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Abstract

This paper examines University-Community engagement projects from the perspective of an adult student. Explicating the difficulties of community engagement as it applies to team based experiential learning, community partnerships, and university instructors, this paper analyzes personal experience of designing and implementing a community engagement project. To aid in overcoming the obstacles universities face engaging community this paper provides program specific suggestions and visual models explaining the importance of a flexible project design to the mobility, needs, and limitations of the community partner.

Introduction

I learned a lot from the collaborative and experiential coursework in the Liberal Studies Accelerated Leadership Program for Adult Students (ALP). These experiences are what connect me personally to the nature of my research. Within the course “Leadership for Social Change” I became a member of a group that used the Design Thinking Method to create a swap program called the Harrison Park Uniform Project. The experience gained implementing the project at Harrison Park Elementary School has shaped how I understand university and community partnerships. Researching this topic has informed my understanding and made clear that even when learning objectives, engagement processes, and other relational aspects intend to include awareness and self-reflexivity it is incredibly difficult to guard against inequalities as engagement experiences unfold. However, deconstructing how actions perpetuate structural inequalities can lead to better relationships, pedagogical strategies, and community engagement practices. Therefore, this analysis can inform future endeavors to contribute to address the obstacles to community engagement.

Problem Statement

How an ALP University-Community engagement project becomes sustainable should involve form fitting the design of the project to the needs, capabilities, and limitations of the community partner. To acknowledge the autonomy of the community partner, I believe the Community Projects designed in the Accelerated Leadership Program can be enhanced by concerted efforts to ensure project designs empower the community partner and do not contribute to a dependent relationship with the University. This has led me to ask two questions about the community projects put forth by the ALP:

What guidelines can ALP Projects use to enhance implementation?

How can the ALP implement ethical guidelines concerning community projects?

These questions help blueprint a foundation for success based in empathy, organizational leadership, self-reflection, and a deeper integration of experience when implementing community projects. This topic is important as it contributes to the field of Higher Education in relation to participatory action research which has emerging lessons and guidelines from all parties involved in service learning. Much has been written about how service-learning impacts students and instructors from the perspective of the university, but there is less that centers around the perspective of the community partner and the student. Indeed, very little research authored by student's and partners is available. This makes understanding their role in experiential learning and community engagement projects challenging.

Interdisciplinary Scholarly Context

I have used qualitative methods to research University-Community based projects as well as analyze strategies, recommendations, and guidelines from University-Community engagement project case studies. Articles explicating perspectives of the student, community partner, university instructor, learning outcomes, and strategies that facilitate experiential learning are related to the areas of Higher Education, Sociology, and Public Affairs. I detail the results of my research and understanding of these perspectives under the following headings: Engagement Experience, Team Based Experiential Learning, Community Partnerships, and University Instructors.

Engagement Experience

Many university-community collaborations involve participatory action research. Participatory and active research practices should include:

(1) aligning the resources being consumed on research with actual communal needs, (2) moving the production of that information more immediately and seamlessly into use, and (3) increasing the capacity of public participants to collaboratively, courageously, and creatively address shared challenges in the future. (Lake & Wendland, 2018)

The use of University-Community engagement projects to facilitate experiential learning can be found across many disciplines, universities, and communities. How it is used in pedagogical strategies must be done with a constant seeking to understand all actors and relationships involved (Marullo, Cooke, & Moayed, 2009). The process of implementing the projects can alter the way community interests and university interests are prioritized. No matter what efforts are made to ensure the project is mutually beneficial there exists plenty of pitfalls and caveats that require constant awareness from all stakeholders (Lake & Wendland, 2018).

