

# Weaving Collaborative Networks in Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development

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#### **Abstract**

The work of the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development (PHENND) is based in a basic premise: that relationships are capacity. It is PHENND's mission to build the capacity of its member institutions and community partners to develop mutually beneficial, sustained, and democratic community-based partnerships. PHENND's uniqueness when compared to other capacity building organizations is undoubtably the focus on network. When we delve into the measurement of PHENND's success as a facilitator of relationships and collaboration, we turn to network analysis. Social network analysis methodology studies relationships between actors, and between actors and attributes in order to draw conclusions. This year, PHENND has turned for the first time to this method to evaluate the PHENND's practices as a manager of the larger PHENND network in its entirety in order to determine the distribution of partnership and collaboration among Philadelphia higher education institutions in reference to campus community partnership work, and determine which PHENND activities are most successful in the facilitation of networking, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration.

#### Introduction

The work of the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development (PHENND) is based in a basic premise: that relationships are capacity. Especially in situations that the nonprofit and higher education sectors find themselves in today -- where the idea of competition has been artificially imported from the private sector, and organizations are pitted against each other, in competition for evidence, beneficiaries, funding, and reputation (Burstyn, 2003) -- collaborative learning networks like the ones managed by PHENND, stand out as ways to intentionally disrupt a pattern of manufactured competition in favor of collaborative and collective action.

Capacity building has taken a number of configurations -- funds, people, plans, skills and knowledge, tools, and equipment, and so on. Capacity building is about effectiveness and sustainability, and whatever it takes to get us there (Philbin, 2006). When we frame effectiveness and sustainability in terms of our ultimate impact, and not in terms of an individual organization's perpetuation -- collaboration and partnership are irremovable foundations of that premise. It is PHENND's mission to build the capacity of its member institutions and community partners to develop mutually beneficial, sustained, and democratic community-based partnerships. PHENND's uniqueness when compared to other capacity building organizations is undoubtably the focus on network.



In Hogue's model of community linkage there are five stages of partnership: networking, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration (Hogue, 1993). Depending on the structure of the network, or the current ongoing collaborations and projects, individuals and institutions may go up or down on this scale from networking to collaboration. It is also feasible in the PHENND network, for two members with a number of shared connections to meet the criteria for the lowest of partnership stages. Understanding linkages between the larger network make it easier for PHENND to act in its capacity as a hub of networking, matchmaker, and facilitator of collective action, so the operationalizations of each level become very important.

- At the networking level, organizations are aware of each other and may understand the role the other takes in a shared space, there is little communication and decisions are made completely independently.
- At the cooperation stage, organizations provide information to each other, there may be formal communication and a definition of distinction in roles. Decisions continue to be made independently
- When actors exist in coordination, they share information and resources, they define their roles in relation to each other, they communicate frequently and can engage in collaborative decision making on occasion.
- In the coalition stage, actors share ideas and resources, prioritize frequent communication, and collaborate on decision making.
- The final collaboration stage mirrors the concept of collective action -- actors belong to a centralized system, communication is characterized by trust, and consensus is used to make decisions.

When we delve into the measurement of PHENND's success as a facilitator of relationships and collaboration, these definitions become very important.

Other operationalizations of partnership that PHENND draws from are theories of collective action. Collective action is most often defined as the process by which cross-sectoral entities come together and put aside their individualized agendas in order to focus on one set of goals, measured in the same way. It is the shared commitment of a group of diverse actors to a common strategy in order to address a specific problem that is key to models of collective action (Kania, 2011). While this is a lofty goal to accomplish on a high level, requiring many resources and incredible amounts of buy in, PHENND looks to the five conditions of collective success in order to inform the work to create a context in which these kinds of movements can grow. These conditions are:

- A common agenda, which necessitates all actors to share their vision of impact. Not just through a shared understanding of all the nuances of a problem, but also the assumptions that underlie a plan to make impact.
- A shared measurement system, in which individual organizations indicators of success are exchanged for a joint approach to collecting data and measuring results.
- That participating organizations engage in mutually reinforcing activities. The key to collaborative impact is cross-sector involvement, therefore mutually reinforcing activities does not mean executing the same work, but by ensuring participants are contributing the



work that they are both best suited to do, and will make maximum impact on the goals of the collective when amplified by the work of the others.

