

## Developing Community Partner Relationships

If you do not already have a partner in mind, work with your community engagement coordinator to **find organizations** that have expressed needs that could be met through service-learning or have missions that complement your course's subject matter.

Once initial contact is made, we recommend that instructors:

**Meet partners face-to-face**, preferably in the community.

**Provide the organization staff with a copy of the syllabus.** Partners want to know how their work fits into the course, overall objectives and learning goals for students. Partners often have expertise to share both in the form of readings and discussion if an instructor is open to including them in the course.

**Allow the organization staff to decide what service students can provide.** It shouldn't be assumed that instructors or students will know what a community organization needs. Rather than "pitch" a specific project, instructors should discuss the qualifications and skills that students possess and the assets of that community to be sure students are satisfying a true need in the community.

**Determine the level of commitment** that the organization is willing to give the service-learning partnership. We encourage sustainable partnerships that last beyond the initial semester. Supervising service-learning volunteers requires time, oversight and feedback. It is important that the organization is able to provide students with the support they need.

**Negotiate an agreement** between the course and the organization that clearly articulates the expectations of all involved. This agreement can be formal or informal. However, there are many benefits to keeping a written account of expectations.

**Communicate regularly** with service-learning partners. Past community partners have expressed great disappointment with those relationships in which they were not contacted at regular intervals. Desired contact may mean calling or checking in by mid-semester and doing so periodically throughout the semester.

**Invite community partners into the class process.**

**Continuously evaluate the success of the project.** Include community partners as evaluators, as well as students. Solicit ideas for improvement.

## Meeting with New Community Partners

### Basics

#### *What is Service-Learning?*

- Provide a clear definition of service-learning, in particular, one that will help the community partner understand their role in service-learning.
- Provide examples of other courses that incorporate service-learning at UNC-Chapel Hill
- Help the organization to understand the differences between service-learning and volunteering.
- Emphasize the intent of a collaborative relationship, where both the university's and community partners' needs are met.

#### *What is the course?*

- If this is an existing course that is being reworked to include a service-learning component, share a copy of a previous syllabus.
- If this is a new course, ideas about content, learning objectives and student skills will be important to share.

### Questions to consider when meeting:

#### *Readiness of the organization for a service-learning partnership and starter questions:*

- What experience does the community partner have in working with college students?
- What makes becoming a community partner in service-learning appealing to the organization?
- What are the major challenges the organization faces in providing services to the community?
- Does the organization see college students as a valuable resource?
- How much supervision will the organization be able to provide students?
- How readily could students apply their service to what they are learning in the classroom?
- Does the organization have the capacity to host and supervise your students? How many? Under what timeframe?

#### *Initial meeting to-do list:*

- Explore community and university assets and needs.
- Brainstorm projects to address mutual needs and desired outcomes.
- Consider a short-term project to begin building a trusting relationship. For example, a community partner may agree to collaborate for a semester as a trial for ongoing work.

#### *Project Development:*

- Over time, determine scope of project based on mutually identified needs.
- Develop shared mission statement and goals for project.
- Establish effective on-going communication and evaluation plan.
- Determine roles and responsibilities.
- Set next steps and a timeline.

## Best Practices of Service-Learning Partnerships

### ***Set specific purpose and agreed upon mission, values, goals, deliverables and accountability***

The first step toward agreement in these areas is to discover the questions that the community partner and instructor have each other. Instructors may have questions about the mission and strategies of the organization, and the community partner may have questions regarding the course goals, syllabus and student skills. Once perspectives and agendas are better understood, a negotiation and prioritization process should be used to distill the areas of mutual agreement that can be used to piece together the beginnings of a working relationship.

### ***Assessment and evaluation***

Assessment can be productive, even at the beginning of partnerships. Establishing a history of assessment will also pave the way for rigorous and meaningful evaluation as the partnership evolves. Gathering feedback is an effective way to show respect for partners, but incorporating that feedback into evaluation outputs and program design reflects a true appreciation of each partner's perspective.

### ***Balance power and share resources***

Many institutions assume that community partners hold limited power and that it's necessary for the institution to "build them up." However, this is rarely the case. Power dynamics must be carefully assessed and then, if necessary, methods of power redistribution should be considered. Once a more equitable balance of power is in place, resources can be more effectively shared. Partners should also be creative as to how resources are defined. Resources are not just financial, but can also include people, supplies, space or knowledge.

### ***Clear, open and accessible communication***

The key to any successful partnership is open communication. Email and regular in-person meetings strengthen working relationships. In addition, visiting partners on-site and in community, as well as inviting partners to class, helps everyone to better understand the work of the organization and the course.

### ***Agree upon roles, norms and procedures***

Many partnerships begin with discussing roles and procedures. However, if values and goals are not aligned, and if mutual trust and effective means of communication have not been established, the process design phase is unlikely to have successful, lasting results.

### ***Partnerships evolve and can dissolve***

Effective partnerships must have the capacity and patience to consider and embrace change as they develop. Partnerships can be viewed as living organisms that must be nurtured over time. Not all partnerships do or are meant to last forever, which needs to be acknowledged and anticipated.