Even when community engagement projects have varying levels of success or failure, the students involved always learn from their experiences (Campbell & Lambright, 2011). Given the institutional power and resources of the university student learning tends to become the main priority for community partners as well, regardless of project outcome. This can be the result of power imbalances and the role universities play within their community (Marullo, Cooke, & Moayed, 2009). The community partner, student, and university instructor all have different perspectives and experience the university-community partnership differently (Strier, 2011). These perspectives highlight the relational enmeshment of responsibilities between university and community partner. When institutions and people engage with one another in a purposeful way what is often focused on consistently are the benefits, the processes, and estimated results of the projects. What is more difficult to identify and call out are the implicit ways community

partners or the university may be prioritizing the needs of the other in a way that detracts from mutually beneficial aspects of the project.

Team Based Experiential Learning

How the curriculum is structured and what pedagogical strategies are used to facilitate experiential learning vary depending on the university, the academic level of students, and the community or non-profit partner. First year master's in public administration students at the University of North Carolina incorporate experiential learning for their graduate students using "two core courses: Public Management and Leadership (Leadership) and Program Evaluation (Evaluation)" This program sets up teams to work on a project they designed as a group while simultaneously taking classes for their major. The project is planned and managed directly with the client agency. When evaluating the program students took part in interviews which reflect their experience with the courses and experiential learning. Much of the student's statements reflect the process and difficulty working in a team when designing a project (Whitaker, 2004).

Team communication and internal dynamics can determine how or if a project continues from one stage to the next. How cohesive and connected team members are with one another corresponds to how fully engaged a team can be within the community. This fact inevitably effects how well a project can be form fitted and implemented. Being a part of a community engagement project requires an understanding of the relationship team members have with one another, how the individuals sees themselves, and their social identity as it relates to the community and what it means to be in a position of privilege as university student. For many students working with the community partner is a new experience and much of the work may challenge how aware a student is of their personal biases.

Community Partnerships

Input from the community organizations is essential information that can be utilized in numerous ways. To better understand university-community engagement from the perspective of the community partner a study was done using a survey and interviews seeking to understand these main points:

(a) the community's receptivity and capacity to involve student learners, (b) what they considered to be the most important characteristics of a campus community partnership, and (c) how frequently they reported experiencing those characteristics in past partnerships.

Their findings state that weak campus-community connections and weaker than optimal approach to communication and troubleshooting are the main contributors to service-learning projects that had failed in the past. Nonprofit managers stressed providing in advance the skills required to address the needs of the nonprofit organization. Communication as well as equal commitment from community organization, student, and university is noted as being the highest priority for partnerships (Gazley, Bennett, & Littlepage, 2013).

Campbell & Lambright's (2011) findings support this claim. They concluded that the close working relationships between the supervisor and student were essential to successful outcomes. A strong working relationship helped ensure the overall goals of the project were achieved and aligned with the community organizations. In conjunction with this, supervisors reported that unsuccessful and moderately successful projects were due in part to a disconnect with university faculty. The community supervisors lack of knowledge of course expectations inhibited their ability to provide effective feedback to students and address the overall value of the capstone project.

A university-community engagement projects requires engagement from all actors. Communicating a shared meaning, the processes, and what is possible within the given time frame is essential to establishing goodwill between institutions and ensuring the possibility for a continued partnership on future projects.

University Instructors

How university instructors experience community engagement projects are very much dependent on the department program or pedagogical strategy used to facilitate student learning and meet the course objectives. Some common responses of university instructors can be found in their willingness to self-critique, share what they have learned from their mistakes, and a desire to improve upon their methods from their experiences. In articles written by instructors who taught courses that engaged the community there is a willingness to illustrate the ways in which failing aspects of course projects became learning experiences. In articles by (Lake, Ricco, & Whipps, 2018), (Gazley, Bennett, & Littlepage, 2013), (Lake, Lehman, & Chamberlain, 2018), (Bata, Cox-Lanyon, Davis, & Whitney, 2019) and (Marullo, Cooke, & Moayedi, 2009) there are distinct recommendations for improvement that interconnect. Instructors teaching one another through shared experiences is one recommendation which some programs and instructors have acted on creating a shared benefit. Referring to *Shifting Engagement Efforts Through Disciplinary Departments: A Mistake or a Starting Point? A Cross-Institutional, Multidepartment Analysis* could be seen as an example of this as institutions and departments come together and in a shared experience to learn from one another. There are listed overarching challenges and struggles that instructors face throughout these articles. Much of these difficulties are based in institutional obstacles, the awareness of progress the instructor/university has of itself and the community, and how well this level of progressing awareness is communicated to

