Developing Partnerships for Service-Learning: Starting Points for Community-Based Organizations

Forming partnerships is key to effective service-learning. But partnerships can be time-consuming to form, and they take time, knowledge, interpersonal skills, and resources to sustain. This fact sheet examines several key questions that emerge when community-based organizations (CBOs) seek to form partnerships.

How Can Partnerships Enrich Service-Learning?

If done optimally, forming partnerships for service-learning can:

- strengthen social capital in the community as trusting, respectful, and sustained relationships form across sectors;
- accomplish work together that would be difficult or impossible to accomplish alone;
- avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts;
- ensure that the perspectives of people receiving service are heard;
- offer opportunities for people to learn from each other and share resources, skills, and funding; and
- ensure that the efforts of schools, higher education institutions, and faith-based organizations become more grounded in community realities and relationships.

What Makes Partnerships Work?

Effective partnerships typically have the following characteristics:

- shared leadership, responsibility, and oversight;
- young people are full partners;
- relationships are central;
- inclusion is intentional;
- an appropriate balance is struck between trust building and action;
- mutual understanding and benefits are understood;
- mutual learning objectives and educational activities;
- vision guides structure; and
- being attentive to planning, communication, training, orientation, and preparation.

With Whom Will You Partner?

The most effective partnerships build upon prior relationships between those who provide the service and their community partners. But how do you find potential partners if you are just starting?

- *Narrow the scope.* Get some clarity about *why* you and your organization want to partner with others, and what you hope to get out of it.
- *Tap existing relationships.* With whom do you work, go to school, worship, or

engage in civic life? These links can play a vital role in broadening the efforts.

- *Connect with bridge builders* within those communities, groups, or organizations that are particularly important or strategic in reaching your goals. They are natural networkers, comfortable operating in different cultural settings so that they can "translate" for others and establish initial trust.
- *Use the networking resources within your community.* Check with the local Volunteer Center or United Way, which often see one of their roles to help facilitate collaborative relationships.

How Do You Shape a Partnership?

A partnership can be simple or complex, depending on each partner's comfort level, readiness, needs, and resources—and the nature of the shared work that is envisioned. As the partnership becomes more complex, the potential impact on the community, the students, and the agency increases. Here is a commonly accepted basic framework for understanding a continuum of relationships that are often thought of as being a hierarchy:

- *Cooperate*—Projects may be centered in one organization with support from the other. This is where many partnerships start out.
- *Coordinate*—Work together in planning a specific effort or program.
- *Collaborate*—Collaboration typically requires a shared decision-making group, comprehensive planning and communication, and formal agreements on roles, responsibilities, and commitments.

What Kinds of Partnerships Are Most Effective?

There is no best, one-size-fits-all model. However, partnerships work best and last the longest when each partner sees benefits in terms of what they consider important. Without a clear demonstration of mutual interest, other efforts to bolster partnerships rarely work. Furthermore, it is most effective to move beyond ad hoc, one-time partnerships towards building sustainable partnerships that continue after the projects are completed. These partnerships result in better experiences for students, better community outcomes, and richer learning.

How Do We Get Started?

As you begin building a partnership, you may become enamored by the potential of a major, sustained approach to working together. Though such a vision may be an appropriate outcome, it's often best to start slowly, then let the relationship grow over time. Thus, many partners begin with a low-risk project or event that establishes trust and an early success.

Over time, larger, more formal partnerships may emerge. While two-way partnerships between educators and community groups have often been the norm, a growing body of literature suggests that three-way partnerships among higher education, K-12 schools, and community groups are feasible and may be more effective and more sustainable. Many people have found that it is important to keep partnerships fluid, adding new people as relationships develop.