AASLH
TECHNICAL LEAFLET
A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY
#279

Students and Community Organizations: Creating Productive Partnerships

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Graduate students participate in a window restoration workshop.

Partnerships with community organizations and local stakeholders are extremely beneficial for students in undergraduate and graduate programs. These partnerships can take a number of forms, from volunteering to class projects to internships and more intensive thesis opportunities. Service learning overall has proven to be a benefit to students, communities, and academic institutions. Working in communities gives students the opportunity to learn and practice skills that are not easily relayed in a classroom environment. Creating successful partnerships requires education, reciprocity, and clearly articulated structures.[1]

Whether you are working in a public history program or engaging in service learning with your regular history class, engagement with the community can be rewarding and inspiring. There is no greater feeling than to know that you made a difference, and students are typically appreciative of the opportunity to do something "real" with their coursework. Creating these positive experiences requires the development of solid partnerships with local institutions and groups, where each side understands the stakes and the expectations. Something as simple as negotiating academic and traditional business calendars can present real problems by the end of a project. While many community organizations are interested in working with students, not all understand the realities and needs of the student population. It is the responsibility of program advisors and professors to both protect and promote their students while still cultivating productive partnerships.

What Do We Want for Our Students?

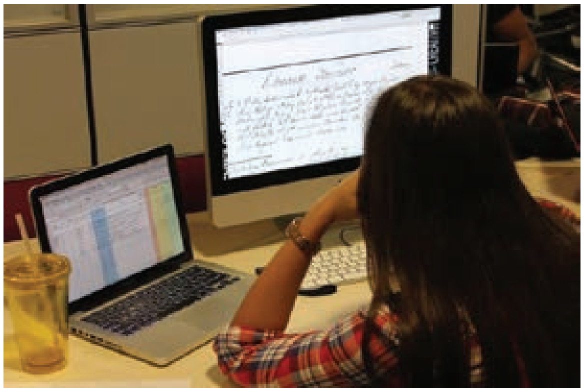
One of the first questions to ask within our degree programs is "What do we want for our students?" There are many answers to this question. It is imperative to decide what these priorities are before we approach potential collaborators, negotiate with new partners, or renegotiate existing relationships. The priorities listed here are examples, and yours may be different.

First and foremost, we want students to have an educational experience. We want them to be able to interact with the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and make tangible connections between their classroom work and the real world. Second, we want students to have a professional experience, one that teaches them lessons they cannot learn in the classroom. Some of these experiences will shape who they become once they leave the university setting or direct their future educational trajectories. Third, we want to teach them the processes of collaboration in a real-world setting. Finally, we want them to be compensated for this work. This does not have to be financial; it depends on the type of interaction we are negotiating and the end product. Teaching students that their labor as historians and professionals has market value and that compensation comes from their labor is an important lesson.

In addition to asking these more basic questions about our wants relative to students, we should also consider what we want for our programs. We want a group of invested, reliable partners to work with students. We want our institutions to be considered valuable assets to their communities. We want to have programs that produce students who are prepared for the challenges of the workforce. We want to help students meet their educational and career goals. We want our administrators to see the value of our work and the contributions of our students to our institutions and communities. Consider having a larger conversation with your advisory board, department, or stakeholders to find the answers that best fit your program and its needs. These are the roots of mission and program statements and can help guide you in creating the best possible collaborations.

Creating Firm Definitions

One important way to create productive partnerships between community partners and classes or programs is by creating firm definitions. Programs need to decide and clearly articulate the parameters for student interactions. Supervision, hours, compensation, and deliverables need to be worked out before opportunities are offered to students or agreements are made. By developing consistent definitions in advance of conversation with partners, programs are more likely to deal fairly and consistently with all stakeholders. When the "ask" happens, the moment where we are approached with a new project or collaboration, we want to be prepared. Far more productive than just saying "Yes" are the more textured responses that occur when a system is in place. While "Maybe, let's talk" may not sound like the most encouraging answer when we want to build relationships, it is the more prudent path to protecting the needs of all involved. Know ahead of time what types of partnership structures you are able to offer and the



An undergraduate student transcribes an eighteenth-century-ledger as part of a service learning project.

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specifics of those structures. Below are a few examples of how these partnerships might be defined both for the program and for community partners. They are not absolutes, but only a model to begin discussion.