students and community partners. In an attempt to address these institutional communication obstacles I have created suggestions and listed opportunities which are designed specifically to counteract institutional and communication barriers. These suggestions and opportunities are specific to my experience as an ALP student; however, they may also prove beneficial to any community partner, student, or university instructor who is a part of a university-community engagement project.

Summary of Work

Through analyzing and synthesizing the recommendations, case studies, and theory related to university-community engagement projects I have integrated my knowledge and experience with experiential learning as a foundation for the following applied projects. In Appendix A I have created a list of recommendations that address the ALP community projects in hopes to improve communication, project design, and community engagement. In conjunction with these recommendations I have outlined an internship in Appendix B. This internship is designed to support valued design thinking projects, ideas that emerge every year from the ALP cohorts, and pre-existing relationships the ALP has within the Westside Community. In Appendix C and D, I have detailed my experience with the Harrison Park Uniform Project as it relates to form fitting ALP engagement projects to the community partner.

Findings, Limitations, Recommendations

I framed my experiences in the context of what I have researched allowing me to explore opportunities to address the obstacles within University-Community engagement. Transparency about my role as an Adult Student in the ALP and a co-creator of the Harrison Park Uniform Project frames my perspective. As an adult student what I may consider to be important may not

be important or as relevant to all students. I present my research from the perspective of a student but I in no way speak for all students. The relevancy of the projects I propose is dependent on the interest of GVSU and the structure of the ALP. The design thinking method may not always be what is used to facilitate community engagement projects, communities change over time and educational departments change leaders. The diversity of the Adult Students within each cohort alone limits how useful my projects may be. What I recommend is that each project I propose be considered for the content of the message and not be limited by how I have chosen to contextualize them.

Conclusion

University-community engagement projects require awareness of self, an openness to change, and to exist in experiences as they emerge. The interconnected nature of the work reveals how important it is to learn from each experience and have a shared meaning as a project unfolds. Community projects designed and worked on as a team provide an opportunity for students to experience and communicate the nuances of the relationship universities have with community partners. These nuances are what need to be communicated and documented between student, university instructor, and community partner to strengthen relationships, empower the community, and aid in leadership development.

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Appendix A

Accelerated Leadership Program Recommendations

Engagement Level

Community engagement projects involve some level of risk to all stakeholders. The more engaged with community a project is, the more risk is involved. Below are elements to consider when discerning how much communication and guidance is needed between instructor, project member(s), and community partner(s):

Location

Where the project takes place is incredibly important to consider. GRPS is a quite different space than a westside business or public location. Understanding the rules and regulations of a location is necessary for project members to follow and being knowledgeable of any mistakes made by previous ALP team projects in that space can help frame how a project is implemented and enhance the learning experience.

Design Preparedness

Not all projects that are continued by the ALP have a goal to be implemented. Some work may be done by one person and then built upon at a later point in time. This scenario involves a lower level of engagement. However, those projects that have a plan for implementation should make a point to let the Community Partner determine their level of preparedness for a project. Transparency and consistent communication allow for shared meaning and mutual understanding to be augmented before, during, and after the launch of projects.

Number of Students, Community Partners, and Volunteers Involved

The number of people involved is the most influential factor of engagement level. The more volunteers and partners coming together to help support a project, the higher the level of engagement with the community. High engagement level imposes a greater demand for structure within the ALP team of students and communicating a process and structure to the volunteers and community partners.

