Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

University-Community engagement: Mentoring in the Pasifika Space

Abstract

This paper reports on a mentoring program called BEAMS (Building Engagement and Aspirations through Mentoring in Schools) and its impact on local Pacific Island or Pasifika communities. The motivation for this paper stemmed from alarming statistics about retention and progression rates for Pasifika students enrolled at university and transition rates of Pasifika students into higher education studies and employment. A qualitative approach was adopted based on semi-structured interviews with community members and field notes, to contribute to our learnings from working with the Pasifika community and to assess the success of the program.

Findings revealed that BEAMS Pasifika had a positive impact on both mentors and mentees, contributing positively to personal and professional growth. Comments from the students involved in the high-school mentoring program show the value of a cultural role model for high school students who do not consider higher education as a viable alternative. Further, the project highlighted the benefits of collaborative university-community partnerships on building community capacity and offered insights for how these partnerships can be improved for the future.

Keywords: mentoring, Pasifika, educational aspiration, university-community partnerships, community learning

Word Count 4778

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

University-Community engagement: Mentoring in the Pasifika Space

Introduction

The relatively recent emphasis on university-community engagement initiatives (Eklund & Hardy, 2014; Garlick & Langworthy, 2008) has seen Australian universities employ a broadening range of activities to develop new and productive connections between the university and their stakeholders. One of these activities is mentoring which is well-documented as an effective strategy for helping mentees achieve their social, career or educational aspirations. In higher education, however, it has not gained as much recognition as a community engagement tool. This article reflects on a mentoring program which was employed at a suburban university from December 2012 to December 2014. The program was named Building Engagement and Aspirations through Mentoring in Schools (BEAMS), and although it was initially aimed at mentoring for retention and academic enhancement, it evolved into a powerful tool for connecting and interacting with the local Pacific Island, or *Pasifika*, community.

The paper begins by outlining how mentoring programs fit into broader agendas for university-community engagement and a rationale for why the Pasifika community was chosen as our focus. The current study's context and methodology are then described, followed by an analysis of the merits and weaknesses of the program as presented through the voices of Pasifika community members involved with the project. The article concludes with learnings from the BEAMS experience and makes suggestions for future research.

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

Before the discussion proceeds, it may be helpful at the outset to describe our understandings of 'mentoring'. There is no singular definition but in broad terms, it is "a skill where one person helps another reach goals" (Burlew, 1991, p. 214). Mentees become acculturated to a role or way of thinking or working. The mentor-mentee relationship is often considered to be mutually beneficial, involving support, assistance and guidance, promoting "positive growth, development and self-actualisation" for both parties (Roberts, 2000, p. 162). The construct is usually applied to individuals but it may also apply to groups (Darwin & Palmer, 2009), and here, both senses of the term are used.

Literature Review

University-community engagement through mentoring

Mentoring programs that connect universities with communities have clear benefits for mentors and their institutions. Mentors experience personal growth such as an increase of self-awareness, increased knowledge about children, and experience with civic responsibility towards the communities in which they live or study (Fresko & Wertheim, 2006; Jackson, 2002; Schmidt, Marks, & Derrico, 2004). Mentoring programs often provide learning opportunities that are not available through formal education, so the literature recommends incorporating mentoring and service learning opportunities into academic programs (Power, 2010; Thistleton-Martin, 2007; Vickers, 2007; Vickers, Harris, & McCarthy, 2004). At the tertiary level, field-specific mentoring programs aimed at culturally and linguistically diverse populations are effective in promoting retention and academic success (Holland, 2012; Summers & Hrabowski, 2006). Thus, there is little dispute that mentoring programs are a positive initiative for universities to pursue.

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

What is less certain is the role of these programs in broader, overarching agendas of university outreach and engagement. Bridger and Alter (2007, p. 170) characterise traditional university-community engagement as focused on development *in* the community as opposed to development *of* the community. Development *in* the community usually focuses on economic development, while development *of* the community aims to enhance the capacity of community members to improve their individual and social well-being. Mentoring falls into this latter category.

