Best Practices of Service-Learning Partnerships

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

The first step towards agreement in these areas is to discover the questions each side has for the other. Institutional representatives may have questions as to the mission and strategies of the community partner, and the community organization may have questions regarding the institution’s curriculum building process and self-teaching opportunities. 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.

Mutual trust, respect, genuineness and commitment

These elements will become stronger over the passage of time, but it’s critical to highlight their importance at the very beginning stages of relationship building. The main message is that each side needs to offer up genuine respect for the other in terms of the value and importance of the resources, perspectives, knowledge and time each side devotes to the partnership. Even though partners may look different, dress and speak differently, it’s important for both sides to reserve judgment and to maintain an open mind as to the motivations of the other party and the quality of what each side brings to the table.

Build on strengths and assets, builds capacity, and also addresses needs

Assessment can be productive, even at the beginnings of partnerships. The conversations that were held while discussing the first two principles should provide a base upon which to maximize each side’s assets while also determining areas of weakness or need that can be further developed through the partnership. 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 their community partners hold limited power and that it’s necessary for the institutions to “build them up.” However, this 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 successfully addressing this principle is establishing real accessibility. Email and regular in-person meeting times strengthen working relationships. In addition, two-way site visits where each partner visits the other were strongly recommended.

Agree upon roles, norms, and procedures

Many partnerships begin with the discussion of roles and procedures. However, if values and goals aren’t aligned, and if mutual trust and effective means of communication have not been established, the process design phase is unlikely to go smoothly or to have successful, lasting results. Thus, it is strongly recommended that parties address the first six principles before embarking on the course of designing processes and defining roles.

Share the credit

Credit can also be defined in this context as appreciation, and appreciation can be shown in a variety of ways. It is important for each partner to share credit and show appreciation for the other partners, whether it’s through financial methods or a mention in an organization’s annual report or newsletter.

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. This needs to be acknowledged and anticipated.

Adopted from Carolina Center for Public Service, University of North Carolina
APPLES Service-Learning Series – Guide to Community Partnerships