

# Building a Student Organization–Voluntary Health Agency Partnership—and Maintaining It During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

New and enhanced partnerships are crucial for harnessing resources and exchanging knowledge, particularly for university student groups with limited resources and networking opportunities. The objective of this paper is to address the value of a student-community partnership and illustrate factors that have contributed to the partnership's success, using a framework developed by the Gallup Corporation that describes characteristics of strong relationships. This paper further addresses the specific challenges posted by the COVID-19 pandemic within this student-community partnership. Using this process helped to explain why the partnership was successful and highlighted opportunities for continued relationship building. The lessons learned from this experience will strengthen and enhance future community-engagement initiatives.

The promotion of student-community engagement requires authentic, reciprocal partnerships (Jacoby, 2015). Individuals come into a partnership with unique contexts, experiences, and agendas; therefore, their collaboration requires the “linkage mechanisms” of shared vision, power, and harmonious decision-making (Giesecke, 2012; Huberman, 1994; Nyström et al., 2018). Sustaining a successful long-term partnership requires much work and patience to achieve shared objectives (Jones et al., 2009; Nyström et al., 2018). To help ensure the success of these collaborations, basic partnership development principles or frameworks can be used (Jacoby, 2015). One framework developed by the Gallup Corporation describes the characteristics of a strong partnership (Wagner & Muller, 2009). This framework has been used to demonstrate partnership development in the past (Giesecke, 2012), but not to describe a student-community partnership. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe the formation of a student-community partnership and to use the Gallup framework to illustrate factors that have contributed to the partnership's effectiveness. Furthermore, specific challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic within student-community partnerships are also addressed.

## Development of Partnership

Eta Sigma Gamma (ESG), the national health education honorary society, is open to eligible professionals and undergraduate/graduate students who have or will have completed coursework

that qualifies them to sit for the Certified Health Education Specialist examination (ESG, 2022). Unlike some honor societies that induct members based on a minimum grade point average alone, members of ESG are expected to actively participate in a range of research, teaching, service, and advocacy projects. Students benefit from opportunities to engage in these experiences. Advanced students also have opportunities to mentor less experienced ones through ESG, and students across the spectrum of experience have opportunities to build leadership skills, whether serving on the executive committee or chairing various subcommittees. The projects undertaken by The University of Alabama's Delta Xi chapter have been influenced by the interests of the chapter's members, executive board, and faculty adviser (JN). Over time, these projects have evolved in effort and scope. For example, simpler on-campus events have included canned food drives and staffing booths at student health fairs. Some of the more complex off-campus events have included developing and implementing after-school activities for elementary school students and partnering with a local community group to deliver an annual health fair for an underserved community.

Although membership in ESG has its benefits, the exclusive eligibility criteria limit the number of students who can be involved, which undermines the Delta Xi chapter's ability to take on the ambitious projects chapter members plan. Therefore, in 2019, a sister organization was formed: Hands in Health (HIH), which is open to any student

on campus with an interest in health promotion. Many students who join HIH aspire to medical or other health-related careers. Now, an additional criterion for ESG (Delta Xi chapter) membership is participation in HIH. The two organizations share a single executive board, which is elected annually. With input from the general body, the executive board selects projects that the organizations will

undertake for the academic year. The one faculty adviser for these organizations offers suggestions based on their experience. The adviser is the one constant for the groups, given the high turnover inherent in student organizations. The organizations have purposely focused on activities in, for, and with communities. Given this focus, HIH/ESG was awarded the status of one of only six

**Figure 1.** ESG Participating in the 2019 Tuscaloosa Heart Walk



**Figure 2.** HIH Participating in the 2020 Tuscaloosa Heart Walk



Anchor Organizations by the university's Student Community Engagement Center. Achieving this status has provided the chapter with the invaluable tangible benefits of having dedicated office and storage space, and it has opened opportunities for select members to participate in networking and leadership training events. Moreover, the recognition prompted an invitation to partner with a local community group to provide fun educational opportunities at the American Heart Association's (AHA's) local Tuscaloosa Heart Walk in 2019 and 2020. The Heart Walk is the AHA's premier fundraising event and helps support their lifesaving objectives (AHA, 2017).