Bridger and Alter (2010) coined the term public scholarship. They suggest moving to a more equal relationship between (university) expert and (community) citizen to create new spaces and opportunities for democratic participation and capacity building. They argue that in the traditional expert-citizen model, citizens play a passive role while experts supply the knowledge and advice upon which policy decision are made (p. 410). This role is turned upside down when experts and citizens are viewed equally, working in partnership to solve problems. In this perspective, engagement is conceptualised as an ongoing process rather than a final outcome of working with communities (Moore, 2014).

The extent to which this process of engagement is embedded in a university's mission and ethos is a reasonable indicator of institutional commitment. If engagement is part of a university's 'core business' as recommended by Winter, Wiseman, and Muirhead (2006), then this is reflected in policy documents, structural arrangements, in the selection of strategies and activities that are funded (Kearney, 2015), and in the rewards and recognition given to researchers carrying out engaged scholarship (Carman, Westle, & Dowsett, 2011; Saltmarsh, Giles, Ward, & Buglione, 2009). Kecskes and Foster (2013) summarise three approaches institutions take to embrace engagement: a public relations approach, a neoliberal approach, and a transformational approach. All three approaches aim to generate good will

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

with the community, but while the public relations approach offers support, resources or funds to communities and measures success in terms of how the university is perceived, the neoliberal approach reframes engagement as a resource-generating, revenue-raising activity with outcomes that are quantifiable and measured in terms of efficiency. In contrast to both these approaches, the transformational approach focuses on community prerogatives and collaboration with communities to identify and address issues of concern, and engagement is measured in terms of "community challenges successfully addressed" (Kecskes & Foster, 2013, p. 11). Kecskes and Foster argue that the transformational approach is the ideal one, but also the most elusive as few institutions are willing to make the radical changes needed to become truly 'community-engaged'.

The current study adds to knowledge in this area by providing insights from a university partnership with the Pasifika community. To the authors' knowledge, there are few published studies on Australian university engagement with this community. Scull and Cuthill (2010) describe a participatory action research project carried out in Samoan and Tongan migrant communities in late 2005 at the University of Queensland's Ipswich campus. Exploring alternative outreach activities, the study found that collaborative partnership with these communities led to several mutually beneficial outcomes including stronger relationships between the stakeholder groups, increased awareness of the university's resources and of the value of higher education, as well as an organisational learning that outreach activities needed to be broadened. According to this study, a minimum of two years is needed to establish a trustful relationship between institutions and communities and engaged outreach strategies should be based on a minimum five-year plan. Kearney (Green & Kearney, 2011; Kearney, 2015; Kearney & Zuber-Skerritt, 2015) describes a fruitful partnership between Griffith University and the Samoan community in Logan, currently in its

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

fifth year of operation, that comprises of three main initiatives: the Griffith Pasifika

Association (GPA); the Pasifika Cultural Graduation; and the LEAD (legacy, education,

achievement, dream) program for secondary school students. Central to the success of this

partnership is the creation of a 'sustainable learning community' whereby participants draw

from knowledge from *within* the community to increase their own capacity for creative and

critical thinking. These studies point to the importance of collaborating with community

members in the conceptualisation, design and execution of community-engagement

programs, and the benefits of harnessing community knowledge.

Why Pasifika?

Pasifika student academic performance has been scrutinised in several publications,

most originating from New Zealand (eg. Airini et al., 2010; Anae, Anderson, Benseman, &

Coxon, 2002; Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae, 2006; Coxon, Anae, Mara, Wendt-

Samu, & Finau, 2002; Ferguson, Gorinski, Samu, & Mara, 2008; Ministry of Education,

2014; Robinson et al., 2004; Statistics New Zealand, 2010) and the sparse Australian

literature in this area echoes New Zealand's findings. Australian sources indicate that

Pasifika students face particular challenges with language and literacy (Horsley & Walker,

2005; Kearney, Fletcher, & Dobrenov-Major, 2008; Singh, Dooley, & Freebody, 2001; Singh

& Sinclair, 2001). In some slightly dated accounts, Pasifika students were considered to have

low overall educational attainment and not likely to complete compulsory schooling (Singh,

