

Investigating the Benefits of a School/Industry Partnership Focused on Overcoming the Skills Gap and Fostering Student Success

Dana M. Griggs – Southeastern Louisiana University

Frances K. Kochan – Auburn University

Ellen H. Reames – Auburn University

Abstract

The focus of this investigation was to discover the participants' perceptions of benefits of a school/industry partnership designed to overcome the skills gap and foster student success. The researcher strove to give voice to the participants through storytelling in Appreciative Inquiry interviews. The perceived benefits presented themselves in four categories: (a) Curricular relevance – Students viewed school as relevant to the real world; tried harder in school; talked to parents and counselors more; and engaged in thinking and learning. (b) World of Work – Students learned real-world work skills; explored a wide variety of careers; clarified college and career readiness; engaged in a reflective process on their decisions; increased attainment of credentials; and improved behaviors outside school. (c) Essential skills – Students learned employability skills; practiced professionalism; learned the power of first impressions; gained confidence; learned the importance of networking; practiced etiquettes and essential skills; and the partners provided authentic audiences. (d) Industry – Employees shared talents and grew; addressed company's focus on education; provided an educational service to the community; and worked with teachers to develop the future workforce.

Key Words: School/Industry Partnership; Skills Gap; College & Career Academies; Business Academy; Career/Technical Education

Introduction

An abiding characteristic of American education is its continuous state of reform. It is near impossible to find a whole decade in which reformers, politicians, parents, and the citizenship-at-large were content with their schools. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 persuasively articulated a call for educational reform specifically in mathematics and science. This report claimed that public support was the greatest resource available to influence the quality of education (Burke, 1986). One way in which this public support can be effectively integrated into school improvement is through partnership arrangements. A decade after *A Nation at Risk*, Tushnet (1993) pointed out that educational partnerships had become popular fixtures in thousands of school systems. He noted that these partnerships connect schools to the human and financial resources outside their facility and that they will be necessary for schools to create and implement the type of education that students need to compete in the global economy.

For the last two decades, partnerships have been used as a means of overcoming identified educational problems (Barnett, Hall, Berg & Camarena, 2010). Educational partnerships have been recommended in federal statutes from the Higher Education Act of 1998 to the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Act of 2006 (Barnett et al., 2010) and in grant requirements. The Perkins Act focused specifically on the need to create school and industry partnerships to overcome what has come to be known as the skills gap. This skills gap, is often found in young adults who lack the technical (hard) skills and the essential (soft) skills that are needed for the available middle-class job openings, and it creates an imbalance of qualified workers for available jobs (Mills & Whitney, 2012). The researchers point to the increasing evidence of a skills gap in the United States workforce. Therefore, many schools and communities have engaged in forming school/industry partnerships. The logic behind school-industry partnerships is that the partners can provide “complementary capabilities and competences” in educating students in which the school alone has been unsuccessful (Watters, Hay, Dempster, & Pillay, 2013. p. 3).

Other countries have addressed their skills gap similarly. In Finland, Denmark, Germany Norway, and Switzerland, 40% to 70% of upper high school students participate in vocational education and workplace training (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). The researchers noted that these education models culminate in qualifications, which are recognized in the labor market. Although each country has a well-developed system of school/industry partnerships, none are exactly the same. Australia is a leader in collaborative efforts between K-12, Technical and Further Education (TAFE), and Universities to meet workforce needs (Symonds et al., 2011). It is now common for over 90% of the students who were registered in studies for a diploma, or an advanced diploma, to be enrolled in TAFE institutions and participating in school/industry partnerships that supported their educational pursuits (Symonds et al., 2011).

The United States has lagged behind other countries in partnering with industry to prepare students for future careers by placing more emphasis on college attainment (Symonds, 2012). A contributing factor to America’s delay in forming school-industry partnerships is that business leaders admit to potential liability issues as barriers to seeking partnerships with local school systems (Advisory Committee, personal communications, March 03, 2016). Although America has fallen behind in promoting industry partnerships, there are pockets of excellence that dedicate themselves to being learning organizations that seek to do the best for students and often find themselves on the cutting edge of innovation. This research studied one such organization, a school/industry partnership.