- The final two conditions are the ones which PHENND is most well positioned to ensure. Collective impact requires continuous communication, not only to facilitate mutually reinforcing activities, but also to build trust.
- Finally, collective action is best facilitated by a back-bone support organization. The work of collaboration is in and of itself a project, requiring a specific set of skills and an amount of time and human capacity besides that of the institutions engaging in the primary work of the elective.

In these models, while networking is considered at the low-end of partnership, PHENND's experience is that the networking makes collaboration possible. Collaborations will come and go as they are needed (or in some cases as they are funded), but a strong, vibrant, and diverse network allows many collaborations to flourish. When they do eventually dissolve, for whatever reason, their successes and failures live on through the network. PHENND's work is carried out in two ways -- first, maintaining a consistent environment at the networking level among higher educational institutions, community organizations, and K-12 schools in Philadelphia, and second fostering relationships and managing initiatives up the scale of partnership, all the way to collaboration and even collective action on occasion, as a project manager, convener, communicator, or consultant.

# **PHENND History**

PHENND began in 1987 with representatives from five colleges and universities. In the spring of 1991, interest in PHENND began to increase, witnessed by an organizational meeting that drew over 20 participants from higher educational institutions throughout the area. In 1992, PHENND, co-sponsored and was the lead organization of Philadelphia's Summer of Service Project, part of an initial effort in President Clinton's National Service Program, which involved the coordination of 12 higher educational institutions through PHENND, the City's Health Department, the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition, and the School District of Philadelphia, as well as other organizations. In 1993, PHENND began to hold regular meetings and policy workshops with local, state, and federal officials.

Metropolitan-area higher ed collaboration was strengthened in 1994 when several Philadelphia-area institutions received grants through Pennsylvania Campus Compact to develop a corps of part-time service scholars. Managing the only part-time corps in the nation, the Philadelphia program coordinators met regularly, helping solidify a regional approach to national service. The program was so successful it became a model for the current "Ed-only" AmeriCorps award, administered by the Corporation for National Service.

In 1997, PHENND received a major grant from the Corporation for National Service as part of the first round of higher education consortia awards under the Learn and Serve program. Since that time, PHENND has grown from a network of five colleges and universities to more than 25 and from 25 individuals to over 7,000. Since the reception of the Learn and Serve grant,



PHENND has held an annual conference every year, which draws higher ed faculty, students, and administrators as well as representatives of community-based organizations and public schools to discuss issues pertaining to campus-community partnership. Partnership-driving practices has also sprung up through the coordination of two AmeriCorps programs, city-wide management of the School District's Gear Up program, the establishment and continuation of more formal K16 partnership network, and a college access and success network.

## **Core Components**

PHENND's network management strategies (which are explored below) traverse programmatic components of PHENND's work, including service and service learning, communities of practice, cross sector convenings, and project management. Each of PHENND's initiatives can be categorized into these components, while the strategies outlined above (acting as a clearinghouse of information, hub of networking, resource provider etc.) are the cross-cutting strategies employed in each of these specific buckets of work. For example, PHENND may work as a manager of a national service initiative, but the reason they are successful in their management of projects such as these components, is because PHENND staff employ the strategies of the larger organization in their day to day administration of each project.

# National Service and Service Learning

PHENND's work in the service area is historically categorized by a focus on service learning, and more modernly reflected through more formal channels of AmeriCorps -- namely, The Next Steps and PHENND Fellows VISTA programs.

