Nature, Benefits, Challenges, and Opportunities of University-Community Engagement at the University of Gondar, Ethiopia: A Case Study

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The relationship that exists between universities and local communities ultimately influences the growth and development of both entities in either constructive or undesirable ways. The study discussed in this article examined the nature, benefits, challenges, and opportunities of university-community engagement (UCE) at the University of Gondar in Ethiopia. The study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. Specifically, the researchers utilized a purposive sampling technique to select participants and conducted key informant interviews and focus group discussions to collect data, which were analyzed using thematic data analysis. Findings indicated that both university and community participants confirmed that working in collaboration to share resources and expertise was mutually beneficial. The findings also suggest that there are a number of challenges that constrain the success of campus-community collaboration. The authors explore the need to address these challenges and how the University of Gondar can utilize opportunities to promote meaningful and successful UCE.

Keywords: university-community engagement, community-based research

In recent years, university-community relationships have emerged as a major area of focus for different higher education stakeholders (Martin, Smith, & Philips, 2003) due to the increased recognition that both entities cannot exist in isolation. Historically, universities and their surrounding communities have failed to work cooperatively to address common problems (Savan, 2004), and the road to university-community partnerships has been fraught with conflict and even hostilities (Martin et al., 2003). Universities have often alienated themselves from the community, rendering partnerships between the two either nonexistent or unconstructive because of opposing philosophies and practices (Bruning, 2006, as cited in Fellizar, 2010; Martin et al., 2003). "Traditionally, universities were considered as 'ivory towers' and producers of knowledge while communities have been passive recipients of the good graces of academia" (Maurrasse, 2001, p. 4). As Martin, Smith, and Philips (2003) maintained, universities were concerned with research, publication, and other academic pursuits while disregarding the life and concerns of nearby communities.

In the late 20th century, however, "many universities and colleges began partnering with social service agencies, businesses, neighborhood organizations, surrounding communities, and health care providers, often with government [involvement]" (Strand, Marullo, & Cutforth, 2003, p. 3) not only because of shifts in the broader political economy, but also because of critical changes in funding, demography, the academy, communities, and educational theory and practice—not to mention the initiatives of faculty, students, organizations, and community residents (Fisher, Fabricant, & Simons, 2004). Since universities are located within communities, there has been increased attention on the impacts each has on the other, constructive and destructive, accidental and intentional, real and imagined (Holland, Gelmon, Green, Moton, & Stanton, 2003). On the one hand, partnerships between universities and communities contribute to building the capacity of community stakeholders and university students. They bring valuable

resources to communities to help them address the needs of youth and families, while also providing opportunities for education, training, and research for students and faculty, as well as providing insights into possibilities for future learning and enhancing the ability of individuals to respond to community challenges (Jacoby, 2003; Martin et al., 2003; McRae, 2009).

Today, university-community partnerships are gaining momentum globally as a powerful force for revitalizing communities, fostering civic engagement, and strengthening in critical ways higher education's core missions of teaching, research, and service (Hatcher & Bringle, 2002; Vlaenderen, 2004). Indeed, there are numerous reports in the literature of such interdisciplinary campus-community collaborations in urban planning, higher education, and community development (for example) (Butterfield & Soska, 2005). University-community engagement (UCE) helps to enrich research, teaching methods, and curricula in universities; enhance students' education and employability by building their knowledge, expertise, and work skills through hands-on research and related experiences; and increase the capacity of the university to conduct and provide innovative, high-quality research and education (Dragne, 2007). Through community collaborations, faculty and students have the opportunity to energize their scholarship and research, and students can discover the value of experiential and service-learning (Brukardt, Holland, Percy, & Zimpher, 2004). By including community residents in research and planning efforts, researchers can create programs that have immediate relevance and policy implications (Strier, 2011) for communities.

University-community partnerships have the potential to promote mutual cooperation, change stereotypes, and provide a rich platform for social learning; they may also play a positive role in giving voice to silenced social issues, thereby playing a vital role in promoting social justice (Strier, 2011). However, building partnerships between universities and communities is a complex task that can generate multiple tensions. Strier (2011) challenged the essentialist views of partnership, highlighting their constructed and discursive nature. He argued that the process of partnership building is affected significantly by several variables, such as lack of symmetry between partners, different perceptions of partnership, role conflicts, different organizational cultures, institutional context, unequal power relations, and inequitable access to decision-making processes. McRae (2009) identified four specific areas of tension—resources/money, reciprocity, relationship building, and recognition of community-university partnerships—and Shea (2011) categorized the potential threats to university-community partnerships into three groups: (1) asymmetries (of power, information, and organizational capacity); (2) inadequacies (of rewards, resources, and infrastructure); and (3) divergences (in focus, priorities, and norms).