Providing health education at the Heart Walk was a natural fit for HIH/ESG given the AHA's mission to fight heart disease and stroke. Heart disease is the leading cause of death and stroke is the fifth leading cause of death in the United States (Kochanek et al., 2020). The goal of the AHA's Go Red for Women campaign is to raise awareness of heart disease among women, since "only 55 percent of women realize heart disease is their # 1 killer and less than half know what are considered healthy levels for cardiovascular risk factors like blood pressure and cholesterol" (AHA, 2021a). To promote women's health, the AHA developed the Red Dress Collection: "an exclusive event where dozens of diverse personalities strut down the catwalk (in beautiful, red, designer gowns) shining a light on heart disease in women" (AHA, 2021b).

Being aware of Go Red for Women and the Red Dress Collection and wanting to raise awareness of heart disease among women locally, the HIH/ESG faculty adviser envisioned partnering with the regional AHA office to develop a local Red Dress Fashion Show that could be coordinated by HIH/ESG and other relevant student organizations. HIH/ESG's history of working with the AHA's local Heart Walk made for a relatively effortless introduction to the AHA's regional director (HD). Early in the spring semester of 2020, the faculty adviser arranged a meeting with the AHA regional director and faculty from the university's apparel and textiles program and hospitality management program. Initial plans were developed for the students from apparel and textiles to design the dresses; students from hospitality management would coordinate the event planning, and HIH/ESG students would focus on health education and raising awareness. The interdisciplinary team set plans to begin working on the program in

the fall of 2020 so that the university's inaugural Red Dress Fashion Show could be held during National Heart Month—February—of 2021. However, like many events of the 2020–21 school year, plans for the Red Dress Fashion Show were postponed due to COVID-19.

### *Partnership Activities*

Building a partnership between HIH/ESG and AHA enhanced AHA's visibility among the university population and allowed HIH/ESG to create events that previously would not have been possible because of inadequate funding and resources. The AHA provided access to online platforms, electronic outreach materials (e.g., .jpeg files for social media), and hard copies of educational materials, but perhaps the single most beneficial resource was the creative skill of the AHA's regional director, who worked directly with HIH/ESG members. Because of COVID-19, HIH/ESG and AHA had to produce new ways to host events while abiding by public health regulations. The collaboration gave both partners a better understanding of how to connect with others in a virtual environment.

One event developed was the HIH Field Day, an AHA fundraising event created jointly by HIH/ESG and the AHA regional director to raise awareness for heart health. The template for HIH Field Day was based on an existing resource that the AHA uses in corporate settings. Typically, the event would last 4 weeks; however, Field Day was adapted as a 4-day virtual event, focusing on a different health topic each day. Members of HIH/ESG chose topics according to their relevance to the university population: access to care, physical activity, healthy eating, and stress management. Information was provided about the topic of the day, and participants were encouraged to complete topic-related challenges to earn points. For example, for access to care, participants were challenged to sign up for AHA's You're the Cure advocacy network (AHA, 2021c). For physical activity, members were encouraged to create a workout using AHA resources and to follow through with their plan. The Field Day event was hosted on an entirely online interface provided by AHA's team, with social media posts allowing everyone to stay safe and socially distanced. The event took place during the second week of November with five teams of four members each, and it raised a total of \$1,241.87. Other partnership activities followed from the success of this event. For example, HIH/ESG collaborated with AHA during the 2021



virtual Heart Walk, which was preceded by a Week of Wellness that involved education and challenges similar to the Field Day activities.

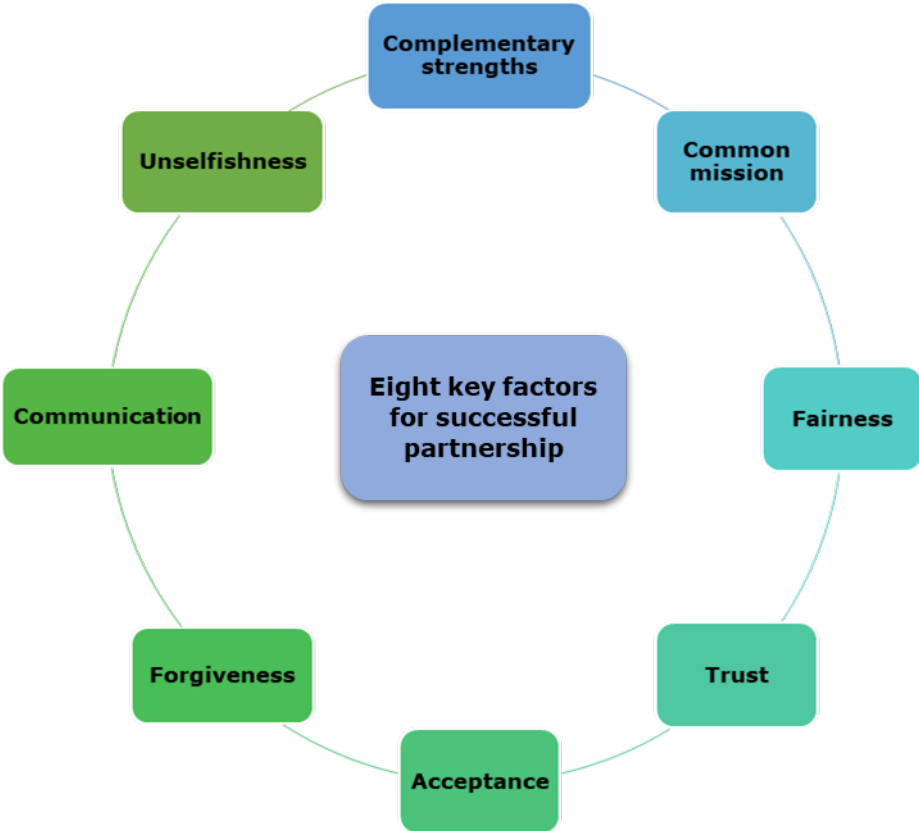
**Illustrating Partnership Development With the Gallup Framework**

