

**A Perspective on Creating Sustainable Partnerships: Critical Elements of
Holistic School-University Partnerships**

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Introduction and the Critical Elements

This paper presents the theory and practice of a holistic model of a school-university partnership in education and teacher education. The focus is on three critical elements of a holistic partnership and more specifically on the *organic relationship* among the partnership's partners and programs as the defining element. This is the perspective upon which the activities, practices, research and policies are designed, and the perspective from which a professional culture and community develop over time.

In this paper I am interested in offering a holistic partnership model as a viable approach to help meet America's current challenge to reduce the academic achievement gap for poor students and minority students. As Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College, Columbia University has commented in *TC Today* (2005), "this is the most important issue facing education today – the equivalent of AIDS or cancer in medicine" (p. 3). Further, I am interested in promoting a vision of a coordinated K-20 education system which is integral to a holistic partnership approach and central to meeting the challenges of an improved education system.

At its most basic level, a holistic partnership has three critical elements. The first element as mentioned previously is the *organic relationship* that is created among the participants and between the partnering institutions. The second element is the partnership's *integrative and coordinative conceptual approach* to educational change, improvement, and reform. And the third is its *smallness*, that is, its size in terms of the relatively small number of participants that

constitute the many units or teams of people that make up the partnership. These three elements are the major features for a sustainable and successful holistic school-university partnership.

The theory and concepts of a holistic partnership and its organic foundation were operationalized in two partnership projects I founded and conducted. The first was from 1980 to 1998 at Queens College of the City University of New York (CUNY). The project was entitled Project SCOPE (see Catelli, 1992; 1995 for an explanation of the project). The second partnership, which began in 1998, is at Dowling College on Long Island in New York State. The partnership is entitled Project SCOPE II, School-College Operation in Partnership Education (Catelli, 2002). Both partnerships involved teachers, education students, college professors, and administrators representing a variety of school settings – urban and suburban. Each partnership has had a respectable record of successes and relevant research associated with its operations (Catelli, 2002). The first partnership project and its personnel received national and international recognition and honors (American Association for Higher Education, 1991; City University of New York, 1991). Parts of the first project still operate today at Queens College/CUNY. The second partnership is in its seventh year of operation and is still in the process of defining its ultimate agenda goals. It should be noted that both partnerships have had a number of accomplishments. Such accomplishments have included (1) the preparation of over 300 preservice teacher education students (three fourths of whom were tenured in teaching positions in the New York City area); (2) educational services to 15 schools and 5,000 pupils; and (3) over 30 collaborative publications (e.g. Catelli & Nix, 1992; Catelli, Franco & Mongiello, 1996; Catelli & Carlino, 2001) along with numerous paper presentations at national and international professional conferences (e.g., Catelli & Nix 1992; Catelli, Carlino, & Longley, 2001). Based on my 27 years of experience of operating on this vision via the two partnership projects, and drawn

from an analysis of the successes, failures and lessons learned from each project, I can say with relative assuredness that these three elements are essential to sustaining a partnership relationship.

The First Element: Organic Relationships

A holistic school-university partnership is a conceptually-based, evolving venture that seeks to change, integrate, and improve professional education and K-12 schooling in a coordinative fashion with a K-20 vision of an education system. As a holistic enterprise, its theory fosters a notion that an organic whole has a reality independent and greater than the sum of its parts. The partnership's parts -- its programs, people, and institutional levels -- function in an interdependent manner toward a common goal and for the benefit of the whole.

In a holistic partnership, the relationship between and among people and programs is, and must be, organic rather than symbiotic (Catelli, 1990). In a symbiotic-type relationship, there are two equal parties, a school and university, who work together to satisfy their mutual self-interests. Each party remains in the relationship or arrangement until the desired goal is achieved. Once the goal is achieved, the relationship ends, and the partnership ceases. Often such school-university arrangements are temporary and lack the stability necessary to bring about lasting change, improvement, and sustainability. These types of arrangements or relationships could be compared to collaborations, such as when a song writer and lyricist collaborate on a musical piece for a period of time. Once the project is completed the collaboration ends and the parties separate. In an organic relationship in education, the two parties and their programs operate in a more lasting, integral, and intimate fashion. The people of the two institutions assume joint ownership of selected programs and responsibility for commonly agreed-upon

agenda goals. Their relationship is ongoing, and their work is directed at the improvement, reform and renewal of an entire education system.