Stoecker (2016) explored the contradictions, unrealized potential, and unrecognized urgency of the causes, risks, and rewards of service-learning. More specifically, he questioned the prioritization and theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of service-learning's core concepts: (1) learning, (2) service, (3) community, and (4) change. He suggested "liberating" service-learning by reprioritizing the latter concepts, starting with change, followed by community, then service, and finally learning. He challenged those in the field to reflect on the language they use—that is, terms like *reciprocity*, *partnership*, and *social justice*—and to critically examine if their practice actually aligns with proclaimed theories and values (Stoecker, 2016).

A partnership may serve as a space for bringing different constituencies into critical and egalitarian dialogue in order to negotiate the conception of partnership itself. The establishment of a university-community partnership may be a powerful vehicle for constructing shared meanings, which represent a basic condition for social action. However, the strength of such partnerships depends on the capacity of the leaders to provide a reflexive, participatory organizational culture and structure capable of making room for supplemental, competing, and/or conflicting agendas (Strier, 2011). Scherrer and Morrison (2015) suggested that recognizing power differentials and other challenges, along with expected benefits, could encourage the community to voice its expectations and demands. Asking community members to take the lead in recognizing, prioritizing, and addressing community challenges offers one way to balance that power differential so that the university and community become truly equal partners in addressing community challenges.

Community-based research (CBR) can serve as an efficient and effective mechanism for combining faculty research expertise with student energy, and for creating a bridge between researchers and communities, allowing both to gain knowledge and experience toward fulfilling a variety of research, policy, educational, and action goals related to community problems and social change (Savan, 2004; Viswanathan et al., 2004). In addition, CBR has the advantages of engaging rather than researching local communities and linking research with action, ensuring more sustainable intervention outcomes in community settings and more "equitable partnerships" between communities and researchers, with the aim of combining knowledge with practical feasible action for community development (Trickett & Espino, 2004, as cited in Rappaport, Algeria, & Boyle, 2008; Viswanathan et al., 2004).

In its fullest sense, UCE combines and integrates service with teaching and learning, the professional contributions of faculty, academic staff, and students, and participatory, community-based research—all applied simultaneously to address community priorities (Dragne, 2007). In *Colleges and Universities as Citizens*, Bringle (1999; cited in Dragne, 2007) illustrated how the elements of engagement cut across the main functions of universities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Elements of university-community engagement (Bringle, 1999, cited in Dragne, 2007)
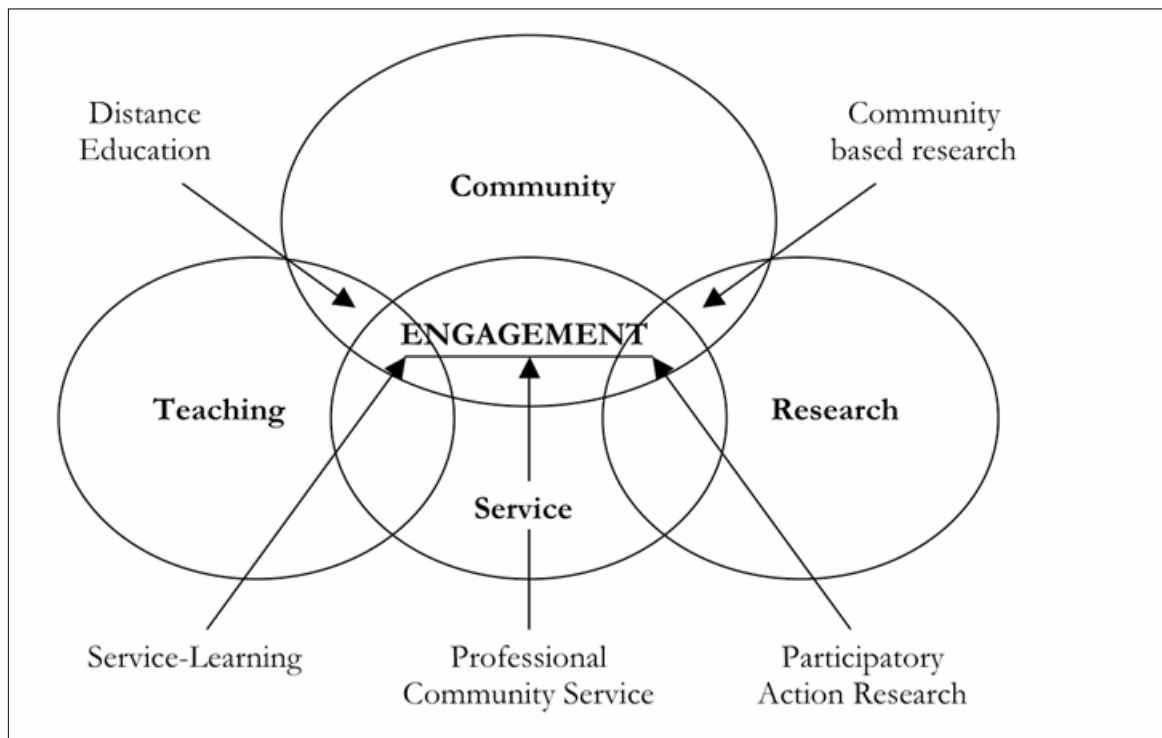
This article discusses several significant findings from a qualitative study that focused on programs and initiatives related to UCE at the University of Gondar (UoG) in Ethiopia. Specifically, the article examines the nature, benefits, challenges, and opportunities of UCE, and suggests strategies for assisting both the university and the community in building cooperative, mutually beneficial engagement.