Thesis and Dissertation Projects: For those involved in graduate programs, some thesis and dissertation projects will involve community partners. In these instances, the student is largely self-directed. While there may well be stakeholders who act as clients or partners in these projects, the goal for the student is to demonstrate mastery of the field. These projects may or may not be paid opportunities. But if the partner institution will gain financially from the product, or it is work that they might otherwise have hired a consultant to complete, it is most appropriate for the partner to provide a stipend or other funding for the student completing the work. While hour limits are not in place for these types of projects, it is important to work with the student as they develop their own project scope. Make sure that an agreement is in place between the partner and the student that outlines exactly what work will be completed, what deliverables will look like, and what deadlines are in place. If the project requires a budget, it should also be developed in advance of agreeing to the project.

Internships: An internship is an agreement where a student works with a community partner a certain number of hours (typically 120 to 150) over a single semester. Ideally this student would be financially compensated through hourly wages or a semester

Preparing Students for Partnerships

Many of our students do not get a lot of professional training along the way.

Starting a relationship with a community partner, either for an internship or in a class setting, can be very intimidating for them at both the undergraduate and graduate level. It is a good idea to offer some training for your students before they begin. Check with your university to see if it has a career services office. Those offices frequently give workshops on how to get ready for the business world. This includes professional dress, how to speak to supervisors, and punctuality. They might also have best practices training for new interns. If these are not available, consider spending at least one class period or having an internship orientation where you discuss some professional skills.

Communication is one of the areas that students become most nervous about. Teach them how to write a professional email, leave a voicemail, and how to address community partners. Many of our students are used to instant and impersonal communication like text messages. Explain how long they should expect to wait for return emails and phone calls. You should also coach them on when a phone call is a better option than an email. Creating online modules that can be placed into a learning management system, a library page, or onto a department website could also help with skills training. Meeting with your community partner, either in person or via Skype, can also be helpful. It makes the relationship seem more real when they can put a face and an expectation with a project.

stipend. The community partner is considered a co-educator and therefore should meet educational standards. The supervisor should have an M.A. in the field of the internship or a B.A. and commensurate experience in the field. Students are expected to meet with their onsite supervisors at least once a week for direction and instruction. The supervisor and student develop clearly defined goals for the term of the internship at the start and submit them to the person overseeing the internship from the university side. Over the course of the semester, or at its end, the student will draft a reflective essay that considers what they learned in their internship and how it relates to their education and career goals. This could be a semester-long blog, a paper, or a dossier of experience with smaller written components. The student then submits this piece to the campus program director. Supervisors should give students evaluations at least once during the semester, to better simulate a work environment. These also should be submitted to the program director.

Class Projects: Groups frequently undertake class projects. They fall under the classification of service learning and involve fewer hours of service than an internship, typically ten to thirty hours in a semester. These projects should fit within a semester or quarter if possible, so it is important to understand project scope before you begin the term. If the project will overrun the semester, have a plan in place for completion of the deliverables. These projects tend to have a lot of moving parts, but they are a great way to help students understand project management and working as part of a project team to achieve goals. Ideally students would meet with the client in the classroom setting. The client explains the organization, its goals, and the desired deliverables. Students can then ask questions directly. After this initial meeting, the class works as a group to complete the project. It determines (with significant input from instructors) what they want to achieve, how to divide up the work, and what deadlines they can meet. Instructors can assign roles to the group such as project manager, editor, and troubleshooter. Class projects can also be done on a more individual basis within a class where single students or pairs work on specific tasks. The entire class can be working individually for the same client or they can be working with multiple clients in smaller groups. While compensation in these instances is usually a grade for the students and a line on a C.V., some financial compensation is not out of order. Some programs request that a donation be made to a scholarship, research, or travel fund. Instructors can also ask for a share in press coverage, to have the program attributed on the final product, or that another type of compensation be provided—for example, a free workshop for the students.

Independent Projects: Some organizations will ask for a student to complete a specific short-term task. This might be research for a program, a few weekends as a docent, or finishing something that another student started. These projects are too short to fit under the above structures or to be considered for course credit but they are likely to provide a nice piece of experience for the student. While students will typically pick up these side jobs where available, it is a good idea to encourage compensation for their time. In essence, faculty have identified these students because they have specialized training in the field. They are lending their expertise to an organization to complete a specified task. Outside of the classroom we call that consulting, and consulting is rarely done for free. As always, encourage students to place this experience on a C.V. or resume.

