



This article is one of more than 40 in an upcoming Compendium on the opportunities and potential of expanded learning opportunities and the importance of afterschool and summer programs, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers. With support from the C. S. Mott Foundation and under the leadership of executive editor Terry K. Peterson, PhD, the Compendium comprises eight sections with articles authored by thought leaders, policy officials, researchers, practitioners and other professionals in the field. Articles from the Compendium are available for download from the new website **Expanded Learning & Afterschool: Opportunities for Student Success** at www.expandinglearning.org

Bringing Universities Into the Mix: New Opportunities for Enhancing Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs

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We can be wise only together.

–Margaret J. Wheatley

The Potential of Partnerships for Creating New Opportunities

Combining the efforts of afterschool providers and institutions of higher education creates a wealth of opportunities for children and communities:

- *Padgett, Deich, and Russell (2010) suggest that postsecondary institutions can help with data collection, research, and program evaluation; provide facilities and staff training; identify quality curricula and link programs to statewide standards; and provide mentors and volunteers.*
- *America's Promise notes that postsecondary institutions can serve as catalysts, conveners, providers, partners, innovators, and civic generators (America's Promise, 2004, p. 14).*

- *Lawson (2010) outlines a partnership model that specifies a variety of supports that can be provided by universities to community partners, including*
 - ▷ *service learning programs and internships for undergraduate and graduate students that place them in community-based settings;*
 - ▷ *joint grant development and other revenue-generating programs and services;*
 - ▷ *initiatives designed to provide training, technical assistance, and capacity-building supports; and*
 - ▷ *a centralized office with stable, visible, and talented leaders who provide a single point of contact and a firm basis for ongoing communication and partnership management.*

Bringing New Experiences to Students in Hutchinson, Kansas

Botany. Nursing. Physical therapy. Computer design. These classes are not typical for young people, but thanks to a partnership with the Hutchinson Community College, middle school students are able to see what these educational and career paths are like.

Nickerson School District, South Hutchinson, Kansas, is home to the Leadership Enrichment and Academic Learning Academy, which works with 369 children in grades K–12 to improve behavior and engagement in learning through community partnerships, notably with local universities. Inside the classroom, college aides are among the program instructors that help students form aspirations for their futures and prepare for higher education. Outside the classroom, middle school and high school students take part in awareness learning days at Hutchinson Community College, where they have the opportunity to explore new fields of study in a hands-on environment and university setting. At the culmination of eighth grade, students take a trip to Kansas State University where they tour the campus and meet with students serving as program ambassadors. In high school, students work closely with Hutchinson Community College and Sterling College on their performing arts programs, where they produce single act plays. The students are involved in every aspect of the show, including script writing, acting, designing lighting and sound systems, and set building.

Tapping and utilizing these resources allows afterschool programs to benefit from a rich exchange of knowledge and experiences.

There are many examples of powerful afterschool-higher education collaboration in urban areas and medium to large cities. Schools and community groups based in smaller towns and rural communities, however, often do not regard public colleges and universities—which might be 50 or 100 miles away—as a resource for starting up, expanding, or improving afterschool and summer learning programs or for assisting them with their 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Likewise, many colleges and universities also may not see the potential for an afterschool partnership with schools and community groups in small towns and rural areas.

These partnerships are worth exploring, however, because they combine both like-minded and unlike-minded individuals and organizations into creative alliances that can achieve powerful results. While such partnerships require time; commitment; and systematic, intentional, results-focused efforts, they can also eliminate inefficient institutional siloing, unnecessary competition, and contentious thinking. This potential can be explained this way: “[L]arge-scale social change comes from better cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated intervention of individual organizations” (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 38).

The following real-life examples tell the story and show the potential of university-afterschool partnerships that could be created in every state, especially states with large numbers of rural or low-income communities.

SHAWNEE STATE UNIVERSITY

Shawnee State University (SSU) is the lead institution of the Ohio South Consortium that manages the 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs established as “After School Malls” in 39 school-based sites across seven school districts in Appalachian Ohio. The area is made up of small, rural towns with high unemployment, high poverty, and low educational attainment. The university is an open-access institution with a mission to serve communities, including providing afterschool services.

The Ohio South Consortium reflects a robust school-university collaboration. Participating school districts interview and hire 21st Century Community Learning Centers site coordinators, who meet regularly to share ideas and resources and assist the consortium director in planning professional development. The university writes the grants, manages research, houses administrative staff, serves as fiscal agent, and schedules evaluation visits. University facilities house afterschool events. Faculty and student clubs provide learning experiences and connect programs to resources.

SSU also offers a summer enrichment day camp for students in the region. Students from 21st Century Community Learning Centers sites receive scholarships to attend and are provided transportation.

BLOOM VERNON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Bloom Vernon is one of SSU’s long-time 21st Century Community Learning Centers partners. Assistant Principal Sandy Smith notes, “The university’s involvement is a huge plus. Shawnee provides accountability, administrative and technical support, and has helped our district and others in the county build relationships that extend beyond the afterschool programs.” The school district credits afterschool programming for generating life-changing differences for many attendees.

The Ohio South Consortium and SSU have provided the operational framework for southern Ohio’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers program for 12 years. The collaboration works well because of well-established relationships between the university and the community, starting with their collaboration in 1992 to expand Tech Prep programming to area high school students. Largely a commuter campus, SSU has a familiar feel to local residents. Even if funding levels change for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, SSU will doubtless remain an active partner in providing a safe learning environment to students enrolled in afterschool and summer programs.

