MANUSCRIPT: PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF A SCHOOL-INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIP

from
A Case Study of a Career Academy:
Toward a Conceptual Framework of School-Industry Partnerships

by
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MANUSCRIPT 2: PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF A SCHOOL-INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIP

Partnerships between school and industry allow educators to capitalize on learning opportunities that occur in the real-world setting of a partner’s workplace (Watters, Hay, Dempster, & Pillay, 2013). The sharing of knowledge becomes a process in which the school and the business develop and adapt specific content to address the needs of the workplace as it is required for learning to take place in the relevance of the work environment (Watters et al., 2013). Watters et al. (2013) found that the logic behind school-industry partnerships is that the partners can provide “complementary capabilities and competences” in educating students where the school alone has been unsuccessful (p. 3). Strong educational partnerships with industry are specifically needed today as Mills and Whitney (2012) point to the increasing evidence of a skills gap seen in the United States workforce. The skills gap, found in the young adults who lack the technical (hard) skills and the essential (soft) skills that are needed for the available middle-class job openings, creates an imbalance of qualified workers for available jobs (Mills & Whitney, 2012).

For the last two decades, partnerships have been referred to as the cure-all for educational problems (Barnett, Hall, Berg & Camarena, 2005). Educational partnerships have been recommended in federal statutes from the Higher Education Act of 1998 to the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Act of 2006 (Barnett et al., 2010). Figgis (1998) found that by viewing educational partnerships as strategic investments, benefits to the school and industry are amplified. However, he found that most business partners saw their participation as a service investment in their local educational system with no expectation of returns. The companies that made up the cases that Figgis studied were astonished to realize over the course of the research they were in a win-win situation that reaped a variety of benefits including a clear investment in their future workforce. Figgis reported additional benefits for businesses were (a) community recognition, (b) productivity, (c) enhancement of the company’s skill base, (d) more efficient and effective recruitment, (e) personal satisfaction, and (f) bottom line improvement. Likewise, partnerships provide many benefits for schools including delivering relevant, work-based learning environments where concepts can be applied to real-world situations.

Background on the Partnership

The partnership examined in this research study was a joint project between Carroll High School (CHS) located in the small, rural city of Ozark in southeast Alabama, and the Alabama Power Company. The high school was the smallest 6-A high school in the state with approximately 720 students. In 2012, the school transitioned from a traditional to a technical high school supporting six career-themed academies in addition to a freshman academy. The change occurred when the system leadership realized that the high school was not meeting their expectations for graduation and college completion. The school’s previous focus on preparing all students for four-year colleges was missing more students than it was reaching. School data showed that only 35% of graduates went on to college and less than that graduated college on
time. The findings also showed that a few students consistently entered the military; others began working for minimum wage with the intention of beginning a two year college the following fall; others “took the year off from school” and usually did not begin college for three or more years – if ever. The data revealed that many students were not prepared for college or career success.

Leaders realized that they were not meeting their objective of preparing students for college, career, and life with the current system of education. They began researching and visiting other systems that seemed to better prepare their graduates. It became clear that something needed to change for the students of Ozark, Alabama.

Leaders met to shape a new vision for education in Ozark City. They spoke to teachers, students, and community leaders to gather perceptions and input. Some visited systems implementing career academies and brought back possibilities. After a year of research, educational leaders broadened their stakeholder discussions. The entire high school faculty was included in meetings and invited to visit a neighboring state’s career academies. Two bus-loads of community leaders were also taken to visit the career academies and have lunch with the community partners that supported those academies. Later, stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders held a visioning retreat.

Shortly thereafter, plans were underway to build a new high school. Based on the investigations into career academies that had taken place, the visioning retreat, and the recognized need to reform graduate preparation, the system built their new high school to support career-themed academies. During the interim period, the high school restructured its instructional program and set up academies within the old high school so that they would already be in place when they moved to the new facility that opened to students on April 1, 2013.

Six career-themed academies were created and added to the Freshman Academy that had been in place for two years. The freshman academy was established to address the high failure rate and discipline incidents that occurred in the 9th grade year. Since its inception, the freshman academy concept improved the promotion rate and lowered discipline issues that began in the freshman year. It became the primary place for career exploration and academy recruitment when the career academies were added. The six academies were The Arts Academy; The Human Services Academy; The Industrial Technology Academy; The Medical Sciences Academy; The Business Academy; and the STEM Academy (Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math). Six new programs were created to enhance the academies, which were Pre-engineering, Teaching and Learning, Masonry, Criminal Justice, Graphic Arts, and TV Production. All of the academies had an advisory committee and some interaction with industry partners.

