University of Louisville Signature Partnership Initiative:

A study of an emerging university-community partnership

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**Executive Summary**

This report describes a study of a university-community partnership. The University of Louisville Signature Partnership Initiative is a joint venture between the University of Louisville and the city of Louisville, Kentucky. The goal of the partnership is to reduce or eliminate disparities in education, economic development, social and human services, and health in West Louisville. The University of Louisville Signature Partnership Initiative is an effort on the part of the University of Louisville to allocate the university’s resources and expertise to restore the most disparate area of the city - West Louisville. The University of Louisville has developed a network of participating partners in the Greater Louisville area to assist in this endeavor, including various nonprofit, religious, and community organizations. The Signature Partnership Initiative has created a forum in which residents can connect with the University of Louisville. The Resident Advisory Council is comprised of residents from various neighborhoods in West Louisville. In addition, the Signature Partnership Initiative has targeted five schools for program and service interventions.

This study examines the impact of the partnership, the perceptions of the community, and the factors contributing to the success of the Signature Partnership Initiative. The guiding questions were subsequently divided into more precise areas of inquiry. These questions are as follows:

1) What is the impact of the University of Louisville Signature Partnership Initiative on the community?

a) What new programs have been implemented as a result of the Signature Partnership Initiative?

b) To what degree is the Signature Partnership Initiative meeting the needs of the community?

c) What is the nature and quality of coordination and collaboration among partners?

d) How accessible are the programs offered through the partnership?

e) What challenges and obstacles are present that place limitations on program implementation and partnership relationships?

2) What is the perception of the partners (schools, community organizations, residents) in regard to the University of Louisville Signature Partnership Initiative? Specifically:

a) What is the perception of the community in regard to the balance of power among those in the partnership?

b) What is the perception of the quality of services provided by the partnership?

c) What does the community perceive that the partnership should do differently that would allow them to better serve the community?

d) Is there a perception of mutual benefit between the university and the community?

e) How does the reputation of the University of Louisville promote or serve as an impediment to creating relationships with the community?

3) What factors have contributed to the successes of the Signature Partnership Initiative (e.g. trust, collaboration, service integration, and leadership)?

In total, 29 interviews were conducted with members of partner organizations, targeted schools, and residents of West Louisville. The relevant findings revealed in the study include:

* The Signature Partnership Initiative has brought many new programs to West Louisville. The Signature Partnership Initiative has created networking opportunities and facilitated the formation of new relationships among community organizations. A Residential Advisory Council was formed which has empowered residents and brought new resources to West Louisville neighborhoods. Schools have benefitted from student workers who assist in serving their students and developing a college bound environment.
* There are discrepancies in the degree of resources and interventions among community agencies and schools. Entities that seek out services or are most active in the partnership have access to more services. Conflict and competitiveness may result from these incongruities.
* Signature Partnership Initiative community partners report no problems with collaboration, though issues of competitiveness and a lack of interaction among some partners can be obstacles when attempting to collaborate.
* The Signature Partnership Initiative lacks transparency in regard to the methods by which agencies and schools access services. Many agencies and schools are uncertain about specific services accessible through the partnership. Even those entities accessing many services were unsure about the various resources that could be availed.
* The education and health interventions provided by University of Louisville faculty and students are seen as very advantageous.
* Reportedly, time spent collaborating with the university is the only cost to residents, schools, and organizations participating in the Signature Partnership Initiative.
* The Signature Partnership Initiative is viewed as having balanced control among partners and is mutually beneficial. The affiliation with the University of Louisville brings prestige to organizations and schools and serves to facilitate relationships with the community.
* The community of West Louisville still has many needs unmet. There is a strong need for parent interventions, such as parenting classes, parental involvement in schools, and improving school/parent relationships. Youth interventions beyond the school day are needed, such as after-school programs, summer interventions, and youth activities. The community needs positive publicity and feedback focusing on the more affirmative facets about the community.
* The Signature Partnership Initiative has successfully identified integral partners in the community and developed positive relationships with individuals and organizations. The collaborative nature of the partnership and effective leadership has been crucial in furthering the goals of the partnership.

The recommendations to the Signature Partnership Initiative are as follows:

* Recognition of Community Needs

The Signature Partnership Initiative is working to address many of the needs of the community of West Louisville. Still the community has basic needs unmet. The Signature Partnership Initiative should consider working on additional ways to address basic needs of the community. This may include helping secure funding to ensure children are fed or having clothing drives so that children can focus on achievement instead of the struggle for provision of basic needs. While the Signature Partnership Initiative is working to address the physical needs of children and residents, it is essential to place an emphasis on mental health issues. Social workers and mental health practitioners are needed in abundance in the community of West Louisville.

* Parent Interventions

The study revealed many issues surrounding the need for parental involvement in

schools. A child’s academic achievement is more closely correlated to parental factors than any other factor in a child’s life. Thus, targeted interventions for parents are also

methods for targeting children’s school success. Schools have asked for assistance to

unite families with them to help children have more successful academic outcomes. The University of Louisville Signature Partnership Initiative can make a wise investment by expending more resources on parents and families residing in West Louisville.

