**Challenges and Opportunities of
Community Engaged Teaching
*By Joe Bandy***

For experienced and inexperienced educators alike, community engaged teaching can present unique and sometimes difficult challenges for which many
are not equipped.  However, when these
challenges are met and overcome, community engaged teaching allows students, faculty, and communities to experience profound growth.

**Time Commitment**

Of the many concerns that educators express about community engaged teaching and research, possibly the most frequent is that it takes a lot of precious time.  Indeed, it takes significant amounts of time to develop a productive working relationship with a community partner, to design projects that meet both learning and community goals, to manage the logistics of the projects as they unfold, to engage students in special skills training, and to reflect on the meaningfulness of projects with students.

**Possible Solutions:**

**Centers for Teaching and Learning**

Centers for teaching and learning offer many resources to assist you in efficiently planning community-based courses that have a high impact on students and the community.  Because each course and community project can be unique, the most useful service is usually a one-on-one consultation.  However, we also offer workshops on community engaged teaching and we host a working group on these pedagogies for experienced faculty.  Here at Vanderbilt’s Center for Teaching, the staff has extensive experience with every phase of course planning and thus can help to make your community-based teaching successful.  Please call the CFT or write [Joe Bandy](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/contact.php?who=bandy) to schedule an appointment.

**Public Service Offices**

Rely on community service offices to bridge the gap between campus and community.  Your fellow educators and your institution’s public service centers can help you to develop meaningful partnerships more efficiently.  Indeed, peers in your department and the staff of organizations such as Vanderbilt’s Office of Active Citizenship and Service ([OACS](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/oacs/)) or the [Center for Nashville Studies](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/vcns/) may have established community partners and project ideas to suit a wide variety of learning objectives.  They therefore can help make the planning much easier and help establish a positive working relationship between you and your community partner.  They also may be able to assist with services such as campus vans or other logistical necessities that your course may require.

**Community Partnership Databases**

Increasingly, many educational institutions are developing online databases that faculty, students, and community organizations can use to register needs or ideas and develop partnerships.  At Vanderbilt, multiple sites may be of service as you identify possible community partners:

* [Office of Active Citizenship and Service](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/oacs/) (OACS)
* [Office of Community, Neighborhood, and Government Relations](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cngr/)
* [Community Research and Action (CRA) Program](https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/departments/hod/graduate-programs/phd_in_community_research_and_action/community_research_and_action_program.php) and its [community engagement projects](https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/research/community-engagement/index.php)
* [Institute for Clinical and Translational Research](https://victr.vanderbilt.edu/pub/) (VICTR) [Research Match Program](https://www.researchmatch.org/)

 **Community Resources**

Likewise, your local community or government may have organizations that facilitate civic action, from volunteerism to campus partnerships.  They are likely to know of a variety of community projects that might fit with your research or teaching interests.  Please see the Vanderbilt and Community Resources links below for more information.

**Ensuring Positive Community Impact**

What if your community-based project with students turns out to be of limited impact in the community?  For many educators this is a significant concern since we would like to have our community partnerships be mutually beneficial and because we want our students to feel effective in their work.

**Possible Solutions:**

**Assessing Community Need**

To ensure a project has significant impact for a community, it is important to address a community’s most urgent needs.  Therefore it is important to rely upon well-respected community leaders and organizations for an assessment of its needs and for greater background on the issues the community faces.  This should be supplemented with academic or government research that may be available about the community.  From these needs assessments, community goals should become clearer, which in turn will allow project ideas to emerge more easily.  Again, public service offices or experienced faculty may have done this work already, so please rely upon them.

**Building Trust**

In many campus-community, or “town-gown,” relationships there are histories of miscommunication, neglect, distrust, and even conflict.  It is helpful to be aware of these histories and the dilemmas they pose for new campus-community partnerships as you enter into dialogue with community members.  Even when there are not histories of conflict, there can be an absence of communication that may cause each side to suffer misunderstandings about the other.  Open, supportive communications are therefore essential to fostering mutually beneficial partnerships.  Also helpful are public conferences, guest lectures, community talks, campus or community tours, and other exchanges that serve to build understanding and trust.  Lastly, it is important to rely upon those bridge-builders between your campus and the community, whether they are community members with ties to the campus or staff and faculty who have been active locally.

**Creative and Flexible Project Design**

When designing a project with a community partner it is important to balance both community engagement and student learning goals equitably.  This might involve some creativity and flexibility on both sides.  Educators need to be flexible in adapting the learning goals of a course to the practical needs of a community partner.  Likewise, community partners may need to be flexible in choosing projects that will provide meaningful learning experiences for students.  Open and supportive communication, mutual understanding, and trust are invaluable in this process.

**Setting Realistic Project Goals**

In defining a mutually beneficial project, it is important to set learning and community goals that are manageable for your students within the time frame of your course.  Further, it is important to communicate these goals clearly to your students and ensure they have a clear sense of what will be expected of them at every step in the course.

**Managing Community Expectations**

Community partners can be excited to have students working with them on new and valued projects, and they may have high hopes about what they can accomplish.  While this enthusiasm is important for developing a good partnership, it is important to ensure your partner knows exactly what capacities your students do and do not have, and to set realistic expectations for project goals.