2001; Singh & Dooley, 2001). More recent reports reveal that this cohort is under-

represented in Australian higher education (Ravulo, 2015; Scull & Cuthill, 2010), and

Pasifika students who do manage to enter university have a relatively high failure rate,

estimated at around 30 to 40% (M. Tomlinson, personal communication, June 7, 2013). Some

of these findings can be attributed to the nonalignment of the Samoan and Australian cultures

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

where neither parents nor teachers make efforts to smooth the way for students (Kearney, Fletcher, & Dobrenov-Major, 2011). The presence of a cultural broker to liaise between the Pasifika community and the school is reported to have positive benefits for this community (Singh & Dooley, 2001).

Building Engagement and Aspirations through Mentoring in Schools – BEAMS

The university delivering the program is a large regional university comprised of four campuses across South-East Queensland, one of which is located in a rapidly growing multicultural area in the western outer suburbs of Brisbane. This campus and its surrounding suburbs have a growing number of Pacific Island heritage residents, and this is evident in some local schools where the Pasifika student population makes up as much as fifty percent of the total student population. Many of these schools are located in low socioeconomic areas.

As part of its community engagement and outreach agenda, the university initiated the BEAMS program which ran from December 2012 to December 2014. It primarily recruited university students to mentor school-aged students in a wide variety of fields and interests, such as sports groups, reading groups, homework clubs and so on. Entry into the program required a positive grade-point average and BEAMS training included understanding the roles of mentor and mentee, learning skills in mentoring such as communication skills, and developing cultural sensitivity. Program administrators actively sought out school requests for mentors and these requests were matched with the database of available, trained mentors.

Due to the location of the campus delivering the project, requests were received for Pasifika mentors to work with Pasifika school students. These requests could not be filled because at the time, there were no trained Pasifika mentors available. Further investigation

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

revealed that this scarcity was because Pasifika students were not achieving the grade-point average required to enter the program; in fact, by one estimate, around 70% of Pasifika students at the university were not achieving a passing grade in their enrolled courses. This became the impetus for BEAMS Pasifika, an offshoot of the main BEAMS program. Its purpose was twofold: to increase the pool of Pasifika mentors by helping students achieve the passing grade-point average required to join the program; and to connect with the schools which could benefit the most from Pasifika mentoring. The rest of this article describes our learnings from working with the Pasifika community to achieve these goals.

Methodology

The aim of the current study was to qualitatively explore the effectiveness of the BEAMS program from the perspective of our community partner. The specific research questions were:

1. What are the perspectives of the Pasifika community about the value of the BEAMS program?

2. What did the university do right, what could it do better, and how can these insights inform future university engagement with the Pasifika community?

A total of ten participants were selected for the study using information-oriented purposeful sampling; that is, a non-random sample of participants was selected on the basis of expectations that their data would be rich and informative. This method of sampling was considered appropriate to maximise the usefulness of the data that could be obtained from this size study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). All participants had been involved with the BEAMS project in some capacity and the sample included three mentors, five Pacific Liaison Officers and two community leaders.

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

Data comprised of our field notes from facilitating the BEAMS program over two years, and interviews with research participants conducted at the end of the program. We used semi-structured interviews, which are less rigid and more interactive than structured interviews (Gray, 2009). The key research questions guided the discussion but the interviews were presented to participants as 'chats' or 'conversations' to allow the interview to diverge into new pathways which may not have been anticipated. We also encouraged the use of narrative and stories, in line with current interview methodology (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & McKinney, 2012). Interviews were recorded digitally using two voice recorders and transcribed in their entirety by the first author.

Data was analysed using thematic analysis, which is where a corpus of data is systematically examined for themes and patterns of meaning (Berg & Lune, 2012). Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for extracting key themes from the corpus of data. Representative quotes for each theme were selected from the interviews and are presented in the discussion below.