Benefits of School/Industry Partnerships

School/Industry partnerships have many benefits. Cardini (2006) observed that partnerships are most often described with terms such as cooperation, trust, and confidence reflecting the relationships that exist between the partnering organizations. They allow educators to capitalize on learning opportunities that occur in the real-world setting of a partner's workplace (Watters et al., 2013). These researchers stated that sharing of knowledge becomes a process in which the school and the business develop and adapt specific content to address the needs of the workplace as it is required for learning to take place in relevance to the work environment. Partnerships between school and industry benefit students by providing learning experiences that occur in real-world work setting (Watters et al., 2013). The sharing of knowledge to accomplish the shared goals of training the future workforce, building skills, and fostering student success is the cornerstone of educational partnerships.

Such partnerships have been a documented part of U.S. history. In the late 1800s, industrial changes demanded that businesses partner with education in response to the emerging needs of the workforce. In the 1970s, partnership efforts were seen largely as public relations efforts in which businesses gave financial initiatives. In the 1980s, businesses acknowledged a lack in preparation of entry-level employees as the economy moved from manufacturing to service driven. Business-education partnerships began to explode in number as industry realized the need to regain a vested interest in preparing its future workforce. (Grobe, Curnan, & Melchior, 1990). Burke (1986) found that most business people and educators consider school-business partnerships as essential for developing the workforce.

Examining school/industry partnerships Figgis (1998) found that when the partnerships are viewed as strategic investments, benefits to the school and industry are amplified. However, he found that most business partners saw their participation in such endeavors as a service investment in their local educational system with no expectation of returns. The companies that comprised the cases that Figgis studied were astonished to realize over the course of the research they were in a win-win situation that reaped a variety of benefits including a clear investment in their future workforce. Figgis reported additional benefits for businesses to be: (a) community recognition, (b) productivity, (c) enhancement of the company's skill base, (d) more efficient and effective recruitment, (e) personal satisfaction, and (f) bottom line improvement. Likewise, partnerships provided many benefits for schools including delivering relevant, work-based learning environments in which concepts can be applied to real-world situations.

Although school and industry partnerships have been in place for many years and seem to be increasing, the research on them is somewhat limited. Additionally, the industries of today differ significantly from those of the last century, meaning that the structures, the foci, and the value of these partnerships may differ from the partnerships of the past. Educational partnerships continue to form and thrive due to the benefits they provide the participating organizations. As Dhillon (2005) related, through working with others in a structured partnership the achievement and success of the individuals are much greater than working alone.

Purpose

The investigation focused on discovering the perceptions of benefits to the participants and organizations involved in a school-industry partnership. Participants were also asked to look at areas for improvement. The overarching research questions addressed were, What is working in this partnership? and What are the perceived benefits to participants and the organizations involved?

Setting and Background

The partnership examined in this research study was a joint project between a high school (grades 9-12) located in a small, rural city in southeast Alabama in the United States, and a local industry. The high school had approximately 720 students. Prior to the initiation of this partnership, only 35% of graduates went on to college and less than three-fourths of them graduated college on time. A few students consistently entered the military; others began working for minimum wage with the intention of beginning a two-year college the following fall; others took the year off from school and usually did not begin college for three or more years – if ever. Leaders realized that the data indicated that they were not meeting their objective of preparing students for college, career, and life with the current system of education. They began researching and visiting other systems that seemed to prepare their graduates for college and career. It became clear that something needed to change.

Leaders met to shape a new vision for education in the city. They spoke to teachers, students, and community leaders to gather perceptions and input. Some visited systems in New Jersey and Texas that were implementing career academies and brought back possibilities. After a year of research, educational leaders broadened their stakeholder discussions. The entire high school faculty was included in meetings and invited to visit career academies in Florida. Two bus-loads of community leaders were also taken to visit the career academies in Florida and had lunch with the community partners that supported the academies. Later, stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders held a visioning retreat. Shortly thereafter, the high school restructured its instructional program and set up academies.