The Next Steps AmeriCorps Program engages college students in community service, mentoring, supportive workshops, and leadership development. Participants, known as Corps Members, will do 300 hours of community service in the course of one year. Corps members can choose any kind of regular service placement and will also mentor two incoming first-year students as part of their service

PHENND also operates a large, multi-dimensional AmeriCorps Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA) project that has two primary tracks: Nonprofit and Education. The Nonprofit track places up 18 members in various capacity building projects at local nonprofit organization. The non-profit track has a three-fold mission: supporting local nonprofits fighting poverty across a wide range of issues, training and retaining local talent to stay and work in Philadelphia, and developing the next generation of nonprofit leaders

The Education track places up 16 members in public schools, serving as Community Partnership Coordinators. Four additional VISTAs are placed in various School District offices. PHENND seeks to improve and expand the infrastructure for community partnership development across the School District of Philadelphia. PHENND's specific goal is to increase the capacity of schools to leverage community partnerships while also helping develop systems and policies that will foster better community partnership development at the District level. Some of the Fellows'



activities include convening monthly community partner meetings at the schools in order to facilitate communication between the schools and their partners, as well as among partners, to encourage collaboration. They are facilitating communication to the broader community through the creation and/or improvement of the schools' websites, newsletters and other social media platforms which are made widely available to the entire school community including community partners, staff, students and their families. They are also meeting with the School Leadership regularly to discuss school needs and then cultivate existing or new partnerships to better address those needs. All of these activities exemplify the network management that PHENND engages in not just in individual schools, but across an entire network of Philadelphia higher eds and community partners.

#### **Communities of Practice**

A key practice for PHENND is convening communities of practice and collaborative learning networks. Over the years, PHENND has convened a number of these groups -- formally, informally, and for long and short term. One of the most successful examples of this is the K-16 Advisory board, though PHENND has convened around food security, college access and success, service learning, environmental sustainability, and democratic community engagement. Operating under the overall PHENND network, the K-16 Advisory board brings together higher education faculty and staff who manage partnerships with public schools. The focus is two-fold: learn from each other about best practices and models for K-16 partnerships in general and as appropriate, while also working with the School District of Philadelphia to help improve and expand K-16 partnerships in Philadelphia.

PHENND's K-16 Network was started in 2011 to increase the collaboration between higher eds in order to enhance and align partnerships in schools. The focus is two-fold: learn from each other about best practices and models for K-16 partnerships in general and as appropriate, work with the School District of Philadelphia to help improve and expand K-16 partnerships in Philadelphia. To meet this goal, the K-16 advisory board and the College Access and Success Stakeholders group meet quarterly to address key challenges faced by the School District of Philadelphia such as: school climate, early childhood literacy and community schools' strategies. The K-16 Network also holds an annual K-16 Partnerships Institute in June in collaboration with the School District. This day-long event leverages the energy and knowledge of the K-16 Partnerships Network for plan and map out goal for the upcoming year. The K-16 Partnerships Network also hosts committees when appropriate and provides individual partnership support.

### **Cross Sector Convenings**

PHENND convenes year-round calendar of formal and informal professional development opportunities for faculty, administrators, nonprofit professionals, community members, and students. Examples include the Annual PHENND Conference and the Service Leaders' Summit. Most opportunities are free to members or are offered at nominal cost to ensure accessibility.

#### **Project Management**



In alignment with PHENND's overall theory of change, while the focus consistently remains on creating a context in which network actors are networking, PHENND also plays a part in when necessary partnerships work their way up the spectrum to collaboration, and engage in collaborative cross-institutional projects. Philadelphia's GEAR UP CRCC is one such project which PHENND has taken a coordinating role on. The GEAR UP CRCC project serves 54 middle/high schools in the School District of Philadelphia and works to build the capacity of schools to address the needs of students for college and career readiness preparation. A key component of the project is partnerships with local colleges and universities. PHENND is leading a team of six university partners who will leverage university resources (particularly college student volunteers) in support of the GEAR UP CRCC project. PHENND manages a cohort of campus partners who in turn, recruit, train, place, and manage college student volunteers using a "College Positive Volunteerism" framework. Primary activities include tutoring in math and English, college visits, career day speakers, and integration of service-learning courses.

GEAR UP CCRC, though likely the largest, is consistent with a number of similar highly collaborative projects which PHENND has facilitated a common agenda and acted as a backbone support organization, consistent with the necessary conditions of collective impact.

## **Strategies**

There are a number of different ways that collaborative learning networks are created and managed; PHENND is successful because of the foundational focus of relationships as capacity, and the five cross component strategies PHENND employs in order to reinforce the context of networking as well as to elevate initiatives up through the stages of partnership. These strategies are: acting as (1) a clearinghouse of information, (2) a hub of networking, (3) a provider of training and technical assistance, (4) a matchmaker, and when possible, a (5) funder or resource provider.