- One variable effecting engagement level is evaluating the role(s) each group of participants have. Collaborative work, even with many students, community partners and volunteers that occurs remotely or a project requiring multiple people, but in the early stage of design may have a low engagement level but substantial number of project collaborators.

How this guidance is facilitated is dependent on the engagement level, project design and the availability of the Community Partner Representative. However, it may take place in the form of:

- Scheduling a specific number of meetings/updates throughout the course of the project (skype, face to face, group email/texts)
- Introductory sit down with ALP students, instructor, and community representative.
 - This would be a particularly good opportunity to discuss the relationship GVSU has with the Community Partner and some of the structural rules and roles of everyone involved. Some community representatives may need to be additional member to the group project who has more decisive power than the students because of their knowledge about rules and regulations of the community.

ALP: Time Capsule of Learning and Experience

This suggestion acts as a virtual reserve of cohort project ideas that did not continue to the testing phase of the design thinking process and an account of what previous groups have learned implementing/working on their engagement projects in the community.

Engagement Experiences

Student to student advice where they can condense what they have learned/experienced and critically thinking about what the next cohort may find useful when engaging in the community. This could be organized/edited in a very formal way or casually.

- Updated design brief after implementation or major project changes
- Project team reflective summary

Design Thinking Community Project Ideas

Project ideas that were not implemented in the community but had support and interest from community partners can reside in this reserve. The value of a brilliant design does not depreciate when made available to students eager to learn. These project ideas have a variety of uses:

- Internship opportunities-taking a project to the next step
- Learning tool-What design thinking step needs to be modified? Ethical considerations? What research might be required?
- Students can create a team with cohort members and continue a project design

Augmenting Experiential Learning

Frame 5-week ALP Students as Traditional 15-week students

Based on what I have read about the ALP, projects that are constructed and pursued as a team in Leadership for Social Change create an opportunity for the instructor to facilitate traditional 15-week outcomes for those ALP students. This can take place by extending resources/worksheets that are used in 15-week courses which because of timing ALP students do not have reason to use. These are worksheets or assignment prompts that pull from both classes that the ALP students have already taken and from ones they will take in the upcoming weeks. Much of what is taught in “Organizational Theory & Dynamics,” “Leadership Dynamics,” and “Dialogue Integration & Action” is incredibly useful and would be even more beneficial as a supporting component to experiential learning.

- Mapping political players
- Role Reversal-How might a community partner understand the design of the engagement project through the structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frame?
- Leadership Assessments-How does your leadership style impact the group project?
- Greater opportunity to host a World Café with community partners

Appendix B

ALP Internship

Center for Adult and Continuing Studies ALP Internship

Brief Overview

This Internship position was developed in an effort to sustain community engagement projects created within the Accelerated Leadership program. Internship students work directly with the Center for Adult and Continuing Studies Student Services Coordinator, Liberal Studies ALP Faculty Coordinator, and Westside Community Partners to ensure that projects implemented in the Westside Community are continuing to benefit all stakeholders. Interns will gain experience in communication, project management, sustainability, and leadership. This is a unique opportunity to engage the Westside Community and develop skills as a student leader.

Minimum Qualifications

- Current enrollment in the Accelerated Leadership Program, in good academic and judicial standing
- Strong commitment to serve the needs of the community as a representative of GVSU and the ALP.
- Should be able to articulate how this work aligns with your Liberal Studies Emphasis learning objectives
- Willingness to work cooperatively within a team-oriented environment.
- Understands the Design Thinking Method

GENERAL JOB DESCRIPTION Duties may include...

- Research and understand the on-going ALP projects and the community partner associated with the project.
- Identify the status of the project, level of continued sustainability, note any changes that have been made and any plans of action needed.
- Create and update shareable reporting documents about these partnership opportunities and share them to ALP stakeholders.
- Coordinate special projects that will vary depending on the engagement project.
- Research best practices for university-community engagement projects and potentially implement or design new project ideas based on your community experience.
- Attend a bi-weekly one on one meeting with Accelerated Leadership Program Coordinator (can be by phone).

