

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

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Liz Meyer, Mesa Community College

## INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Mesa Community College Center for Service-Learning is to promote excellence in teaching and learning through the integration of academic study with active service. We collaborate with the community, encourage civic engagement, promote personal growth, and foster social responsibility. We exist to provide students with educational opportunities through community service by placement in government agencies, educational entities, civic organizations, or citizen advocacy groups. We also help identify community needs by maintaining and developing partnerships between the college, students, and the community. The center also provides assistance to faculty who are interested in developing service learning components in their classes.

The Mesa Arts Academy is a free charter school that integrates the Arts into a rigorous academic curriculum. A high quality alternative for kindergarten through eighth grade students, Mesa Arts Academy offers studies in Reading, Math, Social Studies, Science, Drama, Dance, Music and the Visual Arts. With more than 215 students, Mesa Arts Academy provides quality educational and arts-based programs for primary and intermediate grade levels. Mesa Arts Academy provides a "positive school climate" for all of its students. Mesa Arts Academy treats each student with respect and guides students in the discovery and development of their individual talents. Classes are open to all interested youth, regardless of race, creed, disability or financial status. Students are accepted on a first-come, first-serve basis.

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The Community Asset and Resource Enterprise (CARE) was founded in 1994 and incorporated as a non-profit 501c3 in 1996 as a vehicle for mobilizing the caring power of community to ensure that all people have the availability of health, wellness, education and leadership opportunities. CARE develops individual and community capacity by promoting civic engagement through service, leadership development and advocacy. When people provide service for others, they are valued, they recognize their power and they connect to the community; and as they become safer, healthier and more self-sufficient, our community is strengthened through their contribution.

Initially, neighbors partnered to help each other by conducting exchange programs for children's clothing, food and services (childcare, transportation, home repairs, etc.), ridding the community of drug houses, negotiating a truce among rival gangs by establishing work programs, forming tutoring and mentoring programs for children, leadership training, ESL, adult education classes, and more! Based on success since that modest beginning, CARE has recruited resources from the wider community to progressively take on more and more challenges. Through CARE's efforts, the lives of over 18,000 people are enriched each year with the availability of services that are otherwise unavailable or difficult to gain access to.

## THE PARTNERSHIP

Mesa Community College has been fortunate to have found thriving community partnerships in the Community Asset and Resource Enterprise (CARE) Partnership and the Mesa Arts Academy. Both of these organizations have long worked alongside Mesa Community College to provide educational and value-clarifying service opportunities for students while addressing some of the most vital needs of our community. In interviewing these two agencies, each interviewee conveyed a passion for the community, the clients they serve, and the students at Mesa Community College.

## WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS OF PARTNERING WITH A COMMUNITY COLLEGE?

Both Bev Tittle Baker, CEO at CARE Partnership and Sue Douglas, Principal at Mesa Arts Academy, focused much of their interview responses on the strengths of the partnership. They stressed the vitality of their community partnership with Mesa Community College (MCC) to the sustainability of their programs and to providing quality service for the community.

Since both women work with youth, both commented that college students have served as role models to nurture the importance of education in younger students. Youth at CARE Partnership who may not have otherwise considered a college education have now gone on to earn Bachelor's and even Master's degrees. Bev attributes that to the presence of college volunteers from MCC.

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Sue emphasized the ability of service learning students to give individualized attention and assistance to struggling students and therefore create smaller class sizes. The presence of extra adults in her classrooms means a better ratio of students to helpers. Sue is impressed that Mesa Community College students come to do *service learning* instead of mere observation at her school. She believes that the service is of much greater value to her school and provides greater opportunity for college students to learn as well.

## WHAT ARE THE WEAKNESSES OF PARTNERING WITH A COMMUNITY COLLEGE?

The biggest weakness reported by community partners in service learning is working with the schedules of busy adult learners. Bev mentioned that breaks in community college academic schedules pose challenges for schools and after-school programs that operate on a different academic year. Sue mentioned, too, that the schedules of adult learners do not always permit them to serve at her school because the school hours conflict with work or family obligations. The busy lives of students come into play in other ways. As Sue mentioned, it is sometimes difficult for our partners to engage community college service-learners when they have their own life distractions on their mind when they come to serve.

