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Public-private Partnership: How and Why Six Community Colleges Loved and Left a For-profit Partner

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Abstract
Colleges are increasingly open to partnering with private entities to implement new and innovative programs. Community colleges, in particular, may find such partnerships beneficial, given that these institutions often lack the necessary resources to invest up-front in programs that may yield strong long-term dividends. In this article we report on an examination of a partnership between a privately-held firm and six community colleges, which had established honors programs with the goal of facilitating students' transfer to highly selective institutions. Our analysis traces the evolution of the partnership and the reasons for its eventual failure, and we offer insights for public institutions and privately-held companies wishing to establish similar partnerships.

Keywords Public-private partnerships · Community colleges · Honors program

Public-private partnerships represent a fast-growing trend in U.S. higher education (Storms, Miller, & Hall, 2017). Through such partnerships private entities typically invest infrastructure

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or resources designed to increase the scale or efficiency of a college and then reap the resulting revenues (Amey, 2010; Amey, Eddy, & Ozaki, 2007; Patrinos, Barrera-Osorio, & Guáqueta, 2009; Redden, 2018a). To the extent that colleges can take advantage of the economies of scale of private companies to provide traditional or new services at a lower cost, these partnerships could represent a classic “win-win” scenario. However, cross-sector collaborations can be risky: they often bind partners to long-term contracts and revenue-sharing agreements and require relationship management that can become labor-intensive to the point of unsustainability (Amey et al., 2007; Hunt, 2018; Kim, 2018; Redden, 2018b; Redden, 2018c). To ensure that a cross-sector collaboration works for both parties, entities must carefully select the partner, set clear goals and expectations, and understand differences between the two sectors (Amey et al., 2007; Storms et al., 2017). In addition, it is particularly important to engage both partners’ key stakeholders and obtain their buy-in beforehand (Hunt, 2018) in order to avoid partnership failure.

In the most comprehensive model of partnership development within the postsecondary education sector, Amey et al. (2007) drew from a number of frameworks such as negotiated order theory, sense-making theory, and the interdisciplinary collaboration framework (Amey & Brown, 2004; Strauss, 1978; Weick, 1995) to describe why partnerships are formed and sustained across time. Amey et al.’s framework includes two stages. First, during the *partnership development process*, each partner may be driven by different motivations which are rooted in their own contexts; for example, new state policy mandates, declining enrollments, or community needs could all motivate a college to seek a partner. These motivations are often crystallized by a “champion,” an institutional agent who believes in the partnership and is willing to spend “political capital” to forward the partnership and its goals by leveraging interpersonal connections and exerting social influence (Amey, 2010; Bourdieu, 1991). Amey et al. pointed out that it is critical for the champion and other relevant organizational leaders to “frame” the partnership appropriately during the development process; to do so, they need to help institutional stakeholders understand the intended goals of the partnership and solicit and incorporate feedback regarding the partnership. If the developmental process is short-changed—if champions or organizational leaders assume that institutional stakeholders understand and agree with the rationale for the collaboration—then the partnership “is often not sustained; does not meet the objectives; or results in ill-will, misuse of resources, and organizational dysfunction” (p. 12). The second stage emerges during the *process leading to sustainability* when partners begin to see the outcomes of the partnership and how those impact, or are impacted by, the changing context. Amey et al. said relatively little about why and how many partnerships were not sustained; they noted that partnerships may be dissolved because the goals remain unmet or because the context itself changes; overall, however, they concluded that “The key to the model, and partnership success, is how the institution and its members frame the partnership and how this changes as the partnership continues” (p. 11).

For this case study we used Amey et al.’s two-stage partnership framework to examine the development and dissolution of an academically-focused public-private partnership between a private firm, Quad Learning (QL), and six community colleges. In particular, we asked, if the Amey et al. framework adequately described the trajectory of the partnership or if the framework might need expansion. To address this question we first examined the QL partnership development process including the context and motivation for the partnership, how champions framed the partnership and sought feedback, and how other institutional stakeholders framed the partnership. We next examined the failure of the process leading to sustainability, including how the outcomes and context of the partnership and the related framing shifted across time.

