

ADVANCING NONPROFIT SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

The strength of our service learning project has been our development of partnerships with non-profit community service agencies, many of which were start up businesses. The discipline in which we enjoyed the greatest success was Small Business Management. We targeted non-profit organizations in part because of the economic downturn and had more interest and requests than we had capacity to respond to. Students in the Small Business Management class assisted non-profits with the development of their business plans designed to enhance or expand their services or programs.

Four groups of students and one individual student assisted five non-profit entities with the development of business plans. The partner interviewed for this article is *Alaska's Unique Riders Overcoming Risk & Adversity (AURORA)*. The mission of AURORA is "to develop and promote awareness of equine therapy in Alaska." AURORA provides education, riding programs, and other activities for the benefit of individuals with physical, psychological, emotional or other disabilities. In like manner, AURORA provides community members opportunities to get involved in an endeavor that promotes a positive and safe environment for at-risk youth.

PARTNERSHIP STRENGTHS

AURORA was able to identify several strengths of the partnership with Mat-Su College. The students did a good job researching numerous aspects of their operation, analyzing gaps, identifying existing and prospective competition, opportunities and resources. One of the organization's principals reported that the students showed a genuine interest in their business, worked well as a team, distributed work equitably and created a well received presentation for potential board members and other interested parties.

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While working with the students slowed AURORA's business plan development to some extent, the outside perspective and opportunity to step back and reflect are resulting in the entity's getting more things correct at the outset. Working with the students puts the organization on a more solid foundation. AURORA is in the process of applying for grants and believes they are now better positioned to compete for these funds. Our partner was not able to initially identify ways to strengthen the partnership (or any weaknesses therein).

Some of the specific opportunities and benefits derived from AURORA's participating in service learning were learning about the students and their strengths and weaknesses. A wide range of ages were represented in the student group and their varied perspectives enriched the process. Our community partner welcomed the college's involvement and the students were excellent ambassadors. While they were aware that the college is in the community, they had not previously known what we do. Service learning has opened doors and expanded outside connections for AURORA and Mat-Su College.

PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES

The only threat identified was that if completion of the business plan had been time-sensitive, the amount of time necessary to arrive at a finished product would have been an issue.

Mat-Su College's business faculty member identified several questions of interest to her. The first was whether the business plan was submitted in a usable format. Our partner indicated that the plan was usable and the only items they may consider adding are testimonials regarding the benefits of their services. She believes that 100 percent of the plan items will be utilized.

Another question was whether our community partner felt the students took ownership in the project, acting as if they were a part of the organizational team. Again, she replied in the affirmative and this is evident in some of the use of personal pronouns (we, our, etc.) in the business plan itself. She had no doubts about the sincerity of the students' interest in the organization. Our partner surmised that one student had close personal/family experience with a disability, and this person did considerable research on both the condition and potential therapeutic benefit of learning about horsemanship as one means of enriching an individual's life.

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In response to a question about the organization's interest in having students continue their participation after completion of the class assignment, our community partner stated that some have, and she regards this favorably. Volunteer or employment prospects may emerge from the partnership. She could not identify any reasons why they would not want to continue working with current or future students. In reply to a question about AURORA's interest in participating in a project or organization planning process with Mat-Su College in the future, our community partner not only stated that they definitely would like to do so, but that other organizations have expressed an interest in working with us, further expanding our future partnership opportunities.

Our partner was asked whether interaction with the students and their input caused her organization to look at itself differently. This was the case in several regards. It gave them a broader awareness of the larger community and public's perceptions. They learned what the

community knows and does not know about their business. AURORA also learned that a greater number of community members have a general interest in horses and disability services than previously thought. It helped them get out of their “tunnel vision!”

CONCLUSION

In regard to possible improvements in the process, our community partner could not think of many. The business plan outline was not only helpful to the students as they organized their work and plan, but to AURORA as well. It reinforced the benefit of securing legal and business expertise related to liability, payroll, insurance, etc. She thought the plan was a little bit “light” in regard to the estimated bottom line of business costs. Our partner did not offer any suggestions for enhancing the students’ learning experience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Karen Backlund is the Career Development Coordinator at Matanuska-Susitna College in Palmer, Alaska. Ms. Backlund is a newcomer to service learning, but her interest in community service and engagement spans several decades. She has over ten years of experience in the career counseling, development and job training arena. Prior to this, she worked as an administrator and instructor of adult basic education, including GED and English as a Second Language (ESL). Karen received her M. Ed. in Counseling and Guidance from the University of Alaska Anchorage and her B.A. in Social Studies, Secondary Education from Bethel University in Arden Hills, MN. She has taught *Career and Lifestyle Counseling* in Alaska Pacific University’s Counseling Psychology Master’s program. Ms. Backlund’s penchant for and love of lifelong learning permeates her work. In keeping with the spirit of service learning, she believes that we all learn best by doing and is willing to take risks and lead by example.