Volunteering: Many students take on volunteering as their first exposure to the field. They may have been unable to take an internship because of the time commitment or financial constraints. It could be dedication to their favorite institution, or maybe they just want to get their feet wet. We should encourage students to volunteer where they like as long as they understand the difference between volunteering and the activities above. We should expect our students to volunteer because we are encouraging them in a field that works for the larger community. We want them to be civically engaged and to learn how institutions work. Monitoring volunteer activity is important as well. If you sense that students are being used beyond the bounds of a volunteer, then a harder conversation will likely need to happen with both the student and the partner.

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TO PROTECTING THE NEEDS OF ALL INVOLVED.

Graduate students with their community partner at Norman Film Manufacturing Company in Jacksonville, Florida. These students are on their initial site visit and client meeting.

Field Trips and Workshops: Perhaps the easiest way to introduce students to potential partners is through field trips and workshops. This could take many forms: a behind-the-scenes tour, a conversation with a curator, or a workshop on how to use Sanborn maps. It depends on what that partner can offer. A field trip is a nice first step in gauging student interest, evaluating how this partner might work with students in many capacities, and allowing students a chance to see history in action. Over time, field trips become a great way to reinforce relationships with our partners and to show our students the great value of collaboration.

Developing Relationships

Developing relationships with community partners is a two-way street. Keep in mind the partnership created must be beneficial to all involved and represent their needs and interests as equally as possible unless another arrangement has been made before you begin. Check with your department, advisory board, and institution to find out if there are requirements to formalize partnerships through a memorandum of understanding. Many institutions allow partnerships to be developed at the discretion of program directors and chairs unless there is significant collaboration, copyrights, or financial gain involved.[2]

Productive partnerships take time to build. They require trust and respect, and neither of these is built overnight. It is best to have a single contact person with whom you can develop a relationship. You might also be asked to meet with a board or with the membership to discuss your program and your goals. Be open to these types of meetings. They show good faith with potential partners and can open doors to further support within the organization. The more you build a strong relationship with the institution, the better the opportunities and outcomes will be for both organizations. Your willingness to give of your own time to meet with stakeholders and understand their needs will generally lead to a reciprocal effect where they will be willing to give time to students and to projects.

While building relationships, make sure to maintain appropriate boundaries. Many organizations need a lot of help. They may be understaffed, underfunded, have a crisis of leadership, be interested in some new perspectives, or need space for exhibition or storage. Be sure you know where you are willing to draw the line and how you will maintain a balanced relationship with all partners. Most of us are involved in public history because we want to work with the public. There is only so much we can give without overcommitting ourselves, our students, and our programs. It is best to start new partnerships on a small scale and with a fair amount of oversight, like a class project or workshop. This allows both sides to get an understanding of how the other works. It also will allow each to understand barriers and learn to communicate with each other effectively.

Another way to foster good relationships with community partners is to keep them in the loop of the program. Even if you are not working with them in a specific semester, you can keep in touch easily. Send a newsletter for the program. Invite someone from the organization to judge a research competition or serve on an advisory board. Ask if someone is interested in being a mentor. Like any relationship, productive partnerships require maintenance, respect, and communication.

From time to time you may get an email from a new organization that has heard about your program. They sometimes want to have a conversation about opportunities. Frequently they will have projects that need completion and would like a student to do the work. For these instances, have a packet of information available to send them along with an offer for a phone appointment or in-person meeting to discuss options. This packet should include information about the program, some examples of work that students have accomplished, and descriptions of the available opportunities for collaboration. Explain what constitutes a thesis project, internship, or class project, including the requirements for supervision. Encourage the organization to determine what heading their project fits under and ask that they write a job description that you might share with interested students or colleagues. The process of writing a job description, and the encouragement to see what is required for an educational experience at your institution, will help partners to refine their goals and scoping. Together you can work to create the best possible experience for students while still meeting the needs of the institution and community.

Changing the Conversation

Most of this discussion so far has focused on developing new partnerships. What about existing relationships? You may have partners in your program that have been around for a long time and expect things to work a certain way. How do we strengthen these relationships, both reinforcing our commitment to them as a partner and bringing them in line with changing expectations? They may find a newly articulated structure for student collaboration to be jarring. It may not look like the opportunities they have offered in the past, and it may disrupt their plans for the future.

