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Community-Campus Partnerships and Student Learning: Using Lessons Learned to Chart a Path for the Future

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Abstract

Institutions of higher learning are being called upon more than ever to establish and nurture sustainable partnerships with local communities. In particular, the language of Jesuit mission and identity lends itself to community engagement work and developing the civic skills of our students. These efforts can provide transformative experiences for campus communities, fundamentally altering and perforating the boundaries between campus and community. Yet partnerships present significant challenges. Mission differences, variations in institutional capacity, and divergent cultures can all potentially stand in the way of long-lasting partnerships, particularly when many actors are involved. After trial and error, reviewing best practices in campus-community partnerships, and relying on the rich heritage of Jesuit educational pedagogy and practice, educators at Loyola University Maryland developed a set of take-away principles. These lessons learned now serve as a guide for conversations about entering into both transactional and transformational partnerships on campus. The principles act as a type of roadmap for future engagement with the local community in order to provide high-quality civic learning opportunities for students.

As civic engagement professionals, the community partners with whom we work sometimes lament being referred to as a “service site” or “volunteer placement.” Too impersonal and focused simply on the transaction, they complain. Rightly so, we would argue. But typically, students are encouraged to seek out volunteer opportunities simply to enhance career image, spend extra free time, or find direction for choosing a major and eventual career path. These motives might be effective starting points for students, but our students should, ultimately, be challenged to think more deeply about their experiences in the community. As student interest in community engagement and volunteerism rises across the country, our colleges and universities will be compelled to develop and enhance our community partnerships. From the perspective of the Jesuit intellectual heritage from which we write, the mandate to seek a “faith that does justice” places us in a unique position to model rich,

transformative relationships with our local communities. These partnerships serve to deepen student learning, as many student affairs educators consider community partners to be important and influential co-educators.

Key themes in Catholic social thought give direction to partnerships on Jesuit campuses, particularly the themes of subsidiarity and solidarity. In *Living Justice*, Thomas Massaro suggests that we “cannot realize our full potential or appreciate the full meaning of our dignity unless we share our lives with others and cooperate on projects that hold the promise of future benefit.”¹ When applied to colleges and universities, the sentiment presents a bold challenge to campuses on how they view their role within the local community. That is, is the campus seen as inextricably linked to the local community, largely distinct and separate from it, or somewhere in between? Equally, valuing the

importance of subsidiarity and local decision-making limits the inherent power differences in community-campus partnerships and thereby promotes real listening on the part of both parties. These two themes can challenge campuses to stay faithful to their stated missions. While there are an assortment of other conceptual lenses through which to view community-campus partnerships, the lenses that encourage colleges and universities to view themselves as participating and active members "of the community" -- and not simply as "in the community" -- seem to align most closely with Jesuit mission and values. As Barbara Jacoby states in *Building Partnerships for Service-Learning*, "too many community agencies have complained of being used as 'learning laboratories' or having been 'partnered to death' by universities."² Campuses should tread carefully before entering into partnerships and should regularly assess successes and areas for growth with existing relationships.

Most Jesuit institutions have been involved in important work that has drawn from, and contributed to, our understandings of Catholic social thought and effective community engagement. Looking to these experiences to find the lessons learned can chart a path for deeper partnerships in the future. At Loyola University Maryland, the experience of partnerships through the Center for Community Service and Justice (CCSJ) has fundamentally changed the way the institution approaches old and new partnerships today. Some examples below illustrate lessons learned from partnerships with selected community partner agencies. But these lessons are far from campus-specific; the learning is transferable to the realities of many campuses.

Choose your partners wisely. While some partnerships emerge out of strategic and intentional decisions, others develop out of situational needs and converging forces. Regardless of their origins, partnerships work best when both parties are clear and honest about the self-interest and capacity of each member. Similarly, both partners should have established mission statements and an ethos of collaboration. Loyola recently partnered with a local elementary school, and both institutions excitedly celebrated their shared commitment to one another. The

initial energy and enthusiasm sustained the partnership, a relationship that grew out of a newly stated direction for the campus and newly realized needs for the elementary school. Yet the partnership struggled because of the mismatched capacity of both institutions, and expectations -- while initially set high -- were eventually lowered. In another instance, Loyola's relationship many years ago with a local Police Athletic League center was initiated because of personal connections with senior administrators. A shaky foundation and a lack of long-term goals contributed to a lackluster partnership with irregular communication, inconsistent work for students, and significant challenges with organizational structure and staffing. Ultimately, the PAL centers in Baltimore lost their city funding, and the partnership faded. Conversely, when Loyola first partnered with Project HEALTH, a national case management program largely led by students and sponsored by Baltimore's health department, both groups evaluated their capacity and maintained a healthy reluctance to simply "add one more program" without assessing long-term goals and the mutual benefits of partnering.

