

# INITIATING EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS: GUIDELINES FROM CAMPUS COMPACT

Site: <https://compact.org/resource-posts/effective-relationships/>

## LEVELS OF PARTNERSHIP TO CONSIDER

Different types of community projects require different levels of commitment and collaboration from members at first; but as they succeed and endure, the levels will increase over time, perhaps developing into fully-funded service-learning programs.

- Traditional service like volunteerism and short-term co-curricular projects are typically ones where a community service opportunity is matched with available volunteers prepared to provide the service. Community agencies define the problem and volunteers work to alleviate it, with little discussion among participants of a shared vision or mutual benefits.
- Transformational service projects include service-learning courses and long-term co-curricular projects in which community leaders, students and faculty come together to create innovative programs that address community opportunities. Partners adopt the model of collaboration, working to capitalize on each other's resources and complement each other's assets. For example, an elementary school seeking to broaden its health science curriculum could ally with the college biology faculty and students who develop and teach an HIV/AIDS curriculum at the school.

**RELATIONSHIP BUILDING IS A KEY PRIORITY TO THE PROJECT'S EVENTUAL SUCCESS. KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL CAMPUS/COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS INCLUDE:**

- An established sense of trust and respect
- A common vision and collective commitment
- The community identifies its own resources and unmet needs for service
- A short and long term plan that tackles multiple issues
- The project produces mutual benefit to partners – risks, resources and rewards are jointly shared.
- The process for developing the project infrastructure and problem solving is collaborative.
- Governance is shared and non-hierarchical
- Partners use a shared language and communicate frequently
- Responsibility, authority, and accountability are mutual, with clearly defines expectations and roles
- The projects have a method of assessment

## **MAKING CONTACT**

Early in program development the director and/or members of the planning team need to visit key agencies or projects like United Way, Homeless and Hunger Coalitions, and other human service providers to become familiar with existing community service opportunities, especially the most pressing issues not being addressed. Also, early discussions need to be held with campus offices already working with key community experts or contacts to gain more knowledge about current issues.

A good method of developing important contacts in the community is for the director and staff to participate with local groups involved in service, such as volunteer centers and professional associations. Active involvement will increase the program staff's awareness of and sensitivity to community issues and resources. Representatives from neighborhood groups, the Chamber of Commerce, religious leaders and elected officials, can offer important perspectives on service to the community. Preparing a short survey form or introductory letter to agencies is most useful. It should describe the community service program intent, and request drafts of volunteer job descriptions for students.

Although the "right" mix of numbers and kinds of service sites varies by campus, the community service effort needs to start where the college or university already has some record of success because of priorities, funding, and/or community resources. Developing a diverse group of placements sites and projects is key to attracting a representative cross section of students. Therefore, a good target to start with would be 20, rather than 200 or two. Students' learning potential at the site should be considered, as should be a good mix of advocacy, direct service, indirect service, research, leadership, short-term and long-term service options.

This continuum of activity allows for different levels of students' responsibility, and mirrors the broad spectrum of agency needs. And although student leaders and/or office staff match student

interests, skills and experiences with community resources, the agency has the final authority for screening, selection and placement of students.

As the program matures, more of the director's time needs to be committed to working closely with the community. As the program's fulcrum, the director and staff need to balance the service experience with learning; the community perspective with that of the campus; and the students' interest with those of the agency. This balancing act increases the potential for continued collaboration and mutual satisfaction.

## **TIPS FOR ESTABLISHING GOOD CAMPUS/COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS**

- Always give students an orientation before placing them in the community.
- Create and maintain a priority for diversity among the partners to ensure that understanding and embracing issues of difference are desired outcomes of community service.
- Give community organizations as much accurate information as possible about the program, students' skills and resources, and community service. For many agencies, supervising and educating enthusiastic and energetic students adds a dramatic new dimension to their work.
- Promote relationship building between agencies, faculty and staff by designing specific job descriptions and effective orientations.
- Initiate pilot projects to demonstrate to the community the worthiness of collaboration. Quick assessment and dissemination of successful outcomes are vital, and become important marketing tools.
- Arrange for faculty and staff to attend on-site meetings. These sessions serve as workshops to orient agency supervisors to the learning needs of students, their uniqueness, strengths and characteristics. Collaborative experiences can enrich planning, supervision, and assessment, and are important to the partnering process.
- Insure regular, open and honest communication, both verbal and written, between the partners before, during and after the student service experiences. Project planning forms, service-learning agreements with students, service contracts with agencies, service site job descriptions, written assessments of projects and students, on-site reports, and site appraisals from students and coordinators are all useful.
- Diversify and expand placements regularly to meet student's changing schedules, logistics, skills and learning needs.

- Fine-tune programs at every stage with effective conflict resolution skills (sometimes learned on the job!). Careful monitoring and supervision of early plans reduces conflicts, which can emerge out of differences in culture, communication styles, values, and role confusion. Timely phone calls or site visits to solve problems, improves program activities and helps prevent crisis. Feedback among partners can insure a project against exploitation, student injury and liability concerns.
- Allow for alternative service sites in case an agency match does not succeed. A well-organized program and appropriate staff intervention, however, can save a placement.
- Insure that liability issues are accommodated by proceeding with caution, prudence and perhaps legal counsel before completing a site contract. If, for various reasons, a partnership seems infeasible now, the potential always exists. Resolve the outstanding issue(s) and create the collaboration later.