Evaluating the Impact of Seed Money Grants in Stimulating Growth of Community-based Research and Service-Learning at a Major Public Research University

Judith A. Jetson, Mary E. Evans, and Wendy Hathaway
University of South Florida

ABSTRACT

At a major research university, community engagement must intersect with research productivity and attract external funding to be well-regarded. At USF, community engagement increased its value to the institution by using seed grants for community-based research and service-learning projects. Between 1998 and 2006, 132 projects received $1.65 million in seed money from general revenue and local government funds, bringing over $9 million in grants to USF, a return on investment of approximately 6-to-1.

BACKGROUND

There is a growing institutional interest in service-learning and community engagement, recently promoted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's decision to offer a system for measuring it in academic institutions. Although an optional ranking, it represents a significant verification of the importance of community engagement in the agenda of higher education. Increasing the availability of competitive faculty mini-grants is one of six strategies for building faculty support for engagement (Dubb 2007, p. 81). The other five strategies are: lobbying discipline associations to value engagement, recalibrating tenure evaluation so that engagement scholarship is valued, providing faculty course releases, using awards to increase the prestige of the work, and making available community engagement sabbaticals. Whether referring to high tech business ventures or new interventions to improve children's mental health, early stage seed capital is generally acknowledged as a necessary step to advance from initial conceptualization to the stage where larger investors or grants can be attracted. At research universities, these mini-grants also serve as a vehicle to operationalize several of the principles of community-based research described by Israel, Schulz, Parker and Becker (1998). These principles are: (a) recognizes community as a unit of identity, (b) builds on strengths and resources within the community, (c) facilitates collaborative partnerships, (d) integrates knowledge and action for mutual benefit, (e) promotes a co-learning and empowering process, (f) involves a cyclical and interactive process – including concern for sustainability, (g) addresses health from positive and ecological perspectives, and (h) disseminates findings and knowledge gained to all.

A recent study of community engagement at USF identified eight principles that characterized best practice in engaged research at research institutions (Ersing, Jetson, Jones, & Keller, 2007). While the principles of Ersing et al. track closely with the principles described above (Israel et al. 1998), they place more emphasis on entrepreneurial qualities and small wins and less emphasis on more academic notions such as the community as a unit of identity. The principles identified by Ersing et al. are as follows: community engagement and engaged

research at USF is reciprocal, strengths-based, sustainable, incremental, strategic, enterprising, dissemination oriented, and creative.

USF'S EXPERIENCE

In the mid 1990s, both internal and external factors led to the formation of a seed capital fund to support faculty engaged in community-based research on children, families and communities at USF. The external factor was strong encouragement by the Children's Board of Hillsborough County. The Children's Board is a quasi-governmental organization providing funds to non-profit organizations, schools and neighborhood projects in order to improve child well-being. The Children's Board encouraged USF to provide easy and central access to university knowledge and research expertise as well as to create a clearinghouse for research about children's issues; this external pressure translated into a request for funding to the Provost to support a grassroots organization of faculty from across the university called the USF Collaborative for Children, Families, and Communities. At the same time, USF was - in its fortieth year – transforming itself from a commuter college into a major urban research university. There were many opportunities for engaged research in the diverse, 3 million-and-growing Tampa metropolitan area, but there had not been a clear imperative since community leaders successfully lobbied to establish USF in 1956. In 1996, the Provost made funds available to the university community to launch new research efforts and the newly established USF Collaborative received a grant of $100,000: half to be used for staff support, and half to be used to fund faculty research projects.

Holland (2001) has characterized four paths to engagement, each of which influences the way the practice evolves. Two of the paths are external – pressing social, economic, cultural or political challenges or immediate concerns created by decaying neighborhoods surrounding the campus. Internal catalysts for engagement are crises such as enrollment shifts, budgetary problems, or the desire to transform teaching or research performance. It is this last path – the desire to improve the quality and quantity of research grants and scholarly activity – which has most strongly influenced the path to engagement for USF.

USF has always had initiatives scattered across the institution which brought faculty and community members together around joint research opportunities, service-learning or community service. What the Collaborative Faculty Grant Program seeks to do is focus those partnerships on forming lasting research partnerships that will lead to increased federal funding. The grant program is also used to fund the development of new service-learning courses, which, though not directly connected to meeting research goals, are increasingly seen as key elements of the USF's engagement strategy.

SEEDS OF CHANGE

When the leaders of the USF Collaborative began meeting in 1996, they wanted to create an environment that encouraged cross-departmental collaboration on community-based research, improve communication among the faculty about their existing community projects and relationships, and encourage more faculty to undertake community-engaged research. They believed there were not enough incentives for faculty to collaborate and felt that, in order to improve USF's performance as an engaged research university, small grants awarded consistently for well-designed research projects would, over time, improve the rate at which faculty were conducting community-based research. This "small wins" strategy pulled rather than pushed faculty to change their behavior.