As the partners continue to cultivate this student organization–voluntary health agency collaboration, consideration should be given to what is already known about successful partnerships. Engaging diverse groups of people with different perspectives in efforts to mitigate health disparities can benefit these endeavors (Israel et al., 2001; Nyström et al., 2018; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). Partnership requires creative thinking, sharing of expertise, and adequate capacity to bring resources to the endeavor (Davies & Hentschke, 2006). Though partnerships have clear potential to improve community health, they are not without challenges. Some key challenges in partnership development include diverse views regarding each partner’s goals and objectives, the relationship between partners, role clarity, organizational structure, and core cultural

differences (Huberman, 1994; Nyström et al., 2013, 2018; Sibbald et al., 2014; Svensson et al., 2007).

Partnership principles or frameworks can guide the work of those engaging in collaborative processes (Jacoby, 2015). The Gallup Corporation’s *Power of 2* (Wagner & Muller, 2009) describes eight principles of successful partnerships: complementary strengths, common mission, fairness, trust, acceptance, forgiveness, communication, and unselfishness. Based on our prior activities, these factors align with our understanding of how the partnership between HIH/ESG and AHA developed. Though the Gallup framework was originally designed to describe successful relationships within a workplace, it has been used previously to describe partnership development between a university library and other university departments, although just seven of the eight principles were addressed (Giesecke, 2012). We use all eight principles to illustrate factors that have contributed to our partnership development—factors we should consider as we continue this partnership in the future.

**Figure 3.** Gallup Framework for Addressing a Successful Partnership



### *Complementary Strengths*

One of the most powerful characteristics of partnerships is their ability to take advantage of each partner's strengths (Wagner & Muller, 2009). The strengths of one community partner balance the weaknesses of the other, and vice versa. Thus, partners are able to achieve goals that could not have been accomplished independently. For example, the AHA partner has a wide local contact network and access to AHA's national resources, including education and advocacy materials, whereas HIH/ESG has student volunteers searching for health-related service opportunities to build their resumés and improve their marketability for future employment or graduate school. Bringing these strengths together, the partners have engaged university students in community projects that help achieve AHA's mission to fight heart disease and stroke.

### *Common Mission*

HIH/ESG and AHA have distinct missions, goals, and objectives, yet Gallup recognizes that a successful partnership relies on a common mission (Wagner & Muller, 2009). Even when partners share a common mission, their motivation for pursuing that mission may differ. While the common mission of both organizations is improved health, the motivation for pursuing that mission as a member of HIH/ESG differs from that of the AHA in terms of HIH/ESG's institutional affiliation and focus on preparing students as public health professionals. The AHA aims to achieve its lifesaving mission through research, education, and advocacy, and as a voluntary health agency, it relies on fundraising to support its work. In addition to fundraising and professional development, the AHA depends on volunteers to carry out its mission in the community. During COVID-19, it was more challenging to engage volunteers, and both organizations benefited from the connections made through the partnership. Respecting each other's perspectives has meant that, while the HIH/ESG partner has tried to support the AHA's fundraising efforts, the AHA has recognized that the students' primary incentive for involvement is to apply what they are learning in the classroom so that they can build their professional qualifications. By recognizing and respecting these differences while working toward our common goal, we can strengthen our bond.