# Clearinghouse of Information

Although there are many sources for information, materials, and websites about community service, service-learning, community partnership, and the like, PHENND plays an important role as a disseminator of such information to local audiences. The very nature of service-learning requires that individuals and institutions form partnerships with those outside the educational arena. These partners — who may be more versed in fields such as housing, health, or economic development — are not likely to speak the language of service-learning, and thus, not likely to seek out and utilize most national or state-level service-learning clearinghouses. Conversely, many campus-based practitioners are familiar with key concepts of service-learning (such as reflection) but are not as familiar with the other fields mentioned above. Although these various actors are part of a community of common interest in broader notions of community development and social change, there are also subdivisions within this group that make communication across the spectrum difficult. Think of Robert Putnam's "bonding" vs. "bridging" social capital (Putnam, 2000). PHENND tries to bridge these worlds and disseminate



diverse information to diverse constituencies for the betterment of campus-community partnership.

In his book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell profiles three types of individuals critical to the tipping point theory – connectors, mavens, and salespeople (Gladwell, 200). The role of the PHENND Director is to be a "connector" between projects, people, and ideas via a vis various campus-based and community-based constituency. Each individual who subscribes to the PHENND Update creates a relationship – however superficial – with PHENND. This speaks also to the value of weak-ties, or individuals who do not have the strong partnerships or mutual connections that strong-ties do. These weak-tie connections often represent the potential of expansion or opportunity. By having multiple sub-networks (i.e., campuses, neighborhoods, sectors) on which to draw through an extensive set of "weak tie" subscribers, PHENND is an ideal connector for the campus-community partnership movement.

# Training and Technical Assistance Provider

The second critical element of the PHENND model is the provision of flexible training and technical assistance to both member institutions and community-based organizations. Flexible training is an important feature. Many organizations invest considerable resources into the development of formal training workshops which are then delivered to various audiences upon request. Those organizations may or may not follow-up with their audiences to provide additional technical assistance. PHENND often works in the opposite direction. PHENND spends much more time (up to 30% of staff time) providing informal technical assistance through phone conversations and one-on-one meetings with both campus-based and community-based practitioners. Only after considerable time is spent helping an organization figure out their likely next steps in program development does PHENND then typically get invited to provide a more formal workshop. Sometimes the request for a formal workshop is never made; many organizations report that the informal consultations are quite useful in and of themselves.

In some ways, this method can be likened to the community organizing tool of "one-on- ones." In this method of organizing, time and attention is paid to listening to individuals and learning about their interests, strengths, and resources rather than presenting them with a set agenda or program that they can "take or leave." By utilizing this method, the PHENND staff listens to potential community -- and campus-based constituencies, learns about their interests, strengths, and resources, and begins to help connect those individuals to the larger network. That connection may never materialize into an actual partnership, but nonetheless, the network grows and its potential for forming new partnerships grows as well.

This method also allows PHENND to have a big-tent approach; instead of limiting our focus to community service, service-learning, and/or civic engagement, PHENND chooses to work in all of these spheres and more. A conversation with a faculty member might begin on their own terms – perhaps they are interested in student retention, critical thinking, or career development, each of which can easily be linked to service-learning. The "one-on-ones" and the big-tent philosophy allow the PHENND staff to begin the conversation with that faculty member's



interests eventually linking them to service-learning. This is an approach that can make a convert out of a faculty member who would never have intentionally attended a more formal service-learning workshop.

#### Funder and Resource Provider

At various points in PHENND's development, the organization has been able to re-grant funds to member institutions and others to create and maintain campus-community partnerships. PHENND has re-granted money in a number of distinct ways: to generate new service-learning courses, to generate new campus-community partnerships, and to pay for staff assistants (often grad students) to help expand capacity at campus-based service-learning offices. Through each of these grant processes, careful attention is paid to cultivating relationships that will last beyond the life of the grant. PHENND's approach is not about implementing a specific service-learning project with a finite beginning and end, but rather about cultivating a culture of service-learning and community partnership through the Philadelphia region, which it sees as a long-term proposition.