Community Engagement and Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions

According to Teshome (2003), "higher education in Ethiopia is relatively young. It is not well developed [and] faces problems associated with the quality and relevance of programs of study, research and community service activities, equity and resource constraints, lack of clear program and institutional evaluation mechanisms, and inefficient resource utilization" (p. 2). Most higher education curricula and syllabi in Ethiopia were criticized as imported from mainly Western countries, which have historically

considered universities as "ivory towers" rather than as institutions striving to address societal needs for the development and welfare of humankind (Jimma University, 2004). For these reasons, the practical linkages between local Ethiopian communities and higher education institutions are relatively new and loosely coordinated.

Following global higher education reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, initiatives promoting community-based education began to appear in some Ethiopian universities. For instance, Jimma University (JU) maintains a strong focus on community-based education. (JU, 2004). The College of Medicine and Health Sciences at UoG follows team- and community-based approach to the teaching of health professionals (Tesfamichael & Wassie, 2011). Similarly, Addis Ababa University's School of Social Work also launched a pioneer initiative in establishing a partnership with the Gedam Sefer community in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Higher education institutions in Ethiopia have a mandate to serve three missions: teaching-learning, research, and community service. The University of Gondar has a longstanding tradition of undertaking research and delivering community services which can be traced back to the late 1950s, when the university was known as the Gondar Public Health and Training Center. With the expansion of the university and establishment of new colleges, UoG's community service has expanded beyond health services to new arenas, such as social services (e.g., youth services, legal aid), animal health services, agriculture, and tourism-sector capacity-building programs (Taddesse, Wassie, & Malede, 2010).

Yet, despite the long history of research and community service at UoG, questions have arisen around how much the community-service projects have actually been based on the priority needs of local communities and the country at large. In addition, community service at UoG has been fragmented, disorganized, and not institutionalized. Many believe that the community has not benefitted directly from research outputs or to the desired extent (Taddesse et al., 2010). In addition, the roles of community members in identifying research issues and co-designing and conducting the research projects have been limited. As a result, strengthening UCE has been recognized as critical to promoting community development.

Research Trends in the Field of University-Community Engagement

Research and practice in the vast field of university-community partnerships have evolved dramatically over the last 30 years (Deslandes, 2009). The growing body of literature includes descriptive accounts from university partners' perspectives concerning the impact of UCE on students, faculty, and the communities (Buys & Bursnall, 2007, as cited in Pognon, 2011; Hart, Northmore, Gerhardt, & Rodriguez, 2009, as cited in Pognon, 2011; Timmermans & Bouman, 2004, as cited in Pognon, 2011). While some studies have also used evaluative research to suggest ways academic professionals could improve their relationship with communities (Rubin, 2000, as cited in Pognon, 2011; Spoth, Greenberg, Bierman & Redmond, 2004, as cited in Pognon, 2011), others such as Barnes et al. (2009, as cited in Pognon, 2011), and Creighton (2006, as cited in Pognon, 2011) have identified characteristics of effective partnerships and made recommendations for cultivating, maintaining, and sustaining relationships. Fellizar (2010) maintained that there exists a mutually beneficial and collaborative partnership between universities and communities, though Pognon's (2011) study found that community residents and academics perceived the benefits differently. Likewise, McRae (2009), focusing exclusively on higher education institutions, found that universities benefit from these partnerships. In addition, Maurrasse (2001) acknowledged the incredible power of linking universities and communities for community development, maintaining that there is a strong connection between responsiveness to societal needs and the institutional health of higher education.

In Ethiopia, very little research has been conducted around this issue, with the exception of a project by Butterfield, Kordesh, Wassie, and Mulu (2011) focusing on the Gedam Sefer community partnership in Addis Ababa. Butterfield and colleagues found that the university-community partnership is vital to family- and asset-based community development. Their study—which examined the role of the partnership in improving the lives of poor families in the Gedam Sefer community—indicated that

integrating family- and asset-based community development as a strategy for promoting broader community development initiatives was facilitated by the partnership. Wassie, Melese, and Desalegn (2011) conducted a study of alternative community development approaches in Ethiopia and reported that collaboration and partnership among higher education institutions, communities, agencies, and government represent one of the main strategies for bringing about viable community-based development. To the best of our awareness, no previous study has examined the partnership between UoG and its local communities. Thus, there is a gap in both empirical evidence and conceptual understanding regarding such partnerships. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the nature, benefits, challenges, and opportunities of UCE between the University of Gondar and local communities.

