



Appreciative Collaborative Partnerships: A Novel Approach to Community College-University Partnerships

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Abstract

Using a narrative approach often associated with appreciative inquiry, the authors share their experiences of creating Appreciative Collaborative Partnerships (ACP) between community colleges and a four-year, public university. Partnerships between community colleges and universities have often been characterized as the university proffering a new program or resource to the community college without truly inquiring into the needs of the community college. An ACP is a novel way to create a partnership that addresses the needs of all partner institutions and builds upon each other's strengths. The authors share several stories about the events and programs that have been a result of the ACP and discuss the implications of using an ACP model.

Keywords: Appreciative inquiry; community colleges; collaboration; partnerships

Appreciative Collaborative Partnerships: A Novel Approach to Community College- University Partnerships

In the spring of 2019, faculty and administrators of several community colleges were invited to the campus of the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) for a meeting on *Partnerships at their Best*. Some attendees shared with the organizers that they were unsure as to why they were there; they assumed it was to discuss new articulation agreements and have lunch. This sentiment exemplified the type of relationship leaders of community colleges expect between them and a university. However, the organizers had another vision of how relationships could

be between community colleges and universities.

Prior to the meeting, the groundwork had been laid to create *appreciative collaborative partnerships* (ACP) between UNCW and community colleges throughout the State of North Carolina. An ACP is a shift away from more widely seen approaches to university-community college partnerships that often include the university proffering its status, resources, and academic knowledge to the community colleges as a way to bolster the university's reputation and community involvement. Although the community college may benefit from these relationships, it is not balanced, nor does it necessarily address the needs of the community college. At the aforementioned meeting, the community college leaders were asked something not often asked of them by the faculty and staff at a university: "What are your needs, and how can we partner with you to address those needs?"

In this article, we offer a discussion of the process and framework for creating appreciative collaborative partnerships between community colleges and universities. The framework pulls from several concepts and ways of knowing, including the asset-based approach of appreciative inquiry (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). Additionally, we explore the meaning of collaboration and partnerships with recognition of inaccurate and stereotypical views that there is a hierarchy in post-secondary education. We will use a narrative approach to share examples of how the ACP was brought to life and continues to yield impressive results.

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Defining ACP

An ACP starts with an appreciative framework that is asset-based and uses dialogue to identify and leverage the strengths of all participants. An appreciative framework, rooted in appreciative inquiry, is not positivity for positivity's sake. The "appreciative" refers to seeking out the strengths present in an organization, group, or individual and building upon those strengths rather than focusing on the deficits. In doing so, an appreciative process adds value (i.e., appreciates in value) and progresses the entity beyond the status quo (Watkins et al., 2011). Appreciative inquiry recognizes that issues within human systems cannot be isolated to one component to be resolved; every part of a human system impacts the others. In regard to post-secondary education, we must recognize that community colleges and four-year institutions are inextricably linked. Through an appreciative lens, we recognize we are one system, and we can build upon the strengths of each institution and develop a system that is inclusive and mutually beneficial for all stakeholders.

Collaboration denotes a cooperative process where all sides work together. In ACP, collaboration describes the type of partnership we aspire to have among the participating institutions. We view a collaborative partnership as one that respects the strengths and needs of all sides. It values and appreciates all. In contrast to the types of partnerships often described in the literature (Phelps & Prevost, 2012; Strawn & Livelybrooks, 2012), the focus in an ACP is on working with and not on community colleges. The shift to working with a group is similar to the way Hurtado (2015) described the transformative paradigm and conducting research among marginalized groups. The marginalized group should be included in all aspects of the research process. Working with the group minimizes harm, empowers the participants, and reduces the pathologizing of issues onto the group. Although university-community college partnerships are not necessarily framed as research, the programs and services preferred to community colleges by universities can be experimental, short-term projects, or other pilot projects that lead to publications and prestige for the university (Phelps & Prevost, 2012). We recognize that community colleges in our society have unjustly had a negative stigma associated with them and are often compared to and given less prestige than their

four-year counterparts. We reject these views. In ACP, the focus is on we; working together and seeing the immense value in all types of post-secondary education. In sum, we define ACP as *an asset-based approach to working collaboratively with community colleges and universities in a way that builds upon the strengths of all and addresses and respects the needs of those involved in order to produce mutually beneficial outcomes for all.*

