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Forming Strategic Service-Learning Partnerships

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In the preface to Applegate and Morreale's (1999) *Voices of Strong Democracy*, "Service-Learning in Communication: A Natural Partnership," they viewed communication as a natural fit and reflexive relationship to service-learning because "linking individual learning and public service, by offering the opportunity to put principles into practice and glean principles from practice, service-learning is a perfect pedagogical partner to the study of communication praxis. (p. 13)." This pedagogical approach of service-learning connects student learning in the classroom with real-world experiences and partnerships with the community.

Pedagogical Rationale

The goal of this *Great Idea for Teaching* is to facilitate and develop strategic, mutually-beneficial partnerships in your service-learning communication course. Strategic partnerships "are formed based on a sense of purpose and for what they contribute to helping leaders meet institutional goals and objectives" (Eddy & Amey, 2014). The key to developing a sense of true partnership is to ensure there is mutual respect between all parties in a service-learning (SL) experience. This involves having a knowledge of self and the community by articulating one's relationship to the community and understanding its history, as well as initiating and designing partnerships that address the goals and outcomes of both the organization and course. The development of these strategic partnerships occurs pre-, during, and post-semester.

Pre-semester

Finding a community partner (or partners) is usually the first challenge faculty face when pursuing a community-engaged learning experience for their class. So, where can you start?

1. Working with your college/university's community-engaged learning or community service/outreach office.
2. Networking with colleagues at your institute already practicing service-learning, community-engaged learning or engaged in community service or outreach.
3. Searching for local non-profit community organizations, government agencies, or elementary/high schools. You can also pursue national or international partnerships.

Once you identify potential partners, you will want to begin with what Welch & Plaxton-Moore (2019) refer to as the exploratory phase of finding a community partner or "The Courtship Process." The 10-step process includes: 1) Introduce yourself, 2) Describe the course and students, 3) Get a history lesson (on the organization/agency), 4) Explore their goals/interests, 5) Explore possible projects 6), Reach a decision point, 7) Create an action plan, 8) Determine orientation and discussion protocol, 9) Discuss communication channels, & 10) Create and sign course agreement forms

For step 10, the course agreement form (sometimes referred to as a Community Partnership Outline) is designed to clearly identify mutually-beneficial outcomes that will be realized through community-based activities, as well as establish expectations about a project(s) and the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders involved in the collaborative working relationship. The Community Partnership Outline or Agreement should be completed with your community partner(s), as this will ensure their voice is reflected in the partnership. Below is a general structure for the outline and information you should collect.

1. General Partnership Information (Community Organization, Organization Representative/Community Partner Name(s) & Title(s), Faculty Member Name, Course Name, Course/Partnership Project Start & End Dates)

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2. Mutually-Beneficial Outcomes (Student Learning Outcomes & Community Outcomes)
3. Description of Community Activities (type of activity; timeline with general details; communication plan for instructor/partners; roles & responsibilities)

During the semester

The sustainability of a service-learning project requires reciprocity between students, community partner(s), and instructor, especially at the start of your service-learning project. To ensure reciprocity through the exchange of things with others for mutual benefit, it is important to establish guidelines and touchpoints in your timeline to ensure students and partners are working together. Two strategies to help ensure reciprocity between community partners and your course are (1) scheduling in-class presentations and (2) establishing contact hours.

Presentations.

The presentation is a great way to assist in guiding the partnerships and course design to achieve the desired outcomes for students, partners, and faculty. The presentations can ask the community partners to discuss the organization and reinforce how students can work with the organization, as well as allow students to present their work to the community partners. For example, you could invite community partners to present at the beginning of the semester and students present their work to the partners at the end of the semester. For example, the Media Project Management course at SRU invites partners into the class to present in week 3, then student teams present their project proposals to the partners at the midterm and final deliverables to the partners at the end of the semester. This model allows for both students and community partners to lead the discussion.

Contact Hours Requirement.

To ensure a reciprocal partnership between the students and community partners, a set number of contact hours for each student are established to ensure they are meeting with and receiving appropriate feedback from the community partners to build that collaborative relationship. Students can submit hours by emailing the partner and professor for verification. For the instructor-community partner communication, check-ins were scheduled every other week to access partnership and learning outcomes.

Post-semester

As part of the semester wrap-up, the community partners were asked to complete an evaluation to assist in future partnership planning and improvement followed by an instructor-community partner follow-up meeting to discuss the partner's evaluation of the experience. Service-learning assessment is a vital activity to evaluate the quality of student learning, community partner outcomes, and interactions of stakeholders. The follow-up meeting should address:

- Did the partnership meet all of the desired partnership goals and outcomes? If yes, how so, and if no, what could be improved?
- Discuss the student interactions, instructor interactions, and course structure with the partners.

The wrap-up meeting allows you to conclude the partnership with your course and opens the door for organizing future partnerships.

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