As I have pointed out in other writings, the idea of organic relationships was best promoted by Fritjof Capra in *The Web of Life* (1997), Arie DeGeus in *The Living Company* (1997), and Philip Schlechty and Betty Lou Whitford in a chapter written by them in 1988 entitled “Shared Problems and Shared Vision: Organic Collaboration.” Schlechty and Whitford state:

In organic relationships the parts fulfill unique functions, sometimes in a semi-autonomous fashion, but the purpose of these functions is to serve the body of the whole. Indeed, each part has a major investment in the survival of the whole because ill health of the body has potentially devastating effects on each of the separate parts. Thus, unlike symbiotic relationships, which emphasize mutual self-interests, organic relationships stress the common good above all else. (pp. 191-192)

An organic relationship is the defining element that is crucial to the partnership’s everyday operation, sustainability, and success. To reiterate, in a holistic partnership, all participants conduct their work interdependently for the common good and health of the partnership’s entire educational system and its renewal.

Members of a holistic partnership may, at times, engage in a collaborative type of arrangement, one that is perhaps more symbiotic in nature. For example, members of a holistic partnership may decide to collaborate with a neighboring school district, contracting with an outside agency to provide staff development training for the teachers of both districts to acquire new skills for teaching literacy. Subsequently, they will share the cost, space, knowledge, and personnel for the venture. Their relationship and contractual arrangement with personnel from

the other school district is, in this case, short-term and symbiotic. However, if this arrangement occurs, it does so within the organic structure of the partnership.

I want to clearly state and emphasize that holistic school-college/university partnerships represent a different model from other existing partnership models including what is referred to today in teacher education as Professional Development Schools (see Byrd & McIntyre, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1994/2005; Ravid & Handler, 2001; Whitty, Furlong, Miles, & Barton, 1996; and Wilbur & Lambert, 1995 for models). In a holistic partnership, people of a university and a school come together for the expressed purpose of establishing a new type of educational laboratory, one that is directed at comprehensive change, innovation, improvement and renewal of a system. The partners' work is focused on operating a laboratory of the future: a setting in which people create newer roles and forms of education for improving student learning in a more coordinative K-20 system of education. The system includes master's programs and doctoral programs. Functional connectedness among the levels of education and teacher education is essential. Experimentation and innovation are key notions in holistic partnership; and planned integration and coordination of programs, personnel, and content are priority agendas items.

Over the 27 years that I have put into practice on a small scale this organic notion of partnering relationships I have found that trust, respect and honesty among partnering individuals and institutions are central to actualizing organic relationships. Conscious awareness and an understanding by individuals of what is at stake if any or all of these attributes are violated are of the utmost importance. In the initial phases of the partnership, which are usually labor-intensive, it is crucial for individuals to make public their individual and/or collective motives for creating or joining the partnership. Developing the type of integration and interdependence that I am speaking of necessitates that people are willing to be truthful about

their intentions and motives. This certainly is no easy task. However, this is necessary in order to have a productive, healthy and sustainable holistic partnership. Thus, an organic partnering relationship becomes a reality when people are able to freely express their motives for joining or creating the partnership, and when a reasonable degree of trust, respect, and honesty exists among a majority of the partnership's membership.