In the following sections, we will discuss how several aspects of the ACP came to be. We first discuss how and why we use storytelling in this article and how the authors were involved in the partnership. We then describe the setting of the partners and discuss the creation of the UNCW/Community College Collaborative (UNCW/3C). Emerging from UNCW/3C, we will discuss the conferences and the Aspiring Leaders' Summit that were a product of the meeting mentioned before. Next, we will provide an overview of the Community College Undergraduate Research Experience (CCURE). In each example, the focus is on the process of creating and maintaining an appreciative collaborative partnership. Lastly, we discuss the implications of ACPs for the future of university-community college relationships.

Storytelling and the Authors

Watkins and colleagues (2011) described storytelling as one of the central tools used in appreciative inquiry. Stories provide data that goes beyond a "list of key points or other reductionist reports of a human experience" (Watkins et al., 2011, p. 147). We use stories in this article to provide a more complete and powerful picture of how the ACP worked. Among the several points on the power of stories Watkins and colleagues shared, there are four that we feel are most present in our storytelling: stories are universal in that every culture uses stories as a way to convey knowledge and history; stories are memorable and allow us to share images and ideas with each other; stories stimulate creativity by freeing us from putting situations into categories and allowing the exploration of new possibilities; and, stories can move us forward by examining the past while imagining a new future (Watkins et al., 2011, pp. 147-148). We see the method of storytelling as a powerful tool in research and in sharing new and innovative practices that allows the reader to imagine beyond the simple presentation of figures, scores, and outcomes.

Each of the authors has been involved with

UNCW/3C in some capacity. In the following, Denise, Deb, and Kim share some of the ways they were involved in the creation and implementation of the partnership. James, the Director of High Impact Pathways at UNCW, oversees CCURE and was part of the formation of UNCW/3C. Brian worked as a graduate assistant and in a post-doctoral role with Denise, Director of UNCW/3C, to organize and implement the Aspiring Leaders Summit and Challenging the Paradigm conferences. Kristi worked as a doctoral graduate assistant with James to implement CCURE and is an alumna of the Aspiring Leaders program. For this article, each contributed by either providing their stories or supporting sections that help to frame and define appreciative collaborative partnerships.

Setting

This article describes several programs and events associated with the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW), a mid-size public research university on the coast of North Carolina, and in partnership with multiple North Carolina community colleges. Because the programs and events have occurred on various campuses, it creates a unique setting for each individual partnership. For instance, a partnership between UNCW and Wake Tech Community College, located in the county of the state's capital, faces a different set of considerations for the relationship than a partnership between Brunswick Community College, a more rural college. Many of the programs and events that will be discussed take place on one of the 58 community college campuses throughout the State of North Carolina, each with its own academic, technical, and community focus. Although UNCW is the consistent entity among each of the described partnerships and programs, the faculty and staff have made a concerted effort not to make their campus the focus of the partnerships.

Giving Life to UNCW/3C

UNCW/3C encompasses several programs and events that are partnerships between UNCW and several North Carolina community colleges. In the following, two colleagues share their experiences with the formation and implementation of UNCW/3C and two of its programs that demonstrate the power of an ACP. Denise will share her story of how she became involved with UNCW and

the approach she took in implementing UNCW/3C, including a collaborative meeting among community colleges and the university that used appreciative inquiry to generate ideas for partnerships. Deb will discuss her involvement in the collaborative meeting and two of the major programs that emerged from the idea generation, Aspiring Leaders Summits and Challenging the Paradigm conferences. After Denise and Deb share their insights on ACP, we will discuss CCURE and Kim will offer her story of being an instructor for the partnership that created undergraduate research opportunities for community college students.

Denise's Voice

With a career of over 25 years in higher education, I have been a university-trained scholar and senior administrator. Going through the faculty route. I held positions in the senior administration at universities and leadership positions at community colleges, including the presidency at three community colleges. After serving as president, I moved back to North Carolina and was contracted by UNCW to review and implement community college initiatives and partnerships.