Objectives

The following objectives guided our study:
- To describe the nature of university-community engagement between the University of Gondar and its local communities.
- To examine the benefits of UCE among UoG and its local communities.
- To identify the challenges and opportunities of UCE between University of Gondar and its local communities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study drew on data collected through qualitative research. We employed a descriptive case-study research design to gain a greater understanding of university-community engagement in the context of UoG and its communities. We selected qualitative research to enable us to gather in-depth opinions from participants regarding the engagement between the local communities and university, community perceptions of the engagement, the challenges they have experienced, lessons they have learned, and their recommendations for improving these experiences. Through this descriptive case study, we sought to present a scholarly understanding and reflection on UCE, relying on data gathered from multiple sources and our own experiences supervising and implementing community engagement projects.

Participant Selection

This study involved two categories of participants: (1) university members [faculty and staff] who could provide information about UCE from the university perspective, and (2) community members who would provide information about UCE from the community perspective. The first group included university officials overseeing research and community service activities, middle- and lower-level managers, coordinators of research centers, and academicians and researchers. The university participants included the vice president for research and community service; the research liaison officer; the community-service liaison officer; the dean of colleges, faculties, and schools; and the coordinator of the Research Center for Social Sciences and Humanities. Participants from the university were selected based on the criteria that they were in charge of research and community-service offices or they were involved with community outreach projects or research projects with the local communities. The second group consisted of local community residents working in collaboration with the university on community outreach projects and student internship programs. The community participants were selected based on the criteria that they were long-term residents (i.e., for more than 40 years) and had experience collaborating with the university around engagement initiatives. Our selection of participants for the study was purposeful since, generally, purposive sampling allows the researcher to carefully select participants in an effort to illustrate some feature or process the researcher seeks to explore (Silverman, 2000).

We conducted 25 key informant interviews (i.e., 15 key informants from the university, 10 from the community) and four focus group discussions (two with university staff and two with community members) involved a total of 32 participants. To maintain the homogeneity of participants, there were a separate group of focus group discussions for staff and local community residents. Each of the four focus

groups included eight participants, allowing for greater manageability of discussions. Each focus group discussion ranged from 70 to 90 minutes (Miller & Brewer, 2003). Sample focus group and key-informant interview questions used in the study included: What is university-community engagement to you? How do you characterize the engagement between UoG and the community? What do you think the benefits of university-community engagement include? Do you think the university-community engagement is successful? If yes, what are the strengths (describe them)? What do you think would attract the community and the university to work together? What do you think are the issues and difficulties faced in the engagement? What can you suggest/recommend for the future to improve the engagement?

Data Analysis

Creswell (2003) stated that, in qualitative inquiry, transcribing and reading through the data is the first major procedure of data analysis. He stressed the importance of generating themes that appear as major findings, which should be supported by diverse participant quotations and specific confirmation. To analyze the data generated from key informant interviews and focus group discussions, we used a thematic analysis technique. After the interviews and focus group discussions took place, we first transcribed the data and translated it into English. All notes and taped recordings of the interviews and discussions were transcribed verbatim. After reading the interview transcriptions, we began summarizing the data and sorting them into themes. We then identified themes running through the data for the purpose of discussion and analysis. These themes were then categorized according to the data collected. Finally, the results from the qualitative data were analyzed and presented using thematic analysis methods.

Results and Discussion

This section discusses the study's findings regarding university-community engagement at the University of Gondar. It details the nature and perceived benefits of university-community engagement, and identifies challenges and opportunities of UCE), with the aim of identifying strategies and mechanisms for improving and enhancing engagement in the future. Participants shared their personal experiences with the university, expressed their views about how they were treated in the context of partnership, and provided observations about the challenges and opportunities of engagement. The collected data revealed thoughtful and exhaustive examples addressing what the community and university participants looked for and expected in the engagement. The results discussed in this article center on four major themes—the nature, perceived benefits, challenges, and future opportunities of UCE—with subthemes under each of these themes.

Overall, the participants in this study supported the notions of collaborating to share resources and expertise for the benefit of both the university and the community. However, analysis of the findings indicated that there are a number of challenges related to UCE at the university as well as factors that constrain the establishment of meaningful and sustainable collaborations between the two parties.

The Nature of University-Community Engagement

Globally, universities face high expectations from the communities in which they are located and are often evaluated by the variety and vitality of their interactions with those communities. These interactions comprise what is termed *university-community engagement*. Community service is aimed at developing community potential in order to arrive at predetermined and/or imagined community goals; therefore, the goal of community service is primarily the development of the community at large (Dragne, 2007). The University of Gondar has three overlapping roles, namely education, research, and community service. The first role obligates the university to cater to all educational matters and programs, including teaching and training. While the second role focuses upon pure and applied research endeavors. The last role involves advocating for serving the community through different community service activities and projects, and for improving community development.