Respect the knowledge located within the community. Power dynamics will inevitably play a role in community-campus partnerships. Acknowledging and deferring to the experience and accumulated wisdom within the community can attenuate inequalities in power between campus and community. Navigate these complexities by acknowledging and talking about them. Include partner representatives in decision-making and advisory committees as often as possible. At Loyola, for example, the service-learning and reflection advisory committees both rely on the perspective of several community partners -- as advisors and co-educators -- to help direct the work of each group. This respect builds an atmosphere of trust and mutual investment. Service-learning faculty members regularly include community partners in project development, presentations and assessment of student learning.

Engage in formative conversations. Even the most well-intentioned and well-matched partners will encounter difficulty without strong communication and planning at the start of a

relationship. In these formative conversations, acknowledge and describe the differences between campus and community, especially cultural differences. Articulate the risks, describe tension points and identify the assets of each partner. Loyola's relationship with a local meal program, now spanning more than 20 years, was negotiated from a place of strength and understanding for each partner. The meal program could provide valuable opportunities and space for Loyola students and Loyola could support and supplement the services of the program. In addition, members of both parties had an intimate understanding of one another's organization. From this place, the institutions set far-reaching goals so that each institution's interests could be met.

Formalize and recognize the nature of the partnership and expectations of all parties.

This can happen in a variety of ways: Establish a task force or steering committee with an action plan and assigned responsibilities, create a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with expectations and criteria for the partnership during the formation of a partnership, or put strategic goals in writing. In the example of the meal program, Loyola and staff at the meal program collaborated to write a joint mission statement for the project that provided strategic direction and public recognition for the partnership. This also helps to make sure that a partnership's end goals -- for example, deep student learning and appreciation for a community's assets -- remain at the forefront. This helps institutional and community leaders plan with the end in mind.

Choose justice over charity. Make sure that the key players in your community-campus partnerships see the relationships as reciprocal and the resources as shared. When developing strategic goals, keep social justice goals (i.e., transforming structures of inequality) at the forefront. Look to partnerships with the community as one vehicle to transform the world and be transformed. Recently, Loyola committed to becoming more engaged in the neighborhood immediately surrounding the university. A campus-wide committee was formed to examine the university's options and to chart a course.

Loyola's past experiences partnering with community members had taught us about the richness and wisdom located within the community. Instead of independently determining what we thought the community needed to address the challenges we all faced, Loyola embarked on an eight-month Listening Project that culminated in a presentation of the results to 150 community members. The project engaged over 30 administrators and faculty in individual interviews with residents, business owners, police officers and stakeholders in the community to learn about how Loyola could best engage with them. As a result, the University launched the York Road Initiative, a comprehensive community engagement initiative that works together with neighbors to enhance area education and youth development, build civic capacity and strengthen the commercial corridor bordering the Loyola campus.

Clearly articulate and define staff roles. Both universities and community agencies must occasionally deal with staff turnover and organizational restructuring. Community-campus partnerships will struggle if staff roles are not clearly defined; other priorities and interests will surely take precedence if the partnership itself is not prioritized. Likewise, partnerships based on personalities and individual relationships, while often strong and vibrant, can soon fade as positions and people change. As such, it is critical to include partnership-specific responsibilities in the job descriptions of staff at both institutions whenever possible. Loyola's relationship with the meal program in downtown Baltimore has evolved through many phases. But the relationship has been maintained, in large part, because each organization included the joint work of the partnership in a staff member's duties.