Supervision/Work Environment

The student intern will work under the supervision of the Accelerated Leadership Program Coordinator. Workspace can be either independent, or within an open study space which contains all necessary technology to fulfill duties, or onsite with a community partner.

Application Process

To apply for this internship, please email the following by _____

1. a copy of your resume
2. answer to the following questions

- a. What sparked your interest in the ALP internship?
- b. Why do you hope to work with the ALP and the Westside Community?
- c. What types of Leadership qualities or special skills can you contribute to this position?

Appendix C

Harrison Park Uniform Project

As an example of form fitting a community engagement project to better serve the needs of a community partner I will use the Harrison Park Uniform Project model as it exists now (Model 1 & Model 1a.) and what it would look like modified in a way that addresses institutional power imbalances and empowers Harrison Park School. I helped design the Harrison Park Uniform Project along with three other adult students in the ALP program. The project is designed to combat absenteeism at one Grand Rapids Public School, Harrison Park Elementary School. Research has shown that there is a link to uniforms and attendance. Attendance and the availability/access to uniforms is one of the barriers to education described by a KSSN case worker for Harrison Park Elementary School.

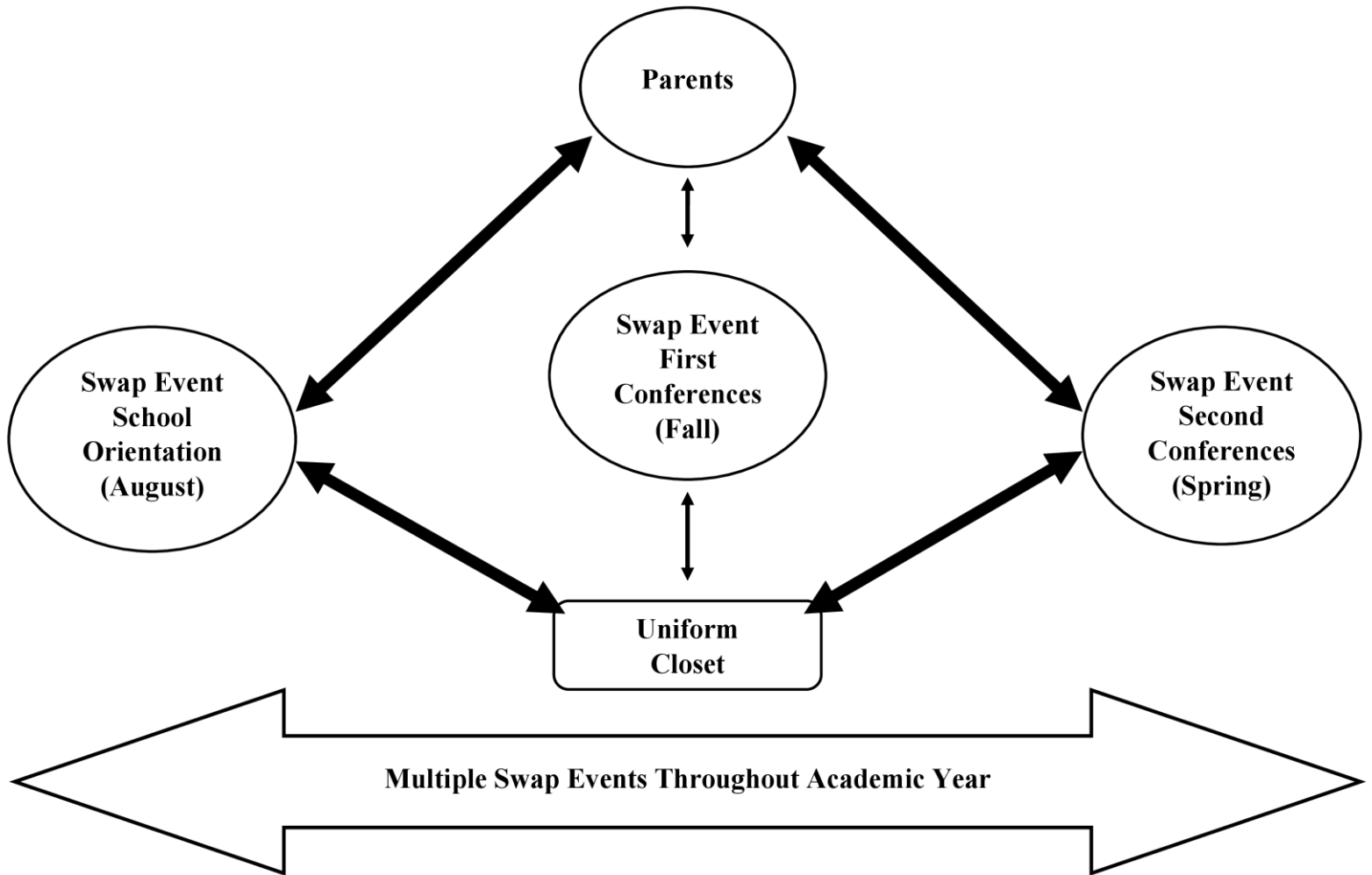
The Harrison Park Uniform project was designed to host multiple uniform swap events for parents at convenient times throughout the year. The uniforms are swapped piece for piece allowing parents to trade what they have for what they need regardless of style or size. The model also allows for a limited number of uniform pieces to be given to students who need them. This is seen as an investment in the future of the Uniform Project as the uniforms given out would eventually be swapped at a Swap Event held in the future. Based on my experience, the program agreements made between GRPS and the GVSU ALP are not allowed to “give away” any resource directly to the parents or students. This agreement restricts the current Harrison Park Model ability to assist families who have multiple children and ‘hand down’ uniforms within the family but are unable to purchase enough new uniforms. As an ALP student I understand this agreement to guard against cultivating a transactional relationship between