The Study

Setting

In fall 2012 QL partnered with two community colleges to pilot a selective-admissions, premium-tuition program dubbed "American Honors" (AH), which was designed to help academically talented community college students overcome the challenges inherent in transferring to more selective four-year destinations. The cohort-based program included a set of honors courses taught by the faculty members at each community college; two support-oriented courses taught by college-based AH advisors who had been recruited, trained, and employed by QL; and intensive advising services. In addition, QL worked to secure articulation and admission agreements for AH students with a wide variety of selective transfer destinations. While the premium tuition rate varied across community colleges, students were typically charged an additional 50% in tuition or fees in order to participate in AH. By fall 2014 the program had expanded to serve 650 students at six community colleges and multi-college districts and was aiming to serve 3,000 by fall 2016. During the fall and spring of 2016, the authors visited six of QL's partner community colleges and interviewed 181 students, faculty members, staff, and key administrators. The human subjects protocol had been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Teachers College, Columbia University (Protocol#16–15316-153). The 2016 site visits resulted in a preliminary brief, which summarized the program's student selection process, key program components, and stakeholder impressions regarding the program's potential to improve student success (Jaggars, Grant, Fay, & Farakish, 2017). At the time stakeholders were generally positive about the program in terms of its potential for improving student transfer outcomes. Yet by the close of 2018 QL had dissolved the AH program for domestic students, and QL itself was sold to Wellspring International Education in a "distress sale" (Wan, 2018).

Procedures

The six sites we visited included a mix of smaller and larger campuses located in large-city, suburban, and small-city areas. Four of the colleges already offered at least some honors courses, but none offered a cohort-based honors program with dedicated advising. During the 2016 site visits, the authors conducted 181 semi-structured one-hour interviews with AH and Non-AH students, faculty members, staff, and key administrators. The purpose of these interviews was to develop "an understanding by means of conversations" (Kvale, 1996, p. 11) with study participants and to explore how they understood and told about "their lived world" as the major stakeholders in the AH program (p. 1). With the exception of a few telephone interviews with faculty members who had scheduling constraints during our site visits, the 2016 interviews were conducted in person. In summer 2018 we also conducted follow-up telephone calls with five key college administrators (one at each of five colleges), who had initially been interviewed during the 2016 site visits, in order to discuss their college's reaction to QL's plans to dissolve the domestic AH program.

To examine the process of partnership development and dissolution, this article drew from all faculty ($n = 33$) and administrator ($n = 37$) interviews. We excluded student interviews from this analysis because students had little knowledge about or insight into the relationship between QL and their college. Administrator and faculty interview protocols included questions about the pedagogy of the AH program, course delivery formats, student campus engagement, transfer resources, student support services, cost-benefit to the college, and the overall experience of partnering with QL. Administrator protocols included more detailed questions and probes about costs and benefits to the college, while faculty member protocols included more questions and probes about curricular and pedagogical matters. Many "administrators" were also faculty members, and they were probed on both business and academic issues. We completed a summary sheet after each interview, recording our observations and initial reflections on the interview data in order to capture researchers' "analytical thinking about data" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96). The team also compiled and emailed a preliminary memo to each college within a few weeks of the site visit to that particular college, which summarized interviewers' observations and reflections about the visit.

To complement college stakeholders' impressions regarding the value of the partnership in terms of student recruitment and enrollment, we also drew from QL's database of electronic student applications to the AH program, which included nearly 12,000 domestic applicants to the program at any of the six community colleges or multi-college districts across the program's fall 2014 through fall 2016 admission cycles. Applicant records were matched with the National Student Clearinghouse, allowing us to track the enrollment behaviors of students who were accepted by the AH program but declined to enroll in it.

Data Analysis

To organize the vast amount of interview data, we designed a coding scheme based on six parent codes (interviewee background, general AH program information, honors pedagogy, transfer processes, advisement, and campus community/engagement), and 64 sub-codes. For example, the "interviewee background" code included sub-codes regarding when or why the interviewee chose to enroll or work at that college ("selection of college"), their initial encounters or judgments about AH ("initiation into AH"), their relationship to AH-related internal committees and governance structures ("honors committee"), their responsibilities or status at the college ("staff responsibilities/student status"), and their perceptions of their college in general ("perceptions of college"). A given excerpt – defined as the interviewee expressing a full thought, which was typically a few lines in length—could be coded with more than one sub-code, if relevant. When appropriate, we also crossed sub-codes with an emotional valence code which indicated whether the interviewee articulated "positive" versus "negative" feelings about the issue under discussion. Using the qualitative software analysis program Dedoose, the team also coded each individual interviewee in terms of stakeholder type (i.e., administrator or faculty members).

To establish coding reliability, twelve transcripts were initially test-coded by each researcher individually and then compared; any coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved so as to refine the final coding scheme. Throughout the coding process each fifth transcript was reviewed by another coder to flag any inconsistencies in coding decisions. The researchers then met bi-weekly to review any flagged inconsistencies, discuss how to resolve them, and further refine code definitions. Coders then reviewed and re-coded sections of previously-coded transcripts, if necessary, so as to adhere to new refinements.

