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Strategies for Establishing Mutually Beneficial Service-Learning Partnerships

Abstract

In an ideal world, instructors would begin the process of planning for their service-learning course at least one year in advance of teaching it, but sometimes that is not the case. Use these steps to get started whether you are one year or a few weeks out before the semester starts.

Keywords

service-learning, community partners, engagement, community, community engagement, partnerships, mutually-beneficial

Disciplines

Higher Education



VCU Community Engagement

October 2015

Strategies for Establishing Mutually Beneficial Service-Learning Partnerships

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In an ideal world, instructors would begin the process of planning for their service-learning course at least one year in advance of teaching it, but sometimes that is not the case. Use these steps to get started whether you are one year or a few weeks out before the semester starts. Planning and preparation is a critical first step of developing a successful service-learning course.

BEFORE You Meet Potential Partners

- ✓ Review your course objectives to determine whether service-learning aligns with your course goals
 - *Do not force a fit. It is important that your content is primary. If you feel you cannot teach the content well with an added service-learning component do not attempt to make it work. Instead, think about smaller more intentional ways that you can integrate engaged learning (smaller community projects or activities, guest speakers from the community) into the larger course.*
- ✓ Do some research on the local community (or community where you plan to serve) to find out what the major issues are in the area (i.e., childhood obesity, homelessness)
 - *Visit local museums. Make the library your friend. Read the local paper. Attend a city council meeting. The possibilities for your own engagement to understand the issues are endless!*
- ✓ Review your syllabus AGAIN while considering the research on community issues to assess the feasibility of your course for addressing those issues.
 - *Students may not be able to fully tackle an issue like homelessness, but within the existing infrastructure of a local shelter, students can be a useful resource to help an organization do its work.*
- ✓ Begin researching community organizations that address the issues you researched to find out what is currently being done in the area.
 - *It is helpful to talk with other community-engaged faculty or connect with the unit on-campus that does volunteer work. There are people who can point you in the right direction so that you do not have to start this search from scratch.*
- ✓ Develop a list of 4-5 potential partners that seem like a good fit with your course objectives and needs.
 - *Options are good. It is good to have a variety of types of organizations (issues they address) along with thinking practically about their location, infrastructure, and operating hours. The size of your class matters a great deal in deciding how many partners are feasible. For courses that rely on indirect service (i.e., efforts that do not involve face-to-face contact such as evaluation, assessment, or campaigns) this may not be an issue.*
- ✓ Contact the partners via e-mail or phone (or both!) to see if they are interested in discussing how you could work together.
 - *Keep this e-mail short and to the point. Do not give a lengthy description of your course or use academic jargon. There will be plenty of time for that later. Instead, ask specifically whether or not the community partner would benefit from having help from VCU students at this time. Understand that you may need to contact a partner more than once (they are busy!), but lack of responsiveness after several attempts may be an indication that the organization does not have the capacity to take on your students right now. Consider including a comment or compliment that shows you know what the organization does.*
- ✓ Schedule an appointment to meet the partner(s) ON-SITE at times that are convenient for them.
 - *Going to the site is a must if your students will be completing direct service at a community organization. You will need to see the area and think about how they would get there (bus route, bike, or car), gauge the safety of the neighborhood (compare your perceptions with actual data from police reporting statistics), and pay attention to the working environment to know if your students would be comfortable. Being on-site also allows the partner to understand that you value their work and are making attempts to accommodate them.*