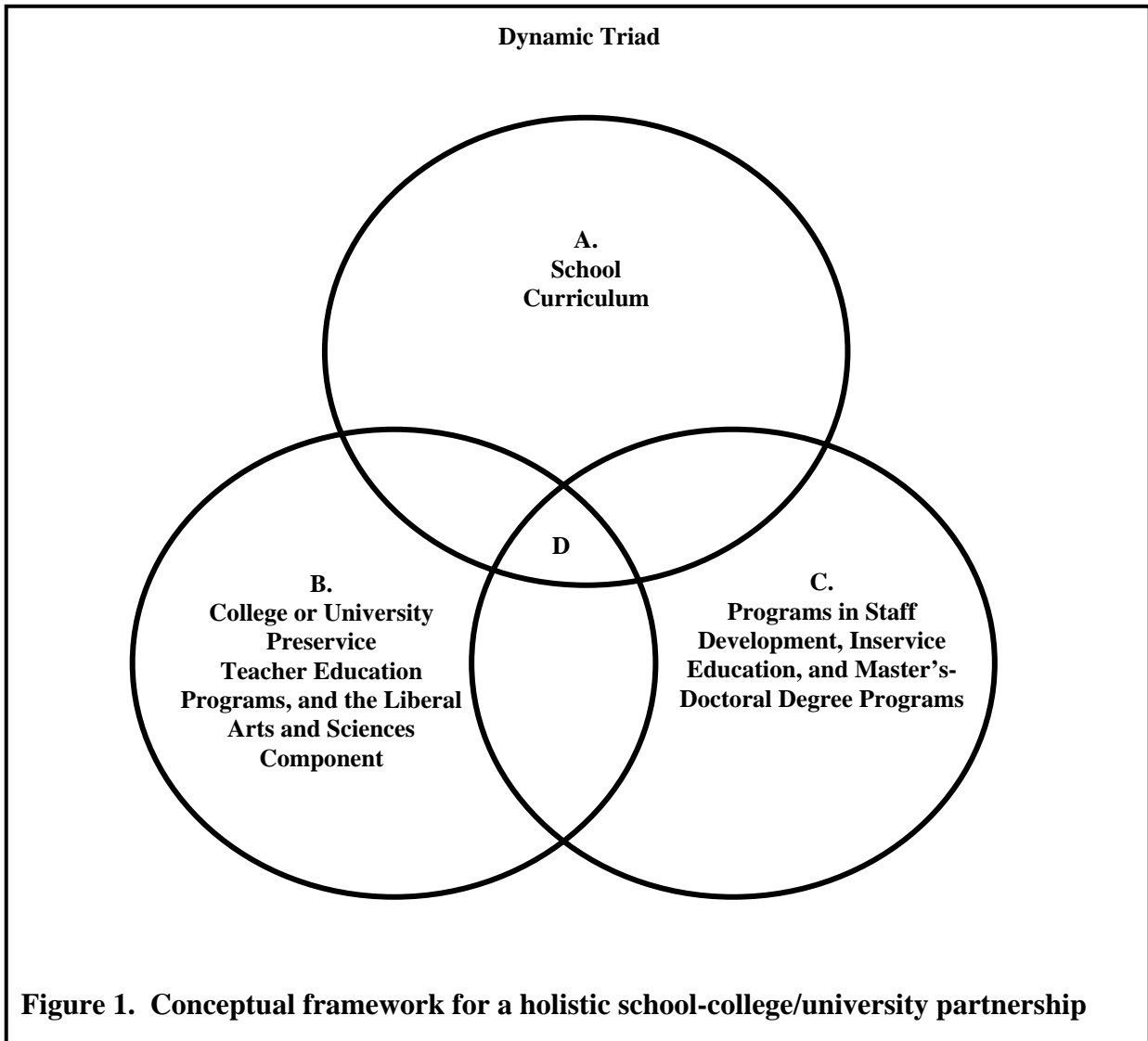
The Second Element: An Integrative and Coordinative Conceptual Approach to Change

A holistic partnership is termed as such for its integrative and coordinative conceptual approach to educational change, improvement, and reform. In the first partnership project, a conceptual framework was developed and acted upon throughout its 18 years. The conceptual framework seen in Figure 1 identifies the three educational domains (A, B, C) that form a *dynamic triad* inclusive of programs, content, students, and teachers. The focus is on the separate education domains of the school's curriculum and staff/professional development program, and the university or college's preservice and inservice teacher education programs. The idea is to artfully integrate these domains to effect coordinative change, improvement, and reform.

The conceptual framework was founded on three assumptions from which all project activities are designed. The three assumptions are:

1. that closer linkages among and eventual fusion of the major domains will result in improving and reforming education at all levels and creating a new coordinated K-20 education system;
2. that the quality and effectiveness of a university's teacher education program is ultimately dependent on its meaningful connection to schools, educational practice, and student learning; and

3. that the development of teaching as a profession and its knowledge base for teaching and learning is best served by a more “participatory” and “organic” relationship among school and university personnel.



