

3CRU: A Case Study of Non-Profit/Higher Education Cross-Sector Collaboration — A ‘Two-Way Street’ Model

By: Kenneth Gill¹, Leslie Stivale²

¹Associate Dean, Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation, School of Health Professions, Rutgers University, NJ

²CEO, Triple C Housing

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Abstract

This article describes a successful collaborative partnership between a community-based non-profit organization (Triple C Housing:3C) and the academic department of a state university (Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Rutgers University (RU)). This cross-sector collaboration, 3CRU, had its origin in offering undergraduate and graduate students a community-based experience with people who have serious mental illnesses. It grew into a series of ongoing collaborative exchanges that have resulted in improved workforce development, expanded services for residents and tenants, and several scholarly initiatives. This case study illustrates that a sustained two-way collaboration may provide a model for non-profit and higher education organizations to develop sustainable alliances.

Introduction

3CRU is a collaborative partnership between Triple C Housing (3C), an affordable housing non-profit organization, and the Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions at Rutgers University (RU), an institution of higher education. Collaborations between non-profits and universities are very prevalent. Trebil-Smith (2018) surveyed 310 non-profit organizations, finding that 98% of non-profits report they have partnered with institutions of higher education, and 70% had done so with more than one institution. Most of these partnerships focus on human capital, engaging students in opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills. A common feature of most of them is that they often operate *unidirectionally*, with one partner primarily serving the needs of another. Most often, an academic program may seek internships or clinical sites in a community-based setting. Other examples might include a non-profit desiring the expertise of a specific faculty member for a project or a university needing a setting for community-focused research. Both organizations usually benefit, although the benefits to each may not be obvious or immediate.

Innovative Solution

What if there were a permanent mechanism or structure existed to foster a **two-way** exchange? Regularly, the leadership of each organization, along with selected staff, could convene to develop and pitch various collaboration ideas and later implement and monitor their progress. By doing this, creativity and productivity within each organization can be enhanced. The higher

education partner can expand and refine its services to the community, thereby better fulfilling its service mission. Simultaneously, the non-profit can contribute to and nurture the scholarly and educational endeavors of the university while bolstering its reputation and expanding its community impact.

According to Trebil-Smith (2018) and our own experience. Five features are essential to a successful, ongoing cross-sector collaboration: 1) a solid foundation of shared philosophy, structures, and incentives; 2) effective management of student experiences; 3) investment of sufficient time and capacity; 4) Sustained partnerships among individuals, although an organizational collaboration based on the shared philosophy of psychiatric rehabilitation is part of the solid foundation, the collaboration of individuals across organizations is essential. 5) Each type of organization can help meet needs the help of the other, as the examples later in this article illustrate. A **‘two-way’** mutual exchange model is likely to embody these five features. 3CRU exemplifies such an endeavor.

A Structurally Sound Foundation

About six times annually, the leaders of the two entities, some “middle-management” supervisors of the non-profit, and faculty members meet with a planned agenda, but also with some “new business” with some “free time” set aside. Additional meetings are scheduled to maximize communication and maintain efficiency, involving only the specific personnel required from each organization. The two organizations discovered they were like-minded in their philosophies, each based on the principles of psychiatric rehabilitation (Pratt et al., 2014).

Effective Use of Student Time to Optimize Learning and Benefit Non-Profit

RU faculty were looking for student placements. in which graduate and undergraduate students worked with persons with serious mental illness in the community in a setting that promotes recovery and community integration and improves their quality of life. The range of supportive housing options offered by Triple C proved ideal for Rutgers’s students. Faculty were conscientious in their efforts to prepare students before entry. They also oriented Triple C’s staff to the supervision experience. Honest communication between site supervisors and faculty proved essential, and their dual role in holding students accountable and giving them feedback was remarkable. The benefits to the students were immediate, learning marketable job skills. The addition of these new, enthused personnel to Triple C was also helpful. Triple C began hiring graduates. Soon, the movement was both ways, including some Triple C staff pursuing further education at RU. The collaboration has continued long enough so that many senior supervisory 3C personnel overseeing today’s students were RU students years earlier.

Each Type of Organization Helping the Other

Other areas of collaboration have emerged over time based on the two organizations meeting each other’s needs:

- Developing collaborative state and federal proposals to provide funding to both organizations engaged in complementary roles on the same projects

- A major supported employment initiative to help Triple C's supported housing staff develop the capacity to assist residents and tenants in seeking opportunities to enhance their income and develop their careers (Gao et al., 2009).
- A wellness and health promotion initiative, "Wellness for Life," focusing on reducing metabolic syndrome and its risks among persons with mental illness, including weekly health education sessions, peer wellness coaching, and exercise offered by a multi-disciplinary team of physical therapists, dietitian, dental hygienist, peers, and psychiatric rehabilitation practitioners and their students from RU.
- *A virtual Supportive Housing Learning Community* led by 3C staff, supported by a federal grant to RU, as a place for multiple supportive housing providers to collaborate, mentor, and share resources with each other, including monthly webinars to communicate and share information. 3C's staff gave the university-initiated project the practical expertise and credibility it needed.
- The *Happier Project* a feasibility study of a manualized group program to identify if a program manual developed with activities based on positive psychology for persons with serious mental illness will help them feel better about themselves and their futures. RU approached 3C for the access to people to try the intervention which can later be more broadly at 3C and elsewhere.
- *Improving assessment of Supported Housing resident's needs* – A current project which began with brainstorming new methods of assessing the needs and skills of supported housing tenants, and now working to develop an instrument that goes beyond assessing risk for hospitalization and Medicaid requirements, more focused on removing barriers to recovery. Triple C staff approached RU faculty for their input.
- *A Flourishing at Work* series to improve stress management and work engagement by looking at the whole being, building on strengths, natural supports, self-compassion, controlled breathing, and mindfulness strategies. Organizational flourishing included identifying meeting-free days, encouraging better use of vacation/personal time, and modeling limit setting by supervisors. RU faculty-led this initiative in response to a 3C request during the highly stressful time of the pandemic.
- *Evaluation of Wellness Activities* offered in communal areas of a Triple C apartment complex to improve tenant wellness and determine their impact on tenant quality of life with the purpose of developing a replicable model. Triple C approached RU for help with the evaluation of this work in progress.

Discussion and Recommendation

3CRU is a living, evolving collaboration. With many mutual benefits, it is not without its pitfalls. Organizational cultures, communication norms, and styles are sometimes complementary, sometimes not, and thus need attention, which strengthens the outcomes. Some projects have been dead-ends. Others start with great enthusiasm, which later wanes. Nonetheless, this type of two-way exchange is a promising way forward.

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