Maintaining the Relationship with Your Community Partner

If appropriate, at the beginning of students’ service the community organization should provide them with a comprehensive on-site orientation. It is important to maintain continuous communication with the designated community organizations’ contact supervisor throughout the students’ service. The mode and frequency of communication should be decided on prior to service and included in the service-learning agreement. Modes to consider are emails, phone calls and site visits. This will allow for any issues that may arise to be resolved quickly, as well as ensure that the students’ are receiving the needed support from the organization.

Faculty should be communicating with the community organization, as well as the students, throughout the length of the service. Through pre-established lines of communication the faculty member should remain in contact with the designated contact person at the community organization. The faculty member should use reflection as a means to stay up to date with the students as their service evolves. A midpoint evaluation should be distributed to the CBO’s contact person in addition to the informal communication with the faculty member. A Community Partner Midpoint Evaluation is provided in the appendix of the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook, but should be tailored to address the specific concerns of the faculty member. The midpoint evaluation should focus on the overall service project and not be solely an assessment of the students’ performance.

Issues may arise during service between the student and the CBO, at which point the professor should use their best judgment and encourage the students to work through the issue. There is truth to the argument that the “real world” experience allows room for problems to arise and is a good learning experience for students. For example, if the student is having difficulty getting a response from the CBO via email, then perhaps they need to call and set up a time to meet in person. It is important to remember that this should not prevent faculty from contacting the CBO if an issue arises that may be out of the students’ realm of control. For example, if the CBO has students filing papers as if they are filing community service hours assigned from the courts a faculty member should step in. The faculty member needs to ensure that reciprocity will be achieved and therefore in this situation it is best for the faculty to take initiative and clear up the miscommunication.

It may be appropriate at some service-learning projects to provide the organization and students with an orientation checklist of topics to be covered before or on the first day of service by the organization for the students. Guidelines for Orientation at Community Site as well as a Sample Student Orientation Checklist can be found in the appendix of the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook. Depending on the organization and the type of clients they serve students may need to be aware of different privacy and/or safety practices. Providing a checklist helps to guide organizations who do not regularly have volunteers in the service-learning capacity, as well as provide an idea to the students as to what they can expect.

Faculty can provide students with a time sheet to use during service in order to track hours and daily tasks. The form should be given to each student before service begins and should be brought with the student each time they serve; the form may require the site supervisor’s signature. Please refer to the Sample Time Sheet in the appendix of the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook for an idea of how a time sheet can be designed.
Evaluating and Sustaining the Community Partnership

Gathering consistent feedback from the community organization is important for future improvement of service-learning partnerships and to ensure reciprocity is achieved. Methods to gather this information may be onsite visits, interviews via phone or email and distribution of evaluations. It may prove to be beneficial to collect information from the population receiving service, in addition to feedback from the CBO’s contact person responsible for the supervision of the students’ service. It is important for this contact person to be the same person who was designated before the service began. The frequency and content of the information being asked is the key to assessing the impact and effectiveness of the service-learning program. These evaluations prove to be the means to achieving continuous improvement and community development for future service-learning projects.

Evaluating the Partnership
Faculty should distribute evaluations to the community partner to gather feedback about the quality of the partnership. The evaluation gives the community organization voice and input for future improvements to service-learning projects. An end of semester Evaluation of Service-Learning Project can be found in the appendix of the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook. Faculty should be mindful of how each evaluative component links with the learning objectives of the course; therefore, evaluation should be linked to the program goals and desired outcomes. Post evaluations from the community organization help to ensure that reciprocity is achieved.

Occasionally, post evaluations from the community organizations will show the need for the termination of the service-learning partnership. If this is the case, it is important to withdraw from the community doing as little damage as possible. Faculty should dialogue with the community organization to ensure that they understand the reasons for termination, and that the opportunity for future partnerships remains. Conducting an asset-survey, creating the service-learning agreement, and performing mid-point evaluations helps to avoid reasons that may lead to termination.

Community Partner Feedback and Student Grades
In addition to an evaluation of the partnership a faculty member may want to ask the community partner to evaluate the students. This type of evaluation may include questions specific to students’ attitudes, behaviors and work; therefore, it can be valuable in the grading process. It is important to remember that students should be assessed on the learning they achieve and not the service they perform. Samples of tools can be found in the appendix of the Service-Learning Faculty Handbook titled Evaluation Form for Community Partner of Student Work and from the Towson Department of Family Studies, Evaluation of Student Service-Learning Project.

---