A representative from the local office of Alabama Power was included in an academy visit to Florida, where the host high school had a partnership with Gulf Power to support a utilities academy. The Alabama Power Business Office Manager was able to talk with Gulf Power representatives and to see the possibilities that could be gained from supporting a high school academy. Four months after the academy visit, the Alabama Power representative invited leaders from the school system to meet with leaders from Alabama Power to discuss the creation of an Alabama Power Academy at Carroll High School. A core team of three professionals, two
from Alabama Power and one from the school system, was created to plan and implement the academy. Alabama Power has referred to the Alabama Power Business Academy as a pilot that may be reproduced at other high schools in the future (Ozark Business Office Manager, personal communication, July 8, 2014).

Officials from Alabama Power committed to provide human and financial resources as needed throughout all aspects of the academy. The officials committed to hosting student field trips and student internships in order to develop their future workforce. In return, the academy carried the Alabama Power name and industry representatives became involved in working on curriculum and providing authentic learning opportunities for students in an effort to prepare them for college and career attainment.

**Purpose of the Study**

This inquiry was a part of a larger study that looked at multiple aspects of a school-industry partnership through the pilot year of an industry sponsored career academy. The investigation focused on discovering the perceptions of benefits to the participants and organizations involved in a school-industry partnership. In addition to addressing the research questions, another objective of the study was to give voice to the participants. Increasing voice among the participants in school organizations, such as academies and the partnerships that support academies, expands the concept of distributed leadership and member buy-in among all involved (Mitra, 2007). Mitra (2007) found that students can contribute a unique perspective about opportunities in which they are involved. The school leaders wanted the students and teachers to be represented in the vision for the academy. Their voice in the reflection of the academy partnership was recorded in the school’s evaluation data and then shared to become part of this study. Lincoln and Guba (1991) wrote that reality is dependent on one’s perception. Therefore, this study incorporates the perceptions of the participants – every participant group contributed their voice.

The research questions addressed in this chapter were

1. What were the perceived benefits to participants and the organizations involved?
2. How might the partnership be improved?

**Methodology**

The methodology combined multiple methods of data collection to acquire valid and reliable (Lincoln & Guba, 1991; Merriam, 2009; Yin 2014) information on the educational partnership on which the study focused. The research design engaged two of the four types of triangulation recognized by Denzin (1989). Methodological and data triangulations were used in order to attain a thorough and credible understanding of the benefits of partnership from the different perspectives of those who lived it. Investigator and theory triangulations were not used as there was only one investigator and the study was inductive, not deductive, with theory
building occurring through the process of data analysis and interpretation (Dhillon, 2013). Triangulation was used to check and establish validity by analyzing each research question from multiple perspectives.

Research methods used included interviews, observations, and review of documents. This study was comprised of three formally scheduled meetings with company employees and school administration. Informal conversations between the same participants and the researcher occurred throughout the school year on nine different occasions. Pre-existing data which received analysis and interpretation through the lens of emerging findings included transcripts of observations, student and teacher focus groups, and teacher interviews generated by the career academy director for evaluation purposes. Student reflections on presentations and events hosted by the industry partners were also pre-existing data reported through this study. Copies of transcripts and reflections were made available to the researcher, void of any names or identifying tags. Transcripts of core partnership leaders from both the school system and the industry along with the pre-existing document transcripts, allowed me to triangulate multiple perspectives including those of the students and teachers on the two research questions addressed in this manuscript. Other pre-existing documents that supported the partnership and provided insight into the thought processes and strength of communication and expectations that were applied to this partnership, but were not used for quotes in the text of this manuscript included partnership literature, such as flyers, registration guides, informative brochures and memos, emails and meeting minutes. Data gathering continued until saturation was reached confirming my interpretation without providing new discernments (Creswell, 2007).

The semi-structured interview method was used for addressing the research questions, yet providing sufficient flexibility for discussions that developed around the participant’s worldview on the topic (Merriam, 2009). All interviews were audio recorded, after obtaining the informed consent of each participant, and then transcribed by the researcher. During each interview, the researcher took field notes of any emphasis that the interviewee placed on spoken words, facial expressions, and noted non-verbal communications. All interviewees were offered their transcriptions via email by which to comment or clarify any point within the conversation. This member checking led to respondent validation of the study and was defined by Lincoln and Guba (1991) as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). It was used as one way for participants to ensure that the voices heard through this research were as intended by the speaker.