The Collaborative sought and received modest financial resources, which permitted the hiring of professional staff infrastructure. These funds have continued for ten years, supplemented by contributions from other university units and community-based funding partners. The grant program has been dissemination-oriented, encouraging faculty to present the results of their research locally at seminars arranged by Collaborative staff, and at national conferences and professional meetings. Requirements and restrictions were minimal, as faculty leaders believed that an open, inclusive approach would lead to more creative ideas and engagement.

APPROACH AND METHODS AT USF

The USF Collaborative for Children, Families, and Communities awarded $1,615,553 for 132 faculty grants between 1998 and 2006 to faculty principal investigators in various colleges and departments throughout the USF campuses. A study conducted in 2007 revealed that $9,279,662 in external grants was subsequently awarded to those faculty members for continuations of their research. The overall return on investment is 5.7 to 1; if we examine only the university general-revenue dollars invested ($1.13 million), the return on investment increases to 8.2 to 1. This figure does not include grant funds received by community partners, since we don't have access to that data. We know of at least one project that resulted in several million dollars in grants to a local child abuse council, even though no funds came to the university.

About 70% of the grants were funded with general revenue dollars ($1,131,941) and the remaining funds ($483,612) were contributed by several university and community partners. The most substantial contributions were made by two special taxing districts which fund programs to improve the well-being of children in the USF service area – the Children's Board of Hillsborough County ($349,617) and the Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County ($111,607). These districts operate as special units of local government, funded by property tax revenues, and distribute resources broadly to support everything from maternal and child health to foster care to after-school programs. Each board restricted their support to projects within their geographic jurisdictions, and actively participated in soliciting proposals and reviewing the proposals submitted.

The Faculty Grant Program was first introduced in the 1998 academic year. Its funds have supported tenure/tenure-track faculty who are undertaking a new research project or entering a new stage of a continuing project. The first year, 4 grants of about $10,000 each were funded using a combination of the money granted by the university administration and contributions from other university units. Each year since, a request for applications is issued about January 1st and informational meetings are held both on campus and in the community. One-on-one meetings are arranged by the Chair of the Research Committee or the Director of the Collaborative, as needed, in order to match faculty and community partners with common interest.

Proposals are reviewed by a research committee of 10-12 people, composed of faculty, community partners and funding sources. Each proposal has three reviewers; the entire committee meets and reviewers discuss the proposals and share their scores on each project. The committee then discusses the merits of each project and develops a consensus rating. Based on this rating, projects are rank-ordered and placed into three categories: (a) definitely fund, (b) fund if discussions with the principal investigator about minor problems are satisfactory, (c) do not fund. Projects are then matched with the interests and requirements of the funding partners, and the general revenue dollars allocated.

Each fall following the awarding of the funds, an informational meeting for new investigators is held to get to know them, learn a little more about their projects, and briefly discuss administrative procedures. Because the program is intended to be an introduction to grant management as well as collaboration and community engagement, we transfer funds to separate accounts in each individual investigator's department once the investigator has received Institutional Review Board approval for the projects, so that each investigator can manage his or her account funds. Reports are required three times: a 6-month progress report, a final report at the end of the 1-year project, and an impact report 2 years after the project ends.

Between 6 to 15 USF Collaborative Faculty Grants are awarded annually, depending on the amount of funds available. Of the 132 grants funded, only 7 were for service-learning grants of $5,000; these awards were used for developing new service-learning courses. Several service-learning mini-grants have also been awarded between 2002 and 2005 to encourage and enable faculty participation in a special neighborhood initiative. Most faculty members apply for the $15,000 for seed money grants for new community-based research projects.

Grant-funded projects have covered a wide range of subjects but have three things in common:

- Significance. They must address an issue of public concern,

- Collaboration. Each research grant involves a collaboration of two or more academic disciplines and true partnership between USF and community, and
- Dissemination. Faculty must present their results at a public seminar in the community.

Other evaluation criteria for awards include: clarity of objectives and project plan, soundness and clarity of approach, demonstrated understanding of current research and practice, potential to contribute to scholarship and faculty professional development, potential to make an ongoing impact in the community and potential to attract future external funding.

USF currently has no formal tracking system to link internal grant dollars to future or externally-granted funds, so this study used a manual process to link topics, titles and principal investigator names of Faculty Grant Program awardees to match against a database of grant awards maintained by USF's Office of Research. External grants were considered

a match when the principal investigator or the co-principal investigator received funds in a subsequent year to conduct research on the same or similar topic or population. In ambiguous cases, email correspondence with the principal investigator either confirmed or denied the match.