Six career-themed academies were created and added to the Freshman Academy that had been in place for two years. The freshman academy was established to address a high failure rate and discipline incidents that occurred in the ninth-grade year. Since its inception, the freshman academy concept improved the promotion rate and lowered discipline issues that began in the freshman year. It became the primary place for career exploration and academy recruitment when the career academies were added. All of the academies had an advisory committee and some interaction with industry partners.

A representative from the local office of the large, primarily utilities company that later became the partner in this educational partnership study was included in an academy visit to Florida. The high school hosting the visit had a partnership with a similar company to support a utilities academy. The Alabama business office manager was able to talk with the Florida business partner and to see the possibilities that could be gained from supporting a high school academy. Four months after the academy visit, the representative in Alabama invited leaders from the school system to meet with leaders from his company to discuss the creation of an academy at the high school to be sponsored by the company and supported by employees. A core team of three professionals, two from the company and one from the school system, was created to plan and implement the academy.

Officials from the company committed to provide human and financial resources as needed throughout all aspects of the academy. However, the school maintained that they believed the power in this partnership was the human factor. Teachers wanted the industry employees to mentor their students more than they wanted money to funnel into the program. The officials committed to hosting student field trips and student events to develop career awareness and expectations in the future workforce. In return, the academy carried the company's name and industry representatives became involved in working on curriculum and

providing authentic learning opportunities for students in an effort to prepare them for college and career attainment.

The business academy became the case for this research. On-the-clock employees took part in providing industry awareness to students. Two ladies in the business office spent the day with the different business classes to teach how to create and use Excel to make work easier and more effective. When the students were marketing the school store and the Boosting Engineering Science and Technology (BEST) Robotics Team, employees from the marketing department came to discuss knowing your audience to reach them. Guest speakers throughout the school year came in to discuss topics such as building your resume, selling your strengths, and being a team player in life. A team of employees devoted two-days during both school semesters to participate in mock interviews for the academy students. Another team of two came to train the academy students in business etiquettes before the Networking Luncheon that the company sponsored twice a year. On the day of the luncheon, 20 to 30 company employees and local business people showed up to network and eat with the students and then grade them on their dress, conversation, poise, and manners. There were many other visits to classes where the employees shared their knowledge and talents and mentored academy students. When the students participated in after-school or weekend competitions, their mentors were often seen cheering the students on to success from the sidelines. During the first year, the only funds provided to the academy by the business was money for the food and paper goods for the luncheons. This partnership flourished as a result of the committed presence and participation of the industry's employees.

Methodology

This was a qualitative case study. The methodology combined multiple methods of data collection to acquire valid and reliable information on the educational partnership on which the study focused. Lincoln and Guba (1991) wrote that reality is dependent on one's perception. Therefore, this study incorporated the perceptions of the participants – every participant group contributed their voices.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was chosen as the research approach used because a partnership is a human system, and it grows in the direction of attention and focus (Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins, & Hetherington, 2009). The focus was on strengths in the people and the partnership rather than on finding a problem to fix. This approach was not an attempt to ignore challenges or difficult experiences. It was built on the premise that examining what is working provides a good starting point for the next transition or change (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008; Michael, 2005; Shuayb et al, 2009). As participants shared their stories, their voices were heard and they became part of the description of the organizational change being studied (Michael, 2005).

The research design engaged two of the four types of triangulation recognized by Denzin (1989). Methodological and data triangulations were used to attain a thorough and credible understanding of the benefits of partnership from the different perspectives of those who lived it. Triangulation was used to check and establish validity by analyzing each research question from multiple perspectives.

Data collection included interviews, observations, and review of documents. This study was comprised of three formally scheduled meetings with company employees and school administrators all signed consent forms before they were interviewed and were informed of their right to quit the study at any time. Informal conversations between the same participants and the researcher occurred throughout the school year on nine different occasions. Pre-existing data,

which included transcripts of observations, student and teacher focus groups, and teacher interviews generated by the career academy director for academy evaluation purposes received analysis and interpretation through the lens of emerging findings within this study. Student reflections on presentations and events hosted by the industry partners were also pre-existing data reported through this study. Student perception and voice on the partnership captured from the school's academy evaluation supplied an important data source used in this study providing the student dimension to a school issue (Mitra, 2007). Copies of evaluation transcripts and reflections were made available to the researcher, void of any names or identifying tags. Transcripts of core partnership leaders from both the school system and the industry along with the pre-existing academy evaluation focus group transcripts, allowed for triangulation of multiple perspectives. Data gathering continued until saturation was reached confirming my interpretation without providing new discernments (Creswell, 2007).