The interview transcripts were systematically analyzed using open and axial coding, which was developed by Strauss and Corbin and discussed in Creswell (2007). The coding was used to identify, categorize, and confirm themes that detailed the basis of the partnership and described the characteristics that illustrated benefits, strengths, and sustainability therein.
Findings

The concept of value-added is a strong motivator to partners within partnerships (Dhillon, 2005). Dhillon (2005) studied the idea that through partnerships with others the achievement and success of the individuals are much greater than working alone. The participants within the academy partnership studied, agreed with Dhillon’s finding. The data showed participants perceived many noteworthy benefits attributed to the school-industry partnership as a whole instead of any single participant. Although the topics were varied, four main categories immersed. The four categories of perceived benefits are (a) Curricular Relevance; (b) World of Work; (c) Essential Skills; and (d) Industry. The partnership seemed to encourage its members to share information and expertise with one another.

Perceived Benefits Connected to Curricular Relevance

Carroll High School decided to structure classes and pathways of learning around career-themed academies because they believed that providing career interest to all subjects would promote more engaged students in all classes by seeing the relevance of what they were learning to what they would do beyond high school. Thus, an expected outcome of the partnership with Alabama Power was that it provided relevance to classroom learning through the employee mentorship. This benefit was perceived by the participants. A student summed it up in a focus group conversation:

I think that having the business partners come in regularly to talk about their work experiences made school more relevant.

A teacher confirmed this prediction in her conversation:

This partnership makes students see things as they are in the professional world…. Our partners provide relevance.

Regular exposure to multiple partnership activities seemed significant to student engagement in the academy and seeing relevance in what was learned at school.

They [Alabama Power employees] also drive home why what we are learning in school is important! The more I am around them and hear them, the more I get it. - Student

I listen better when employees from Alabama Power are here showing [things we learn] from their point of view…sure our teachers tell us the same things, it just seems more important, front line, when the people from Alabama Power come in and tell us. – Student

Students in all focus groups reported that the business partners stressed the importance of high school subject knowledge and maintaining good grades. The partners explained how both would positively influence the students’ futures. So, students reported that they were trying harder in their core classes to attain higher grades and think a little deeper than before, because, they understood the importance of it all.

An unexpected result credited to this partnership was that
students reported talking to their parents and counselors more about their plans for college and work. Examples of this came from student focus group and teacher interview transcripts.

I think that working with the people from Alabama Power has made me talk to my mom more about what I want to do beyond high school. I see the possibilities. – Student

I talk to my parents more, too, but about college mostly and the things I think I’ll take. – Student

When my mom asks me what I did at school, I have more to talk about. – Student

A teacher commented on the fact that she had received more positive feedback from parents this year as opposed to previous years. Here is one example:

A parent stopped me in a store to tell me that she was not sure what we were doing at school this year, but her son was coming home excited about his day and what he was learning from business and industry people. It had given him a new outlook on what he was learning and he could finally communicate the relevance of the things he was learning. – Parent comment via Teacher

I think if we learn what [the Alabama Power Employees] are telling us now, we will be ahead of others, and we will know so much more than other people competing against us for jobs. – Student

The students and teachers talked regularly about how learning seemed more relevant and interesting when delivered by someone from the workforce. Students began to see the connection between what was going on in the classroom and their interest for future employment.

Speakers from Alabama Power come in and talk about real world experiences and opportunities. I think they will prepare us in a way that school cannot. - Student

**Perceived Benefits Connected to an Enhanced Understanding of the World of Work**

The core team predicted that the partnership would provide information and experiences for students and teachers that connected them to the world of work. Career exploration is a primary goal of high school so that the world of work will not be so unknown and daunting for students when they are faced with the choice of what they want to be and where they want to work. The Alabama Power Company appeared to be an excellent choice in an academy partner because it does not focus on just one type of job; the company employs varied workers and skill-sets to fill a number of jobs in order to keep the lights burning. The versatility and job experiences that each employee presented to students provided students with knowledge to make informed career choices and acquire the capacity to transition into those careers successfully.