A specific example can be found in PHENND's management of the GEAR UP program. College students (managed by GEAR UP Coordinators on local campuses) serve as 'college coaches' for middle and high school students. The Coordinators work with students and departments on their campuses to embed the responsibility for GEAR UP services within the universities so that the work can continue after the grant period has ended. In a more unorthodox way, PHENND has acted as a resource provider. While no cash is granted to organizations who host PHENND Fellows VISTA, the resource of the service of a full time VISTA should not be understated. PHENND acts as a sponsoring organization for over 35 VISTAs across Philadelphia. Through facilitation of their recruitment, payroll, professional development and more, PHENND ensures that service sites feel the full benefit of a full-time service member at their organization or school.

#### Matchmaker

Somewhat related to PHENND's role as a clearinghouse of information, is PHENND's role as a matchmaker. Whether the goal is a collaborative product that no single actor can do on their own, or an exchange of expertise in order to continually improve process, PHENND's number of both strong tie and weak tie relationships with schools, organizations, and institutions in the higher ed region is certainly a significant resource for network members looking for expertise, experience, or partnership. PHENND staff speak to seeing themselves as vintage switchboard operators- patching through connections and collaborations as they come up.

# **Hub of Networking**

The next critical component of the PHENND Model is that PHENND acts as a hub of networking, much like the center of spokes on a wheel. An important part of PHENND's work has been to create forums for direct connections between campuses and community organizations can take place without the need for PHENND to broker each relationship. These



forums are also primarily opportunities for training and program development but their secondary role as hubs of networks cannot be overestimated. The obvious examples of this include the PHENND Annual and Fall Conferences, however, this strategy, like all the others is cross cutting. One example of this is through the PHENND Fellows VISTA program, where PHENND quarterly convenes workshops of the VISTAs site supervisors. Principals and non-profit professionals from all corners of Philadelphia who may otherwise not have opportunity to know each other, may very well meet and exchange ideas in this setting. In some special cases, relationships formed at meetings like this have gone on to see collaborations independent of the VISTA projects. PHENND considers collaborations like these a profound success.

#### **Evaluation of Success**

Evaluating capacity building initiatives is unwieldy even in the most common circumstances, in the case of relational capacity, even less is established in the mainstream. Over the years, PHENND has developed a way of evaluating the PHENND Fellows VISTA program which puts community partnerships coordinators in public Philadelphia elementary and high schools to manage the network of community partners that the school works with. The evaluation has turned to the lesser-used methodology of social network analysis in order to illustrate the scope and shape of the school's community network. Social network analysis methodology studies relationships between actors, and between actors and attributes in order to draw conclusions. PHENND has historically used this tool to evaluate the success of our VISTA project of community partnership coordinators in Philadelphia Schools.

VISTAs work in Philadelphia public schools to coordinate the network of community partners the school has. A public school in Philadelphia has on average 19 community partners, who may be working with the school to provide anything from mentoring and tutoring, to in kind donations and special events. The basic assumption that underlies the logic model is that an increased level of partnership between the schools and their partners, and between partners within a school will lead to improved student outcomes for the students in those schools. Therefore, through a capacity building lens, the short-term outcomes in this model would be the increase in strength of relationships between network actors, operationalized by level of collaboration or stage of partnership. SNA methods allow us to uncover these relationships through the output of network maps, or sociograms, and analyze patterns in engagement in the school network.

This year, PHENND has turned for the first time to this method to evaluate the PHENND's practices as a manager of the larger PHENND network in its entirety. In this situation, we can think of the school community partnership network as a micro chasm of the overall higher education network for campus community partnerships that PHENND facilitates. In the same way that the community partnership coordinator in a school facilitates communication and networking- so does PHENND on a regional scale. The short-term outcome of collaborative relationships remains the same; longer terms we see these strong relationships increase the capacity of institutions ability to fulfill their mission, creating a long-term impact of more



effective, efficient, or more widespread positive outcomes in campus community partnerships in Philadelphia.

