

# SERVICE LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH THE EYES OF OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

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## INTRODUCTION

How do Community Based Organization's (CBO's) view effective CBO/higher education service learning partnerships? What factors do CBO's recognize as essential to effective community/campus partnerships? While higher education's perspective on such partnerships has been well documented, the perspective of the CBO on community/campus partnerships has only recently been explored in any detail (Maurrasse, 2001).

This paper attempts to take a look at the community/campus partnership through the eyes of the community partner. Through a series of informal conversations with a long-time community partner and a review of relevant service learning literature, this paper tries to articulate themes and specific factors that CBO's view as essential to effective community/campus service learning partnerships.

## KINGSBOROUGH'S COMMUNITY PARTNER

For the past eight years, Rose has been the director of an award winning after-school program located in a public school a short distance from Kingsborough's campus in Brooklyn, NY. Her CBO serves approximately 300 children ranging from kindergarteners to eighth graders. Rose holds a master's degree in social work and her staff of 45 includes certified teachers, social workers, program directors and assistants. Funding for Rose's CBO comes from city, state and federal sources. Rose's organization runs numerous programs such as homework helpers, tutoring in most academic areas, ESL and ELL instruction, literacy development, theater arts, music, media design and production, health awareness, and fashion design. Rose's CBO has been in a service learning partnership with Kingsborough Community College since 2005.

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During our conversations about effective community/campus partnerships, Rose identified two themes as most important: our relationship as the foundation for our partnership; and the basic role that her CBO plays in educating our college students. Significantly, these two themes were also identified by community partners as primary components of effective community/campus partnerships in recent service learning research.

## THE RELATIONSHIP IS FOUNDATIONAL

Rose stressed that the trusting relationship that has developed between her organization and our campus is the foundation for our service learning partnership. She asserted that the relationship itself underpins our partnership and serves as a springboard for any service

learning project or event that we may undertake. Rose consistently emphasized factors that both demonstrated the value that we place on our relationship, and the need to continually nurture our relationship, as having the highest priority.

Further, recent service learning research focused on the CBO's perspective on service learning partnerships also posits the community/campus relationship as the foundation for service learning partnerships. In the largest study of community partner perspectives on service learning partnerships to date, the California Campus Compact (2007) found that factors that demonstrate valuing and nurturing the community/campus relationship were consistently referred to as having the most importance for effective service learning partnerships by all groups participating in the study.

For example, both Rose and respondents to the California Campus Compact study (2007) stressed that the most important factors for building effective community/campus partnerships involve: mutually identified roles and goals; clear lines of communication and intentional contact among partners; clear and intentional efforts to understand each other's realities; informal connections; and expressing appreciation.

## **RELATIONAL PROCESSES**

This emphasis on relationship highlights the importance of process. Relational processes are major factors in an enterprise that heavily depends on relationships (Maurrasse, 2001).

The importance of relational processes is clearly highlighted by the factors identified by both our community partner and the California Campus Compact (2007) study as most important for effective community/campus partnerships. For example, in addition to the those identified above, other identified factors of effective partnerships that signal the importance of relational processes include: significant contact between the CBO and faculty; knowledge of, and access to, resources; procedures for addressing student behavior at the field site; CBO input into academic assignments from the college; and CBO input into the particular students assigned to the site.

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*The community/campus relationship is the foundation of the service learning partnership.*

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## **PROCESS AND ASSESSMENT**

Relational processes operationalize community/campus relationships. That is, relational processes make community/campus relationships visible and, since the community/campus relationship is the foundation of the service learning partnership, this visibility provides a point of access to assess the health of service learning partnerships.

For example, by identifying significant contact between the CBO and faculty and access to resources as key relational processes that lead to effective community/campus partnerships, one can evaluate the health of the partnership by looking at the level of access to resources and quality of contact between the CBO and faculty.

Now, this is not meant to imply that we should ignore whether or not specific goals are met by particular service learning projects when evaluating partnerships. Clearly, concrete outcomes that improve the lives of real people are the end-goals of most service learning partnerships. However, assessment of such partnerships should focus on the processes involved in the relationship since it is the community/campus relationship, and the relational processes that engender the relationship, that form the foundation of the partnerships (Maurrasse, 2001).

### **EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY/CAMPUS RELATIONSHIPS ARE A LIVED REALITY**

It is important to note that both our community partner and the respondents in the California Campus Compact study (2207) stress that the fundamental nature of effective community/campus relationships is ongoing and based on trust and reciprocity, not static and based on mutual obligations.