I used to think that Alabama Power was all electrical…I am learning that it offers me more…I can be anything in Alabama Power! - Student

Originally, students thought of Alabama Power as climbing poles and working with electricity. Many thought, “Why would I be interested in that?” The Alabama Power employees came and talked about the different jobs that are a part of Alabama Power. Now students see that there are other jobs in nursing, business, engineering, and they are interested! The job opportunities are endless. -Teacher
College and career ready has been something that our teachers have mentioned, often, but it makes sense now that we hear it from the business world and see it in action. – Student

When the ladies from the business office came in to show us how they use spreadsheets in their job, the lesson became something that I need to learn because I will use it one day. – Student

The marketing presentation stressed looking your audience in the eye, speaking clearly and slowly, and dressing and acting professionally. – Student reflection

The marketing presentation taught us that planning is a very important stage in all we do. I don’t believe any of the students were fully prepared to market something as big as our robot, so the advice during our planning stage was extremely beneficial – Student reflection

We have experts that come in and bring real life experiences to the kids. - Teacher

The students see that what they are learning is applicable to their future work. - Teacher

Not predicted was the influence that the partners had on the increased number of students credentialing in Microsoft Office Suite, which is an opportunity provided by this career academy. The industry partners value credentials in their employees and spoke about them regularly to the students. Their interest in credentials was addressed in conversation with students by the industry partners.

By working hard and obtaining the credentials that are available through my courses, students can get a good job with a good future. Alabama Power employees have reinforced this by sharing stories of hiring people with high school diplomas and credentials, and then providing on-the-job training and growth incentives. – Business, Marketing, and Administration Teacher

From working in Human Resources I realize that people can put on an application that they are proficient in Microsoft Word and Excel, but what does it mean to be proficient to that one or that one? If they have a Microsoft Certification, that means something. I know what to expect from someone with the industry certification. I told them how important it was to an employer if you could provide a certification. – Program Manager

The teachers appreciated the attention that the industry partners gave to the importance of credentialing. This appreciation was talked about in observations and in interviews.

We want [our graduates] to go to college if that is what they want, but either way, we want them to be work ready with skills and credentials that matter. I think my students understand that now through their involvement with the academy partners. – Teacher

Students talked about the role that the partners played in encouraging them to credential.

[The Program Director] talked to us about the importance of credentials every time she spoke to us. – Student

Our teachers encouraged us to earn credentials all the time; the partners supported that message every chance they got. – Student

I think that I have tried harder to obtain more Microsoft credentials because the Alabama Power employees have talked about the job-landing power in them. – Student
The research data supported what the participants discussed at the end of the year. Students in the Alabama Power Business Academy earned more than three times the number of credentials than the previous year’s business program students. Two of the students earned the credential of Microsoft Office Specialist Master, which was the highest level of Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS) certification offered. Having dedicated, persistent adults who regularly and firmly reinforce the importance of completing tasks, such as credentialing, with their own experiences and work related examples, was a definite advantage of the school/industry partnership.

Another benefit to consider was the influence that the industry partners had on student behavior outside of school. Data from this study suggested that the partnership with professionals provided motivation and a better understanding of what is expected of entry-level employees. Students regularly mentioned that the partners talked about requirements for being hired, which include basic skills, police reports, drug testing, and credit reports. Many students did not realize that employers check this information on employees. Students began to think more about their past behaviors and the importance of making the right decisions in a timely manner. Thus, the partners provided a stimulus that engaged the students in reflective processes. They were able to imagine themselves in situations that were never before seen as possibilities. They also recognized potential losses due to bad behavior. One teacher stated that she saw students who developed bigger dreams due to the possibilities that the industry partners presented to them.

We don’t get a lot of experience at school as to how it is on the job. I feel like we are the future of America and this is an outstanding privilege to be a part of the business world now through our Alabama Power partnership. – Student

Perceived Benefits Connected to Essential Skills

Knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and in the labor market take precedence in the education of a high school graduate. Teachers teach employability skills, which are called essential skills in this paper, and plan opportunities for students to use them regularly throughout the high school experience. The academy partners provide additional real-world experience in which to practice using essential skills. This research seemed to show that the more that students practice essential skills such as decision making, trustworthiness, work ethics, and flexibility the better they work and are identified as leaders. The frequency of the use and application of essential skills within this school-industry partnership was an unplanned bonus for the students and teachers. An administrator who interacted regularly with the students participating in the partnership stated that she believed that the attainment of essential skills was the absolute best result to come out of the interactions.