The goal of this, initial network-wide SNA research which PHENND is embarking on is to determine the distribution of partnership and collaboration among Philadelphia higher eds in reference to campus community partnership work, and determine which PHENND activities are most successful in the facilitation of networking, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration. In order to conduct this study, PHENND distributed a survey to community partnership and civic engagement officers, directors, and specialists in the PHENND network.

The survey collected social network analysis data on the partnership levels of the respondents through self-evaluation. The survey also collected information on PHENND services that the respondent used and found most useful. In terms of sampling, PHENND engaged a snowball sampling plan, beginning with the core members of the PHENND network (as defined by the steering committee and a collection of civic engagement directors which is convened by PHENND quarterly. Each respondent referencing a number of additional PHENND network members who they deem important to be included. The benefit of this is to naturally define the network through collective, if distinct, contribution. The survey itself was implemented in the summer of 2020.

Initial analysis of survey response is very positive. There is a high degree of density- the proportion of relationships that exist to the number of potential relationships that could exist. With a .44 unweighted density of the core members of the PHENND network surveyed, 44% of all possible relationships between actors do in fact exist. The weighted density considers the degree of partnership in the density calculation. Connections who are completely collaborative and are totally integrated as partners are weighted more highly than those who remain in the networking only stage. The network has a .22 weighted density and an average edge (relationship) weight of 2.48, the overall PHENND network does hover in the cooperation/coordination zone of partnership engagement. The levels of partnership engagement displayed by the network do follow a roughly normal distribution.

We also look at measures of centrality to determine network leadership. Betweenness centrality reflects the number of times an actor acts as a bridge between two other actors. Based on PHENND's positionality, it is no surprise that the PHENND Executive Director displays the highest degree of betweenness centrality -- especially considering the role PHENND plays as a "connector", matchmaking and coordinating between weak ties to facilitate partnership. However, even when the PHENND Director is removed from the map, the network remains without isolates, and central actors appear. It reflects the cross-institutional nature of PHENND that the next three highest actors in the network come from completely different institutions in the area, and that none of these next tier network leaders come from the same parent institution as PHENND (University of Pennsylvania).

Next steps for the PHENND network analysis include higher order quantitative methods. PHENND seeks to understand which exact components and strategies can potentially affect



network positionality. While we cannot prove causality in the study as implemented, PHENND hopes to determine relationships between specific methods of engagement in PHENND programming (like the PHENND update, annual meeting, communities of practice, or other programs) and SNA measures which reflect robust collaboration in the network, whether communities form in the PHENND network due to participation in collaborative programming or some kind of other factor (such as shared interests or physical proximity), and whether peer effects affects enhanced participation in collaboration. PHENND will use community detection algorithms on the network data as well as OLS regression between actor attributes and degree centrality to determine these relationships.

#### Conclusion

PHENND is a dynamic, flexible, and entrepreneurial organization with a long-track record of accomplishments. PHENND has an elastic structure which allows it to be extremely flexible and dynamic. This elasticity leads to challenges however when it comes to defining PHENND's impact. PHENND's mission is to build the capacity of its member institutions and community partners to develop mutually beneficial, sustained, and democratic community-based partnerships, but in what way? When resources are scarce, which activities take precedence? How are we measuring our long-term impact? How does that get regularly reported to key stakeholders? These are all questions that PHENND continues to wrestle with as it defines itself. Turning to social network analysis and theories of collective action, however, have been a clear step forward in defining that impact, and building on PHENNDs existing success.

It is clear to PHENND that higher educational institutions can function as permanent anchors and partners for community improvement. Moreover, it is deeply in their interests to do so; their futures are intertwined with that of their neighborhoods. PHENND provides a vehicle for coordinating and, where appropriate, combining the efforts of higher eds so that they can make a significant contribution to improving the entire Philadelphia region.

PHENND's growth signals an increasing recognition that significant curricular and co-curricular benefits can result when student and faculty members focus their research on working with the community. PHENND provides increased hope that higher educational institutions will work together to help solve our country's most pressing problems. For the Philadelphia area, PHENND signals a new kind of democratic partnership that will result in substantial benefits for the colleges, universities, schools, and communities of our region.

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