The semi-structured interview method was used for addressing the research questions, and providing sufficient flexibility for discussions that developed around the participant's worldview on the topic (Merriam, 2009). All interviews were audio recorded, after obtaining the informed consent of each participant, and then transcribed by the researcher. During each interview, the researcher took field notes of any emphasis that the interviewee placed on spoken words, facial expressions, and noted non-verbal communications. All interviewees were offered their transcriptions via email by which to comment or clarify any point within the conversation. The interview transcripts were systematically analyzed using open and axial coding, which was developed by Strauss and Corbin and discussed in Creswell (2007). The coding was used to identify, categorize, and confirm themes that detailed the basis of the partnership and described the characteristics that illustrated benefits, strengths, and sustainability therein.

Findings

The data showed participants perceived many noteworthy benefits attributed to the school-industry partnership as a whole, instead of any single participant. Although the topics were varied, four main categories emerged. The four categories of perceived benefits are (a) Curricular Relevance (b) World of Work (c) Essential Skills, and (d) Industry. They are summarized in Table 1 and discussed in the section that follows.

Table 1

Perceived Benefits Reported by Participants

Curricular Relevance Students view school as more relevant	World of Work Students learned real-world work skills	Essential Skills Students learned employability skills	Industry Employees shared and grew
Students tried harder in school	Students explored a wide variety of careers	Students practiced professionalism	Employees addressed company's focus on education
Students talked to parents and counselors more about their plans for the future	Students clarified college and career readiness	Partners provided authentic audiences for communication and presentations	Employees provided an educational service to the community
Students talked more to parents about what happened at school.	Students engaged in a reflective process on their decisions	Students learned the power of first impressions	Employees invested in the future of Alabama
Students engaged in thinking and learning	Partners provided work perspective to classroom projects	Students gained confidence	Employees and teachers developed the future workforce
	Students increased attainment of Microsoft credentials	Students learned the importance of networking and 'how to.'	
	Student behaviors improved outside of school	Students learned and practiced etiquettes and essential skills.	

Perceived Benefits Connected to Curricular Relevance

The high school decided to structure classes and pathways of learning around career-themed academies because they believed that providing career interest to all subjects would promote more engaged students in all classes by seeing the relevance of what they were learning to what they would do beyond high school. Thus, an expected outcome of the partnership was that it provided relevance to classroom learning through the employee mentorship. This benefit was perceived by the participants. A student summed it up in a focus group conversation:

I think that having the business partners come in regularly to talk about their work experiences made school more relevant.

A teacher confirmed this prediction in her conversation:

This partnership makes students see things as they are in the professional world.... Our partners provide relevance.

Regular exposure to multiple partnership activities seemed significant to student engagement in the academy and seeing relevance in what was learned at school.

They [employees] also drive home why what we are learning in school is important! The more I am around them and hear them, the more I get it. - Student

Students in all focus groups reported that the business partners stressed the importance of high school subject knowledge and maintaining good grades. The partners explained how both would positively influence the students' futures. Students reported that they were trying harder in their core classes to attain higher grades and think a little deeper than before, because, they understood the importance of it all.

An unexpected result credited to this partnership was that students reported talking to their parents and counselors more about their plans for college and work. Examples of this came from student focus group and teacher interview transcripts.

I think that working with the people from [the company] has made me talk to my mom more about what I want to do beyond high school. I see the possibilities. – Student

I talk to my parents more, too, but about college mostly and the things I think I'll take. – Student

When my mom asks me what I did at school, I have more to talk about. – Student

A teacher commented on the fact that she had received more positive feedback from parents this year as opposed to previous years. Here is one example:

A parent stopped me in a store to tell me that she was not sure what we were doing at school this year, but her son was coming home excited about his day and what he was learning from business and industry people. It had given him a new outlook on what he was learning and he could finally communicate the relevance of the things he was learning. – Parent comment via Teacher

The students and teachers talked regularly about how learning seemed more relevant and interesting when delivered by someone from the workforce. Students began to see the connection between what was going on in the classroom and their interest for future employment.