ANALYSIS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The first study of the impact of funding, conducted in spring of 2005, revealed $5,152,041 in external funding had been received by the faculty participating in the program to date. Of the 113 programs funded between 1996 and 2004, fourteen (12%) were successful in bringing additional funds to USF. That study was updated in 2007, when we found that twenty-four (18%) faculty had been awarded an additional $4,129,621 in external grants from 2004-2006, bringing the total to $9,279,662. The actual projects, funds invested, and additional grants received are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Examples of USF Collaborative Faculty Grants Attracting Other Awards				
Year Funded	Project title	Collaborative Funds invested	Number of Additional grants received	Total funds received
1998	Identifying Strengths of African-American Families	7,120	4	315,000
1998	Kinship Care	9,466	32	3,746,670
1999	Match Team: Strengthening Adoptive Families	9,822	4	644,330
1999	Women Cardiac Care	15,000	4	1,627,968
1999	Child Maltreatment Collaborative	10,000	12	466,599
1999	East Tampa Initiative: 34th-37th Street Redevelopment Plan	17,000	6	159,934
1999	Nutritional Choices Among Economically Disadvantaged Inner-City Latinos	9,991	5	72,000
1999	Developing Entrepreneurs and Leaders (DEAL)	10,000	3	529,475
2000	Risk of Arsenic Contamination Association with Hillsborough County Golf Courses	14,803	3	132,368
2000	Building Community Ownership and Responsibility for Infants and Toddlers	15,000	3	258,933

Table 1 Continued				
2000	Impact of Housing Reform on an Urban Neighborhood	16,000	6	272,643
2000	Project to Study and Evaluate an Elder Ready Tri-County Region	15,000	2	117,827
2000	Wages: What's Effective and Where Are the Gaps?	15,000	1	89,930
2001	Public Guardianship in Florida	15,000	2	83,133
2002	Tampa Bay Community Indicator Assessment	15,000	5	205,367
2002	Shaping the Future of Patients with Sickle Cell Disease	15,000	3	60,087
2003	Pathways to Resilience: A 19 year Follow-Up on Pinellas Youth	15,000	1	75,000
2003	Providers Perceptions of and Ability to Influence Quality of Life Domains for Nursing Home Residents at End of Life	15,000	3	302,572
2004	Creating Meaningful Context for Learning through Partnerships	15,000	1	35,000
2005	Listening to Caregivers: Perceptions of Barriers and Bridges to Family Involvement in Education	15,000	1	40,000
2005	Examination of the Psychological Well-Being of Students in Bartow High School's IB and Gen Ed Programs	15,000	1	20,000
	Total	299,202	103	9,279,662

The most productive of the projects was one of the first funded – a *Study of the Need to Create a Program of Kinship Care in Florida*. This was a planning grant in 1998 which enabled faculty from the School of Social Work and community partners throughout the region to begin discussions about the nature of the problems being experienced by grandparents who were, often unexpectedly, becoming responsible for raising their grandchildren. The grant also allowed them to begin to identify the numbers of families experiencing this circumstance, network with researchers in other states, and begin to develop a network of advocates who then urged Florida state government to collect better data and provide targeted services. The preliminary study resulted in

the establishment of the Florida Kinship Center at USF (http://www.flkin.usf.edu/index.asp) which today provides tremendous benefits to the community – it operates a variety of innovative programs; conducts research; offers training, support groups and conferences; and operates the Kinship Care Warmline – a toll-free statewide number connecting caregivers, service-providers and advocates. The benefits to the university are also outstanding: faculty have developed productive new areas of research, given scores of presentations, and published papers on the topic in top journals in their fields; students have had practical hands-on service-learning opportunities in an emerging field, and new jobs have been created for graduates of the program. Grant funding for

this program has come from both state and local government, Area Agencies on Aging, and private foundations.

Another highly productive project – in terms of dollars attracted to USF – is a study of *Women's Cardiac Care*. The preliminary study funded by the USF Collaborative showed that while coronary heart disease claimed more than half a million women's lives annually, women diagnosed with heart disease typically do not participate in rehabilitation because of lack of suitable facilities and difficulty in making their own health a priority. The USF Collaborative Faculty Grant provided resources needed for a preliminary study which led to a National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR) award of $1.5 million to implement a 5-year study examining the effects of gender-sensitive interventions in a randomized clinical trial involving 400 women. The NINR grant was supplemented by a minority supplement that permits the collection of additional physiological data on women enrolled in the study, adding additional resources to the original federal funding. The principle investigator, Dr. Teresa Beckie, has given many presentations and published papers on this topic and was given a permanent position in the College (tenure) and promoted to Associate Professor as a result of the grant-funded project. The College of Nursing is now planning a Women's Heart Health Center which would help women in the local community complete rehabilitation and improve the quality of their lives.