Local business and industry representatives often complain that students do not know how to talk with adults and do not know what is expected of them in the adult world. So, regular practice with essential skills was a tremendous benefit provided by the partnership. Teachers and administrators felt that students leaving this academy interacted with confidence and better understood what was expected of them in the workplace. The school’s goal is to make strong partnerships and reproduce these interactions within other academies.
Students have noticed the benefits of being exposed to regular interactions with business representatives, too.

School feels more professional when our Alabama Power partners are here. - Student
I think professionalism is something that should be exemplified in education, every day, all the time. - Student
I think that the partnership has taught me the power in first impressions. A smile and a firm handshake can set the tone for business and how your associates view you. - Student
Communication and presentation are things [the business partners] talked about often.
You have to be able to communicate with a wide variety of people and to present yourself and your ideas in ways that interest others. – Student
I learned [from the regional director’s motivational speech] that no matter if I do the right thing, it means naught if I did not have the right attitude to go with it. – Student reflection
I am looking for more ways to bring in Alabama Power employees, not just as speakers, but to do things, interact and model professional attitudes. Students get to see how professionals interact and work with others when they are working beside the employees of Alabama Power. – Teacher
We know that you cannot tell someone to do something right and expect it to be learned. They have to see it in action and to understand why it should be learned. – Program Manager

A history teacher reported that after a visit from Alabama Power employees, a student came to her class and commented that he had never been around people that spoke like the people from Alabama Power except for his teachers and, with them, it was different.

The two networking luncheons that Alabama Power sponsored provided opportunities to practice essential skills over an extended period of time with a variety of adults. Students, teachers, and administrators voted the networking luncheons the most memorable moments within the academy. Two Alabama Power employees came to the school prior to each event to go over rules of etiquette and how to professionally network at a social function. They discussed with students how to dress and mingle, and how to eat at a formal affair. The students asked questions, created a Google document with additional questions and the two ladies answered every question. A teacher remembered

On the day of the luncheon, the students were bundles of nerves. When the bus load of students arrived, they were greeted by about 30 employees of Alabama Power and the local community. The students were to walk around introducing themselves and carrying on conversations with as many adults as they could in the 30 minutes prior to the meal. You could see them relaxing as time went by, then they tensed again when it was time to sit down and remember all that they had learned about table etiquettes. By the time we reloaded the bus; the students had a new sense of confidence in their practiced communication skills. - Teacher

The same teacher later commented
A board member and the mayor who had both attended the luncheon stopped me in town to talk about how much they thought about the networking luncheon experience and how beneficial they felt that it was to the students. - Teacher

Employees of Alabama Power who were at the networking luncheon from different areas in south Alabama talked about how they wished their children in other schools could experience this learning opportunity. – Business Partner

The week following the first networking luncheon, a student who participated was asked what his most memorable activity in the academy had been. His answer provided poignant insight into the influence that the partnership had on his life.

The thing that I think I have learned the most from is the networking luncheon. The ladies taught us a lot and then we dressed up and practiced what we learned. My family was so excited that I taught them how to eat the next day. We practice what we learned almost every night now, together. - Student

During the year-end evaluation of the partnership, a teacher related to the recorder,

We were all most impressed at how the partners realize the importance of developing the whole student and worked to help us do it, not just focus on office skills and knowledge. - Teacher

This comment resonated with the school faculty and administration. Alabama Power seemed to come to this partnership committed to do whatever it took to succeed, including attending to the broader view of student development. This commitment was evidenced in every employee that came to share with the students. Students benefitted by wanting to succeed, having a bigger picture of success, and knowing that more than just their test scores were deemed important.

Employees with Alabama Power have shown us the technical aspect of the business.

– Student

They are preparing us for business no matter where we go. - Student

I am excited about the Alabama Power partnership and expect it to grow. - Student

Perceived Benefits Connected to Industry

Research has shown that educational partnerships enhance classroom opportunities for students and afford teachers and business partners with chances to develop new skills in new ways (Dhillon, 2005; Tushnet, 1993). When investing time in schools, partners never know what to expect, the challenges are motivating and the results are rewarding. The benefits to industry that were identified in this study included employees shared and grew from their interactions with the students; employees addressed the company’s focus on education when they provided an educational service to the community through their participation in the Alabama Power Business Academy; employees invested in the future of Alabama when they invested in its students; and this partnership allowed employees to develop the future workforce.