For example, community partners assert that partnerships need to be “fed” and one cannot assume that the partnership will stay the same over time. They maintain that sustainability only comes when partners continually work at building relationships and when there is a certain “humanity” to the whole enterprise (California Campus Compact, 2007).

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*Community partners seem to view effective community/campus relationships as living, organic entities that change over time and need to be nurtured in order to sustain their effectiveness.*

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Clearly, the community partners referenced in this paper understand effective community/campus relationships as a reality that manifests in the day-to-day interactions among partners. It seems that community partners do not view effective community/campus relationships as utilitarian arrangements based on mutual obligations that spring-up when a need arises to forward a particular agenda. Community partners seem to view effective community/campus relationships as living, organic entities that change over time and need to be nurtured in order to sustain their effectiveness.

### **CBO AS EDUCATOR**

A second theme identified by our community partner during our conversations about effective community/campus partnerships that is also identified in the California Campus Compact study concerns the role the CBO plays in educating college students. Community partners expressed a significant awareness of the benefits of service learning for students and viewed educating students as part of their responsibilities, even when such responsibilities are not explicitly part of their partnership agreement (California Campus Compact, 2007).

For example, both the respondents to the California Campus Compact (2007) study and our community partner consistently referred to the “hands-on” experiences provided by service learning projects to students as a significant benefit for students’ education. They pointed out that this “hands-on” experience enables students to apply theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom to a field experience provided by the community partner.

Moreover, our community partner made the profound observation that service learning field experiences provide benefits to students that other field courses, such as student teaching, do

not. For example, our community partner recalled that when she did her student teaching courses as an undergraduate, because she had so many assignments, she did not have time to focus on any of the nuances of classroom teaching, or the time to reflect on her own personal development as a teacher.

Indeed, this is an insightful observation. The primary focus of most student teaching courses is aimed at developing specific skill sets such as curriculum development, pedagogy and classroom management. However, while these specific skills sets are obviously critical to classroom teaching, the rigors of student teaching courses leave little time for students to develop more nuanced aspects of teaching.

For example, student teachers need time to reflect on their own personal histories and assumptions about children and how their preexisting assumptions, and the expectations that such assumptions can lead to, may impact them as teachers. The value of such reflection should not be underestimated. Merton's (1948) self-fulfilling prophecy effect shows that teacher expectations about the academic ability of an individual child, or an entire class of children, may influence their curricular, instructional, and evaluative decisions.

## DISCUSSION

Undoubtedly, understanding how community partners view effective service learning partnerships is vital to developing effective partnerships. That in-depth attempts at understanding the perspective of community partners are now being made at both the local level and through large scale investigations is, clearly, an important step forward for the service learning movement.

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For example, such investigations have shown that community partners, during both informal one-on-one conversations and large scale formal surveys, seem to agree on two basic themes concerning effective service learning partnerships. First, community partners seem to place a great deal of emphasis on relationships and acknowledge community/campus relationships as the foundation for effective community/campus service learning partnerships. They articulate such relationships as a lived reality that manifests in day-to-day interactions that are characterized by trust and reciprocity.

Second, community partners recognize educating college students as part of their responsibilities and affirm their role as educators as vital to the effectiveness of the partnership. They point out that the "hands-on" experiences they provide enables students to apply theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom to concrete situations at the CBO site.

Further, by identifying these two themes of effective service learning partnerships, other advantages for partnerships come to the surface. For example, the primary focus on relationships as the foundation for partnerships highlights the importance of relational processes and yields relational processes as an important evaluative tool for assessing the health of service learning partnerships. Also, by articulating community/campus relationships

as a lived-reality, the CBO alerts both partners of the need to respect and nurture the relationship in an on-going manner. Additionally, asserting the role of the CBO in educating students demonstrates, especially to the campus, that the CBO needs to be included in academic decisions.

## **REFERENCES**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Peter Fiume** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences at Kingsborough Community College, currently teaching a wide range of courses in the Department's education programs. In addition to his teaching duties, Dr. Fiume is Kingsborough's faculty representative to the CUNY BA program and faculty coordinator of Kingsborough's Service Learning Program. Dr. Fiume received the Ed.D. from Columbia University and the M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary in NYC. Dr. Fiume's research interests and most recent publications include an empirical study exploring possible connections between religiosity and entrepreneurial behavior and a theoretical piece proposing theoretical and pedagogical frameworks for mobilizing the diversity commonly found in NYC's public college classrooms as a resource for learning.