Since its establishment (first as the Gondar Health College and Training Center), UoG has made various contributions to the community in the areas of teaching-learning, research, and community service. The university has demonstrated community engagement across the three components of its institutional mission (education, research, and service) which are mutually inclusive and cannot be understood separately: The accomplishment of one leads to the success of the other and vice versa. University-community engagement at UoG in general involves initiatives and processes in the areas of education and research which are applied to address issues relevant to community development priorities to the mutual benefit of the community and the university.

Study participants agreed that since the establishment of UoG, the university has organized and implemented several community service activities. This is consistent with findings that emerged from a review of secondary sources, such as the university's annual reports and conference proceedings. However, there has been low participation of community residents in jointly running these activities. As one community participant noted:

> The university [staff and students] come with some kind of services, and they will give these services to us, then they will return to their home [university]. They did not involve us in the process; they simply come, give, and go.

This shows that even though the university did provide community service to the local communities, the residents did not take part fully in managing and controlling the overall activities of that service.

Within the last few decades, UoG has enhanced its community engagement initiatives in different areas. Key informants from the university highlighted the rapid growth of the university's engagement with communities. One informant commented:

> UoG has shown a dramatic change in the area of research and community service in the last two years. The university developed various guidelines for conducting research and community service. The university also allocated [more money in the budget] for undertaking research and community intervention projects. Staffs are highly involved in research and community services more than ever.

As this quote underscores, UoG has significantly enhanced its development of community engagement as measured by its research and community service activities, staff involvement, and the establishment of research and community service guidelines.

Concomitant with this change, the university has also identified the following community service activities as university priorities:

> Providing direct service (which includes health care services, veterinary clinical services and legal aid services), consultancy services (provide assistance to communities who request specific advice/technical expertise), capacity building (building capacity of local community/individual/group/organization and building capacity of staff in research and community service), partnership (complements local organization in a joint effort), donation (provide funding/support to community), liaison (link community with resources), advocacy (support community effort to obtain resource or change policy), mobilizing (work directly with the existing leaders and community groups to stimulate actions), and organizing (bring the existing organization together in new ways around the issue. (UoG, 2012)

Drawing from the previously mentioned community service agendas and activities, it is clear that, compared to earlier times, UoG has made considerable progress in contributing to the community. Indeed, all of the community service activities relate directly to improving community situations for the betterment of residents. This is consistent with the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's (2009) higher education proclamation, which stipulated clearly that higher education institutions are responsible for rendering community service in areas of their competencies.

Despite these recent developments, however, community service at the university was originally understood in a limited and narrow sense. One university participant shared that, in earlier years, "less emphasis was given to the community service wing of the university. Even [now] when staffs seek academic promotion, they will present participation in local *Idirs* [a grass root self-help associations that

operate at the local level and offer mutual socio-economic support to their members] as community service. This is too … rudimentary and too elementary [a] way of understanding community service."

While such comments clearly show past and current community-service trends at the university, in the last decade, UoG has identified the community as its main stakeholder and target beneficiary during the revision of its five-year strategic plan, as suggested in UoG's motto: "We are committed to serve the country." The university has moved forward rapidly with community service activities and in turn has contributed to developing and improving local communities. It has also increased its involvement in the community, as evidenced by budget allocations and community service activities completed. The community liaison officer in the study reported that "UoG … increased its community service budget from $18,200 in 2011 to $68,200 in 2013 and the number of community intervention projects … increased from 16 in 2012 to 39 in 2013." These figures only relate to governmental allocations and do not include multimillion-dollar projects financed by international and local donors. For instance, in 2017, according to data collected by the community services directorate of the university, the amount of money spent on community services from both the regular budget and donors exceeded more than 45 million Ethiopian birr, equivalent to $204,550.

Forms of University Community Engagement

University-community partnerships can take many forms based on the partners' intentions. Some common examples … include: higher education institution/community partnerships; college, department, program/community partnerships; individual faculty/community partnerships for service learning; individual faculty/community partnerships for community-based research and students/community partnerships. (Portland State University, 2008, p. 8)

Similarly, university-community engagement at UoG assumes various forms, namely community service projects and student outreach programs. However, such engagement initiatives often operate separately and lack synergetic cooperation or strategic direction. Moreover, they are often not adequately participatory and lack tangible and sustainable outcomes for the local communities; rather, UCE is fragmented, existing in the form of projects and other community service activities. Hence, current engagement initiatives must be improved so that more sustainable and mutually beneficial partnerships can be developed.

Community service projects. As part of its commitment to providing needs based community interventions, UoG offers a growing range of community services, including health care services, veterinary clinical services, and various long-term and ongoing direct services and projects (e.g., a chronic illness project, an integrated seed sector development programme, a legal aid center, a tertiary eye care center, and a community-based rehabilitation project), a large number of which are provided in partnership with national and international organizations and institutions.