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Though there is some measure of funding available to support 21st Century Community Learning Centers in rural areas, resources are often inadequate, resulting in an uneven patchwork of afterschool programs with varying standards and limited scopes. The good news is that opportunities to address these challenges exist through partnerships with land grant universities located in each state and territory of the United States.

Through its extension educator network, Kansas State University, the oldest land grant university in the nation, has successfully built and sustained partnerships for rural afterschool. The university has established partnerships with an array of local afterschool programs, from small town stand-alones to large, centrally administered 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool programs. Additionally, Kansas State supports 4-H afterschool clubs on three military installations.

Given the variety of operational challenges that 21st Century Community Learning Centers grantees in rural areas may face, partnering with land grant universities provides many types of support to help programs overcome those challenges. Such partnerships can provide university students with opportunities for student teaching and conducting research studies and concomitantly can provide afterschool and summer programs with additional staff and evaluation services. While these are typical examples of community partnerships for most major universities, regardless of their mission or location, there are additional important extension/outreach roles especially for land grant universities:

- *conducting needs assessments to establish afterschool programs;*
- *training for program leaders in evidence-based practice, positive youth development, and learning theory;*
- *identifying quality curriculum (e.g., science, healthy living, citizenship) that can be appropriately tailored for delivery in rural areas;*
- *bringing resources to the community through grant writing and marketing;*
- *cooperating with programs that address the needs of families; and*
- *providing research-based information for public policy changes (Ferrari, Linville, & Valentine, 2003).*

COUNCIL GROVE, KANSAS

Council Grove (population 2,182) is one rural community that has partnered successfully with Kansas State University to host a 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. Council Grove wanted to broaden its afterschool offerings to address the community's high child obesity rate and lack of formal venues for physical activity for children and youth. With an understanding of the university's mission, leadership in Council Grove and Unified School District 417 worked with university faculty to acquire federal funding for a 5-year research and extension project, the "Power Up Club" for elementary students in an afterschool setting. Focusing on healthy living and physical activity, the club was led by Council Grove high school students who had been trained in an evidence-based health curriculum by Kansas State faculty. In addition to training, university faculty provided evaluation support and documentation of the program's impact on youth. The success of the program motivated Council Grove high school students to expand "Power Up Clubs" into summer healthy-activity day camps, and the program has become a model for rural afterschool programs across the state (Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network, n.d.).

This successful partnership between a major university and a small town would have not been possible without an understanding of the land grant university's mission—teaching, research, and outreach—and a respect for the capacity of town and afterschool leaders. It is this sort of mutual understanding that will serve afterschool programs well as they seek to partner with their state's land grant universities.

KANSAS ENRICHMENT NETWORK

The Kansas Enrichment Network serves as an intermediary to afterschool providers across the state. Seeking "collective impact," the network collaborates with afterschool programs, universities, and a host of other community-based organizations. The University of Kansas manages the fiscal responsibilities, freeing the network to establish partnerships that strengthen services to 21st Century Community Learning Centers grantees and other afterschool providers.

Recently, the Kansas Enrichment Network facilitated an outreach effort by Kansas State and Cornell University to provide training in positive youth development to afterschool providers. Dropout prevention events were enhanced through Wichita State University's assistance. A statewide infrastructure around science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) has been created for stakeholders in Kansas who seek to increase STEM opportunities for youth. Outreach to afterschool program providers across the state, including those in rural and low-income communities, was strengthened through collaborations with the University of Kansas, Fort Hays State, Johnson County Community College, Kansas City Kansas Community College, and intermingling partnerships through Kansas State. Collectively, these higher education partners are bringing valuable stakeholders, resources, rigor, and relevancy to the table.

Faculty members on the network's advisory board heighten benefits. Presentations and discussions afford members increased understanding of youth and brain development and promising practices. Credibility soars as afterschool research is sprinkled into conversation.



Recommendations

Schools should seek out institutions of higher learning

If you are involved in a local afterschool program or a local or state afterschool network, seek out help and support from your local colleges, especially land grant institutions or public colleges in rural areas because they often have a mission to improve educational and youth development opportunities and to strengthen communities and schools. For a land grant university, this connection is typically managed through its extension services, employing both university and community-based educators.

Colleges and universities should seek out afterschool partnerships

If you are professionally affiliated with a university, especially a land grant institution or a public college in a rural part of a state, seek outreach opportunities by considering partnerships with 21st Century Community Learning Centers sites and other afterschool programs because they help fulfill that aspect of your mission.

Partnerships require a full commitment

When you create partnerships, you should build in the time and commitment to ensure that they are strong and sustainable. Relationships must be built and nurtured before partnerships are realized. This requires time and dedication from all stakeholders. Commitment flourishes when partnerships complement each other's strengths and support each other's weaknesses to the desired purpose. Partners should foster open communication and celebrate success.

Partnerships should blend rigor and relevancy

All stakeholders seek quality opportunities for children and youth to prepare them for success in school and life. Universities foster rigorous research, innovative ideas, and knowledge of promising practices. They can contribute to partnerships by unpacking research to make it relevant and practical for program implementation.

Success depends on mutual understanding and mutual respect

Partners should work to foster understanding across community sectors. They should learn about each other, develop mutual respect, and commit to the common purpose.



Resources

America's Promise—The Alliance for Youth. (2004). *Connecting communities with colleges and universities: Strategies to strengthen local promise efforts through higher education involvement*. Retrieved from <http://www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/downloads/APEU04.pdf>

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Lawson, H. (2010). An appreciation and a selective enhancement of the developing model for university-assisted community schools. *Universities and Community Schools*, 8, 5–20.

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About the Authors

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For more information on this subject, as well as additional articles from the Compendium, please visit:

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