Speakers from [the company] come in and talk about real world experiences and opportunities. I think they will prepare us in a way that school cannot. - Student

Enhanced Understanding of the World of Work

The core team predicted that the partnership would provide information and experiences for students and teachers that connected them to the world of work. Career exploration is a primary goal of high school so that the world of work will not be so unknown and daunting for students when they are faced with the choice of what they want to be and where they want to work. The company appeared to be an excellent choice as an academy partner because it did not focus on just one type of job; the company employs came from multiple departments with varied skill-sets to fill a number of jobs to “keep the lights burning.” The versatility and job experiences that each employee presented to students provided students with knowledge to make informed career choices and acquire the capacity to transition into those careers successfully.

I used to think that [the company] was all electrical...I am learning that it offers me more...I can be anything in [the company]! - Student

Originally, students thought of the company as climbing poles and working with electricity. Many thought, “Why would I be interested in that?” One teacher explained the new understanding among students when she shared,

The employees came and talked about the different jobs that are a part of within [the company]. Now students see that there are other jobs in nursing, business, engineering, and they are interested! The job opportunities are endless. -Teacher

The experiences they had also expanded students' perceptions of specific skills needed in the workplace, including specific work skills and personal attributes and skills that are required. Some student comments about this were:

When the ladies from the business office came in to show us how they use spreadsheets in their job, the lesson became something that I need to learn because I will use it one day. – Student

The marketing presentation stressed looking your audience in the eye, speaking clearly and slowly, and dressing and acting professionally. – Student reflection

Not predicted was the influence that the partners had on the increased number of students credentialing in Microsoft Office Suite, which is an opportunity provided by this career academy. The industry partners value credentials in their employees and spoke about them regularly to the students. Their interest in credentials was addressed in conversation with students by the industry partners.

By working hard and obtaining the credentials that are available through my courses, students can get a good job with a good future. The employees have reinforced this by sharing stories of hiring people with high school diplomas and credentials, and then providing on-the-job training and growth incentives. – Business, Marketing, and Administration Teacher

The teachers appreciated the attention that the industry partners gave to the importance of credentialing. This appreciation was talked about in observations and in interviews. Students also talked about the role that the partners played in encouraging them to credential.

[The Program Director] talked to us about the importance of credentials every time she spoke to us. – Student

Our teachers encouraged us to earn credentials all the time; the partners supported that message every chance they got. – Student

Students in the academy earned more than three times the number of credentials than the previous year's business program students. Two of the students earned the credential of Microsoft Office Specialist Master, which is the highest level of Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS) certification offered.

Data from this study suggested that the partnership with professionals provided motivation and a better understanding of what is expected of entry-level employees. Students regularly mentioned that the partners discussed requirements for being hired, which include basic skills, police reports, drug tests, and credit reports. Many students did not realize that employers check this information on employees. Students began to think more about their past behaviors and the importance of making the right decisions in a timely manner. Thus, the partners provided a stimulus that engaged the students in reflective processes. They were able to imagine themselves in situations that were never before seen as possibilities. They also recognized potential losses due to bad behavior. One teacher stated that she saw students who developed bigger dreams due to the possibilities that the industry partners presented to them.

We don't get a lot of experience at school as to how it is on the job. I feel like we are the future of America and this is an outstanding privilege to be a part of the business world now through our partnership. – Student

Perceived Benefits Connected to Essential Skills

Knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and in the labor market take precedence in the education of a high school graduate. Teachers teach employability skills, which are called essential skills in this paper, and plan opportunities for students to use them regularly throughout the high school experience. The academy partners provide additional real-world experience in which to practice using essential skills. This research seemed to show that the more that students practice essential skills such as decision making, trustworthiness, work ethics, and problem-solving the better they work and are identified as leaders. The frequency of the use and application of essential skills within this school-industry partnership was an unplanned bonus for the students and teachers. An administrator who interacted regularly with the students participating in the partnership stated that she believed that the attainment of essential skills was the absolute best result to come out of the interactions.