The University of Gondar provides health services to more than five million community members and owns one of the best referral hospitals in the country. Through outreach activities, health professionals educate community members about important health issues, provide screenings, refer patients to the university hospital, work with relevant authorities to promote health-seeking behavior and health services in the community, and strengthen the linkage and referral system of the health sector generally.

To improve good governance and promote justice, university professionals conduct capacity-building trainings for local administrators and provide free legal aid to disadvantaged segments of community through legal-aid centers. The university also collaborates with the community to implement students' experiential learning through practical attachments, internships, and community engagement outreach.

Additionally, UoG is undertaking a number of projects in and with local communities. Each year, the university provides grants to finance community service projects in order to encourage and stimulate a culture that is responsive to the needs of the community. Some of the projects aim to improve community members' quality of life by promoting entrepreneurial skills, fostering sustainable livelihoods, developing, testing and disseminating better seed varieties, and advocating gender equality, to name a few. Other projects focus on promoting quality education in the community through continuous professional development for teachers and education officers, tutorials for students by university faculty,

and the provision of necessary inputs (e.g., books, laboratory materials, chairs, and tables). The projects—designed by staff from each college, faculty, and school of the university—are developed within the following thematic areas: direct service, consultancy service, capacity building, partnership, donation, liaison, advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing. The community liaison officer in the study reported that

> even though such kind of culture [has] a very short history in the university [it started in December 2011], it brought important benefits both to the university and the community. The university benefits from the project because staffs will get the chance to work with communities and, by this, the community will benefit [from] … the activities of the projects. It contributes [to] building the capacities of communities and contributing [to] community development.

Student community outreach services. In addition to the previously discussed forms of community engagement, UoG also demonstrates UCE through its Team Training Program (TTP) in the College of Medicine and Health Sciences, and through field education in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities. The TTP enables students to develop positive attitudes about rural practices, appreciate community health activities and challenges, establish community links with other sectors, gain experience in real-life conditions, develop team-building skills, hone communication skills in relation to a range of stakeholders, develop mechanisms for facilitating involvement in all health activities, and enhance their research skills. Through the program, students oversee a range of activities and provide a host of services, including community diagnosis, polyclinic activities, health institution supervision, environmental health services, mini-projects, seminars, health education activities, school health service, prison health service, home visits, outreach, documentation and reporting, and research projects.

Perceived Benefits of University-Community Engagement

Study findings showed that UCE at UoG was perceived to be important from the perspectives of both university and community participants, who commonly agreed that the engagement was mutually beneficial and that engagement as significant to the life and growth of the university and community.

According to the literature, the growing interest around issues related to the role of colleges and universities in the community revolves around the mutual benefits derived from engagement. Communities, businesses, and individuals can draw on the knowledge and expertise of universities to address real-world issues, while engagement initiatives can shape university research agendas, enhance student learning, and contribute to the overall quality of education (Alter, 2005, as cited in Hart, 2010). University and community participants also perceived that UCE is most beneficial when it produces a measurable or tangible outcome that contributes to the community as well as to the university.

Perceived benefits by university participants. The university participants recognized that it is the mandate of the university to work in close collaboration with the local communities in which the university is located. Since the community is "home" to the university, the university is expected to contribute to the community's improvement—as demonstrated by the centrality of community service to the university's mission. The university gains multiple benefits from collaborating with communities. The university utilizes the local community as a learning ground, and that interaction and exchange with the community enables students to understand and engage with real-world issues. This was evident in the interviews with university participants, one of whom noted the following:

> The university has been providing and expanding the scope of community service activities as part of the curricula of all disciplines. Community service provides opportunities for students and academic staff to develop the values, skills and understandings needed to contribute to societal well-being and enhance the quality of the teaching-learning process. Providing a service in areas of need within the broader community enables students to acquire practice-oriented education and inspires research undertakings for academic staff. Students get an opportunity to substantiate their theoretical knowledge in dealing with real-life problems. In addition, university-community engagement enables the university to realize its goals with respect to community-based teaching and learning, and ensure the quality of education.

The preceding comment highlights how UCE is valuable in advancing the professional or educational enlightenment of both faculty and students. Students can prepare educationally and psychologically for their future careers. Studies have shown that solid partnerships with communities are vital sources for teaching, research, and practice (Butterfield & Soska, 2004). Faculty and students can energize their scholarship and research through community collaborations, while students have the chance to discover the value of experiential and service-learning (Brukardt et al., 2004).

University-community engagement is also important for developing a curriculum that is responsive to the community needs and problems. One university participants held that

> every discipline should contribute something to the community. Any discipline which has nothing to contribute to the community should not be given in the university. Every discipline is expected to teach students in the way that can develop their knowledge, skill, and capacities in solving societal problems. In doing so, working closely with communities is essential. So by working with communities, each discipline can identify the specific needs and problems of the community, which in turn can help each discipline to design curricula which considers the needs and problems of the community.