**Ensuring Continuity**

Community needs often exceed the limitations of one project and the semester time frame in which most educators teach.  Therefore, it is helpful for the community and educators to develop lasting partnerships.  Not only do lasting partnerships yield multiple projects over time that can result in a cumulative impact on the community, but they also allow for the trust and mutual understanding that ease future project planning and success.   If these partnerships can be established between the community and entire departments, programs, or institutions, community needs can be addressed across multiple educators and courses over time.  This ensures even greater community impact and partnerships that are less vulnerable to the career shifts of individual faculty.

**Adhering to IRB Guidelines**

If your project involves student research with human subjects from the community, it is imperative to have all members of the research project adhere to Vanderbilt University’s [Human Research Protection Program policies and procedures](http://mcapps01.mc.vanderbilt.edu/IRB/policy%26procedures.nsf).  These ensure respect and just treatment for community members and may provided useful teaching moments with students about ethical dimensions of community research.

**Assessing Impacts**

As in any form of instruction, it is imperative to evaluate community-based teaching and its impact.  While educators typically gather student ratings of a course, there often is no such mechanism for community partner evaluation.  Community partner evaluations can be done in the midst of a project for the purposes of implementing any mid-course corrections, but they also should be done once the project is finished to determine its final impact.  This can be in the form of a final written evaluation that an educator asks them to submit, one with specific questions regarding every phase of the project – from the usefulness of project design, to student conduct, to the helpfulness of the final results.  If there is more than one partner and they have online access, using an online survey service such as Survey Monkey can ensure greater anonymity and openness.

**Additional Resources**

* Learn and Serve’s "[Building Higher Education Community Development Corporation Partnerships](https://community-wealth.org/content/building-higher-education-community-development-corporation-partnerships)"

**Ensuring Student Learning**

Another common worry is that students will not be prepared well enough to complete a community-based project successfully and that this will limit the learning experience as well as fail in helping their community partner.  While failure can happen in any teaching setting, the obligations educators and students may feel to community partners can make that prospect more worrisome.  It is therefore important to ensure students have all the preparation necessary to succeed in their projects and to benefit from the learning experience that community engagement provides.

**Possible Solutions:**

**Content**

For the greatest synergy between learning and service tasks, and for the greatest chance of project success, it is important to weave the project thoroughly into the content of the class.  It is therefore helpful to provide students with course content – readings, lectures, discussions – that develop their knowledge of community issues and their understanding of relevant theoretical perspectives.  When possible, it is helpful to have community partners suggest useful readings, provide a guest lecture, or participate in class dialogue.

**Orientation to the Community Partner**

Students may benefit from an orientation to the project and the community with their community partner, whether it is off campus or in a guest lecture.  This helps to provide students with an introduction to the community and the project goals, and better understand the synergies that exist between service and learning goals.  It also can help the students to make the community partner less abstract and enhance their sense of accountability to the project, serving as an important motivation for student performance throughout the course.

**Skills Training**

If students require skills training that will be helpful in the project – such as interviewing or film-making, just to name two – it is important to set aside time for this inside or outside of class.  In these trainings it may be helpful to rely upon colleagues or support staff who have the relevant skills.

**Ethics Training**

It is always crucial to ensure students do no harm to their partners or those they represent.  This may require special readings and discussions about potential ethical problems associated with your project and how students should avoid them.  When possible, it is useful to have community partners participate in these discussions to help sensitize and inform students, and to enhance mutual trust.

**Logistical Support**

Students may have the motivation and knowledge to complete a successful project, but if logistical difficulties such as scheduling, IRB processes, transportation, or communications mount, success is less likely.  Therefore it is important to provide students with the resources they need and that they are using them effectively.

**Assignments**

To ensure students are progressing towards the project’s learning and service goals, it is important to assign relevant readings and assess their progress through tests, reports, oral presentations, or other assignments.  If the project is substantial, it is helpful to assign its component pieces throughout the course so that students gradually build towards the final result with important comments and corrections along the way.

**What if Projects Don’t Succeed?**

What if students cannot complete the project successfully and thus fail their community partner?  If one has designed the project with realistic expectations, adequate student preparation, open communications with the community partner, and a thorough work schedule, it is unlikely that students will have nothing meaningful to share with the partner.  Indeed, because students and faculty feel accountable to the community partner, it is rare to see community-based projects yield no results whatsoever.

What is more likely is one of two scenarios:

1. Students and community partners may encounter unforeseen obstacles that limit the project outcome in some way.
2. The project’s results, especially those projects that involve original research, are not what the students or the partner expected.

In either of these cases it is important to see these as teaching moments, both for students and for the community partner.  Research or service projects conducted in the context of real world constraints may indeed surface unforeseen issues that can be the subject of intensive reflection and critical analysis.  When students have the opportunity to problem solve collaboratively to address these issues, they may learn even more about the complexities of real world contexts beyond abstract course content as well as valuable leadership skills of adaptation.  However, for these moments to have the greatest educational and community impact, educators need to have the courage to teach in the context of real world complexities and challenges.

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