### *Fairness*

For partnerships to succeed, it is essential that both parties perceive workloads—as well as rewards—to be distributed fairly (Wagner & Muller, 2009). Equitable workload distribution can mean that partners contribute based on the particular strengths or expertise they bring to the partnership. For example, HD provided ideas for projects based on her prior AHA experience, and she had AHA resources to contribute to the partnership. HIH/ESG students, on the other hand, provided a specific student perspective that was needed to implement projects on a college campus. Both parties were able to use their unique talents and technology experience to charter a new way of reaching others. Each partner has taken part in planning meetings and events where awards were given for student fundraising efforts. Continued partnership success will require ensuring the equitable distribution of work and recognition for this work.

### *Trust*

Developing trustworthiness is the basis of a true partnership; partners must be able to rely on each other to do what they say they are going to do (Wagner & Muller, 2009). The AHA Ethics Policy holds a high standard of conducting business, as is to be expected from a nearly 100-year-old organization. The AHA's commitment to fostering “a culture of openness, trust and integrity in all we do” is deeply rooted in its ethics policy and is vital to its lifesaving mission (AHA, n.d.). The strong ethics of the AHA and HIH/ESG—two recognized and trusted brands—gave the partnership a strong foundation from the beginning. Building trust between HIH/ESG and AHA began with holding meetings together, establishing tasks for partners, and then accomplishing those tasks within given timelines. To retain trust in the future, both parties should continue in this “spirit of goodwill” (Giesecke, 2012) by acknowledging each other's contributions and encouraging each other to meet the common mission.

### *Acceptance*

Rather than focusing on partners' weaknesses or trying to change each other, partners should accept one another for who they are and recognize and uphold each other's strengths and performances positively (Wagner & Muller, 2009). HIH/ESG and AHA each had strengths to bring to the partnership yet also recognized that the

partners were not without weakness. Particularly during COVID-19, HIH/ESG appreciated the understanding and support received by HD from the AHA. Students' ability to plan and participate in events was hampered by inexperience, multiplied by the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet instead of pointing out flaws in the execution of plans, HD always offered support and encouragement. Acceptance is a continuous learning process (Giesecke, 2012), and we will strive to blend the different strengths of each partner as we continue to nurture our relationship.

### *Forgiveness*

Partners can make mistakes that violate trust and create conflicts (Giesecke, 2012). To reestablish this trust and rebuild earlier working relationships, both parties must think beyond their limitations, learn from their positive experiences, and incorporate ideas for working together (Wagner & Muller, 2009). Forgiveness in the HIH/ESG and AHA partnership to date has meant accepting outcomes that did not meet our goals and discussing how we might meet goals in the future. In our cooperative partnership, based on prior joint activities, the Gallup framework encourages us to address "what makes us successful" and "what does not" (Giesecke, 2012), and then we can plan for future improvement.

### *Communication*

Effective communication involves having appropriate listening skills, avoiding misunderstandings, and valuing each other's input (Wagner & Muller, 2009). Communication between HIH/ESG and AHA occurred through email, telephone calls, face-to-face meetings, and—during COVID—regular Zoom meetings. To capitalize on the connection between partners, we should continue to conduct regular meetings to plan collaborative projects and participate in social activities when able. Having HD attend HIH/ESG meetings has helped to build networking and communication between the organizations and helps motivate students to participate in joint events.

### *Unselfishness*

Lastly, Gallup stresses unselfishness in maintaining partnerships (Wagner & Muller, 2009). In building this unselfish nature, partners should move away from an inherent self-centered nature and toward an appreciation of the partners' successes. Rather than working alone,

Gallup emphasizes the value of the collaborative partnership to successfully achieve goals together. From the beginning of the HIH/ESG-AHA partnership, we were concerned about engaging in events that would help meet each other's goals. For both partners, one goal was always to provide students with opportunities that would support AHA's mission. Successful achievement of that goal was seen as a win-win situation.

## **Conclusion**

The HIH/ESG-AHA partnership is still in its infancy, but it has already had some successes the partners are proud of. Using the Gallup framework helps to explain why this partnership has been successful up to this point and suggests what will be required to maintain success in the future. Diverse educational and informational activities have engaged each group and their members to become more proactive, promoting learning and continuous interaction among participants. On the one hand, this partnership has provided the student organization with opportunities for experience-based learning; on the other hand, it has allowed the AHA to embrace the engagement of their volunteers to raise heart health awareness and, therefore, develop community-engaged activities more realistically. The lessons learned will bolster future collaborative and partnership initiatives and benefit health-related community service.

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