* The Necessity of Transparency

Repeatedly respondents intimated the need for transparency from the Signature Partnership Initiative. While the Signature Partnership Initiative does have an internet site and newsletters, many in the community are not aware of what the partnership is doing in the community and how to access the services. The Signature Partnership Initiative needs to publicize accomplishments in school and local newspapers, television and radio productions, and at community events. Heralding the progress of initiatives not only serves to create community awareness about partner activities but also motivates others in the community to become more involved. It will also provide the partners, the schools and organizations, valuable publicity about their services and programs. While publicizing, the Signature Partnership will need to be more explicit about the services of the university and partner organizations as well as the methods to be utilized when accessing services.

* Shared Governance

While the Signature Partnership Initiative has often included the community in

the decision-making process, it appears that much of the time the Signature Partnership Initiative informs the members about decisions that have been made regarding provisions for the community. Partners should be included in a greater way in decision making. For instance, at the University-Community Partnership Board meeting, the partners sat quietly as the presenter discussed the strides being made by the Signature Partnership Initiative and the plans for the partnership moving forward. When possible, inclusion of the partners in decisions about how to invest time and what initiatives to pursue will help create a better sense of shared culture and cohesion among members. It will help solidify alignment of goals and a shared purpose that is essential in successful partnerships. The outcome from these actions will be increased motivation that comes from the collective shared purpose of the partners.

* Connecting the Right People to the Right Resources

Several partners mentioned a need for resources provided by other partners in the Signature Partnership Initiative; yet, they had no idea how to access the services. It is advisable that the Signature Partnership Initiative work to facilitate relationships between partner organizations that may benefit from each others’ expertise and resources. Striking the perfect match between partner organizations allows for organizations to pursue their goals while also serving populations that need these services. This in turn further promotes the Signature Partnership Initiative goal to moderate the disparities in West Louisville.

* Expanding Professional Development Opportunities

During this study, schools emphasized the value of professional development that has been provided by the University of Louisville through the Signature Partnership Initiative. Professional development in schools has been a valuable resource. Given the number of partner organizations beyond schools, it is advisable that the University of Louisville utilize staff to provide professional development in more partner organizations. Frequently, partners expressed gratitude for the assistance provided on grant writing and technical support. It would be of great value to conduct workshops to help organizations learn these skills, among others, so that they can be more self- sufficient and further address the needs of the community.

* Careful Consideration of Distribution of Resources

Given the inequality of the distribution of resources among partners, it is advised

that the Signature Partnership Initiative carefully consider how resources are distributed.

Considering the variation in need among agencies and schools in the partnership, it is entirely possible that a vertical distribution of resources is the wisest decision. Yet, it seems that perhaps resources are not distributed based on need. Instead it appears to be based on the initiative of clients or relationships between individual partners and the university. A more uniform method for determining distribution of resources is necessitated. Resource distribution should guarantee the population in greatest need receives resources while also providing for other agencies.

* Continuing to Assess Needs

The University of Louisville Signature Partnership Initiative is working to address many community needs. It is important to monitor progress and make changes as needed to align the goals of the partnership with the current need of the community. Ongoing

assessment of needs is essential for ensuring that the partnership is working to reach

their goal of disparity diminishment.

* Ensuring Sustained Efforts

A problem with many initiatives in a community like West Louisville is that groups often intervene in an attempt to give the community a quick fix. Before long, the group either runs out of resources or decides to withdraw initiatives before goals are achieved. The University of Louisville Signature Partnership Initiative should make every attempt to remain active in the community. Beyond this, the Signature Partnership Initiative is advised to work to support and motivate the partner organizations to stay involved and continue working toward the goals of diminished inequalities in West Louisville. The goals are long-term and it may take decades to see the goals actualized in the community. The University of Louisville should take steps to ensure that the efforts are maintained and do not lapse with changes in leadership and resources.

* Signature Partnership Initiative Summit

The partners have expressed a desire to meet with other organizations more often.

In addition, many partners are requesting more information about the Signature Partnership Initiative in general as well as its services which are ever expanding. It is recommended that there be Signature Partnership Initiative Summits at determined intervals which allow for every partner organization and school to be involved, gain information, and share information about their organization and schools. The summits can be held as often as deemed appropriate by the Signature Partnership Initiative, but a yearly summit seemingly would allow the Signature Partnership Initiative to keep partners updated and elucidate any changes.

* Ongoing Evaluation and Feedback

The University of Louisville Signature Partnership Initiative needs to create a means for ongoing evaluation and feedback. This may be in the form of conducting studies such as this one at set intervals. It may mean developing a website that allows partners to provide feedback as needed. A highly advisable means of creating a feedback loop is community forums. These partner meetings will allow for opportunities to discuss projects in the community and give partners a chance to share opinions about their success. Partners will also be able to provide input on how to make improvements. Thus, the Signature Partnership Initiative will have a means to receive input from the voices of the community providing feedback on an ongoing basis.