When the Alabama Power business representatives were asked why they chose to participate in this educational partnership, they gave the following answers:

This is a win-win project! We involve our employees because it is developmental to them. When we bring someone in for a specific task, they are the best to ask. Often, they
have never shared what they do before coming to the school. As with the office ladies who came to share Excel with the students, one has since taken on a new role and additional responsibilities and I think that the presentation to the students was a pivotal moment for her. We know the value of interacting with others…now we have a place for many of our employees to share and grow. This partnership is certainly a win-win project. – Program Manager

We want to be the support that our community needs. When we strengthen our communities, it strengthens Alabama Power Company. – Business Office Manager

It [the academy partnership] fits our focus on education. We are a company that wants to see things better for our communities. The career academy is just one way to do that. We want to assist in any way that we can. If someone is doing something good in our community, we want to be onboard! – Program Manager

A little later, the Business Office Manager commented

I believe that more than anything, you can never go wrong when investing in the future. When you are investing in students, you are investing in the future and you are not going to go wrong. - Business Office Manager

The academy concept was innovative, and we knew that we could not go wrong partnering with you. – Program Manager

When asked what benefits they have received from the partnerships the two core partners replied

We always hear about the ‘bad kids.’ We always hear how teenagers today have no drive and they just don’t care. Our employees, that participated in the luncheon, walked away saying that not any of the kids at the luncheon were ‘bad kids.’ The academy kids aren’t like that; they have drive and determination to achieve. It is kind of like the butterfly effect; with just a little push we can give them the wings that take them forward. – Program Manager

I can echo that, we hear that kids are bad and are about to run the future into the ground. From my interaction with the academy, I can say that we are in good hands. These students are great! – Business Office Manager

When I became a new employee of Alabama Power, I was told that this company was great before you came on, don’t mess it up. I thought about that as I interacted with these students, the world was great before they came along and they are going to keep it that way. Our future is in good hands. These kids will invent and think of things we never could. We are in good hands. This was the “ah-ha moment” for me. You don’t hear about the good. Good doesn’t sell papers. But our kids are good. There are some bright minds out there, we don’t ever hear about. – Business Office Manager

At one of the luncheons, I asked an Alabama Power employee from a nearby city why she decided to participate in the luncheon? She replied

I heard about this opportunity and wanted to see what the academy was all about. Now, I wish my office could partner with our local high school in this way. Everything that the
students at my table told me was amazing. I am so proud to be a part of a company that means so much to students!

Later, she stated that she believed that her investment in the networking luncheon was an investment in education and an investment in the future.

**Possibilities for Partnership Growth**

Throughout the implementation year of the academy, the school administration and teachers asked students to provide input by reflecting on activities, speakers, and solutions to the regularly asked question, “What do we do next?” A major emphasis in academy building is to generate pride and belonging to the group. Students and teachers who were asked their opinions and then saw their voice create change seemed to become active in the change initiative. A natural question for the evaluation team to ask at the end of the implementation year was, “How would you like to see the partnership grow?” The following are some contributions from teachers.

I would like for Alabama Power employees to come in for more activities like they do for the networking luncheons to model professionalism and community service to our students. – Teacher

I think that the mock interviews that I normally do with my students would now mean more if Alabama Power employees are a part of the panel. – Teacher

I would like for different partners to come in when we are doing specific projects and teach the lesson instead of telling us about how they use the tools we are learning to use. I would like to see them take on the mentor role, because our students seem to enjoy that interaction the most. - Teacher

The kids have enjoyed the learning WITH the business partners and they talk about those experiences more often. So, I think we need to do that more. - Teacher

The students have really benefitted from this partnership, and that is why we are here. The only change I would like is more of the same. - Teacher

I am looking for more ways to bring in Alabama Power employees, not just as speakers, but to do things, to interact and model professional attitudes. Students get to see how professionals interact and work with others when they are working beside the employees. – Teacher

When the students were asked if they had any ideas for growth or improvement for the academy partnership, they shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads. One student volunteered

Everything that we did this year has been great! I still want to do the field trips, the motivational assemblies, the lessons on Excel, and business etiquettes…and especially the networking luncheons, but I would like to add even more. – Student