Upon entering, I was presented with the results of a feasibility study that had been conducted regarding a community college leadership graduate certificate program and a goal of a partnership with the community colleges in the Eastern region of North Carolina. I reviewed the materials, including the proposed curriculum and budget allocated to recruit to the new certificate program. After the review, it was apparent, based on my successful experiences in collaborating with community colleges and working at the university level, that there was a gap in the ability of the program to be successful. The gap was the lack of an authentic partnership. Most often, the history of universities working with community colleges is because the university wanted something from the community colleges; for example, their students, their locations, their ability to reach community partners, or delivery of new programming at the community college. Community college professionals commonly reference the perception of academic snobbery experienced through the approach used by universities that enter into relationships with community colleges; this sentiment exemplifies the idea that these partnerships are about the big universities and colleges doing it to the community colleges.

This gap revealed from the feasibility study was that there was little consultation with the community colleges and their leaders within the region. I discussed the gap with the coordinator of the higher education program and asked if we could take a couple of steps back and consult with community college leaders by inviting them to a gathering. At this gathering, we could facilitate a process of collaborating, shoulder to shoulder, to develop what would be considered a *Partnership operating at its best*. We approached the Dean to ask if the money that had been set aside for recruiting students to the certificate program could be reallocated to conduct the facilitated gathering of community college leaders. After receiving permission, I designed an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) facilitation process using the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results (SOAR) model, the antithesis of a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. The focus of the inquiry for the gathering was to identify the needs of the community colleges, as well as best practices for partnerships that would be sustainable for the future. In developing an agenda for the facilitation and creating a presentation, our desired outcome for the day of the gathering was to create action plans to guide us to priority-setting what would meet the needs of the community colleges respectively, and through meaningful partnerships, where one plus one would equal three.

Deb's Voice

I was serving as the Senior Vice President of Instruction and Student Services at Lenoir Community College (LCC) in Kinston, NC when I received the advertisement for UNCW's Community College Collaborative Leadership Gathering, entitled *Collaborative Partnerships*; I began talking with others from LCC to see if anyone wanted to attend. At the time, I was not sure what the gathering was truly about, but I knew that we were interested in partnerships with our four-year universities and I suggested to my colleagues that we attend.

As the gathering began, I could tell I was in the right place for our college. The day's workshop was very engaging. Organizers from UNCW seemed to be extremely interested in getting to know our community colleges better and were genuine in asking what we thought and what we needed for our colleges. From my experiences with other universities, I do not recall having been asked that question before.

It was also interesting because that is how community colleges operate with local businesses. But, with the universities, they usually let us know what they have to offer and then ask if we want to participate. In other words, here is what we are going to do, and do you want to join us?

The gathering was a great moment to learn more about our colleagues in the room. We did this by interviewing the person next to us. As a participant, we were asked to respond to two prompts. First, tell a time when you, as a leader, were at your best or when you experienced a leader that you thought was an amazing leader; what were the things that you felt made the leadership great? Then, tell about a time when you experienced, between two post-secondary organizations, a collaborative partnership; what were the aspects of the partnership that made it strong?

Next, we spoke about appreciative inquiry (AI). Although this was new to me, it made sense. We spoke about the telling of stories and quickly learned that stories are not conveyed just to make people feel good and warm. The power of the stories is their ability to remind us of what success looked like and felt like – to relive the event and remember that we can be successful and that we have the capability to bring life and energy to our work. Among other activities, the one I most remember was being asked to reflect on the day and consider, "What will we do with the results? What opportunities could we apply from today's meeting?" As the day went on and I learned what the meeting was about, I felt UNCW really wanted to know how we could walk shoulder-to-shoulder to meet the needs of our community colleges.

The Aspiring Leaders program was one result of the meeting and exemplifies an appreciative collaborative partnership. Prior to the meeting at UNCW, I had just returned from the American Association of Community Colleges Conference and attended sessions that had to do with creating your own leadership training. I knew we needed this at LCC. I also knew that it was something our new President and other Vice Presidents in North Carolina had discussed many times. We would often say, how do we grow our own leaders with the competencies and experiences to lead in higher education? That was it! In the meeting, I put those words on a Post-it note and posted them on the wall during one activity. From that note and others, an action plan was

developed during the meeting.