Students also seemed to notice the benefits of being exposed to regular interactions with business representatives as demonstrated by the following statements.

School feels more professional when our partners are here. - Student

I think that the partnership has taught me the power in first impressions. A smile and a firm handshake can set the tone for business and how your associates view you. - Student

Communication and presentation are things [the business partners] talked about often.

You have to be able to communicate with a wide variety of people and to present yourself and your ideas in ways that interest others. – Student

A history teacher reported that after a visit from [the company] employees, a student came to her class and commented that he had never been around people that spoke like the people from [the company] except for his teachers and, with them, it was different.

The two networking luncheons that [the company] sponsored provided opportunities to practice essential skills over an extended period of time with a variety of adults. Students, teachers, and administrators voted the networking luncheons the most memorable moments within the academy. Two [company] employees came to the school prior to each event to go over rules of etiquettes and how to professionally network at a social function. They discussed with students how to dress and mingle, and how to eat at a formal affair. The students asked questions, created a Google document with additional questions and the two ladies answered every question. A teacher remembered:

When the bus load of students arrived, they were greeted by about 30 employees from [the company] and the local community. The students were to walk around introducing themselves and carrying on conversations with as many adults as they could in the twenty-five minutes prior to the meal. You could see them relaxing as time went by, then they tensed again when it was time to sit down and remember all that they had learned about table etiquettes. By the time we reloaded the bus; the students had a new sense of confidence in their practiced communication skills. - Teacher

The same teacher later commented:

A board member and the mayor who had both attended the luncheon stopped me in town to talk about how much they thought about the networking luncheon experience and how beneficial they felt that it was to the students. - Teacher

The week following the first networking luncheon, a student who participated was asked what his most memorable activity in the academy had been. His answer provided poignant insight into the influence that the partnership had on his life.

The thing that I think I have learned the most from is the networking luncheon. After seventeen years, I learned how to eat! The ladies taught us a lot, and then we dressed up and practiced what we learned. My family was so excited about what I was learning that I taught them how to eat the next day. We practice what we learned every night now, together. - Student

[The company] seemed to come to this partnership committed to do whatever it took to succeed, including attending to the broader view of student development. This commitment was evidenced in every employee that came to share with the students. Students benefitted by wanting to succeed, having a bigger picture of success, and knowing that more than just their test scores were deemed important. As one student stated.

They are preparing us for business no matter where we go. - Student

Perceived Benefits Connected to Industry

Research has shown that educational partnerships enhance classroom opportunities for students and afford teachers and business partners with chances to develop new skills in new ways (Dhillon, 2005 & 2013; Tushnet, 1993). The benefits to industry that were identified in this study were that employees shared and grew from their interactions with the students; employees addressed the company's focus on education when they provided an educational service to the community through their participation in the academy; employees invested in the future of Alabama when they invested in its students; and this partnership allowed employees to develop the future workforce.

When the [the company's] representatives were asked why they chose to participate in this educational partnership, they gave the following answers:

This is a win-win project! We involve our employees because it is developmental to them. When we bring someone in for a specific task, they are the best to ask. Often, they have never shared what they do before coming to the school. We know the value of interacting with others...now we have a place for many of our employees to share and grow. – Program Manager

We want to be the support that our community needs. When we strengthen our communities, it strengthens our company. – Business Office Manager

When asked what benefits they have received from the partnership the two core partners replied:

We always hear about the 'bad kids.' We always hear how teenagers today have no drive and they just don't care. Our employees, that participated in the luncheon, walked away saying that not any of the kids at the luncheon were 'bad kids.' The academy kids aren't like that; they have drive and determination to achieve. It is kind of like the butterfly effect; with just a little push we can give them the wings that take them forward. – Program Manager

Our future is in good hands. These kids will invent and think of things we never could. We are in good hands. This was the "ah-ha moment" for me. You don't hear about the good. Good doesn't sell papers. But our kids are good. There are some bright minds out there, we don't ever hear about. –Business Office Manager

Possibilities for Partnership Improvement

Throughout the implementation year of the academy, the school administration and teachers asked students to provide input by reflecting on activities, speakers, and solutions to the regularly asked question, "What do we do next?" A major emphasis in academy building is to generate pride and belonging to the group. Students and teachers who were asked their opinions and then saw their voice create change seemed to become active in the change initiative. A

natural question for the evaluation team to ask at the end of the implementation year was, “How would you like to see the partnership grow?” The following are some contributions from teachers.