These three assumptions are the main agenda goals for a holistic partnership. They operate as the guiding principles for all partnership activities and action research studies impacting one or more of the domains. Over time, domains B and C of the conceptual framework in Project SCOPE I were expanded, in theory, to include the faculties of the liberal arts and sciences for the

preparation of preservice teacher candidates via master's and doctoral programs. Although this was never achieved in the first partnership, it became part of the conceptual framework in the early 1990s (Catelli, 1993). Such institutional barriers as a non-responsive faculty reward system, rigid department lines, and a negative perception of teacher education held by a small percentage of the College's faculties all prevented this from occurring. However, it is now clear to the larger education community and a number of accrediting agencies in teacher education such as the National Council for the Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE, 2002) that the liberal arts and sciences faculties of a university must join the team of teacher educators and school teachers to adequately prepare teachers. Also, the *Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching* under the directorship of Lee Shulman has conducted research on collaborative models between faculties of liberal arts and sciences and faculties of education.

As a *dynamic triad*, the conceptual framework for a holistic partnership promotes the idea that each domain relies on the others to accomplish the agenda goals. For example:

1. If instituting major changes in a school's curriculum (e.g., standards-based education) necessitates the implementation of new pedagogical approaches or skills (e.g., constructivism), then the training of such skills for the practitioners responsible for the curriculum relies on the school's staff or professional development program for its accomplishment.
2. If student teachers who will be assigned to the school are expected to demonstrate the new pedagogical skills, then this requires that the university's teacher education program include in its course content and experiences adequate preparation of such new skills.
3. If cooperating and/or supervising teachers at the school are expected to facilitate the student teacher's performance of the skills, then the acquisition of supervisory knowledge

for the development and assessment of such skills requires the university and school to provide adequate inservice training or professional development for the cooperating teachers.

The main idea I am promoting is that for fundamental change and lasting comprehensive improvement to occur each domain is dependent upon the others. Whether new education practices are initiated by research findings or from a revised school curriculum based on pupil needs, or based on the creative ideas and practical wisdom of school practitioners and professors, all parties must be involved in an integrative, innovative, and coordinated fashion for its success and implementation. Similarly, all parties must be involved to facilitate student learning and produce new teaching and learning knowledge for the profession of teaching.

Central to a holistic partnership theory and ideals is area D of the conceptual framework. Area D represents the point at which the programs, personnel, content, and resources come together on common ground for the integration and improvement of professional education and K-12 education. It is the area in which integrative activities, courses, and research studies involving pre- and inservice education students, teachers, and professors are conducted and coordinated. It serves as the partnership's "catalyst" and intermediary structure for change and its laboratory for experimentation and innovation (see Wilson, 1972). Area D is the heart of a holistic partnership. It is semi-autonomous in its structure, governance, and policies. As an evolving and spiraling process, a holistic partnership moves slowly toward increasing the size of area D while improving and revitalizing professional education and school curriculum. This is the area that places educators from schools and the university in a new configuration where their roles and relationships are defined differently. Such new professional roles for teachers as action-researcher, student-teacher supervisor or mentor, university course instructor, change

agent, institution-builder, curriculum developer, proposal writer, conference speaker, and author of professional articles are intertwined, and often jointly participated in by members of the partnership (e.g., Catelli, 1995; Catelli, DeCurtis, Nix, Johnston, McLaughlin, Mongiello, & Moskowitz, 1995; Catelli, Johnston, Nix, Stack-Lennon, Turner, & Escobar, 1994; Catelli, Franco, & Mongiello, 1996; Catelli & Nix, 1992). With regard to education professors, in a holistic partnership, their role is also defined differently to include the interconnected roles of director, staff developer, and research coordinator. The new professional roles for professors and teachers and the activities associated with each are critical to achieving the ultimate goals of the partnership.

An important point I want to make is that the main idea of area D is to artfully design partnership projects and research that integrate, change, and improve all three domains, simultaneously or in a coordinated fashion. It is the area in which educators and students are prepared to serve in these new professional roles that are deemed more conducive to the current or emerging needs of education and society. In this case, we are focused on helping to reduce the academic achievement gap. The action goal is to increase the size of area D so that it encompasses and integrates more of the three domain areas. It is to institutionalize the partnership(s) among institutions in a way that makes the emergence of a new coordinated K-20 system of education and teacher education visible.