In order to identify excerpts which dealt with the development and dissolution of the partnership with QL, we focused on codes dealing with faculty members' and administrators' perceptions of QL staff, the AH business model, and other aspects of the AH partnership. For example, in order to identify excerpts relevant to the partnership development process, the lead researcher pulled all administrator and faculty members excerpts coded under "initiation into

AH," "honors committee," or "perceptions of AH," and read each carefully, discarding those that dealt with an interviewee first encountering the program well after it had been established on campus or that dealt with perceptions of AH that were unrelated to how the college entered into, or initially communicated about, the partnership. This process resulted in 109 excerpts from 41 unique respondents which described the development of each college's relationship with QL. In analyzing the data, we then used the grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2003; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Robson, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) to conduct a "careful, line-by-line reading of the text while looking for processes, actions, assumptions, and consequences" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 275) in order "to identify categories and concepts that emerge[d] from text and [to] link these concepts into substantive and formal theories" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 278). That is, we identified concepts regarding the partnership development and dissolution process and determined how well or poorly they matched with Amey's two-stage partnership framework.

In addition to the qualitative analyses, we conducted a descriptive analysis of the National Student Clearinghouse data in order to understand the competitive business landscape for the program. The focus was on the two- and four-year college destinations of students admitted to AH who ultimately did not enroll in the program.

Findings

We organized our results according to Amey et al.'s two-stage model of partnership. First, we examined the *partnership development process* including the context and motivation for the QL partnership, how college champions framed the partnership and sought feedback and how other institutional stakeholders framed the partnership. Second, we examined the failure of the *process leading to sustainability* including how the outcomes, context, and framing of the partnership shifted across time, leading to the eventual dissolution of the partnership.

Context and Motivation for Partnership

The administrators at all the colleges felt it was important for the institution to develop a robust and well-known honors program for four reasons: to provide opportunities for local high-achieving but low-income students, to boost the institution's reputation for strong academics and transfer success, to increase enrollments and revenue, and to improve retention and graduation rates for the college in general. As one administrator put it, "We wanted a way of attracting a type of student that we knew we weren't getting very much. And by that, I mean a stronger student who probably is more likely to finish and complete."

Four of the six colleges already offered at least some honors courses prior to their relationship with Quad Learning, and two of these offered enough honors courses to characterize it as a fully developed program. However, neither of these institutions had the necessary resources to create a coordinated model of wraparound support by packaging its activities within a cohort-based honors program with intensive and proactive transfer advising. Accordingly, a partnership with QL seemed appealing: QL would provide up-front resources to quickly establish and market a wraparound support program that would attract many new and higher-caliber students. To deliver the program the community colleges would need only to perform the ordinary business of the college (recruiting faculty members to design and teach honors courses and organizing honors students admission, registration, financial aid, tuition payment, scheduling, and other administrative processes) with a small amount of additional overhead (providing office spaces for AH advisors and a small Honors lounge). QL would invest all the up-front costs such as providing financial and instructional design assistance to honors faculty members for course development; recruiting, training, and paying the salaries of AH advisors; developing relationships and transfer agreements with admissions staff at selective universities across the country; and absorbing the cost of some AH student and faculty members activities including student orientations and graduation dinners as well as an annual faculty members professional development conference. In return for QL's investment, the college would split all revenues from premium-tuition AH enrollees.

Champions and their Framing

At all six colleges, a top administrator first heard about AH and recommended that the college consider joining the network. To these champions the motivation for the partnership seemed obvious, as detailed above; and thus most institutions shortchanged the process of framing and seeking feedback. One college took a "top-down" and "whirlwind" approach to joining the network; four colleges involved a small set of key stakeholders from among faculty members in the decision-making process; but only one was highly inclusive. The inclusivity of the decision-making process was obviously and directly correlated with the faculty members' interest in the program and their initial willingness to teach its courses. Given that only one college was strongly inclusive in its decision-making approach, the majority of our faculty interviewees were initially highly resistant to the partnership idea. One faculty member described the decision-making process as follows:

> And, you know, so it was kind of proposed as an idea, but it really wasn't a proposal, it was this "Here you are." So that immediately turned a lot of people off. I mean I was at that first meeting. And it was kind of like, "Well, so we are having it, right?" It really isn't a discussion. And . . . then the discussion became for two years, "Well it's going to happen. If full-time faculty members do not participate, other people will be found." In fact, the way I found—it was a done deal.

The five colleges that spent less time engaging faculty members in the AH partnership process at the front end experienced a major "political loss" in their rush to adopt and implement the program. As one faculty interviewee at the most "top-down" college told us:

> Some people just hold on, they are just pissed off. They are not going to join [the honors program] until it's independent of American Honors . . . People say, 'I'm just waiting for their money to dry up. And then we will have an honors program, and I'll love to teach in it.