I would like for the employees to come in for more activities like they do for the networking luncheons to model professionalism and community service to our students. – Teacher

I think that the mock interviews for my students now mean more with the employees a part of the panel. I want to do more activities like this. – Teacher

I would like for different partners to come in when we are doing specific projects and teach the lesson instead of telling us about how they use the tools we are learning to use. I would like to see them take on the mentor role, because our students seem to enjoy that interaction the most. - Teacher

When the students were asked if they had any ideas for growth or improvement for the academy partnership, they shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads. One student volunteered

Everything that we did this year has been great! I still want to do the field trips, the motivational assemblies, the lessons on Excel, and business etiquettes...and especially the networking luncheons, but I would like to add even more. – Student

Another student commented,

I feel like this is the first year of the academy and the prelude to what is to come. It is hard to suggest things to change. Right now it is still too new. I don't want to change anything. – Student

The core team members from [the company] talked with the researcher about how they would like to see the partnership grow and change. The program manager stated that it is hard to say how we would like it to change, because it is always changing. Everyone agreed. Then, she thought about it and quantified:

I think I would like to grow this across academies. We had one young lady that was in the STEM Academy and the Business Academy. She came to several of the events in the Business Academy. I would like that to happen more. If we can influence more students in different academies, I would like to grow in that direction. – Program Manager

I would also like to bring people from other divisions who have ties in this area back to speak on their life experiences. We have some very interesting employees that can really aid us in what we are doing. We can reach farther within our company for resources. – Program Manager

I think that we need to document the partnership more through pictures, videos, and news articles. That way we could recapture the events. – Business Office Manager

I would like to see [the company] influence other businesses to partners like this in a career academy. They may not be a full sponsor, but a partner in the learning. Every business will bring something to the academies that none other can. I would like to increase participation in the academies for the sake of the students. – Program Manager

Discussion

An educational partnership provides learning benefits to its participants by offering pathways that are seen as engaging and relevant to life beyond high school. Participants asserted that the partnership provided relevance to classroom learning. Business partners easily drew clear connections from what students were learning in school to how it would be used in the world of work. Students talked openly about how what they were doing in class made sense to them as far as why they needed to learn it. This impact may have occurred because interactions

with business partners provided a connection to the real world that motivated and clarified learning that under regular classroom circumstances may have felt disconnected for students. Career and Technical Education (CTE) was reported to add relevance to learning in core subjects. Taking into account the number of visits by industry partners, field trips, and the networking luncheons, this research indicated that the level of benefits realized by students correlates to the amount of exposure to industry partners. The academy director commented one day that the teachers and students were noticing that everyone from [the company] spoke the same language and walked the same walk. Everyone from [the company] that visited the classrooms shared the same message - it was a powerful teaching tool.

The greatest and most unexpected result of the partnership was the growth in essential skills that was seen in the academy students. The teachers and administrators reported that the students exhibited the greatest increase in confidence, communication skills, employability skills, and understanding of why the essential skills are important as compared to previous year-end results. This outcome could be described as inevitable since a multitude of professionals spoke with and worked with students on a regular basis. Regular practice with essential skills with adults through professional interactions would logically lead to students acting in confident, professional ways. The program manager was observed by the researcher and described by a teacher to be comfortable correcting minor mistakes in communication and explaining the expectations in the professional world. The students seemed to respect the program manager and the other employees that worked with them. Their respect led them to emulate and work to meet the expectations of the business partners. Therefore, implications of this finding are that knowledge in essential skills transfers to students in regular, professional interactions with industry partners within a school-industry partnership. The teaching of essential skills became a regular conversation among teachers and administrators. It was believed that essential skills were important enough to be evaluated, so CTE teachers worked with their administrator to develop a rubric to assess workplace skills in students.