Reflection and Discussion

Engagement and retention at university

In trying to connect with Pasifika students on campus, the first hurdle we faced was the lack of official data that disaggregated students by ethnic, cultural or linguistic identity. University data collected at enrolment noted place of origin and main language, but as noted in other studies (Horsley & Walker, 2005; Thomas & Kearney, 2008), it failed to capture numbers of Pasifika students who came to Australia by way of step-migration through New Zealand, as country of origin would appear as New Zealand rather than a Pacific Island. Ultimately, Pasifika students were located by working through lists of names of enrolled

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

students to discern which names 'sounded' Pasifika, and they were invited via email and word-of-mouth to participate in a new academic support program.

The Pasifika Academic Support program, which aimed to mentor students through their academic journey at university, enjoyed limited success. Attendance was high in the first few weeks and then tapered off until by the end, only one student was attending regularly. One initially enthusiastic and determined student stopped attending because of financial woes. To support his family, he dropped out of university and returned to full-time work. Two first-year students stopped attending after three weeks, as they later admitted that they found it difficult to balance their studies with their family, work and church commitments. The following year, both students had left the university.

Several points were highlighted by BEAMS' efforts at higher education retention. Firstly, the crudeness of our method for identifying Pasifika students highlighted the need for more sophisticated categories of officially collected student data, for the purposes of understanding who makes up the student population. Universities cannot hope to ensure equitable access and participation at the tertiary level if they do not know which groups of students require access and who is, and is not, participating successfully. Secondly, student engagement with the academic support program confirmed the literature on the challenges faced by Pasifika learners with higher education (Anae et al., 2002; Benseman et al., 2006; Cuthill & Scull, 2011; Ross, 2008; Toumu'a & Laban, 2014). The collective orientation of Pasifika cultures, financial restraints and cultural pressures were all factors observed during the program. A final point is the significance of language to Pasifika tertiary level success (cf. Benseman et al., 2006). Although our Pasifika students were mostly fluent in English, they still needed support with mastering the academic language skills demanded by their university courses, such as reading for research and writing essays.

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

Mentoring in the community

One student who took part in the academic support sessions subsequently became a BEAMS mentor for a local high school, assisting with an after-school homework club. Prior to her assignment, she thought that mentoring was merely tutoring, but in reflection, she noted the wider impact of her role:

> *I think for me the experience was that children got to see a Polynesian lady in the community studying, continuing to further education and just being, I think, present with them, just to show them it's real . . . because I don't think they see much of it, much of um, like people who are continuing to study. . . They don't see it. They need to see it, someone who's doing it.*

She described an incident that stood out in her memory:

> *I was having a conversation with a few of the boys, the senior guys, and they were saying how after school they were headed for the mines . . . and they were so excited. They were really proud. They were really proud that they were headed for the mines and they were gonna work and they were gonna make all this money. I asked them, you know, why the mines? And they were like, our uncles are there, our dads work there, our, you know.*
>
> *And um, so we started this conversation about furthering their education, about uni, about TAFE, you know, um, a trade maybe, you know, not ev-. There's not- all the money is not at the mines. So we had that discussion and then they just had so many questions. . . It was just seeing the way these kids see things and just, I was really trying to help them understand that, you know, if they furthered their education that they would have more options.*

She described the connection to community that mentoring gave her:

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

> *[To] go out into the community, it brings me back down. It makes me feel*
>
> *connected but also . . . it's just a reminder that . . . I used to be one of these*
>
> *kids that wanted to dream . . . and here is someone telling these kids that it*
>
> *can happen.*

She later mentioned that her mentoring experience gave her the opportunity to critically reflect on her own educational and career direction. As a mature-aged student who had left high school to work and raise her family, not returning to higher education until more than a decade later, this mentor drew upon this experience to empathise with the high school students and to encourage them towards broadening their educational horizons.

At a different school, with a Pasifika student population of 30%, a Pasifika staff member described his school's experience with the BEAMS Pasifika mentor:

> *[The mentor] definitely added value to our homework program, especially*
>
> *in terms of providing assistance to our Pasifika students and mainly, I think,*
>
> *what she built was aspirations in our young people in terms of having a*
>
> *Pacific Islander studying at university. She was a great role model for our*
>
> *young Pasifika and Maori students here at this school. . . What the kids took*
>
> *most away from their interactions with [the mentor] was just being*
>
> *empowered and being inspired by having a Pacific Islander at university.*

Pasifika youth in the local area have many sports role models, but few educational ones. The BEAMS program helped fill this void by connecting successful and relatable university students with Pasifika school students. These interactions may or may not translate to positive and measurable outcomes for the university, but the excerpts above show the transformative effect they have had on the individuals involved.