DURING Your First Partner Meeting

- ✓ Bring a copy of your course syllabus to share with the partner.
 - *The partner may never read this, but it is important to keep learning at the forefront of the partnership. This provides the partner with information that could help them make the service experience of your students more meaningful and relevant to their coursework and helps them to see themselves as co-educators.*
- ✓ Describe the concept of service-learning.
 - *Do not assume that a partner knows what service-learning is all about. They may simply think of your students as volunteers. It is important that they can make the distinction.*
- ✓ Describe in as much detail as possible what expectations there will be for the community partner.
 - *For example, will the community-based supervisor complete evaluations on the students? Sign the students' time sheets? Participate in end-of-semester reflections? Many organizations are very busy, so being clear about your expectations will help partners decide whether this is a good opportunity for them at this time.*
- ✓ Ask the partner questions ABOUT EVERYTHING*
 - *If you do not understand something about the organization, chances are your students will have similar questions. This meeting with the partner serves as an important vetting process for you to see if students could be successful and learn from the environment. At the end of this document there is a list of questions that could guide your discussion.*
- ✓ LISTEN to the partner describe their organization, work, and how they address issues.
 - *Instructors have a tendency to want to talk rather than ask questions and listen for the answers. This will be a great test of the instructor's active listening skills as the teacher becomes the student during this meeting to learn more about the organization.*

AFTER the First Partner Meeting

- ✓ Think about all of your initial partner meetings and determine which ones have the likelihood of being successful.
 - *Reflect on the experience you had on-site, the infrastructure of the organization to work with your students, and your course objectives. Most importantly, think about your typical student and determine if they could be successful with the partner. Keep in mind that 'success' does not mean lack of challenges, but be mindful that setting students up for failure logistically could negatively impact their learning.*
- ✓ E-mail the partner(s) to thank them for their time and give them a short recap of your meeting.
 - *Include an electronic copy of the syllabus for them to review and bullet a few areas that you could see your students assisting the organization. Ask the partner(s) if your ideas for service fit with their structure and provide them with a date to get back to you and confirm their participation. If you feel the partnership will not work simply thank them for their time and say that it is not a good fit for your class. You also want to give the partner an opportunity to say 'no' without feeling they will lose out on university resources in the future.*
- ✓ Set up a follow-up meeting to plan for the semester with the partner(s) that agreed to work with your students.
 - *Plan for the meeting to be at least an hour. Choose a day and time that is convenient for you both and meet in a neutral location (it helps breed creativity without either person getting the upper hand).*

BEFORE the Semester Starts

- ✓ Discuss the logistics of the partnership**
 - *Think about how the volunteer work will be done based on the needs of the partner and your learning objectives. This part will take COMPROMISE. It is rare that each stakeholder gets everything they want out of the relationship. Be open-minded and think about both the short and long-term goals for the partnership.*
 - *Develop a plan that describes what students should do if they have problems or concerns. How and when should they contact the instructor and/or community-based supervisor?*
 - *Discuss a plan for what the community partner should do when there is a concern about a student, such as inappropriate dress or language, missed sessions, use of cell phones on site.*
 - *Understand what mandatory trainings and/or background checks are required by the community partner and when these are available/offered. Build in time for these to be completed.*
- ✓ Schedule a time for the partner to attend one of the first class sessions.
 - *It is important that the partner feels like a co-educator in the service-learning process. Attending the class helps the partner feel legitimately a part of the learning process of students. Invite them to do more than make an announcement about the organization, but have a conversation with students about the issues that their organization addresses in the community and how their work will impact it. Many individuals working in the community enjoy the opportunity to expand their skill set and serve as a guest lecturer.*

- ✓ Discuss how hours will be tracked and/or students evaluated.
 - *If possible, use a teaching assistant or advanced student to assist with this. The key is to be aware of how much you burden the partner. There is a big difference between tracking and signing the hours of 5 students versus 30. Think about how much responsibility you will give the students for tracking their hours as well as sign-in procedures the organization has in place that could help the process be more efficient (i.e.-all volunteers electronically sign in and a sheet can be printed for each student at the end of the semester).*
- ✓ Determine set points to check-in during the semester.
 - *Pre-schedule phone calls or short visits to check on student progress that respect the busy times for the partner. While just showing up to check on students may seem like a good way to make sure they are on track, it might appear that you do not trust the partner. Remember, you have vetted this site and should feel comfortable with what is happening there before placing students. You will also want the students to feel empowered and able to tell you if anything is occurring on-site that makes them uncomfortable.*
- ✓ Agree on the terms of the partnership and develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU).
 - *Depending on your institution, you will probably not create a legal 'contract' with the partner; however, an MOU can serve as a foundation for understanding the roles and responsibilities of the partner, instructor, and students. Many MOUs are signed by all three stakeholders. A sample service-learning MOU can be viewed at <http://community.vcu.edu/resources--toolkit/teaching-resources/>*