A third early project, *East Tampa Initiative: 34th-37th Street Area Redevelopment*, provided resources for faculty and students in the College of Architecture and Urban Design to create neighborhood redevelopment plans in a decaying urban neighborhood. This neighborhood, East Tampa, later became the focus of a university-wide initiative to mobilize faculty and students from all USF colleges and disciplines, and is the subject of a paper presented last year (Ersing, Jetson, Jones & Keller, 2007). The relationships established by Professor of Architecture Trent Green, principal investigator for this study, have grown stronger over the years and have led to many additional grants and contracts for studies in the East Tampa neighborhood and the City – as well as have helped create neighborhood improvements, such as turning retention ponds into neighborhood parks, which would not have been possible without the time and

attention of USF faculty and students. Listening to the community and translating residents' vision into reality are key components of the work coming out of Professor Green's studios – and important preparation for students graduating from this program.

LESSONS LEARNED

Each project has a story similar to those noted above, and several deductions can be drawn from a review of the program's outcomes:

- *Have patience.* It takes several years, frequently at least three years, following the initial seed money grant for projects to attract significant external funding, particularly federal funding.
- *Look forward, not back.* Grants made to help faculty assess new trends in the community (i.e., Kinship Care, Quality of Life for Nursing Home Residents, Community Indicators) and new government policies and programs (HOPE VI, Public Guardianship Child Maltreatment) appear more likely to result in additional resources coming to the university than types of projects.
- *Be strategic.* Faculty grants to obtain preliminary data which can then be used in proposals to obtain NSF or NIH grants is money well invested.

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE EVALUATION

The evaluation of the success of the Faculty Grant Program has used an admittedly narrow definition of success, that is, external funding. There are other ways that the USF Collaborative could measure the results of the USF Collaborative Faculty Grant Program including the number of papers presented by faculty who received these grants, number of articles accepted in top journals, number of grants awarded to community partners in order to implement the pilot projects developed, good will developed between the university and community, and improved perception of the university and its students by community leaders. These are all additionally valid and important measures for evaluating community engagement and universities

seeking to begin similar seed grant programs should establish a database to track some or all of these outcomes.

We are interested in better understanding why some of the seed money grants resulted in additional funds and why others did not and are currently undertaking a study of the relationship between the faculty PI and community partner to begin to answer this question. All participants in the 2008-2009 grant program have been asked to take pre- and post-participation surveys to measure issues such as respect, reciprocity and mutual benefit.

We also think it is time for a study of the personal qualities of faculty who are successful at community-engaged research – was there a mentor that made a difference, or a career imperative? Does implementation or personnel problems derail projects, are certain types of projects more likely to result in funding, or does the principal investigator's experience and attitude toward partnership make a difference? We have much to learn from discerning why projects were <u>not</u> successful in attracting external funds, and discussions with both investigators and community partners in these cases should be pursued, especially during the first two years following the completion of the project.

In an era of increasing accountability and decreasing state resources, a major public research university like USF must clearly demonstrate how community engagement intersects with research productivity and fundraising success if community engagement efforts are to be sustainable and institutionalized. A return of 5.7 to 1, or 570 percent, has been attained so far with seed money grants, and the ability to describe the economic impact in these terms has been essential to the Collaborative Faculty Grant Program's effort to demonstrate how community engagement helps USF meet its goals.

LITERATURE CITED

Dubb, S. (2007). Linking colleges to communities: Engaging the university for community development. College Park, MD: Democracy Collaborative at the University of Maryland.

Ersing, R., Jetson, J., Jones, R. & Keller, H. (2007). Community engagement's role in creating institutional change within the academy: A case study of East Tampa and USF. *Passion to Objectivity: International and Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Service-Learning Research, 7,* 177-195.

Holland, B. (2001). Toward a definition and characterization of the engaged campus: Six cases. *Metropolitan Universities: An International Forum, 12*(3), 20-29.

Israel, B. A., Schulz, A. J., Parker, E. A. & Becker, A.B. (1998). Review of community-based research: Assessing partnership approaches to improve public health [Electronic version]. *Annual Review of Public Health*, *19*, 73-202.

Tableman, B. (2005). Universities Working with Communities: An Evolving Partnership (Best Practices Briefs No. 32) [Electronic version]. East Lansing, MI: University-Community Partnerships @ Michigan State University.

AUTHOR NOTES

Judi Jetson, M.A. is Director of the Collaborative for Children, Families and Communities at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida. She is Program Manager and researches community engagement to create and manage programs which increase research-based engagement.

Mary E. Evans, RN, PhD, FAAN is Distinguished Health Professor and Associate Dean for Research and Doctoral Study at the University of South Florida's College of Nursing. She is a child mental health researcher and is currently at the Institute of Medicine as Senior Nurse Scholar in Residence.

Wendy Hathaway is a doctoral student in the USF Department of Anthropology.

For further information, contact jetson@usfcollab.usf.edu or call (813) 974-7318.