Best Practices and Tools for Successful Community Partnerships

The relationship between faculty and community organizations is extremely important to the success of the students’ service-learning projects. A goal of service-learning is that both the students involved in service-learning achieve the learning objectives, and the community based organization receives exemplary services and/or materials that will add to their overall capacity. With the goal of reciprocity in mind, it is important for there to be communication between the two parties before, during, and after the actual service. The following tools are examples that can be used by faculty to ensure proper communication is taking place and the goal of reciprocity is actually being achieved.

When used the tools help to ensure that best practices for service-learning are being achieved. In terms of the faculty’s relationship with the community based organization (CBO) these practices include:

- Giving CBO voice during the design of the service-learning partnership
- Ensuring all parties’ roles are clear and communicated upfront
- Open and continuous communication between faculty and CBO during the length of the partnership
- Achieving reciprocity: students meet learning objectives and CBO’s needs are met through the students’ service
- University creates and maintains service-learning culture with the community

The tools included in this section are divided based on whether they are to be used prior, during, or after the students’ service. They are here to give you a framework of documents you may wish to create but should be tailored to your service-learning initiatives. In addition to these tools, faculty may contact the current Service-Learning Coordinator in the Department of Civic Engagement; benefits of this can be assistance in finding community based organizations to partner with as well as course and service project development. Additionally, faculty can search the TU in the Community database to identify collaborative service-learning opportunities, and also avoid an overflow of student projects from different courses at one CBO.
Establishing Your Community Partnership

Initial communication with community partners should take place long before the start of your course to allot time to make sure that the service idea is appropriate for the particular community based organization. Faculty should develop academic and civic learning objectives for the course and align a community partner that will help to achieve these goals. Please refer to the “Incorporating Service-Learning into Your Syllabus” section of the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook for more information on developing course learning objectives. It is recommended that faculty build on previous relationships created by TU faculty and staff.

Different resources are available to Towson faculty to assist in identifying community organizations. There is a TU Service-Learning Coordinator in the Department of Civic Engagement who can identify community organizations that have been involved in past service-learning projects. Faculty may also use the community organization database found on the Department of Civic Engagement’s service-learning website. Additionally, faculty can search TU in the Community online database to identify opportunities to collaborate with other faculty members as well as identify community organizations. Creating partnerships with faculty members across campus can avoid duplication as well as create opportunities that would not be possible without collaboration.

Intentional inclusion of the community partner in the planning of the course is a best practice for successful partnerships. Doing so will allow faculty to decide if student expectations and the community organization’s goals align. To avoid miscommunication and confusion, a site supervisor at the community organization should coordinate and direct the service throughout the project, in conjunction with the faculty member; this supervisor is an essential role in successful college-community partnerships. An asset survey, which collects information about current strengths and resources, should be distributed to the organization prior to the start of the course; please refer to the appendix of the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook to locate a Sample Community Partner Asset Survey Form. Through this survey faculty may decide that the organization does not have the resources to support a service-learning project and will then need to contact a new potential partner. Additionally, an asset survey will avoid creating the idea that the organizations to receive students are needy and that the students are there to fix something. By conducting an asset survey the faculty member is identifying areas where the organization is strong and can then develop service ideas that fill voids and will be sustainable after the students have completed their service.

Furthermore, an asset survey engages the community organization on a more intimate level. This type of approach can help open lines of communication and raise the level of investment the organization will have in the individual students. By creating service around factors specific to the organization, the students’ final product will be of greater value to the organization and therefore, reciprocity will be achieved.

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Faculty should consider how many community organizations they are going to partner with for each service-learning project. For higher success rates, it is recommended that inexperienced service-learning faculty choose up to four organizations. If there are multiple organizations it may become difficult to manage the best practices and tools included in this section. Faculty may consider dividing the class into small groups of 4-5 students, dividing the class in half, or even designing a service-learning project in which the class works with one organization as a whole. It is up to the faculty member to decide what works best in order for students to achieve the learning objectives, and reciprocity be achieved for the community partners. The faculty member should also be clear about student abilities and limitations.

**A Checklist for Community-Based Organization Visit**, which may be found in the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook, for faculty to use during their initial contact with the organization is included in the appendix to help decide if the organization will make an appropriate partner for the specific service-learning project. Vetting each community organization will help to decide if a partnership will be successful or not. Example factors to consider are:
- resource personnel available to support service-learning project
- location and accessibility
- CBO’s mission and goals
- Does the transience of the students’ placement have a negative effect on the CBO’s clients, the community agency, or the student’s moral and professional development?  

**A Sample List of Expectations**, which may be found in the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook, outlines the different parties’ roles and responsibilities from the beginning to the end of the course. The list should be tailored to the individual service-learning project and should address communication mode and frequency, as well as any onsite orientation and training the students might need. Continuous communication between faculty and the CBO throughout the students’ service will help to ensure reciprocity is achieved. **A Community Partner Midpoint Evaluation**, which can be found in the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook, or phone call is recommended. This will help to address any issues or changes that need to be made such that the goal of reciprocity will be achieved upon the completion of the students’ service.

Additional tools may be used to ensure organizations remain invested in the students throughout the length of their service. **A Memo of Understanding** may be created after the initial dialogue between the CBO and faculty member, examples of which can be found in the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook. Faculty should explain the difference between a student volunteer and a student service-learner, as some organizations may be new to the concept of service-learning. These documents may be used to clarify all of the parties understanding of the project and to manage possible risks involved. They are to be crafted by the faculty member and should outline expectations for the roles of the CBO, professor, and student. They can be used to highlight different areas that the faculty member feels are imperative to reaching the goal of reciprocity and any other areas that may need further clarification. It is up to the faculty member whether the documents are to require signatures.

Following up with the CBO with either a Memo of Understanding, or a Service-Learning agreement, helps to guarantee that everyone involved understands the content and details of the project before students begin service. **Sample Service-Learning Agreement** forms can be found in the appendix of the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook. Taking the time to build strong relationships with CBOs is not only important for future service-learning projects, but to the university’s future as well. Hopefully each new
relationship with the surrounding community will improve the foundation for programs across different colleges.