Much to my surprise, the leader of the training, Dr. Denise Henning called me the next week to discuss my thoughts. We spoke for a while, and then she asked who else I thought might like to join our conversations based on the resulting action plan from my table group at the gathering. I suggested the Vice President from Craven Community College, and she suggested a student from her class who worked at Nash Community College. I also suggested the Vice President from Cape Fear Community College and a colleague of mine from LCC, the dean of arts and sciences. We spent the next several weeks writing a proposal and developing a concept based on the goals of the action plan. The proposal was finalized by our working group and submitted to the Dean of Watson College of Education at UNCW. The proposed program, now implemented, was titled *Aspiring Leaders, Created BY community college leaders FOR Aspiring community college leaders WITH university partnership*. In its third year, the two-day summit has had stellar evaluations and empowered many of its participants to either advance their degrees or move into administrative leadership roles within the community college system.

Another initiative that came to fruition from the gathering was an annual conference hosted by UNCW entitled *Challenging the Paradigm; Partnerships...*. The conference was a result of the need for community colleges, particularly rural community colleges, to have professional development focused on partnerships that lead to successful results. The concept was to focus on different themes every year that came from researching student trends and best practices that lead to success. In its third year, the conference has had themes related to innovation, diversity-equity-belonging, and multi-barrier student success; each one has been highly informative and well attended. The gathering continues to grow each year.

Denise and Deb's Voices

Appreciative collaborative partnerships (ACP) are rooted in authenticity through storytelling that identifies the groups' strengths. ACPs may be long-standing and, because they are based on authenticity, can withstand the ebb and flow of partnerships. They are energy-giving and energy-producing; as individuals from within the partnership may potentially leave, they do so with new strength, new ideas,

and a shared focus on the possibilities for their organization. The stories shared to identify strengths at the beginning lead to further generative ideas. The result of these powerful partnerships is that they release and empower innovation and ideas beyond a single person or group's imagination. As so eloquently stated by Carry and colleagues (2015), "The power of partnership is that each member uplifts the work of the others, expanding to include the voices of so many people who all have something to offer in co-creating their institutional future" (p. 38). AI accelerates the positive and co-creates a transformational future.

Community College Undergraduate Research Experience (CCURE)

The Community College Undergraduate Research Experience (CCURE) was started as a new initiative at UNCW in the spring of 2021. Using an ACP approach, colleagues from UNCW worked collaboratively with community college leaders to design and develop CCURE as an experience that opens pathways to undergraduate research for community college students prior to transferring to a 4-year institution. CCURE was structured as a dual enrollment experience that provided community college students with an introductory-level applied research experience that was taught by a community college instructor and supported by a UNCW faculty mentor. CCURE participants earned UNCW credit for completing the experience at no cost to them as all fees were covered by UNCW.

CCURE Goals

The primary goal for CCURE was to provide students with exposure to an undergraduate research experience prior to transferring to a 4-year institution in order to build confidence and experience in engaging in undergraduate research (or other high-impact practices) after transferring. In addition to helping community college transfer students succeed, CCURE was framed around a partnership model that encouraged direct engagement between community college and UNCW instructors. Thus, a secondary goal was to provide opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration to develop among stakeholders.

The CCURE Partnership Model

The development and implementation of CCURE

would not have been possible without the contributions of a critical network of individuals at both the community college partners and UNCW, including individuals from Admissions, the Registrar, and Honors College, among others. The primary leadership and management of CCURE was a collaborative effort between the Office of Applied Learning & High Impact Practices and UNCW's Community College Collaborative (UNCW/3C), which is housed in the Watson College of Education. The College of Arts & Sciences at UNCW also provided significant support in terms of both advising community college students and identifying faculty mentors for CCURE courses. Our approach to working collaboratively helped ensure that all partners benefited from engagement that was meaningful and reflected a true partnership.

In 2021, CCURE started with three partner institutions, Cape Fear Community College, Craven Community College, and Lenoir Community College. It has grown to include additional partners each year, growing to nine partner institutions in 2022 and 11 partners in 2023. Student participation and completion of CCURE grew concurrently with the increased partnerships, from 18 graduates in 2021 to 41 in 2022; in Spring 2023, 56 students applied to participate.

