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Partnering

By

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Connie Coogle's reflection in this issue mentions a principle of operation so embedded in the workings of the Virginia Center on Aging (VCoA) that we take it for granted: collaborative partnering. It warrants citation or acknowledgement as a vital ingredient in what, I think, has made the VCoA such a productive and meaningful entity for the past 35 years. Starting before I arrived almost 24 years ago and certainly reinforced during my tenure, partnering has been the bedrock *modus operandi*.

I'm sure that part of the motivation for this partnering came from honest self-appraisal within VCoA. The numbers of our adjunct faculty and instructors associated with our Elderhostel/Road Scholar lifelong learning programs have waxed and waned with the economy over the years, varying from two dozen to more than three dozen annually; but our core in-house staff has consistently been about 12 to 15 people.

Not having the flash or appeal of some areas in higher education and not producing an incremental number of alumni to call upon for endowments or advocacy (because we are not a department), VCoA has seen partnering with individuals, agencies, businesses, and foundations as a practical approach to maximizing the efficiency of operations. In my Tibbitts Award address at the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (and much earlier) I called this "marginal gerontology." Being on the margins means, among many things, being free to create, adapt, and explore ways of getting needed things done.

I started to review the issues or matters in which we are currently investing our energy. I couldn't think, off hand, of an area where we were not partnering. In our work on instilling and maintaining a love of learning over the life course, several of us are partnering with institutions of higher education, public schools, community businesses, and talented instructors, both paid and volunteer, to offer Road Scholar programs across Virginia and the Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield. And of course, all of us essentially are partnering with the learners themselves in a relationship that gives quick feedback if it isn't working.

In our work to prevent and respond to elder abuse and domestic violence in later life, several of us are partnering and have long partnered with statewide collaborators like the Virginia Coalition for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services, and SeniorNavigator, as well as regional coalitions in greater Richmond (e.g., the Central Virginia Task Force on Domestic Violence in Later Life) and in far Southwest Virginia, to reinforce the agencies that respond to the needs of victims and to train the continuum of professionals, from law enforcement, to prosecutors, to judges, who must confront the perpetrators.

The Virginia Geriatric Education Center (VGEC) that we are privileged to direct is itself a consortium of three institutions of higher education whose faculty contribute their expertise in health care in order to improve interprofessional geriatrics training across Virginia. With colleagues in Medicine, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Pharmacy, Physical Therapy, and Social Work, we comprise the VGEC's Plenary Committee which meets twice a month to steer the direction of this consortium.

Our work to combat alcohol abuse and to promote understanding of alcohol's impact in later life on medications and overall health partners us with the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) and numerous agencies and individuals in the productive efforts of the statewide Alcohol and Aging Awareness Group; these efforts have produced training conferences and materials, a network of human and community resources, informational brochures for customers in all ABC stores, and more.

VCoA's administration of the Alzheimer's and Related Diseases Research Award Fund (ARDRAF) has relied on extensive partnering; the results have exceeded my fondest hopes by ARDRAF becoming the premier state-funded, pilot study dementia research program in the country. It is built on a foundation of partnering, whereby Virginia researchers and educators contribute their considerable expertise, in areas as varied as cell biology, drug design, clinical care, physiology and anatomy, and community-based services, to scrutinize applications for funding of research. These partnering individuals are volunteers whose dedication to the highest standards of research has netted Virginia and the world first-class research findings, scholarly publications, and a stunning return on investment for the Commonwealth.

Our focus on the opportunities and challenges associated with growing older with lifelong developmental disabilities has been productive because of the partnering within the Area Planning and Services Committee in greater Richmond; these two dozen individuals and the agencies they represent have created *de facto* public policy and practical solutions because the partnership encourages both innovation and real world problem-solving.

Partnering, coalition building, collaboration. Call it what you will. It's been a core value of VCoA. My predecessor, the dearly loved and recently departed Bill Egelhoff, himself an Episcopal priest, recognized the aging of congregations and the need for clergy to be prepared in aging-related issues. He knew that VCoA could take a lead in responding. Bill was retired but still a member of our advisory board; so he conceptualized and worked with partners to establish the Interfaith Coalition on Older Virginians (ICOV) in the early 1990s, bringing together people from state agencies, academia, and communities of faith to wrestle with these issues. Henry Simmons at the Presbyterian School for Christian Education joined the effort, as did MaryEllen Cox, another member of our advisory board and one who had earlier started the Virginia Caregivers Coalition. And so it went.

Partnerships are so vital to meeting our mandates and responding to opportunities that we have made it a practice to include in our annual Legislative Breakfast each January a summary of our partnerships and business with public and private, for-profit and non-profit entities in Virginia during the just-concluded calendar year. In the past year, for example, we did business or partnered in aging-related projects with 275 local or regional, and 48 statewide agencies, businesses, organizations, coalitions or non-profits across Virginia, as well as with and 35 units of VCU. The numbers have been similar for over a decade.

Issues, crises, challenges, and opportunities have a way of arising episodically, often confounding established entities whose focus is prescribed by regulations or past histories. No one group can be all things at all times. Responsive and forward-looking partnerships (they need to be both) have helped to meet these issues. VCoA has been privileged to have been in this arena for the past 35 years.

At our 2013 Annual Legislative Breakfast, we inaugurated a new motto or catch phrase that is the essence of our beliefs and actions: **Aging—we're all in it together.**