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

University-community relations

Prior to BEAMS working within the wider Pasifika community, consultations were carried out to discern the needs and desired outcomes of the community. However, community members were at first sceptical of positive university-community partnerships due to a previous experience with another university. As one Pasifika elder recalled:

> *They wanted us to collect information from our community so we went door-knocking. . . I mean, we went into people's homes and sat down with them, asked them all the questions and stuff. And we took it back to the fellas in charge. We were all excited thinking, 'Finally! This is going to make us!' [ie. Help us succeed]. And they told us that they were going to make a report from all our information and take the report to the top. But then we never heard anything from them. No report. Nothing.*

Several other community members expressed the same disappointment, including the Pacific Liaison Officer who had been hired for the project:

> *I was the first cultural liaison officer in this area. The university hired me to connect them with the Pasifika community and we organised [an event]. That was one of the best things that has ever happened for our Pasifika kids, because it brought us all together and we felt like something great was getting started. . . .But then the university ended the project . . . That's always the problem with these programs. They never last.*

The views of these community members stress how important it is for universities to establish trustful and mutually beneficial relationships, and more importantly, relationships that are sustainable for the long-term. The Pasifika community members seemed disillusioned by their previous experience so extra efforts were made by the program leaders to regain their

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

trust and respect. Some of the strategies used at this stage were frequent face-to-face

meetings that were more casual than structured, the use of cultural protocols such as prayers

to open and close formal meetings and larger gatherings, and the exchange of culturally

appropriate gifts or tokens of appreciation.

Working with community representatives

After a slow and gradual introduction, the BEAMS program began working with the

Pasifika community through Pacific Liaison Officers in schools. Pacific Liaison Officers

(PLOs) are employed by local high schools to provide pastoral care and academic support for

Pasifika students. They work independently within their schools and have few opportunities

for networking or experiencing professional development in their field. In consultations,

several PLOs identified the need for a neutral space where Pasifika education issues could be

discussed, so in response, BEAMS established a monthly Pacific Liaison Officers' Forum. At

these Forums, the PLOs began to coordinate a Professional Development unit for local school

teachers about Pasifika learners. The Forum members agreed that pooling their collective

knowledge together and publishing a unit that would outlive the group would serve their

community better in the long run.

These efforts illustrate Bridger and Alter's development *of* community and the

university's "purposive efforts to strengthen the community field" (Bridger & Alter, 2007, p.

170). With the PLO forum, BEAMS was primarily a facilitator and host. The agenda for the

meetings, the dates and the chairing of each meeting were details decided by the PLOs

themselves. Giving control of the Forum to the PLOs, while working together to help them

achieve their goals, emphasised the collaborative and respectful nature of the university-

community partnership – the university was not the only knowledge-bearer in this forum; the

participants as professional cultural brokers also had expertise and knowledge to be shared.

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

The impact of the forums is described by these two participants:

> *We need to keep [the PLO forum] going because of the issues that I'm having in my school . . . I'm on my own. I feel like I'm on my own. I feel so much better just to be able to offload and know that they [the PLO participants] know exactly where I'm coming from. That's what I got out of the forums. Everybody was in the same boat . . . and we all had the same challenges at every school. I think that's where the connection was. That really filled my charges, like my battery was full to the top, was 100% . . .I was like, great! I'm back to where I was before, my passion's back.*
>
> *If anything it brought awareness in terms of what we needed to do as PLOs in the school itself. The forums actually gave us inspiration to push more and to advocate more on behalf of our people and our students. It was a great time of sharing of knowledge, sharing of information and experiences and networking, it was great for that, but, if I could say, if there were some great outcomes, the outcomes were us being empowered.*

For these participants, taking part in the forums provided personal growth and reinvigorated their sense of purpose. They indicate that through the Forums their professional capacities were enabled and inspired. Creating this 'enabling setting' (Korten, 1984, as cited in Bridger & Alter, 2007) did not require many resources on the part of the university; simply a room to meet and time to attend. However, because Pasifika still view universities as 'ivory towers', being invited to attend a forum on campus grounds and meeting peers in that space helped demystify the idea of the university being inaccessible to their community. It may also have helped increase the perceived value of higher education for that community as some forum participants went on to pursue studies with the university.