One administrator, expressing regret over how the program was adopted, said, "I wish I could think of a way to reset the clock of how it was introduced;. . . some people's pushback against American Honors is political." Most colleges found it challenging to recover from the political loss; many experienced ongoing resistance (whether explicit or implicit) regarding AH-related activities and initiatives although the resistance eased over time as some faculty members became more familiar with and invested in the program.

Stakeholders' Framing

From the beginning of the partnership, faculty members had a variety of reservations about the QL partnership, including tensions arising from the cultural clash between the for-profit and non-profit sectors, concerns about exclusionary elitism, and AH's initial emphasis on online and blended learning. In addition, college administrators expressed some frustration with issues of co-branding. While some of these concerns were ameliorated over time, others continued to linger.

For-profit/non-profit culture clash From the beginning QL's "start-up" culture was unfamiliar and distasteful to many faculty members, who were accustomed to a more deliberative approach to decision-making and program-building. Within a short period of time, QL needed to hire and train advisors, instructional designers, and college liaisons, most of whom lacked experience with the community college sector. In order to move quickly enough, QL "operated faster than anyone else" in ways that appeared "disorganized and very frantic" to many stakeholders. High turnover among QL staff at the beginning of the process intensified anxiety among stakeholders.

This cultural clash was exacerbated by faculty members' skepticism regarding the profit-making nature of QL. Some faculty members were concerned that QL would prioritize revenues above student welfare, and others were concerned about the implications of long-term partnership. One faculty member captured the anxiety expressed by many interviewees:

> I think the for-profit aspect of it turned a lot of people off . . . I mean, one would like to think it doesn't contaminate [the program], but it has to in the long haul . . . at some point they need to see a return on their investment, or they're going to withdraw their funding, and so how does that play into the local micro-level of an individual program?

In order to better communicate with the faculty members, QL hired executives with strong experience in postsecondary education, who devoted considerable time to working with AH deans, directors, and faculty members on curricular issues and other academic affairs. As QL connected more directly with faculty members, they became more comfortable with the program. By the time of our campus visits in 2016, some faculty members articulated specific reservations about the program's business model; but most believed that QL staff were genuinely passionate about the program's mission of student success and had learned how to organize their work within the context of their respective campuses. Some colleges had also more deliberately integrated QL staff into their institutions, educating them about and involving them in their decision-making processes.

Exclusionary Elitism At several colleges, faculty members believed the AH program to be unnecessarily exclusionary, for three reasons. First, most faculty members did not support the notion of a premium program fee. As one interviewee expressed:

> I have a fundamental disagreement with the idea that some people should pay more than other people are paying for the same degree. I know the argument is, there's added value in all of that; I know that argument. It's still problematic to me. And I know we have had students in the past in [our college] honors program, who were phenomenal, who I know would not participate if they had to pay more.

Second, some faculty members believed that establishing or expanding any honors program was out of line with the college's open-access mission. At a college with a long-established honors curriculum, one administrator recounted that:

> Since we began the honors program, even before our partnership with American Honors, there have been people on campus, and there continue to be on campus, who feel it's not

> democratic, that serving honors students is not necessarily part of our mission. They were there when there was no tuition differential, and it was just "should we have this elitist thing on campus?". . . I don't know that there is anybody who has changed their minds because of the tuition differential and because of the presence of American Honors advisor on campus. I think the people who didn't like honors as part of our mission before still don't. I don't know that we have changed any minds.

Third, in order to create a strong cohort-based model for AH, some colleges limited AH program enrollment to full-time students, which some faculty members felt was unfair to part-time students. Commenting on this policy, one faculty member said that part-time students

> . . . are working, they're parents, sometimes single parents, sometimes they are working multiple jobs. Sometimes those are our most committed students. Why are we not allowing them to come through this program? . . . It would increase enrollment in the program, it would increase enrollment in classes, it's not going to hurt us.

Among interviewees who expressed their own concerns regarding elitism or exclusion or who relayed such concerns from the perspective of colleagues, such concerns seemed rooted in a philosophical opposition. This opposition was unlikely to soften or bend over time.

Online and Blended Learning QL had originally envisioned a model in which faculty members would be compensated for developing high-quality online honors course materials that could be deployed in blended or synchronous online settings; and then other colleges in the network could quickly and easily adopt those honors courses on their own campus, using a common set of learning outcomes. Not only would this approach allow the honors program to scale up quickly across many colleges, it would also allow QL to develop and maintain admissions and articulation partnerships more easily with a wide range of selective colleges.