Students and teachers believed that the partners influenced the students' acquisition of industry related credentials. This result could be due to the fact that the program manager made it her mission to discuss the importance of credentials each time she talked with students. Other employees talked about the job-embedded credentials earned and the increase in salary or position that resulted. When something, such as credentialing, has attention called to it regularly it gains the students' attention. When told over and over that it is an irrefutable accomplishment that will positively affect your future wage earnings, it is understandable that students would devote more time to earning the credentials. The credentialing attainment of the participants affirm the maxim that "the more you hear something from people you revere, the quicker you learn it - or believe it - and then act on that learning."

Students, in grades 10 through 12, reported that they had talked with their parents and counselors more this year than ever before about their plans for college and work. This benefit was a result of engaging students in learning and providing them a believable picture of what they could do. When students were exposed to life beyond the school walls, they began to understand what was important, and to plan what they would do to navigate previous insurmountable barriers. It was also believable that if students were talking more about their future in school, they continue that discussion at home. Simply talking about college does not guarantee that it will be attended; however, without such discussions, it would be hard to imagine that a commitment to attend college would likely occur. Therefore, the number of

students that stated they were talking about college with counselors and parents was a positive accomplishment of this partnership and an essential first step for the students.

The data spoke to the fact that students need high levels of exposure to industry partners to increase their interest in school and in their future. Students reported that they could see the connection between what they were learning in school and where they will go in the future, because of the association with business partners. This benefit likely occurred because the partnership experiences, unlike the traditional school activities and curriculum, afforded a link to the real world that motivated students who may feel marginalized otherwise. Watters et al. (2013) found that partnerships that provided students with both in-school and work-based-learning experiences could significantly enrich learning results and aid transition into a related career. Partnerships, such as this one, also assisted students in understanding expectations and industry culture.

A noted benefit to both organizations was the opportunity to self-reflect and to ask how the partnership can become better. Self-examinations set up a system for examining different ways of relating to internal departments, external partners, and the community. A partnership can be a medium for institutional reform and/or improvement.

There were not a lot of suggestions for improving the program. Participants seemed to primarily want to expand it. This may be because the program was in its first year and there were so many positive aspects to it that it was difficult for those involved to identify potential or real weaknesses. It would be beneficial to provide additional opportunities for discussion about this in the future and perhaps to conduct individual survey of all those involved on an annual basis.

Implications for Future Research

Future research of this academy partnership is needed. A study over multiple years to include quantitative data is encouraged to add the statistical data of participant test data to the perceptions of the participants. A longitudinal study of the partnership to determine whether facilitating factors, benefits, and outcomes are maintained and changes made over time is recommended.

When other school partnerships are formed with this particular industry, year one implementation research would be a good comparison to this study. This would help determine whether another school-industry partnership yielded similar results in participant-perceived benefits. It would also be advantageous to replicate this study with other school/industry partnerships in different fields and verify or refute the findings of this study. There is a need for additional qualitative research on school-industry partnerships that looks at successes and sustainability. Not all partnerships are the same, so it is recommended that researchers look at the differences. Much can be learned from the differences discovered in partnerships. It might also be advantageous to examine the elements that specifically foster school-industry partnerships and those that hinder its success.

Conclusion

The language of partnership is powerful when implemented in practice. Benefits seemed to abound for the participants of this academy partnership. Everyone spoke of benefits that they personally received from their participation. The voices of participants were powerful and told the story very well. An educational partnership was seen, through this study, as building relationships to educate the youth of a community. The value-added idea of partnership was clearly understood through the voices of the participants in this study. A couple of closing remarks from students in this partnership and one from the program manager captured the essence of these feelings.

I would like the employees to know that I really appreciate what we have seen so far, and I appreciate the time that they give to prepare us for what work is like. - Student
It is an outstanding privilege to be a part of this academy. - Student
This is a sustainable, continuing project for [my company] as long as the high school feels that we are valuable. It is worth continuing. – Program Manager

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