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

For one PLO who had been in her role for over a decade, the opportunity of meeting

through the forums was unprecedented:

> *To be honest, that was probably the first time ever, ever, I've ever been in a*
>
> *forum like that with my PLO peers. Ever. Without the BEAMS program, we*
>
> *never would have gotten together. . . [For the forums] we got the emails, they*
>
> *were given to our Principals so it was like, all legit. This is what we're doing*
>
> *and then get there and it's like, oh, wow! Huge eye-opener for me. Like, oh*
>
> *wow, this is what's happening at their school. Oh wow, you're feeling the*
>
> *same way. . . I think it was very, very positive. I think it's really important*
>
> *that we do keep connected- that we do keep connected with each other.*

Pursuant to strengthening the community field and increasing individual and group

capacity, BEAMS helped create a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) for the PLOs,

addressing a need the Pasifika community had identified themselves and serving the

prerogatives of that community, not institutional ones. This is indicative of a transformational

approach to community engagement (Kecskes & Foster, 2013), a collaborative approach

where success is measured not by the revenue it creates or the benchmarks it meets, but by its

responsiveness to community challenges.

On reflection, BEAMS Pasifika was a moderately successful initiative. Members from

our partner community noted positive and transformative experiences from their engagement

with the university, and we, as facilitators of the program, learned more about the level of

commitment required to create authentic or "deep" partnerships (Brukardt, Holland, Percy, &

Zimpher, 2004). Our program worked at different levels with the one community – at the

university, in schools, and with community representatives – and these multiple opportunities

for sharing knowledge and resources gave us a familiarity with the Pasifika community that

we could not have gained otherwise. The weaknesses of the program (lack of accurate data, limited success of the academic support program, short term nature of the initiative) could most effectively be addressed with structural interventions at the institutional level. This 'radical institutional change' (Brukardt et al., 2004; Kecskes & Foster, 2013) represents the most obstinate hurdle for successful university-community engagement.

Limitations

This article has only examined one program at one university so, as with most case studies, it is difficult to generalise findings across other tertiary institutions. The learnings in this article may be more useful for institutions with a similar community demographic that includes a high number of Pasifika people. Another issue is that this study provides qualitative support for our claims, but we have not been able to provide quantitative evidence of the impact of BEAMS, and this data is not likely to be forthcoming. In December 2014, the funding for BEAMS ceased and the program ended.

Conclusion

This article has presented learnings from a two-year mentoring program that worked closely with a local Pasifika community at various levels of engagement. The tertiary-level academic mentoring program emphasised the need for more refined student data as well as targeted Pasifika student training in academic language skills. Comments from those involved in the high-school mentoring program show the value of a cultural role model for high school students who do not consider higher education as a viable alternative. Our work with the PLO forum taught us that universities must invest in their community relationships and aim to cultivate meaningful and more importantly, *sustainable* relationships. We also learned that responding to community issues on community terms resulted in greater reciprocity, more

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

genuine collaboration and transformative opportunities than if the university had 'set the agenda'.

Moving forward, there are several areas that need exploration. Multi-pronged and innovative approaches to community engagement should be investigated, particularly with communities that do not have a history of engagement with universities. Institutions should be asking 'What, precisely, is needed for successful collaborations in *our* community?' (Winter et al., 2006). As well, more theorisation of evolving models of community engagement that accommodate cultural and other context-specific considerations is needed. Finally, the links between university-community engagement and individual and social well-being (Bridger & Alter, 2007) need more attention as these should be included in the array of measures used to gauge the success of any program. Research in these areas will hopefully encourage institutions to experiment with new ways of working, and importantly, *with new ways of knowing*. Therein lies the true potential of engaged community outreach.

Tualaulelei, E. & Kavanagh, M.

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