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to changing the conversation with existing partners. Judge how to conduct this based on your existing relationship. The truth is, relationships change over time. A partnership that was worked out years ago by two people who are no longer involved may not work the same way now. Explain to your partners that you are working to create productive partnerships that are of maximum benefit to both students and organizations. This means creating some standardization across partnerships and developing firm guidelines.

You can also point to a need for consistency for accreditation purposes, best practices, and grading. Particularly for those opportunities that are associ-

Liabililty

Liability is an issue any time a student is engaged in off-campus activity for classroom or credit purposes. Make sure you know how your university's risk management department considers off-campus activities and collaboration. You may need to have students and partners fill out release forms or liability documents in advance of internships, classroom projects, or any type of collaboration. It is also prudent to review campus resources for harassment and counseling. Make sure students are aware of how to report an issue and whom to report it to. Reassure them they will not be in trouble if they bring issues to light. It's a good idea to have them visit the site of a potential internship or research location in advance to make sure they feel safe and can address any safety concerns with supervisors before they begin work.

ated with course credit, there must be a consistent structure in place to govern community interaction. It could mean more opportunities for collaboration or it could mean less, depending on what the organization can offer. You might consider bringing all your partners together for a larger meeting about program changes so everyone is in this together and all questions and concerns can be addressed.

Will you lose some partners and opportunities by changing the structure for partnerships? Maybe. However, if your partners are not willing to make some shifts to accommodate greater educational opportunity, then this was perhaps not a fully productive or reciprocal relationship to begin with. It does happen that partners feel alienated. You may be surprised, though, to see how many are willing to work with you or to find ways to create new options. Maybe what used to be called internships become volunteer opportunities or class projects. Or maybe what used to be unpaid internship work becomes a paid entry-level job for one of your graduates.

Graduate students meeting with their community partner. Students are on their initial site visit and client meeting at Old City Cemetery, Sacramento, California.

Funding

The discussion of funding is not an easy one. Many of us feel awkward asking for funds from institutions struggling to keep the lights on. We may have organizations approaching us that see student labor as the last hope for saving their institution. There are some questions you should consider before you ask about funding from a partner. First, what will the money be used for? Second, is this a job that a consultant would be paid for? Third, how will funds be processed? Last, what is the going rate for stipends or hourly work? If you can answer these questions, you can face most of the questions that community partners will ask.

How do we explain the need for funding? It's actually easier than you might think. One way to discuss funding with a partner is to explain that there is a finite number of trained students. Those students will gravitate to paid opportunities first. Their chances of retaining a student who will be well trained and committed to their project and institution will improve dramatically with funding. We might also explain funding as an equity issue. Not all students can afford to accept an unpaid opportunity. Many students work to afford the rising costs of college, including working full time and taking a full course load. Unpaid opportunities may not be filled even if there are students interested if they also have to work. It allows greater opportunity for all students when compensation is provided.

Unintended costs are also something that we need to look out for when discussing funding with partners. Will students need to travel to the institution? Is there a cost for parking? What about fabrication costs for potential projects? These are all issues that will create challenges for students that our partners might take for granted.

When we evaluate the work our partners ask students to do, we find that some are really asking for a student to adopt an entry-level position or to be trained for a future position at their institution. Both of these instances are typically compensated in the business world. Teaching students to value their education, experience, and labor will assist them as they move forward in their careers. We should encourage our partners to view our young professionals as such and compensate them accordingly.

At the same time, we should caution partners that funding is not magic. It will not make a student appear from thin air to accept a project. It increases the chances that a student will participate, but we do not make guarantees. Particularly in programs where students are few and potential partners are many, students can be choosy. They will select the opportunity that works best with their future career goals. Remind partners that they are also providing an educational experience and that our students and their own interests will be best served by opportunities that align with their educational goals.

Resources

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[1] This has been documented through the scholarship of teaching and learning in multiple disciplines over the past few decades. See Alexander W. Astin, Lori J. Vogelgesang, Elaine K. Ikeda, and Jennifer A. Yee, "How Service Learning Affects Students," *Higher Education* (2000): Paper 144. http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcehighered/144; Emily E. Straus and Dawn M. Eckenrode, "Engaging Past and Present: Service Learning in the College History Classroom," *The History Teacher* 47, no. 2 (February 2014): 253-66.

[2] For more examples of successful partnerships, see Brian O'Neill, "21 Partnership Success Factors," *History News* 69, no. 4 (Autumn 2014): 17-21, available at resource.aaslh.org/view/21-partnership-success-factors.