From the outset faculty members at each partnering college were strongly opposed to the notion of a common curriculum with common learning outcomes—particularly when that curriculum would be guided by a for-profit company that had no experience with community college students. Faculty members were primarily worried that academic quality and student learning would suffer; they were "concerned about another organization having the potential to influence instruction and curriculum," as one instructor said. These concerns were layered with worries about intellectual property, frustration with the technical performance of the online platform, skepticism that honors pedagogy could be delivered through an online medium, and the belief that honors students would be uninterested in online courses. As one faculty member recalled:

> When [QL] presented themselves, they saw a vision of quality shared through a network, and I don't know, we just, the faculty here [sic]—most of us have Ph.D.s, and we like to design our own courses. . . . Out of all the value that we get from American Honors, turning our courses online was not one of them. That's not what made me think joining that network would be good.

Another faculty interviewee explained as follows:

> A lot of faculty [sic] were reluctant to just give up any kind of right they had to their course. . . . I think they just didn't like the idea that it was suddenly not theirs anymore in some sense, or they didn't have any say in what would be used. And I know that initially that was a big reason why a lot of people stayed away, at least here.

In general, colleges experienced difficulties with recruiting faculty members to teach the online courses and in enticing students to enroll in them. Accordingly, four colleges quickly abandoned the synchronous online approach and taught most or all of their honors courses in a face-to-face format. The fifth college had a general culture of offering hybrid-online courses and thus continued to offer several of its honors courses in that format. The sixth college had multiple campuses, many of which were quite small, and would have been unable to maintain separate AH programs at each campus; they thus continued to lean heavily on the synchronous online format in order to enroll students from multiple campuses in the same honors course section.

Co-branding Despite a generally positive relationship after the start-up phase, co-branding was an ongoing point of contention. College stakeholders characterized QL as aggressively promoting the American Honors brand in marketing and promotional materials, recruitment efforts, and student and campus events, at the expense of the college's own brand. For example, at public-facing events, "students that [sic] were chosen to talk about their experience. . . talked a lot about American Honors. . . [and] didn't talk as much about [our college]." Over time, QL became more sensitive to colleges' concerns about branding. As one college administrator recounted:

> When American Honors first came in here, they kind of wanted to brand themselves as American Honors. Their materials were branded as American Honors, and I would say to them, "Guys, the reason people are coming to school is to go to [our college], not to American Honors."

On the other hand, if the AH program was expected to recruit a large volume of students for its partners, then it needed to assert a national brand identity that was not necessarily tied to each college. On a local basis, this tension was resolved by co-branding materials as "American Honors at [Local College]." Even after QL reduced the emphasis on the AH brand, occasional tensions around the coordination of recruitment events and related branding resurfaced at some colleges.

Failure of the Process Leading to Sustainability

By the time of our campus visits in 2016, AH students and instructors were highly satisfied with the program's academic quality, proactive and specialized transfer advising, and supportive community for its students (see Jaggars et al., 2017). However, as part of its initial "sales pitch," QL had also promised two key outcomes: (1) increased enrollment, which would generate more revenue for the colleges, and (2) improved opportunities for students to transfer to highly-selective destinations. In this section, we discuss the challenges colleges experienced in terms of meeting these desired outcomes.

Increasing Enrollment and Revenue In order for the AH program to increase colleges' enrollment and revenue, the partners needed to first set an appropriate price-point for AH's target audience of talented lower-income students. Then QL would leverage its marketing and recruitment models—much more sophisticated models than the typical community college can afford—to bring in these students.

In setting the price point for the program, QL understood that talented lower-income students might be willing to pay the community college a higher-than-usual price for a "premium" experience but that students might instead opt for a local four-year competitor if the price-point became too high. While the exact formula varied between its partnering colleges, based on the local economic context (including the prices of nearby less-selective four-year colleges), QL settled on a general approach in which a partner college would charge AH students approximately 150% of the community college's regular tuition and fees; and the two partners would split the revenue, such that each would receive about 75% of the per-student revenue the college normally earned. Given that each partner would be receiving *less* than a full-time student would typically pay, the viability of the business model was dependent on reducing program costs through economies of scale and also recruiting "net-new" students who would not otherwise attend the partnering community college.

Some administrators found the additional program cost a recruitment challenge; one administrator in particular described the higher AH tuition as "a deterrent . . . As soon as you tell a student or their family, there's an additional fee. . . , it's almost like done, end of discussion. .. no I'm not interested. So it's really hard." Despite the potential barrier of the differential tuition for some prospective students, the colleges and QL believed that by using recruitment tactics typically beyond the reach of community colleges—such as purchasing and leveraging high school graduates' data from national standardized test providers or pursuing international student recruitment—QL could significantly increase colleges' enrollment numbers. However, at each college, we heard that QL's enrollment projections and goals were consistently not met, causing friction in the partnership.