DURING the Semester

- ✓ Introduce the partner to the class ON-CAMPUS.
 - *Let the students see that the partner is a co-educator by physically and visually creating an environment for them to be in the role of 'expert.' This helps with students respecting the authority and knowledge of the partner in the community.*
- ✓ Incorporate the partner into the course in all aspects.
 - *Partner information should be included on the syllabus along with the contact information. Have students research the partner organization and learn about it prior to completing service. In addition to inviting the partner to one of the first classes provide them with an opportunity to come at the midterm and end of semester if they are available.*
- ✓ Provide opportunities for the students to reflect on their learning and experiences in the community.
 - *This is the most important aspect of connecting the partner to the course. Allow students to think about how their service is related to academic learning goals. This may be difficult at first so you may need to model this for them early in the semester.*
- ✓ Check in with the partner several times during the semester.
 - *Remember to check in at pre-determined times so you do not burden the partner. Be the initiator in this process. Partners have many roles outside of working with service-learning students so they may have a question or issue that goes unaddressed. A phone call or e-mail is an easy way for them to touch base and let you know how things are going.*
- ✓ Be accessible.
 - *It is important that the students and partner can contact you (via e-mail or phone) at reasonable times. If something happens on-site individuals want to know that you are available as a resource. For a traditional course, professors may feel comfortable with having more scheduled 9-5 or other set business hours. Placing students in the community at various places and times means being more flexible with how you schedule your time.*

AFTER the Semester

- ✓ Thank the partner for their time and efforts.
 - *Send a thank you e-mail or card (get the students to sign if possible). This is a nice gesture to provide closure to the partner and let them know you appreciate their efforts.*
- ✓ Debrief about the things that well during the semester and things that need to be improved.
 - *Have a meeting (1-hour or less) to talk about how the semester went and discuss if this will be something to continue. You may want to share highlights of what your students learned in a short report (i.e.-number of hours, excerpts of written reflections).*

***POTENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR THE FIRST PARTNER MEETING**

- ✓ Does your organization require background checks? If so, do the students need to pay for them?
- ✓ What capacity do you have for taking student volunteers from my course?
- ✓ Is there a volunteer orientation for volunteers?
- ✓ What is the culture of the organization?
- ✓ Do you work with many college-aged students?
- ✓ Have you interacted with members of the university community before? If so, in what capacity and what was the result?
- ✓ Is there an attire or dress code that students should be made aware of to be on-site?
- ✓ What do you like about working at this organization?
- ✓ What should the students know about the issues in this community?
- ✓ What should the students know about the population you serve?
- ✓ What perceptions does the community have of college students?

****POTENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR ESTABLISHING THE PARTNERSHIP**

- ✓ What is the check-in process for volunteers?
- ✓ Who will be the main point of contact for students?
- ✓ What is the best way for students to communicate with the contact person?
- ✓ Will there always be a staff member present while students are providing services?

*****OTHER POINTS OF DISCUSSION**

- ✓ Discuss the university's policies for student conduct and behavior.
- ✓ Discuss the university's policy on discrimination.
- ✓ Discuss safety (of site and neighborhood).

Recommended Citation: Brown, E. (2015, October). *Strategies for establishing mutually-beneficial service-learning partnerships*. Division of Community Engagement. Virginia Commonwealth University: Richmond, VA.