Another student commented,

I feel like this is the first year of the Alabama Power Academy and the prelude to what is to come. It is hard to suggest things to change. Right now it is still too new. I don’t want to change anything. – Student
The core team members from Alabama Power talked with the researcher about how they would like to see the partnership grow and change. The program manager stated that it is hard to say how we would like it to change, because it is always changing. Everyone agreed. Then, she thought about it and quantified

I think I would like to grow this across academies. We had one young lady that was in the STEM Academy and the Business Academy. She came to several of the events in the Business Academy. I would like that to happen more. If we can influence more students in different academies, I would like to grow in that direction. – Program Manager

I would also like to bring people from other divisions who have ties in this area back to speak on their life experiences. We have some very interesting employees that can really aid us in what we are doing. We can reach farther within our company for resources. – Program Manager

I think that we need to document the partnership more through pictures, videos, and news articles. That way we could recapture the events. – Business Office Manager

I would like to see Alabama Power influence other businesses to partners like this in a career academy. They may not be a full sponsor, but a partner in the learning. Every business will bring something to the academies that none other can. I would like to increase participation in the academies for the sake of the students. – Program Manager

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions of benefits to participants and organizations involved. The benefits were related through the voices of the participants. Every participant group was given voice in this research. Students, teachers, administrators, and business partners shared their perceptions on the benefits of the partnership. This inquiry also pursued possible growth ideas for the academy partnership.

An educational partnership provides learning benefits to its participants by offering pathways that are seen as engaging and relevant to life beyond high school. School/industry partnerships keep educators up-to-date on how workplace skills continually change. Workplace learning also provides a more flexible educational experience that values innovation and creativity. When we learn, we infer, transform, and produce applicable, cultural, and career-ready systems of knowledge. We learn from people, with people, and through people. School/industry partnerships grant learning opportunities that are not limited to the usual constraints of school time and space. When learning happens in real-world environments with real-world people, the learning becomes relevant life experiences. Student reports of increased motivation to learn in core and career classes possibly occurred because the partnership, unlike traditional school opportunities, provided access to the real world. The activities and experiences motivated students to understand and learn because it seemed relevant to their futures.

Participants asserted that the partnership provided relevance to classroom learning. Business partners easily drew clear connections from what students were learning in school to how it would be used in the world of work. Students talked openly about how what they were doing in class made sense to them as far as why they needed to learn it. This impact may have
occurred because interactions with business partners provided a connection to the real world that motivated and clarified learning that under regular classroom circumstances may have felt disconnected for students. Career and Technical Education (CTE) was reported to add relevance to learning in core subjects. Taking into account the number of visits by industry partners, field trips, and the networking luncheons, this research indicated that the level of benefits realized by students correlates to the amount of exposure to industry partners. The academy director commented one day that the teachers and students were noticing that everyone from Alabama Power spoke the same language and walked the same walk. Everyone from Alabama Power that visited the classrooms shared the same message - it was a powerful teaching tool.

Table 1

Perceived Benefits Reported by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curricular Relevance</th>
<th>World of Work</th>
<th>Essential Skills</th>
<th>Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students view school as more relevant</td>
<td>Students learned real-world work skills</td>
<td>Students learned employability skills</td>
<td>Employees shared and grew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students tried harder in school</td>
<td>Students explored a wide variety of careers</td>
<td>Students practiced professionalism</td>
<td>Employees addressed company's focus on education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students talked to parents and counselors more about their plans for the future</td>
<td>Students clarified college and career readiness</td>
<td>Partners provided authentic audiences for communication and presentations</td>
<td>Employees provided an educational service to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students talked more to parents about what happened at school.</td>
<td>Students engaged in a reflective process on their decisions</td>
<td>Students learned the power of first impressions</td>
<td>Employees invested in the future of Alabama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students engaged in thinking and learning</td>
<td>Partners provided work perspective to classroom projects</td>
<td>Students gained confidence</td>
<td>Employees and teachers developed the future workforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students increased attainment of Microsoft credentials</td>
<td>Students learned the importance of networking and 'how to.'</td>
<td>Students learned and practiced etiquettes and essential skills.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The greatest and most unexpected result of the partnership was the growth in essential skills that was seen in the students. The teachers and administrators reported that the students exhibited the greatest increase in confidence, communication skills, employability skills, and understanding of why the essential skills are important as compared to previous year-end results. This outcome could be described as inevitable since a multitude of professionals spoke with and
worked with students on a regular basis. Regular practice with essential skills with adults through professional interactions would logically lead to students acting in confident, professional ways. The program manager was observed by the researcher and described by a teacher to be comfortable correcting minor mistakes in communication and explaining the expectations in the professional world. The students seemed to respect the program manager and the other employees that worked with them. Their respect led them to emulate and work to meet the expectations of the business partners. Therefore, implications of this finding are that knowledge in essential skills transfers to students in regular, professional interactions with industry partners within a school-industry partnership. The teaching of essential skills became a regular conversation among teachers and administrators. It was believed that essential skills were important enough to be evaluated, so CTE teachers worked with their administrator to develop a rubric to assess workplace skills in students. The Workplace Expectations Scoring Guide that was created during the implementation year is slated to be implemented during the next school year (Appendix 4, contact the author for a copy).