In particular, during our 2016 site visits, college administrators were frustrated that the proportion of net-new students in the program (i.e., students who would not have otherwise attended that community college) did not seem to be high. One administrator had hoped AH would "bring new people to the funnel, not cherry pick people out of a funnel, because we had already spent money, resources, to get them into the funnel. I was expecting [AH] to bring new people." For incoming freshman students, it was impossible for the college to determine whether AH students were truly net-new, but administrators suspected that most would have come to the community college anyway. One clear recruitment option to gain net-new students was to pull them away from a nearby four-year college, but administrators became skeptical about whether this was realistic. As one administrator said:

> Oftentimes the kinds of students who we are targeting for American Honors are also being recruited to go . . . directly to the four-year institution and being offered quite significant scholarships to do so.

In addition, although AH had originally been designed with incoming freshman students in mind, it was open to continuing students who met certain academic criteria; and some administrators felt AH was too aggressive in recruiting these students into the program (and thus in reducing the college's revenue from 100% to 75% for these students).

In order to get a better sense of where AH students might have enrolled in the absence of the program, Table 1 shows National Student Clearinghouse enrollment data for students who were accepted to AH but opted out of the program.

Among older students, who represented more than half of AH enrollees, 94% would likely have enrolled in the same community college in the absence of American Honors (and in fact, almost all were already enrolled at that college prior to AH application). Among recent high school graduates who chose to enroll in AH, 55% would likely have enrolled in the same community college in the absence of AH, while most of the remainder would probably have enrolled in a four-year college. Overall, across the 1,517 American Honors enrollees in this

Table 1 Enrollment patterns among recent high school graduates and older students (Students accepted by American Honors who were matched with the NSC and who enrolled in any college during the term for which they applied to enter AH) accepted to American Honors (among those enrolled in any college during the target term)

Enrolled in…	Graduating High School		Older Student	
	Opted Out ($N = 1014$)	Entered AH ($N = 904$)	Opted Out ($N = 1052$)	Entered AH ($N = 613$)
Four-year college	41%	1%	4%	1%
Target community college*	55%	99%	94%	99%
Other two-year college	4%	0%	2%	0%

*The "target community college" is the institution offering the American Honors program to which the student applied

analysis, if one liberally assumes that American Honors swayed the enrollment decisions of 45% of those who recently graduated from high school and 6% of those who were older students, then AH may have swayed the enrollment decisions of up to 29% of its enrollees. If this estimate is correct, then QL fulfilled the colleges' need to bring in at least 25% of its enrollees as "net-new" students. However, the estimate may be inflated. For example, students who "Opted Out" of AH may have received stronger four-year college financial aid offers than "Entered AH" students; and these differential financial aid offerings may have strongly influenced students' final enrollment choices, independent of the existence of AH.

From an economic perspective, administrators told us during the 2016 site visits that they seemed to be breaking even on their partnership with QL—which is far from the promise of sharply increased enrollment and revenue. As one administrator said:

> I'll just speak direct[ly]; [QL] perhaps overpromised in terms of what they would be able to bring in, in terms of new students. . . . It's great to get our existing students into American Honors if it enhances their experience. [But] we really want to see more students who are attracted to [our college] because of American Honors.

Improving Transfer Opportunities To create strong transfer opportunities for their students, QL had planned to create relationships with the admissions offices at some of the nation's most selective universities, such that completion of the AH program might provide students with an advantage in admissions or allow for seamless transfer of credit. Initially community colleges were particularly excited about this aspect of AH. As one interviewee said, "Relationships with schools across the country can bring opportunities to [our] students that they might not otherwise have thought of." Each college knew it was unfeasible to secure individual articulation agreements with universities across the nation; and they believed, as one administrator put it, that articulation agreements "are not things that we as a college [can] manage."

QL invested a substantial amount of time and resources into its transfer network and signed more than 70 transfer agreements with four-year destinations, including some highly selective institutions. Most agreements specified that if the AH student met key criteria (for example, completed a certain number of honors credits, earned a specified GPA or above, and had no incidence of academic misconduct), then the student would *qualify* for admission; however, there was typically no *guarantee* of admission. QL also initially planned to create articulation agreements with its network of four-year colleges in order to ensure that students' credits would seamlessly transfer; however, without a common AH curriculum, the articulation framework became more daunting. To ease students' credit transfer in the short-term, QL worked to ensure that AH curricula were comprised of courses that would readily transfer to most four-year colleges. In addition, AH advisors worked closely with students on honors and non-honors course selection and registration in order to ensure that most or all courses would be transferrable to the student's desired destination colleges. However, students would have no guarantee of seamless credit articulation. Thus, as one administrator explained, QL's transfer relationships were not particularly beneficial for students:

> I don't think that the sort of formalized articulation agreements that American Honors set up for that were especially helpful. . . . I would say what American Honors did best was truly encouraging our students to apply to places that they otherwise would not have thought of. They really did push that. And we really did have students getting into such a wide variety of schools, really great schools and much more so than in the past. What also happens, however, is that we had a lot of students, who are . . . middle class students, got into great schools and didn't get enough financial aid, so they still didn't go.

