IMPACT CASE STUDY 3

Homelessness Through Different Lenses: Negotiating Multiple Meaning Systems in a Canadian Tri-Sector Social Partnership

March 2017 | Office of Community-University Engagement
This *Impact Case Study* was produced by Dr. Crystal Tremblay in collaboration with the faculty lead(s) identified in the following case study. All twelve *Impact Case Studies* were included in Dr. Crystal Tremblay’s research project, *Community-Engaged Research (CER) at the University of Victoria 2009—2015*, that scanned the impact of UVic’s involvement with community-engaged research over a six-year period.

Dr. Tremblay's research was supported by the Office of Community-University Engagement and the Office of the Vice-President Research. Learn more about this project at uvic.ca/ocue/research.
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UN Sustainable Development Goals addressed by this project

3. Good health & well-being
10. Reduced inequalities
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all & build effective, accountable & inclusive institutions at all levels

UVic's International Plan Goals addressed by this project

- Science, Technology and Sustainability
- Borders, Trade, Immigration, Laws and Government

Advancing processes of diverse partnership collaboration within complex organizational contexts through a case study of the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness

Faculty Lead: Sarah Easter & Mary Yoko Brannen, Gustavson School of Business

Partners: Donald Elliott, Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness. Board of Directors include: Lisa Helps, CRD-City of Victoria Ian Batey, Community Director, Steve Tribe, Community Director, Michael L, Community Director, Bruce Parisian, Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness, Vicki Sanders, CRD-Saanich, Lynda Hundleby, CRD-Esquimalt, Shayne Ramsay, BC Housing, Sandra Richardson, Victoria Foundation, Patricia Jelinski, United Way, Cheryl Damstetter, Island Health, and Coalition Stakeholders.

Project timeframe: 2015-2016

Funding: The Coalition receives operational support from the City of Victoria, Capital Regional District and Island Health. In addition, the Coalition projects are supported by the United Way, Victoria Foundation and the Government of Canada.

Partnership webpage: http://victoriahomelessness.ca
About

The research explored how tri-sector partnerships (i.e., public, private and nonprofit players) tackling a complex social issue, such as homelessness, interact and work together over time. For partnerships that are highly interconnected in nature and managerially complex, working together over time can be particularly challenging as these types of alliances often bring together individuals and organizations that are diverse in terms of social issue scope and definition, goals, values, working expectations, etc. As such the purpose of this research was to seek to understand and document the processes by which such diverse partnerships collaborate over time with a central focus on players that act as boundary spanners within these complex organizational contexts.

The Coalition, founded in 2008, is a partnership involving all levels of government, service providers, business members, the faith community, post-secondary institutions, private citizens and the homeless themselves focused upon effectively ending homelessness in the Greater Victoria area by 2018. Their is a robust governance and operational framework in place that support approximately 41 distinct stakeholder organizations.

"The work significantly enhanced the Coalitions' ability to engage in strategic planning and help facilitate a rethinking of the role of the organization at supporting stakeholders in providing housing and support services to those experiencing chronic homelessness."

(Donald Elliott, Community Partner)

Impact Summary

One of the key overall findings that was helpful to the Coalition directly was: surfacing of different understandings of the Coalition’s identity (i.e., its focal purpose and goals) among involved players emanating from key contextual factors (e.g., organizations/stakeholder groups that individuals represented within the partnership). Making explicit these different perspectives helped the Coalition players to better see things from alternative viewpoints and to work to be inclusive and supportive of different notions feeding into the Coalition’s work.

Level of Impact: Individual Community Systems

Several benefits to the Coalition were identified through participating in this project, including:

in-depth research related to the operations priority of the organization; a better understanding of how the Coalition has developed and grown over time; and, an enhanced sense of the level of alignment between stakeholder organizations. In addition, this project had the potential to contribute to an enhanced understanding of cross-sector partnerships and critical factors for more effective collaboration on complex social issues.

Good Health and Well-being - Impact through the development of a more robust ‘systems approach’ to providing better health and social support services in support of the needs of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.

Reduced Inequalities - Better collaboration between stakeholders on providing housing at shelter rate to individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.