One weakness that Sue felt she could better manage was the time and effort she contributed to recruiting volunteers and recognizing their efforts. She believes that stronger attempts on her behalf in this area might ensure more service learning students at her campus that serve more hours.

## **WHAT OPPORTUNITIES ARE DERIVED FROM THE PARTNERSHIP?**

Our partners noted a variety of opportunities that come from the service learning partnership. At CARE Partnership, Bev values the expertise of service-learners coming from a variety of disciplines and bringing with them a variety of skills. The services offered at CARE are far-reaching and she enjoys the ingenuity that new skills and ideas bring to her organization.

At Mesa Arts Academy, Sue has found that her students have experienced improved self-esteem as a result of working with community college students. She finds that her young students feel incredibly valued when college students make a special effort to come and spend time with them.

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Mesa Community College students find unique opportunities working with Sue and the children at Mesa Arts Academy as well. As Sue explained, if service-learners commit to serving at the Arts Academy for at least 50 hours, she will pay for their fingerprint clearance cards. In addition, staff at Mesa Arts will run background checks on-site, free of charge, for all volunteers serving at least 20 hours.

## **WHAT ARE THE THREATS INVOLVED IN THE PARTNERSHIP?**

Bev said that the main threat she perceived in working with a community college partner was the risk of losing the partnership. Without volunteer efforts and support, she said she could not imagine having the capacity to run the kinds of programs she runs or serve the large population she serves.

Sue had trouble imagining a threat posed by partnership, but did mention that she does not always know who is walking through her doors when a service learning student comes in to her office. Sometimes service learning students are high-maintenance helpers who are unable to contribute as much as their peers because they require so much staff attention themselves. Not all MCC students have been a good fit, and teachers have asked not to have them remain in their classrooms.

## **WHAT TASKS DO SERVICE LEARNERS PERFORM THAT ARE BENEFICIAL TO YOUTH?**

Bev appreciates that not only do service learning students provide homework assistance, program planning, physical activities, nutrition and safety activities for those at CARE, but that they also have initiated projects of their own creation based on their skills and interests.

Sue mentioned that her teachers also appreciate when community college students can go above and beyond small group work, tutoring, and homework help to do some preparatory work before classes, provide additional supervision at recess, and simply spend time with students. Sue emphasized again and again the value her young students find in themselves when a college student spends time even talking with them.

## WHAT IMPROVEMENTS HAVE SERVICE LEARNERS HAD A PART IN ACHIEVING?

Both Bev and Sue have seen increased academic gains in the youth at their agencies. Bev finds that not only have youth been encouraged to continue their education through high school and beyond, but that they have received more scholarships, better grades, and additional academic distinctions. Sue has seen test scores increase significantly since service learning students have been in her classrooms.

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## WHAT OTHER ROLES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE SERVICE LEARNING STUDENTS PERFORM?

Because CARE Partnership is a growing community organization constantly looking to increase programs and possibilities, Bev would like to see additional service learning students serve from more departments and in more capacities. She recognizes and values the expertise of community college service learning students and expressed a need for service-learners in her dental clinic in particular.

At Mesa Arts Academy, Sue would love to see more opportunity for her students to build their self-esteem through mentoring. She expressed a hope to see additional service-learners come with that focus in mind.

## HOW DOES SERVICE LEARNING ASSIST YOU IN SERVING COMMUNITY NEEDS?

Bev said simply that service learners are involved in everything. MCC students currently serve in most all of CARE's efforts and provide a structure to help keep CARE a part in serving the Mesa community.

Sue said that service learning builds the community. When her administrative building burned down last year, Sue remembers how service learning students from MCC came to beautify her campus with a mural. People from the surrounding community came to add their own strokes of paint to the project. Sue sees that the seeds service learning students plant get carried home by the youth at Mesa Arts Academy and flower into brighter futures for her students.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Elizabeth Meyer** serves as a Program Specialist in Mesa Community College's Center for Service-Learning. She coordinates service activities with the ASSETS grant, works with MCC instructors who teach evening and online classes, and assists with the AmeriCorps program on campus. Liz received her Bachelor's Degree in Studio Arts and English from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Following graduation, she served a year as a full-time AmeriCorps member teaching English as a Second Language and GED classes, worked and volunteered in the public library system, and rode her bicycle across the continent to alleviate world poverty.