Members who operate in such a structure do so concurrently on both a macro (institutional) and micro (classroom) level. Their managerial styles and governance structures slowly change from hierarchical to organic. Ultimately, the partnership through area D becomes institutionalized. The relationship takes on a type of ongoing and sustainable coherence that ensures programmatic quality, teaching and learning effectiveness, and professional and

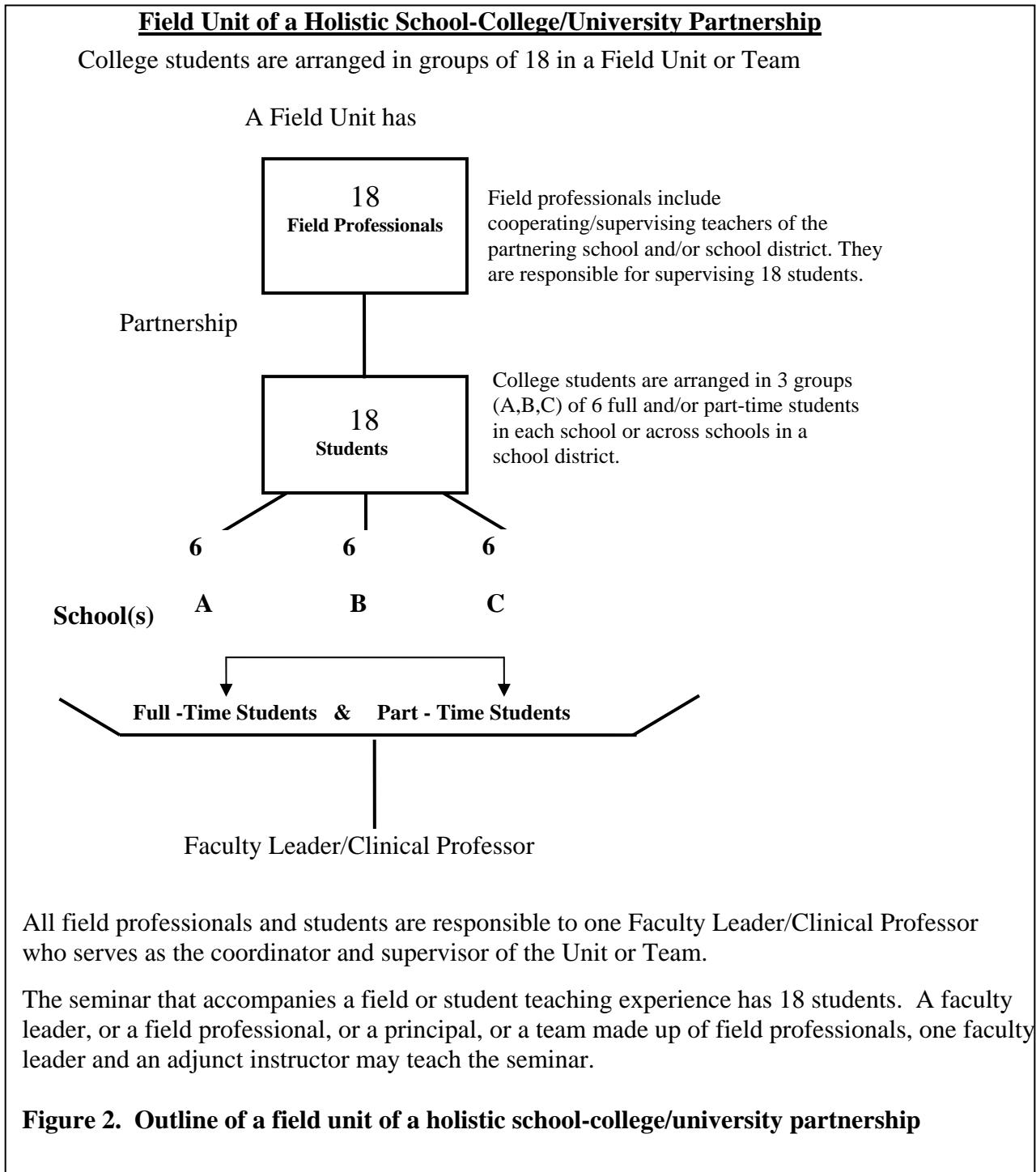
institutional accountability. One of the larger questions is how does one begin to put into practice the theory, ideas and conceptual approach to change that are essential to holistic partnerships?

Third Element: Smallness in Size

The partnership's "smallness" -- that is, in terms of the relatively small number of participants that make up each of the units or the many teams of the partnership is the third critical element of a holistic partnership. The small number of participants in a unit or on a team is a main ingredient for success. It is what makes the organic relationship between people work. The partnership consists of a series of units comprised of fifteen to eighteen teachers, and one professor (see Figure 2). Each unit or team is responsible for no more than eighteen teacher candidates in an academic semester. Thirty-six students are supervised by the team each academic year for their student teaching, field or internship experience. I have found that when the number of school-based supervising teachers and preservice students is above eighteen for a semester, the partnership's productivity and level of effectiveness decreases. Often, communication between members was seriously hampered, and each member's ability to solve daily problems of teaching and learning diminished significantly.