Similarly, the literature has shown that by including community residents in research and planning, scholars and practitioners can create programs that have immediate relevance and policy implications (Strier, 2011). University-community engagement helps enhance research, teaching methods, and curricula in universities; build their knowledge, expertise, and work skills via research and related experience; develop the university's capacity for quality research and education (Dragne, 2007).

Perceived benefits by community participants. University-community partnerships contribute to community development by building the capacity of community members and university students (Jacoby, 2003; Martin et al., 2003). Improving the quality of life is the driving force behind universities' community service initiatives (Dragne, 2007). Wassie et al. (2011) also identified specific roles that higher education institutions play in relation to the community, including helping communities to initiate, plan, and develop local projects; rendering continuous professional support to communities, agencies, and government to enhance local community-based development; emphasizing the training of a large number of professionals capable of organizing and leading local development; developing university curricula that emphasize student-community attachment and collaboration and establishing a university-agency-community-government partnership through which students can be placed for field practica.

Consistent with the literature, this study found that community participants associated many benefits with UCE. Specifically, they perceived engagement as important in the exchange of educational and non-academic resources and for providing opportunities to share resources to address community issues and problems. All of the community participants emphasized the value of maintaining relationships meaningful to sharing and exchanging university intellectual resources, acquiring expertise in support of community activities, and solving community problems. The community benefits from the personal and professional relationship with university faculty and students, who help to develop community capacity via different trainings, thereby enhancing the problem-solving capacity of community members.

Challenges of University-Community Engagement

Working with communities can be a difficult task. The literatures indicates that the main obstacles to forging more egalitarian university-community partnerships include lack of symmetry between partners, role conflicts, differing organizational cultures, institutional contexts, unequal power relations, inequitable access to decision-making processes, bureaucratic constraints, poor planning and implementation, lack of ongoing evaluation processes, lack of sustainability, stakeholders' varying knowledge and experience, inadequate participatory processes, mistrust, and frequent uncertainty about the viability of proposed outcomes (McRae, 2009; Strier, 2011). Study participants' accounts indicated that there are various challenges of university-community engagement at UoG. These include misunderstanding of the mission and roles of UoG in partnerships, institutional bureaucracy, resource limitations, power inequalities, lack of tangible outcomes or benefits, lack of sustainability, community fatigue, lack of strong systems, attitudinal barriers and/or cultural incompetence (among faculty), lack of initiation and preparedness of

staff, the consideration of community services as a paid service by some staff, and lack of clear understanding of the purposes of community service. Participants perceived these challenges as hindrances to engagement practices that impeded the progress of engagement initiatives.

The University of Gondar strives to contribute expertise (i.e., professional service) in its partnerships with local communities. However, community members oftentimes view the university as funder; thus, requests to UoG for financial support for joint projects are common. In many of the community projects, UoG assigns experts and covers their travel and related expenses. While faculty sometimes view these payments as compulsory , the university also sometimes faces budget constraints that limit its ability to cover such expenses related to joint projects. This is exacerbated by increasing demand for local community development projects, limited community financial contributions to joint community practices, small (albeit increasing) budget allocations from the federal government for community partnership projects, and the limited (but improving) capacity of the university to secure funding from external organizations.

Faculty working with communities oftentimes must confront different attitudes, practices, and power relationships. Often, faculty and community members speak different "languages," have different levels of educational training in different from disciplines. University-community engagements can also represent sites of conflict between emic knowledge (knowledge gained from experience) and ethic knowledge (knowledge acquired through formal educational training, literature, and research). While these differences comprise potential learning opportunities themselves, an effective partnership ultimately requires collaborators to transcend these differences and forge a team. Since this is a very challenging endeavor, university-community partnerships are sometimes compounded by tensions and conflicts, which can de-motivate faculty and community members and undermine effective project implementation.

Even though communities are endowed with diverse personal and environmental resources (experiences, skills, and knowledge), many community members assume that university experts are more powerful and influential in their relations with the university. Study participants shared a common perception of the university as the source and owner of resources and knowledge and the community as a recipient of the ideals of the university. This view overshadows the assets and resources of the community and makes the community more dependent on the university to find solutions to local problems. This power inequity hampers the establishment of successful university-community relations. Such power dynamics must change in ways that foster equal power relations between the two entities. In addition, the long-standing bureaucracy of local community administrations sometimes hampers progress in implementing joint projects.

Most engagement efforts do not produce immediate and direct community benefits that are visible and measurable outcomes of the UCE effort. This in turn affects community members' commitment to engagement initiatives. Many UCE initiatives also have a sustainability problem because of the shortage of financial and material resources. In addition, the process does not fully involve community members in the needs identification, planning, and implementation processes of projects.

