Collaborating with Community Partners

Finding a Community Partner

1. Ideally, the process of identifying community partners should begin at least one semester before the service-learning course is to be offered.
2. Consult the Center for Civic Engagement for ideas about local organizations that offer service experiences that would enhance the course learning objectives for students.
3. Visit UTSA Engaged to review a list of nonprofit organizations in the San Antonio area.
4. Identify several potential community partner organizations and meet face-to-face with representatives to learn more about their organizational needs and describe your student group and course learning objectives. Ensure that the community partners thoroughly understand the distinctions between service-learning and other types of community-based learning, such as volunteerism, internships and community service.
5. Select one or more community organizations to work with, remembering that the goal is to create an ongoing, collaborative partnership that strikes a balance between meeting the needs of the community organization and providing students with real-world learning opportunities that relate to course content.

Before the Semester Begins

1. Visit the site location to update the primary community partner contact, as well as the contact person who will be working directly with students.
2. Consider sharing a copy of the course syllabus with community partners so that they can better understand academic learning goals.
3. Determine with the community partner the best way to orient students to the service site. For example, the community partner might teach a class to describe their organization and, if applicable, present the service project. Alternately, faculty may hold a class meeting at the service site to learn about students’ roles and responsibilities.
4. Invite the community partner to teach a class to present the service project.
5. Clarify the service-learning teaching assistant’s responsibilities to the community partner. Establish a regular meeting time with the teaching assistant and the best way to contact each other.
6. With the community partner, collaboratively develop any service contracts or service logs that the students will use. Insure that all parties have a shared understanding about the use of these logs.

After the Semester Begins

1. Schedule several contacts to check in with the community partner during the semester.
2. Meet face-to-face with the community partner toward the end of the semester to review the service project and discuss possible changes for future semesters.
3. Consider inviting the community partner to attend any end-of-semester presentations given by students.
4. Consider sending the community partner samples of journals and/or reflection papers that reveal student learning that occurred at the community partner’s site. Always insure that student confidentiality is maintained or secure the students’ permissions before sharing assignments that disclose student identities.

Steps to a Successful Partnership

Before staring a community engagement effort:
• Be clear about the purposes or goals of the engagement effort and the populations and/or communities you want to engage.
• Become knowledgeable about the community. Learn about the community’s perceptions of those initiating the engagement activities.

For engagement to occur, it is necessary to:

• Establish relationships with the formal and informal leaders in the community.
• Remember and accept that self-determination is the responsibility and right of all the people in a community. No external entity should assume it can bestow on a community the power to act in its own self-interest.

For engagement to succeed:

• Partnering with the community is necessary to create change and improve well-being.
• All aspects of community engagement must recognize and respect the diversity in the community.
• Community engagement can only be sustained by identifying and mobilizing community assets and strengths and by developing the community’s capacity and resources to make decisions and take action.
• Organizations that wish to engage a community as well as individuals seeking to effect change must be prepared to release control of actions or interventions to the community and be flexible enough to meets its changing needs.
• Community collaboration requires long-term commitment by the engaging organization and its partners.

Adapted from Erin Burke Brown, Strategies for Establishing Mutually Beneficial Service-Learning Partnerships, Virginia Commonwealth University Office of the Provost Community Engagement website, October 2015.