GVSU and the Harrison Park School. Simply giving away uniforms does not address absenteeism or the ongoing need for uniforms or aid in experiential learning for the ALP student. However, it prevents students who may need uniforms the most from accessing them. For this model to continue it is dependent on the availability of outside volunteers to set up and host the events. The project in its current state needs a volunteer group or future cohorts to take on the responsibilities of setting up and hosting the swap and ensuring that the parents of the students attending Harrison Park Elementary have continued access to this resource. The modified model of the Harrison Park Uniform Swap is designed to address these issues.

Currently, the uniforms swapped, and ones purchased as stock reside in the Uniform Closet at Harrison Park Elementary. The Uniform Closet originated out of the same ALP program and coursework using design thinking as the Harrison Park Uniform Project. The Uniform Closet was supplied with uniforms when first implemented but had since run out of stock until replenished with uniforms purchased by Westside businesses partnered with the Harrison Park Uniform Project. The Uniform Closet is used by the KSSN workers at Harrison Park at their own discretion to supply uniform pieces to kids who are in need. From my understanding the Uniform Closet is not advertised to parents and kids at Harrison Park to ensure uniforms are being given only to the kids who are really in need. The problem with the Uniform closet is that it is not self-sustaining. Based on my understanding of Harrison Park, the Uniform Closet, and the Harrison Park Uniform Project, a way to acknowledge and augment the autonomy of Harrison Park is by using the Uniform Closet as a place for donations and for parents to swap uniform pieces. This is represented by Model 2 which allows for a consistent flow of uniforms to be traded between Harrison Park Parents and the Harrison Park Uniform Closet. Model 3 represents the combined form fitted model to empower Harrison Park.

