



# Partnerships for Higher Education Service-Learning

Source: Tanis Vye Mihalynuk & Sarena D. Seifer, *Community Campus Partnerships for Health*, September 2002, updated March 2008

For additional resources on this and other service-learning topics visit Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at [www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org).

Partnerships serve as the foundation of service-learning programs in higher education. These partnerships can exist in different configurations depending on the nature of the program.

## Developing Relationships

Forging service-learning partnerships can be challenging, but fortunately there are principles and best practices that can make the task less daunting. An initial step is the development of relationships with key individuals within community-based organizations. There are many ways to do this; below are a few suggestions to get you started:

- **Build on existing faculty, staff and student relationships with the community.** Identify the faculty, staff or students who are already involved in community service, community-based education and community-based research.
- **Contact the office of service-learning (or equivalent entity) on your campus.** Resources may be available there, from community connections to funding sources to support partnership development.
- **Contact your local United Way.** The United Way can be an access point to a variety of non-profit organizations in your community.
- **Meet face-to-face early on, preferably in the community.** Phone calls and e-mails are often an expedient way to communicate, but can never fully substitute for in-person interactions.

## Assessing Assets and Needs

Conducting a thoughtful assessment of the assets and needs that community agencies and academic institutions can each contribute to the service-learning experience is time well spent. Asking these questions early in the development of service-learning partnerships can help uncover opportunities and strategies for success.

- **Assess community assets and needs for service-learning.** For example, which community-based organizations and collaboratives already have partnerships with the campus that can form a foundation from which to build new relationships?
- **Assess campus assets and needs for faculty, staff and student involvement in the local community.** For example, what opportunities exist among faculty, staff and students for community service, service-learning, collaborative evaluation and research?

## Choosing Partners

You should consider what agency characteristics may be important to the success of a particular service-learning experience. For example,



- Non-profit vs. for-profit status - depending on intended learning objectives, the status of the agency may be important.
- Accessibility - is the agency accessible to students by walking or public transportation? If not, how feasible will it be for students to get there? Is the agency accessible to students with disabilities?
- Safety - does the agency and its surrounding area provide an undue risk to student safety? Are adequate safety measures followed?
- Supervision - is the partner able to designate a staff member or volunteer to serve as an accessible supervisor during the student's term of service?
- Nature of service - is the partner able to offer the student a high-quality service-learning experience connected to the goals of the course?

### **Developing Principle-Centered, Ethical Partnerships**

Ethical dilemmas and implications inherent in service-learning partnerships must also be considered. For example, one ethical obligation of faculty members who design service-learning experiences for their students is to avoid harm or burden to the community. This obligation raises such questions as:

- Does the transience of the student's placement have a negative effect on clients, the community agency, or the student's moral and professional development?
- Does students' presence take away from agency staff responsibilities?
- Are students adequately supervised or are they working beyond their depth?
- Is there a risk of the agency becoming overwhelmed by students?

### **Negotiating Formal Partnership Agreements**

Codifying a relationship in writing can serve many useful purposes, including: ensuring that all partners have a shared understanding of the nature and extent of their work together, holding all partners accountable for the roles and responsibilities they have agreed to and clarifying legal obligations and the management of risk. At a minimum, written partnership agreements include:

- The name of each partner organization and the names of key staff from each.
- Each partner's expectations and anticipated benefits of the partnership.
- The roles, responsibilities and key tasks for each partner, along with a timeline.
- The partnership's intended outcomes.
- The partnership's financial and staffing consideration.
- The partnership's risk management plan.
- The partnership's anticipated products and any copyright or ownership issues
- The partnership's evaluation plan.
- The partnership's plan for publicity.

### **Incorporating Partnerships into All Aspects of Service-Learning**

Community partners and actions intended to strengthen partnerships can be incorporated into all aspects of service-learning, including: student recruitment, student orientation, community service, reflection, faculty development, curriculum development, and assessment & improvement.

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*For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at*

[www.servicelarning.org/instant\\_info/fact\\_sheets/he\\_facts/he\\_partners/expanded.php](http://www.servicelarning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/he_facts/he_partners/expanded.php)

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