINC Project have resulted in new funding for intergenerational initiatives in the state through the Corporation for National Service.

NOTE

1. The first five sites, funded in 1995 and 1996, included the cities/towns of Florence, Richland, Spartanburg, Iva, and McCormick. The second group of seven funded sites, funded in 1998, included Florence, Irmo, Kershaw, Aiken, Greenwood, Belton, and Sumter.

REFERENCES

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