From the perspective of the colleges, QL was supposed to improve transfer outcomes through its transfer agreements; instead QL was primarily working to improve outcomes through the knowledge and efforts of its transfer advisors. For a college, this observation might raise the question of whether the partnership with QL would remain worthwhile if the college were to hire its own specialized advisor.

Dissolving the Partnership

In 2017 challenges meeting domestic student enrollment goals prompted QL to move more aggressively into the international student market to recruit AH students. In the following year the company launched a separate program called American Success, which focused on recruiting international students into community colleges to brush up their English-language or other academic skills before transferring to their desired four-year destination. While the international market was a good fit for two colleges, the remaining colleges either felt that moving into an international market was a mismatch with their locally focused mission or that they were unable to attract large numbers of international students due to their location. By spring 2018 QL was conducting conversations with each college to discuss ending the AH partnership for domestic U.S. students.

When we conducted follow-up calls with a subset of key college administrators in early summer 2018, all said their colleges had benefited from the partnership with QL. As one interviewee said, “We wouldn't have [established an honors program] without them. . . . I'm not sure we would have . . . carved out the time and centrally now the resources—the money—to make it happen.” Now that an honors program infrastructure was in place, however, each college could sustain the domestic program on their own. Most planned to re-brand the honors program to be college-specific and to institute changes that would make the program more attractive to both instructors and students (such as reducing the level of differential tuition or allowing part-time students to enroll).

In general, colleges were not sorry to leave the partnership; prior to QL's outreach about the program's dissolution, some colleges had already started internal discussions about not renewing their contracts, primarily due to the lack of net-new student enrollment. As one financial administrator said:

> When we first set this up, we did a model based upon the number of students we projected to have . . . however, there was a bit of cannibalism that went on because . . . [QL] took some of the existing students, and that clearly is not a good situation for us.

Dissolving the QL partnership would also allow colleges to maintain the components of the AH model that they liked ("much of that is just good practice for honors programs," as one AH administrator pointed out) while revising the components that they did not like.

By the time of our follow-up calls with key stakeholders, they believed that "AH was critical" in helping them launch the honors program in the first place but that the partnership was no longer necessary unless the college had a particular interest in international recruitment. As one administrator said, "Having another organization on campus does cause issues. . . . In certain cases, it did not feel that we were on the same team, and that was the problem. So there are advantages of having it in-house."

Discussion

As more private entities attempt to provide academic services and programming through postsecondary institutions, based upon the findings of our study we suggest that colleges and universities need to evaluate these for-profit companies carefully and plan how to address the potential challenges and tensions that may arise. Such examination is particularly important when these partnerships are focused on curriculum and course development and involve faculty members.

Amey et al.'s (2007) model of partnership suggested that, if the framing and feedback process were shortchanged during the development phase, the partnership would encounter ongoing cultural issues which may ultimately make it unsustainable. At all six colleges the QL partnership initially struggled with a variety of cultural clashes and logistical challenges, which were magnified at those colleges that did not deeply include faculty members in the partnership decision-making processes. Gradually some of these challenges were mitigated as the partners created a closer and more trusting relationship—particularly after QL retreated from its original expectation that colleges would share courses with common learning outcomes via an online platform. By 2018 the set of re-interviewed stakeholders unanimously agreed they had benefited from the partnership with QL.

Yet despite benefiting from the partnership, colleges were also happy to withdraw from it. In discussing the process leading to sustainability, Amey et al. stated that "how the institution and its members frame the partnership and how this changes as the partnership continues" was key to sustainability or the lack thereof, but they provided little detail regarding how this framing could be accomplished. Our analysis suggests that the willingness of the colleges to dissolve the partnership was due to the fact that administrators' own framing of costs and benefits shifted over time. Administrators found that they were continuously expending time, energy, personal influence, and other forms of social and political capital in order to defend and maintain the program. While they had expected the QL partnership to require some up-front political costs, they also expected these costs would lessen over time and eventually disappear as the benefits of the program became clearly apparent to all stakeholders. In return for champions' initial investment of social and political capital, QL delivered on one key promise: It helped colleges quickly establish a high-quality academic program which was well-liked by students and provided a reputational benefit for the college. QL also partially delivered on its promise to create stronger admission and articulation relationships with a variety of four-year colleges. However, its most important contribution was training and paying specialized transfer advisors, a tactic which most colleges could manage on their own. Most importantly, however, QL failed to fulfill a critical promise: providing substantial new revenue. Although colleges believed they broke even financially on the partnership, administrators also felt that breaking even was not worth the continuous effort required to maintain the program in the face of entrenched criticism. Instead, they preferred to dissolve the partnership, which would allow them to re-brand the program and continue it with modifications, such as reducing or eliminating the tuition premium, that were more politically acceptable to campus stakeholders.