Seek support and direction from campus leadership. Occasional, direct communication between leaders of partner institutions will maintain strength and direction, even if others are involved in the day-to-day work of the partnership. Executive leadership can also bolster the partnership in its initial stages. The example of Loyola's recent partnership with a nearby elementary school had these elements -- strong support and a compellingly shared vision at the

beginning helped generate a sense of ownership across the campus. That support involved senior leaders from both institutions who tied the partnership to both schools' missions and values. Similarly, Loyola's partnership with the meal program in downtown Baltimore relies on fairly regular conversations between directors -- those who may be once or twice removed from the daily activities and who are charged with maintaining a broad, overarching view -- to ensure that both partners stay true to their stated missions.

Facilitate ongoing communication and formal/informal evaluation meetings. Once established, partnerships can sometimes run the risk of entering into "auto-pilot" mode. When patterns are developed, needs are consistent on both sides, and programs are carried out year after year. To combat and prevent this, it is essential to regularly assess the health of a partnership, especially at key transition moments. This was illustrated by Loyola's longstanding partnership with a community center in northwest Baltimore, which slowly entered into a rhythm over the course of 25 years. Volunteers and service-learning students supported several programs, and the community center partnered with several faculty members year after year. Through staff transitions, the understandings and investment of all parties waned. Re-instituting regular check-in meetings helped both partners to re-envision the partnership. These conversations create familiarity with the work of each institution and maintain commitment to support each other's long-term goals. Additionally, partnerships produce incredible results, particularly in the lives of students; don't underestimate the importance of sharing those students' evaluative feedback with partners as well as creative work they have done. That work can help inspire new energy and enthusiasm for the partnership. Several service-learning professors at Loyola spend regular time with partner representatives to keep lines of communication open, to gather ideas for new projects based on emerging needs, and to share significant highlights from the semester. These ongoing conversations serve to build trust and shared responsibility for each other's needs.

Dedicate time to community partner and campus education. Bringing campuses and nonprofit agencies together can often feel like

mixing apples and oranges. Differing institutional styles, structures, and goals can potentially, at best, challenge partners to grow and, at worst, set up unrealistic expectations and foster disappointment and discontent. Assist partners in understanding campus culture, priorities, language and capacity from the outset to avoid such pitfalls. Likewise, spend time learning about the culture, history, and ethos of community partners, both new and long-established. Similarly, educate campus partners on the local community's assets and needs and the overall, reciprocal work of the partnership. Staff members from the community center in northwest Baltimore have visited campus regularly for donor lunches for Loyola's holiday donation program and welcome lunches for an annual summer campus hosted by the university. These gatherings serve to "give a face" to the partner and gently encourage people to move from supporting charitable giving to working for social justice.

Establish a centralized campus resource/clearinghouse for community partnerships. Establishing common understandings about partnerships across campus ensures that partnerships follow institutional priorities and mission. Although campuses are challenged by decentralized initiatives, ideally, one department can serve as the center for community partner development. A centralized clearinghouse will also ensure that individuals do not duplicate efforts and can build a network of collaboration across campus. Individuals can draw on experience, lessons-learned, resources, research and knowledge of other relationships and activities across campus. Loyola's CCSJ attempts to serve in a community partnership advisory role for the campus, but also relies on expertise from other campus clearinghouses, such as the School of Education and the York Road Initiative.

These "lessons learned" are never static. New lessons are always emerging in new contexts and with new partners. As our campus proceeds in engaging in the community through community-campus partnerships, we will continue to refine and reflect on our relationships. These partnerships have transformed how we practice new partnerships, the ways in which we engage in local and global communities and how we proceed internally. Our campus mission to work for

justice in both the global world and in our local neighborhoods and to form students to be men and women for and with others can begin through the work of these reciprocal community-campus partnership. ¹

Notes

¹ Thomas Massaro, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 120.

² Barbara Jacoby and Associates, eds., *Building Partnerships for Service-Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003), xviii. For additional scholarly resources on partnerships, see Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher, "Campus-Community Partnerships: The Terms of Engagement," *Journal of Social Issues* 58, no. 3 (2002):503-516; Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, *Achieving the Promise of Authentic Community-Higher Education Partnerships: Community Partners Speak Out* (Seattle, WA: Author, 2007); Portland State University Center for Academic Excellence, *A Guide to Reciprocal Community-Campus Partnerships: Proceedings from Portland State University's Partnership Forum* (Portland, OR: Author, 2008); Jan Torres, *Benchmarks for Campus/Community Partnerships* (Providence: Campus Compact, 2000).

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