Model 1

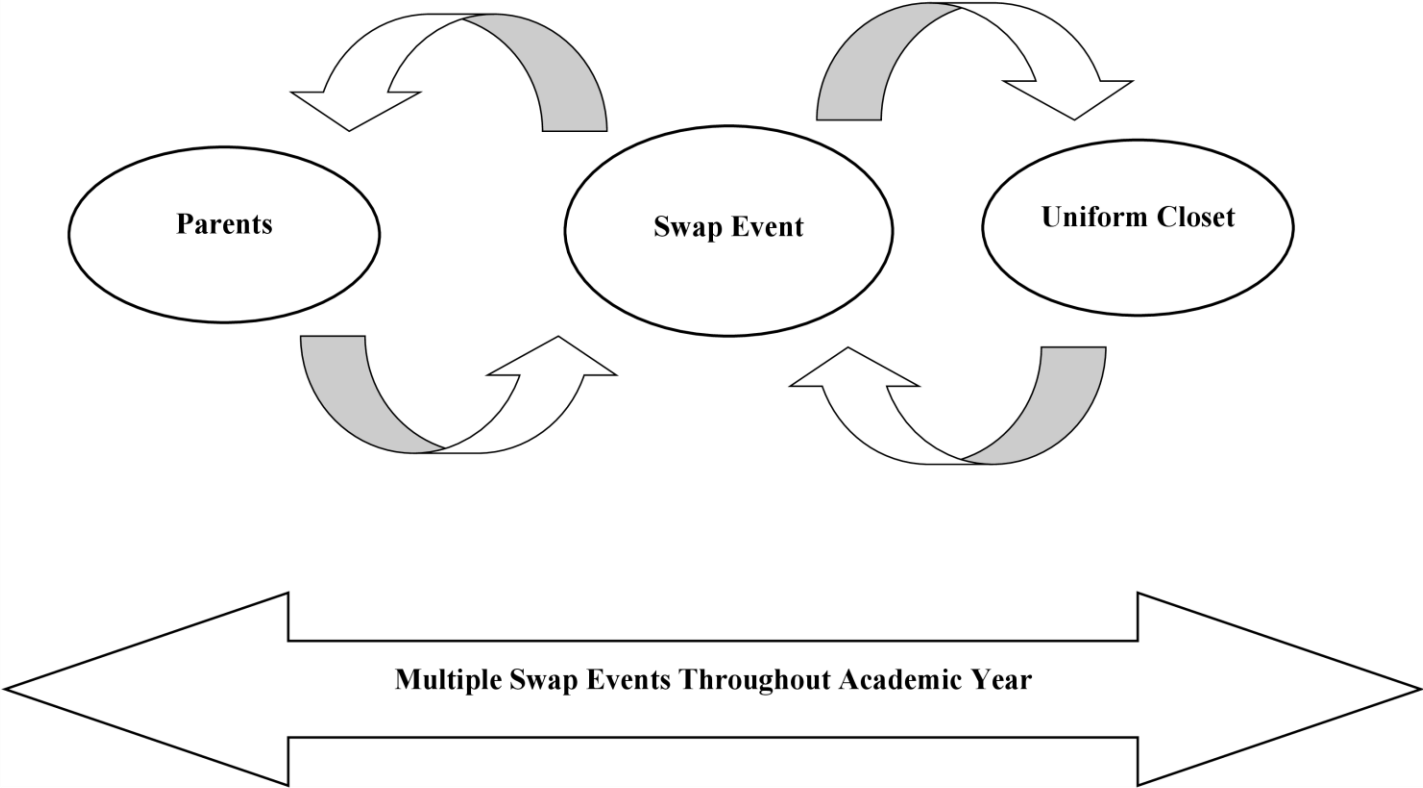
Current Uniform Swap Model



Model 1

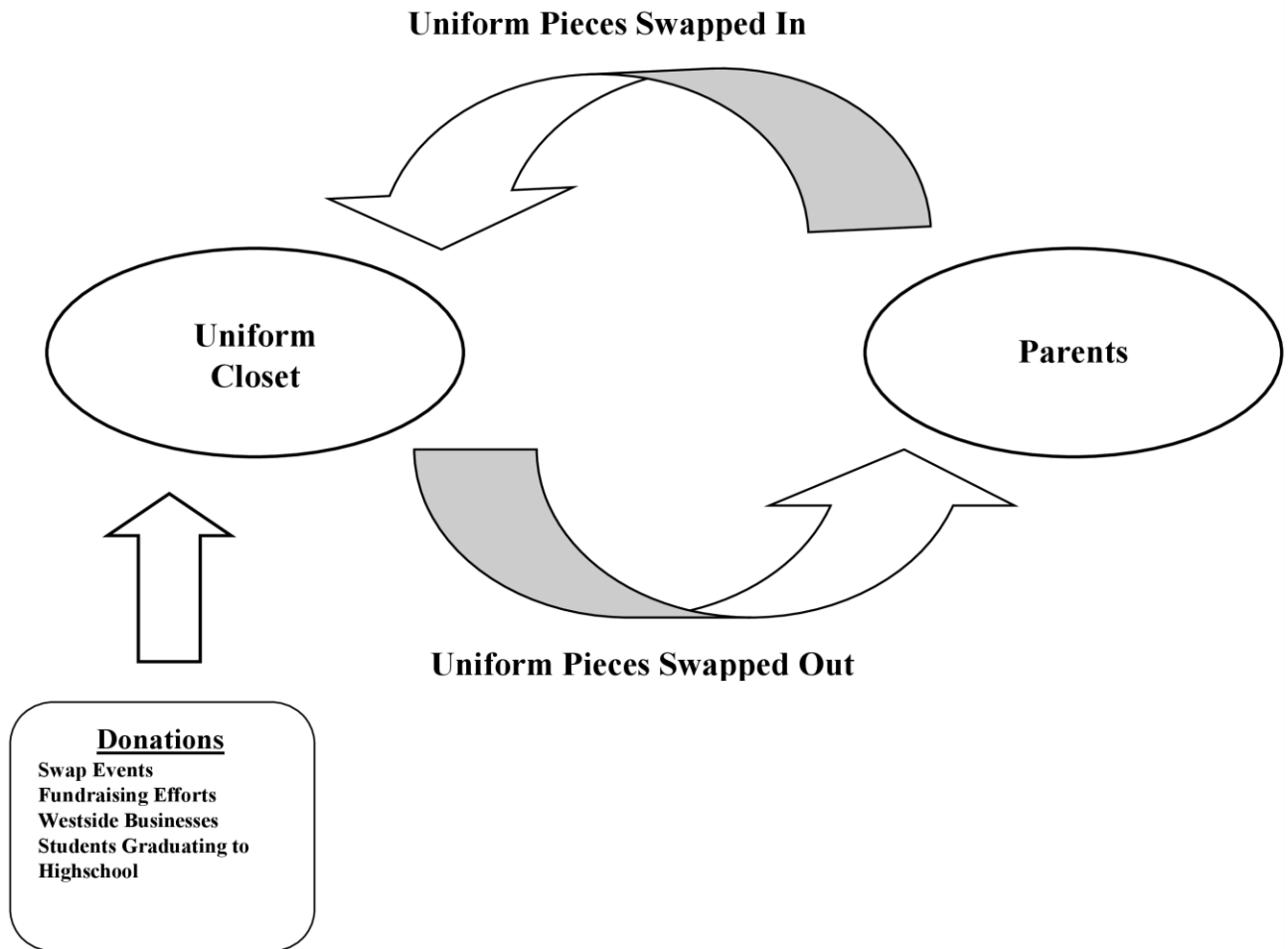
Model 1a.

Current Uniform Swap Model



Model 2

Modified Harrison Park Uniform Project Model



Model 3

Combined Uniform Swap Model

