

**A Chicken in Every Non-Profit Pot:
Building Successful Partnerships in an Economic Downturn**

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At a time when the United States is at war and in a recession, we can learn important lessons in working together for a common goal to meet the needs of those in our communities from an earlier generation. Using concepts from the 1930s and 1940s, we describe four practical steps for colleges to use in supporting non-profit agencies through service-learning and civic engagement in our current economic downturn.

Midlands Technical College is a two-year open admissions community college with over 11,000 credit students located in Columbia, the capital city of South Carolina. MTC CARES (Community, Academics, and Resources Engaged through Service), a group of students, staff, and faculty who foster service and service learning on campus, has established ongoing relationships with three community agencies (Burton Center, which serves adults with special needs and disabilities; Bridges Clubhouse, a day program for adults with mental illness; and the Ronald McDonald House). Through working with these agencies, we have learned strategies for supporting non-profits through tough economic times.

1. Grow a Victory Garden – Sow and cultivate relationships in your own backyard.

During World War II, American families were encouraged to grow victory gardens in their yards so that they could provide fresh produce for themselves since it was increasingly unavailable. Similarly, colleges can serve non-profits in their own communities by cultivating relationships with them, not simply doing one project and moving on to the next agency. The first step is to research the agency – What do they do? Who do they serve? Where does their funding come from? What community partners do they already have? What volunteer opportunities do they advertise? The second step is to pay a visit to the agency. Instead of

asking “what do you need?”, a more productive question is “What would you do if you had the time and the staff?” This question gets answers beyond the standard wish list or defined volunteer roles. When we asked the Ronald McDonald House this question, they said they would reorganize the business office, weed out old files going back to the 1980s, and find the best price for fixing a vexing plumbing problem. This discussion brought us to the next step of cultivating relationships – leveraging resources. Connecting an agency with a resource that can meet a need is an important service to provide. We put RMH in contact with our financial aid office who found two students to serve as work studies at RMH, giving them the staff and the time to take care of what had been long term concerns.

We found that the next step was to develop and implement an ongoing series of projects with each of our partners. With Ronald McDonald House, we decorated for Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter as well as holding a clean up day on Martin Luther King Day. With Burton Center, we have a long term plan of building an outdoor shelter so that all 100 participants can have comfortable seating outside for cookouts and other activities. In working towards this shelter, we have held several work days to build picnic tables and plant a garden.

We further cultivated these relationships by including the agency’s participants whenever possible, both in service activity and reflection activities. Families staying at RMH helped create decorations, often for their sick children, and joined with students in a meal and reflection afterwards. Burton participants worked beside MTC students to build picnic tables, and Bridges Clubhouse members painted their cafeteria with MTC students as well as participated in reflections afterwards. Students and members of the agencies, whether staff or participants, begin building personal relationships through these activities and enjoy seeing each other during subsequent projects; in addition, students get to see what adults with disabilities can do during these activities rather than what they can not do.

2. Move from rent parties to tin can shows – Transform Partnerships into Networks

During the Great Depression, people threw rent parties, inviting their friends to their homes with the understanding that each would bring a couple of dollars to help pay that month's rent. In other words, friends were helping friends. Movie houses also sponsored Tin Can Shows, showings of movies to which moviegoers would bring canned food that would then be shared with hungry families in the community. People were helping strangers.

To survive the economic downturn, colleges have to extend our assistance beyond their friends, the agencies they are accustomed to working with. Colleges need to change their partnerships into networks by linking needs and services and by forming consortia of agencies that work towards meeting the same needs. For example, the Burton Center provides work for its participants so they can be productive and earn a small amount of money. We discovered that RMH had boxes full of soda tabs (which they recycle as a fundraiser) which needed to be packaged. By linking Burton and RMH with a donor, Burton participants can package the soda tabs and be paid a modest wage by the donor, and RMH can obtain their fundraising dollars without using valuable staff time.

We also formed a consortium to establish a professional clothing closet for students and community members who need appropriate attire for interviews or new jobs. When we were unable to find appropriate space on campus for this project, a student pointed out that a local women's shelter (Hannah House) had a warehouse they wanted to convert into a clothing closet. We invited the Midlands Education and Business Alliance (MEBA) to join us and these three agencies have now formed a consortium to create Hannah's Boutique on Main.

3. Be like Rosie the Riveter: "We can do it!" – Empower volunteers.

Perhaps one of the most memorable home-front icons from World War II is the poster of Rosie the Riveter, a young woman with her sleeves rolled up, flexing a muscle built from working in a factory that supported the American war effort, saying "I can do it!" Just as women

were empowered to take manual labor jobs outside of their homes (and their typical places in society), students can be empowered to contribute to local agencies, doing jobs effectively that they've never tried before.

The first rule of service should be like the first rule of medicine: do no harm. To be an effective partner, colleges should prepare students and volunteers to work with the agency so they are not a drain on the agency's time or resources. Students should understand the basic goals and services of the agency as well as ethical guidelines that they should follow during their service. When student leaders are prepared to direct projects, agency staff are not pulled away from other tasks; students are then adding value rather than using up precious agency resources. Colleges should seek to empower students by giving them responsibility and assistance in fulfilling it; students will rise to those occasions and then become the most powerful recruiters and trainers of other students. In debriefing from the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service, the young woman who coordinated the Burton worksite and directed her fellow students in their work told us with tears in her eyes, "No one has ever trusted me to do something like me before. No one ever thought I could do it." She went on to tell us the confidence she developed as a result of being put in this leadership position and her commitment to continuing to develop her ability to serve. Rosie the Riveter could not have said it better.

4. Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without. -- Use all resources – human and material – wisely.

During World War II, this rhyme was a reminder to reuse and recycle in an era of limited resources. In our current economic era, it is vital that we use all we have as wisely as possible. Colleges can help non-profits by making treasure out of trash, recognizing that what one agency needs to discard, another needs to use. When MTC students were cleaning out the attic at RMH, they found gently used children's toys that RMH could not use because the sick children require new toys for sanitary purposes. Rather than simply throwing these toys away, MTC students

took them to Children's Garden, a day care for children who are homeless. When MTC staff realized the number of plastic bottles being thrown away on campus because local companies would not recycle them, they found that the local food bank could use them to distribute detergent. In addition, MTC staff began collecting plastic bags and egg cartons which the food bank can also use to distribute food. No matter the resource, someone can use it. Colleges can help by consciously looking for ways to connect one person's waste to another's need.

Another way to use resources wisely is to accept all gifts, no matter how small. Many fundraisers go for the large numbers – million dollar grants, thousand dollar donations, hundred dollar tickets to charity events – and discount smaller amounts. Our new president, Barak Obama, has shown us how effective having small donations from a great number of donors can be. In addition, fund raising is also friend-raising. Every contributor, whether that contribution is in the form of money, expertise, or time, is a means of support, of networking, of leveraging resources. Accepting those contributions, no matter how small, builds the community. Children are often willing volunteers and should be encouraged to join in as long as it is safe for them to do so. Children who grow up volunteering are more likely to continue serving others.

Using human resources wisely also means allowing those who are typically the served to provide service. We have tried to cross-pollinate agencies by encouraging the participants in one agency to provide service to another: Burton Center participants can create cards for the families in RMH; Bridges Clubhouse participants can plant a garden for Burton Center. If service is good for the soul, then it's good for those who are usually on the receiving end as well.

Conclusion

When we cultivate relationships with agencies, develop networks within our community, empower our students to serve, and use all resources wisely, our communities will know that we – like Kilroy -- were here because we will have left our mark. And we – like a generation past – will be ready not just to “go all out for America” but to go all out for the world.