Kim's Voice

My experience with UNCW's CCURE program has been invigorating as a Brunswick Community College (BCC) instructor of 25 years! It was life-changing for community college students to see themselves as university honors students. It was refreshing to bring something that I am very passionate about to life and see it done through the eyes of my students. In the following, I share my enthusiasm through reflection.

The BCC Vice President of Academic Affairs described the first meeting that she had participated in at UNCW and asked, as Dean of Arts & Sciences, if I knew of any ideas for an engaging research project that students could get involved in. I had been waiting for that moment. As scholarly research is often not encouraged in the community college culture, it was, and still is, an exciting opportunity for me to teach a CCURE course, listed as a UNCW Honors class. For the area of research, I have always had a keen interest in studying bottlenose dolphins along the Brunswick County coast. I was hopeful that stu-

dents would find fin photo-identification of bottlenose dolphins in the Cape Fear River region an interesting and relevant topic.

As some reference, BCC is small with just under 2,000 academic students, and was ranked #1 in the nation for 2020 and 2021 by SmartAsset. The UNCW/BCC Research & Discovery pilot course recruiting began in the late fall of 2021, and I braced for large numbers of students wanting to study dolphins. Instead, I had very little response. In speaking with students, I discovered that many did not consider themselves ready or worthy of being honors students at the university level. Brunswick Community College has so many incredible students. How could there be such a lack of confidence? My spring 2022 class began with six students and spring 2023 began with eight students. Even with anticipating the lack of confidence and changing the recruitment strategy for 2023, it did not really overcome that confidence barrier of the students. Fortunately, research shows that community college student confidence levels are not static (Bickerstaff et al., 2017). Shifts in confidence are "continually reconstructed through interactions and academic experiences. Success moments not only reframe students' academic identities but they may also be associated with increased motivation and productive academic habits and behaviors" (Bickerstaff et al., 2017, p. 507). Feedback from students in the spring 2022 sections reflects success moments with one student stating, "The CCURE program was a life-changing experience for me. It was my first 'formal' experience with research, and it confirmed for me that I could pursue a career in some form of research." Another student echoed a similar sentiment, "One important thing I gained from the course is the willingness to just go out and do something. There is a stark difference between sitting in a classroom and learning about dolphins versus actually getting on a boat and seeing them myself." One student addressed how the course shifted their perspective on trying new things:

While I enjoyed the experience overall, I felt a little bit of fear of the unknown. If anything, however, try new things even if you are not sure what they entail! This was truly one of the best decisions I have ever made, and one of the coolest experiences in my life.

Authentic partnerships are always about the integrity of the individuals involved. The UNCW team

was an awesome group of individuals who genuinely wanted to infuse high-impact practices into each unique community college culture. The appreciative framework between UNCW and BCC has been built on responsive communication, meaning that not only did each party listen, but positive action was taken toward improvement. Researchers have provided recommendations for building collaborative undergraduate research programs and described that these partnerships are built on “maintaining communication, establishing trust and common goals, and developing a plan specific to each partner institution” (Ashcroft et al., 2021, p. 14). The ACP framework embodies these best practices and seeks to add more. I cannot express enough how important it has been that UNCW has embraced BCC students, not only into a course at UNCW but considering them Honors students.

I have identified several foundational strengths of the appreciative collaborative partnership between BCC and UNCW. The strengths of UNCW were providing vision, a framework, funding, the faculty mentors, and full UNCW resources. BCC’s strengths were providing administrative support, the diversity of the student body, professional enthusiasm from its faculty, the faculty instructors, and creating new experiential learning opportunities.

Two things have been made clear by the UNCW administrators of CCURE, which demonstrated the novel qualities of this Appreciative Collaborative Partnership. First, community colleges are considered to have professional faculty who can be trusted to know their campus culture. Additionally, the faculty have been allowed to make their courses their own, with academic freedom. Second, the Research & Discovery class has the full support of UNCW faculty, staff, and resources. The appreciative collaboration has been further reinforced by the opportunity to present as a partnership at the North Carolina Community College Conference. As this journey continues, I look forward to each institution uplifting the other, with the goal of student success always at the forefront.