Students and teachers believed that the partners influenced the students’ acquisition of industry related credentials. This result could be due to the fact that the program manager made it her mission to discuss the importance of credentials each time she talked with students. Other employees talked about the job-embedded credentials earned and the increase in salary or position that resulted. When something, such as credentialing, has attention called to it regularly it gains the students’ attention. When told over and over that it is an irrefutable accomplishment that will positively affect your future wage earnings, it is understandable that students would devote more time to earning the credentials. The credentialing attainment of the participants affirm the maxim that the more you hear something from people you revere, the quicker you learn it - or believe it - and then act on that learning.

Students, in grades ten through twelve, reported that they had talked with their parents and counselors more this year than ever before about their plans for college and work. This benefit was a result of engaging students in learning and providing them a believable picture of what they could do. When students were exposed to life beyond the school walls, they began to understand what was important, and to plan what they would do in order to navigate previous insurmountable barriers. It was also believable that if students were talking more about their future in school, they continue that discussion at home. Simply talking about college does not guarantee that it will be attended; however, without such discussions, it would be hard to imagine that a commitment to attend college would likely occur. Therefore, the number of students that stated they were talking about college with counselors and parents was a positive accomplishment of this partnership and an essential first step for the students.

The data spoke to the fact that students need high levels of exposure to industry partners to increase their interest in school and in their future. Students reported that they could see the connection between what they were learning in school and where they will go in the future, because of the association with business partners. This benefit likely occurred because the partnership experiences, unlike the traditional school activities and curriculum, afforded a link to
the real world that motivated students who may feel marginalized otherwise. Watters et al. (2013) found that partnerships that provided students with both in-school and work-based-learning experiences could significantly enrich learning results and aid transition into a related career. Partnerships, such as this one, also assisted students in understanding expectations and industry culture.

A noted benefit to both organizations was the opportunity to self-reflect and to ask how we can become better. Self-examinations set up a system for examining different ways of relating to internal departments, external partners, and the community. A partnership can be a medium for institutional reform and/or improvement.

Implications for Future Research

Future research of this academy partnership is needed. A study over multiple years to include quantitative data is encouraged in order to add the statistical data of participant test data to the perceptions of the participants. A longitudinal study of the partnership to determine whether facilitating factors, benefits, and outcomes are maintained is recommended.

When other school partnerships are formed with this particular industry, year one implementation research would be a good comparison to this study. Did another school-industry partnership yield similar results in participant perceived benefits? Was there a dramatic growth in essential skills development as seen in student behavior by teachers and administrators?

There is a need for more qualitative research on school-industry partnerships. Not all partnerships are the same, so it is recommended that researchers look at the differences. Much can be learned from the differences discovered in partnerships.

Conclusion

The language of partnership is powerful when implemented in practice. Benefits seemed to abound for the participants of this academy partnership. Everyone spoke of benefits that they personally received from their participation. The voices of participants were powerful and told the story best. The benefits were reflected and triangulated in the stories by others. An educational partnership was seen, through this study, as building relationships to educate the youth of a community. The value added idea of partnership was clearly understood through the voices of the participants in this study. A couple of closing remarks from students in this partnership and one from the program manager follow.

I would like the Alabama Power employees to know that I really appreciate what we have seen so far, and I appreciate the time that they give to prepare us for what work is like.
- Student

It is an outstanding privilege to be a part of this academy. - Student
This is a sustainable, continuing project for Alabama Power as long as Carroll High School feels that we are valuable. It is worth continuing. – Program Manager
Chapter References