In short, Amey's two-stage partnership model accurately characterized the development and dissolution of this particular partnership. However, our case study points to the importance of incorporating more detail into Amey's model in terms of ongoing stakeholder management, as well as in terms of the ongoing process of re-weighing costs versus benefits. In particular, costs and benefits should be understood as not purely financial, but also as personal, interpersonal, and political.

In a follow-up to the 2007 paper describing the two-stage partnership model, Amey (2010) discussed the leadership competencies required to build and maintain cross-institutional partnerships, including communication, group facilitation, and organizational analysis. About the latter, Amey noted that leaders needed to have a deep understanding of the college, including "the kind of strategy that is most beneficial in the short and long run" (Amey, 2010, p. 18), in order to determine whether the potential benefits of a partnership will be worth its costs. Among the six colleges we studied, this element was not present: prior to being approached by QL, none of the colleges had a pre-existing strategic plan which called for the creation of a more robust honors program. They did not explore a range of potential tactics or partners needed to create or expand an honors program or conduct an analysis that pointed to a partnership with QL as the optimal tactic. When presented with an attractive and innovative opportunity, the colleges' administrators allowed that opportunity to drive their vision, rather than first creating an institutional vision and then selecting the most appropriate ways to implement and support it. In the process they shortchanged the often-lengthy process of strategic planning and stakeholder engagement.

If the colleges had first conducted a review of options for establishing and growing a high-quality community college honors program with strong transfer outcomes, they might have identified other opportunities for partnership. For example, colleges which have committed to seeking strong improvement in student success have found it extremely useful to connect to other such colleges through state or national coalitions such as Achieving the Dream (https://www.achievingthedream.org), the University Innovation Alliance (http://www.theuia.org), the American Talent Initiative (https://americantalentinitiative.org), or statewide community college Success Centers (https://www.jff.org/what-we-do/impact-stories/student-success-center-network/) in order to share and scale best practices. For colleges interested in honors programs, one potential partner could be the National Collegiate Honors Council (www.nchchonors.org), which provides consultations for honors program development, mentorship services for new community college honors directors, and networking and learning opportunities with fellow honors faculty members and directors.

After such a review, colleges could still conclude that a for-profit partnership would be the most promising way to achieve their strategic goals. If so, then they might consider three recommendations we offer. First, institutions need to ensure that external entities have a deep understanding of the inner workings of the current academic and administrative processes at the target colleges. These companies should have senior executives with extensive work experience in the sector or an advisory board comprised of leaders, administrators, and faculty members from the sector. Second, while national for-profit companies are responsible to their investors, often over a relatively short term of time, community colleges are responsible for serving the needs and expectations of their local communities across the long term. With this in mind, faculty members are likely to question the motives of for-profit entities, to have concerns regarding additional costs to local students, and to worry about whether resources invested in the partnership will pay off over the long term. If the pace of a partnership's creation and implementation is too quick, these concerns may not be properly resolved.

Finally, to create positive and sustainable partnerships, institutions need to be inclusive and transparent and to fully involve the faculty members when evaluating academic partnerships. In our study, the college with the most inclusive approach identified a core group of faculty members who were interested in the initiative and worked on building buy-in and support through information sharing and ongoing dialog. Once the partnership was established, this college also created an implementation team that worked closely with QL so as to ensure clear lines of communication, build mutual trust, and collaboratively address some of the unforeseen challenges the partners faced. The inclusive approach of this college decreased resistance, tension, and the energy required from champions to continuously defend the program.

Conclusion

For-profit companies have become quite interested in partnering with community colleges and four-year institutions to provide services to their students. Yet such private-public partnerships fail as often as they succeed. This case study suggests some potential lessons for postsecondary institutions interested in establishing partnerships with private ventures. In particular, we recommend conducting a strategic review to determine whether the potential partnership is the most promising option for meeting the strategic goals of an institution and creating a comprehensive plan for campus stakeholder engagement and management. As part of both processes, administrators should assess the expected costs and benefits of the partnership–including their own personal, interpersonal, and political costs and benefits–and establish processes for reviewing the balance of costs and benefits as they change across time.

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