Implications for Practice

During the first workshop in which we used an ACP approach, one of our community college partners paused at one point and asked: “what exactly are we doing here?” The question pointed directly to a shift in intention and tone for collaboration be-

tween UNCW and our community college partners. In a follow-up discussion, several community college partners stated that their prior engagement with the institution was limited primarily to signing articulation agreements, and only rarely were they asked about their particular needs and never had they been asked to participate collaboratively in the vision setting for the partnership. Starting with an ACP approach from the beginning helped to establish our intention to be collaborative, inclusive, and seek mutually beneficial outcomes throughout our future work together. Thus, one promising practice that those seeking to develop an ACP should adopt is direct engagement with all partners from the beginning of the planning process. Direct engagement at the point of visioning or developing an initiative ensures not only that partners feel valued but also that their perspectives are integrated into the design.

A second promising practice is to intentionally design ongoing opportunities for engagement and collaboration. Indeed, one of the benefits of utilizing an ACP approach was the relationships that formed and strengthened throughout our regular engagement. For example, UNCW/3C formed an advisory board that included senior leaders from community college partners engaged in the network. The advisory board supports inter-institutional partnerships between UNCW and community colleges as well as among community college partners that provides a supportive space for discussing issues facing NC community colleges. For CCURE, regular meetings between community college instructors and UNCW mentors provided opportunities for partnerships to develop that transcended institutional and, at times, disciplinary boundaries. One of the most interesting partnerships was formed between a community college instructor of Animal Husbandry and a UNCW mentor from Sociology-Criminology. Despite the stark differences in discipline, the partnership provided a foundation for both individuals to learn from each other and to work collaboratively to support students’ engagement in an applied research project. It is important to note, however, that these partnerships were not successful by accident; rather, throughout our ACP we regularly connected individuals and supported mentorship relationships. When developing an ACP, individuals should consider how they will provide support to ensure there is time and energy committed to its success and the success of the individuals who engage.

Another promising practice to utilize when developing an ACP is to provide adequate space for dialogue and reflection among participants. This space must also be intentionally designed as a part of the ongoing engagement with stakeholders. In addition to providing direct benefits to participants, regular reflection also provided critical feedback to leadership of the partnership initiatives at UNCW. Recommendations from the UNCW/3C advisory board led to the development of a “homegrown” professional development workshop series called *Aspiring Leaders*, which seeks to support community colleges in developing leadership capacity on their campuses by working with the members of their campus community. For CCURE, regular communication across partners allowed us to adapt practices and supports to meet specific needs of each section and partnership team. For example, we identified opportunities for supporting the professional development of instructors and mentors who were participating in the initiative through both online resources and synchronous workshops. We also identified opportunities to extend collaborations to include applications for external funding (i.e., grants and fellowships) and discussions of transfer pathways for students. Notably, dialogue and reflection was integrated in multiple ways across our initiatives, including through group discussion, 1-on-1 conversations, evaluation surveys, and informal methods (e.g., phone calls, emails, ad hoc meetings). We recommend that others find multiple ways to engage all individuals in sharing their perspectives on the success and challenges associated with the ACP so that leadership can engage in regular monitoring and evaluation of the initiative and adapt practices as needed.

One final promising practice to continue your engagement through to the celebration of successes. The collective “we” on the authorship of this article includes representation from UNCW and multiple community college partners as well as from a range of positions including practitioners, graduate students, and faculty members. Effective communication and collaboration through the entire cycle of engagement in an ACP will undoubtedly be a challenge at times, but the benefits can be equally meaningful if achieved.

Conclusion

In this article, we used a narrative approach often used in appreciative inquiry to convey a novel ap-

proach to partnerships between community colleges and universities. The novelty of appreciative collaborative partnerships is in the dynamic of the relationship; it is based on true partnership and collaboration. Too often, the partnerships between a university and community colleges is focused on what the four-year institution can offer or do for the community college rather than what the community college needs. In an ACP, the needs of each institution are addressed by utilizing the strengths that each brings to the relationship. Our stories demonstrate the positive change that has occurred on campuses throughout the state by using the ACP model. Our hope is that other institutions use the ACP model to develop partnerships that focus on each other’s needs and build upon their strengths.

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Authors' Note

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