There may be any number of units representing the same or different subject areas within and across school districts. In fact, the across-district arrangement is most desirable for a partnership's research agenda. It provides members with a varied sample of school sites and educational contexts to conduct research studies from which findings may then be deemed more generalizable. The increase in number of professors that are needed in this plan come from a pool of faculty from the liberal arts and sciences, or from a consortium in which a college may

participate, or from a pool of educators who have retired their systems and serve as adjunct professors at the college or university.



The relatively small number of members that constitutes a unit allows for the much needed professional intimacy among and between the members. It allows members to team, and to collaborate for class instruction, peer coaching, and curriculum development. More importantly, the small number of participants in a unit usually provides the partnering members with more opportunities to communicate with one another, which is absolutely critical to conducting the daily operations of the partnership effectively. Also, it allows members to immediately solve problems that arise within the unit. This is especially important in urban and inner-city settings where teachers and students confront enormous social, educational, and economic problems on a daily basis. The team's membership, which includes student teachers, a professor, and supervising teachers, reduces the pupil-to-teacher ratio in the classroom, thus allowing for more individualized instruction to occur. This was cited by the teachers of Project SCOPE I as a key benefit of the holistic approach (see Catelli, 1992).

The unit strives to become a community of people with other units within and across schools. The unit is a smaller entity for change within the larger catalyst structure of the partnership (area D). Also, given the partnership's integrative nature, the team must remain small in its membership. Teachers are preparing for and then serving in different professional roles with varied functions at different points in time; that is, they are teaching education courses, supervising student teachers, serving as mentors, assisting in clinical field experiences, conducting action research studies, and engaging in collaborative inquiry. In essence, they are instituting integrative change and improvement focused on student learning at both the K-12 and college/university levels in a coordinated fashion. More importantly, they are responsible for and responsive to the all-inclusive needs of their pupils. To do all of this effectively over long periods of time and to keep everyone who is on board, motivated, and growing professionally,

the units must remain small in size. Smallness is the third element that is important to the success and sustainability of a holistic partnership in an inner-city, urban, or suburban setting. Size counts and does matter as we have found in the research conducted on class size (e.g. Molar, 1999). Size is a significant factor in learning and teaching, and it is a critical feature of a holistic partnership. The holistic approach substantially reduces the pupil-to-teacher ratio in the classroom, and it increases opportunities for students to learn and achieve.

Final Comments

More than in any other time in the history of American education, educators and government leaders are designing action plans to meet the challenge of closing the academic achievement gap in the U.S. Currently, U.S. educators and leaders envision school-university ventures and comprehensive community partnerships as a major part of a larger schema to meet the daunting challenge of closing the gap for poor students and minority students (Bowen, Kurzweil & Tobin, 2005; Education States Commission, 2005; Gates Foundation, 2003; and Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). Also, there is general agreement, now and in the past, that schools alone are unable to successfully respond to the economic and social pressures, and demands for accountability (Calabrese, 2005; Robinson & Mastny, 1989; Shinnars, 2002; Slater, 2005; Stallings, 1995; Stoel, Togneri & Brown, 1992). K-12 schools are no longer viewed by many educators and state leaders in isolation or separated from the higher-education sector of America's education system (California State University [CSU] Presidents' Group, 1996; Schmidt, Badillo, Brady, MacDonald, Ohrenstein, Roberts, & Schwartz, 1999). Both sectors are essential components of an interactive web of social institutions creating a seamless web of global sustainability (Calabrese, 2005; Cotton, 2001; Leibman & El-Eini, 1996; Malone & Yohe, 2002). Sustainability requires planning to meet school, community, and partner

challenges; and from my perspective it requires a commitment to a more integrative, coordinative and organic type of participation in the planning, implementation, and assessment process than what education leaders of the America education system have entertained in the past. Healthy, sustaining partnerships between school and university institutions and other stakeholders require organic relationships at their core. If we are serious about meeting the challenge of closing the academic achievement gap in America then I offer in a modest way a holistic partnership defined by its three critical elements as a viable model to help meet the challenge.

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