Promote Inclusive Societies - Significant re-imagining of the role of the Coalition in addressing homelessness. Evolved organization much more focussed on action and functioning in the capacity of ‘system manager’ with community at the heart of all initiatives.
Motivations for starting the project

The project was initiated by Sarah Easter who engaged the Coalition Executive Director at the time, Andrew Wynn-Williams. Several benefits to the Coalition were identified through participating in this project, including: in-depth research related to the operations priority of the organization; a better understanding of how the Coalition has developed and grown over time; and, an enhanced sense of the level of alignment between stakeholder organizations. In addition, this project had the potential to contribute to an enhanced understanding of cross-sector partnerships and critical factors for more effective collaboration on complex social issues.

Student role & Impact

This project was carried out by me, a former student, as a part of my dissertation work at UVic. While I provided ongoing updates to the Coalition throughout the course of this study, at its conclusion I also provided a summary of the key findings as well as recommendations for the Coalition in moving forward.

"Engaging in this work showed me the value of taking up a community based approach in understanding a complex societal challenge and how this actually plays out in action. It also highlighted for me the power of collective action as well as the incredible challenges facing such a multi-faceted partnership that involves public, private and nonprofit actors in working to solve homelessness in the local community."

Key findings

1) Surfacing of different understandings of the Coalition’s identity (i.e., its focal purpose and goals) among involved players emanating from key contextual factors (e.g., organizations/stakeholder groups that individuals represented within the partnership);

2) A process model detailing how the Coalition’s identity is continually changing over time; and

3) Capabilities that individuals possess who are savvy at navigating across different perspectives within the Coalition

Extent of community collaboration throughout the project cycle  55%

In the beginning of the project, during the proposal development phase, I first met with the Executive Director to discuss the Coalition’s possible involvement in my dissertation research to ensure that this was a collaborative endeavor that would also be beneficial to the Coalition’s ongoing work.

Throughout this ethnographic study, I worked closely with the Coalition in order to ensure that my emergent sense making was reflective of their experiences working in the Coalition including regularly meeting with involved players to discuss ongoing findings, clarify issues and ask follow up questions. At the conclusion of the study, I also provided a draft summary of findings and recommendations and sought out additional feedback from participants before finalizing it.
**Outputs**

| Working papers | 3 |
| Refereed conference papers | 3 |
| Dissertation | 1 |
| Non-refereed publications | |
| Invited Presentations | 1 |
| Partner committee meeting | 1 |

**Outcomes**

- Development of new and improved theory
- Increased interdisciplinary linkages
- Developments to the cross sector partnership, organizational identity and boundary spanning literatures
- Increased collaboration from a multi-disciplinary perspective
- Industry connections and spinoffs
- Building community sector organization capacities
- Project helped bring stakeholders to the table
- Better understanding of organization and re-connection with existing stakeholders
- New strategic plan and direction
- New institutional/organizational structures

**Key factors for a successful CER project:**

Engaging with the Coalition partners as much as possible throughout the duration of this study.

Capturing the variety of different perspectives involved in the Coalition and how they interacted over time in seeking to address a complex societal challenge.

"**Ongoing transparent communications and a willingness to produce research that is of benefit to both the university and the community partners are key factors in the success of the partnership**"

**Challenges encountered**

Faculty lead: As I was concerned with providing a holistic narrative of the Coalition's work and accounting for a variety of different viewpoints, it was challenging to ensure that I appropriately gave voice to all of the different players involved -- governmental, nonprofit, business, faith, postsecondary, experiential community, etc.

Community partner: Lack of clarity of Coalition by stakeholders. Lack of communication between some within Coalition framework. Lack of resources to address identified needs. Politics surrounding issues of poverty and housing/homelessness.
Key References


Working papers:

Easter, S, Brannen, M.Y., & Thornton, P. The promise of integrating institutional logics and negotiated culture perspectives for cross sector partnership research. Targeted for Human Relations (December 2016)

Easter, S. & Murphy, M. Bridging across multiple meaning systems: Boundary spanning in a Canadian tri-sector social partnership. Status: Preparing draft for submission to 2017 Academy of Management Conference Target journal: Organization Studies