Another significant challenge to university-community partnerships is the lack of a strong institutional/organizational support system that controls and guides UCE initiatives. Thus, building a robust system that supports UCE is paramount. Some staff lack initiative and preparedness, or they consider community services a paid service. Also, some faculty do not possess a clear understanding of community service. All of these challenges necessitate a call for joint efforts to address the barriers and establish a successful UCE.

Opportunities of University-Community Engagement

Both university and community participants in the study reported that community engagement at UoG offers many opportunities that can be utilized for growth and development of the community and the university. On the university side, participants reported that one such opportunity is the government's recent attention to community engagement and applied research. The government is also striving to achieve sustainable development goals that center on partnerships and working in collaboration with different stakeholders. This in turn has encouraged the university to increase its community involvement

initiatives in recent years; within the last decade, the university has given increased attention to research and community service initiatives. Study participants reported that the current system is somewhat more encouraging of community service activities than the past system, before the introduction of business process reengineering and the development of UoG's five-year strategic plan. Cognizant of these facts, the university has increased its community involvement. Another encouraging motivator for academic staff involvement in community service activities is that research and community service have credit values similar to those of teaching and learning.

Community participants in the study revealed a surprising awareness of the possibilities and benefits of collaborating with the university. They expressed interest in and willingness to exchange their resources for access to new ideas and knowledge that could enhance their capacity for solving community problems. Specifically, the community residents wished to work in collaboration with the university to enhance and strengthen community capacity for improvement. They also reported that in recent years the university has been motivated to work with communities, and certain university environments have been motivated to work with communities. For instance, the university has designed and implemented several community service projects and established various research centers such as climate change research center and disability studies and services center.

The Future of University-Community Engagement

University participants in the study recognized that community service/engagement comprises an integral part of the university's teaching, learning, and research activities. It promotes the mutually beneficial interaction between the university and the community. On the one hand, community engagement is beneficial to the university since it promotes contextualized, relevant, and quality teaching and learning. On the other hand, it benefits the community since it promotes the social, environmental, economic, and cultural development of communities.

As is evident from the perceptions of study participants, the future is promising for both the university and community if they work in collaboration and establish strong, well-institutionalized engagement efforts. The university must develop relationships with local and regional authorities, governmental and non-governmental agencies, civic/community-based organizations, and other surrounding communities. Likewise, communities must establish strong relationships with the university. Both university and community participants indicated that if a mutual collaborative engagement is established in the future, all will benefit from the fruits of the engagement. University-community engagement can be used to promote community-based development; however, to accomplish this, a formalized institution must be established to guide and manage the activities of university-community engagement efforts, as the university participants stressed.

Conclusion

The literature acknowledges the importance and limitations of university-community engagement. According to Dragne (2007), UCE can function as a vehicle for promoting community awareness and participation; enrich research, teaching methods, and curricula in universities; and enhance students' education and employability by offering of diverse opportunities. Yet, there are also constraints that can limit the success of partnerships. McRae (2009) and Strier (2011) identified challenges such as lack of balance between partners, organizational cultures, institutional context, and unequal power relations and access to decision making processes, bureaucratic constraints, poor planning and implementation, lack of ongoing evaluation processes, lack of sustainability, and inadequate participatory processes.

The University of Gondar engages with local communities and the wider public through a diverse range of activities such as community service projects and student outreach services. Both the university and the community have benefited from these engagement initiatives. Enhancing university-community engagement in the future will contribute positively to meeting community needs and solving community problems, and will benefit the university by ensuring the quality of teaching-learning, research, and

service. It seems safe to conclude that UoG's current engagement initiatives represent favorable beginnings compared to earlier engagement efforts at the university.

University-community engagement also poses challenges that impede the establishment of successful and effective engagement which includes misunderstandings about the mission and roles of partnerships, institutional bureaucracy, resource limitations, lack of tangible outcomes, lack of sustainability, community fatigue, attitudinal barriers, and/or cultural incompetence among faculty. Among the most significant barriers to UCE are the power disparities between the university and the community. Community stakeholders consider the university as a powerful entity capable of providing them with resources to solve their problems. Such views, however, make it more difficult for the community to uncover its own strengths and assets to utilize toward its betterment and development. These challenges need to be addressed, therefore, and the benefits of the engagement should be strengthened so as to realize meaningful, collaborative, and is mutually beneficial engagement.

The findings from this study may inform university administrators (and others interested in participating in UCE) as they work to develop supportive policies and programs that can contribute to more progressive and sustained partnerships between these entities by offering a thorough understanding of the influences of the university on the community as well as the responses and perceptions of the community in relation to the university and vice versa. It may also help community development agents and practitioners to identify and understand the factors that hinder and/or facilitate the nature of the engagement and to take actions for better outcomes. Furthermore, this study may serve as base for a more in-depth and broader study designed to understand the perceptions of local communities and the university community regarding the engagement that exists between these two parties and to foster mutually beneficial university-community engagement.

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