



Executive Summary: Preliminary Findings of Spring 2016 Community-based Research on UW-Madison Partnerships

Authors: Elizabeth Tryon, Haley Madden, Carolina Sarmiento

"It's easy to accept the dominant narrative as fact (that service based learning courses/student collaboration is always useful and positive). However, considering the positions of community partners, particularly the smaller, more resource-strapped organizations, makes it easy to see this is not always the case. There are ways to facilitate a more streamlined, mutually beneficial partnership between community partners and the university, but it is a two-way street that must be treated with more respect."

- *Student in CSCS 570, Community-based Research*

In spring 2016, the Morgridge Center for Public Service partnered with a community-based research (CBR) course in Civil Society and Community Studies, School of Human Ecology, to design and implement a semester-long CBR project to better understand the viewpoints of community organizations that partner with UW through student volunteers in academic and extracurricular contexts. This is a summary of some of our preliminary findings, which can be contrasted with a similar project completed by Beth Tryon and Randy Stoecker in 2006 (see Appendix). We hope this comparative analysis is the first of three summaries of this research, which also included organization priorities and experiences, and the organizations' perspectives on impact.

Methodology

The preliminary part of this project involved an online survey sent to over 100 organizations, of which 51 responded. Based on that initial feedback, four focus groups with representatives from 21 community organizations shared their perspectives on UW-community relationships. Twenty-one organizations agreed to give an additional hour of their time for in-depth interviews to further enhance and expand themes that developed in the focus groups. All responses were confidential. Student coding and brief analysis developed themes around these relationships.

Preliminary Findings

Results are still being analyzed as of this date, but an important preliminary finding is that many community partners have well-established relationships with specific faculty and staff at UW. They now have a better understanding and awareness of UW-Madison, its resources, and how to access them, and many are interested in pursuing deeper partnerships through collaborative, cumulative, and equitable research projects. They are also finding that when students' passion, skills, and experience match their objectives, hosting them can go beyond simple increased productivity to an enrichment of community capacity.

Other findings that help us better understand where we are compared to 2006 fall into these main categories:

- **Institutional support and access:** As they were ten years before, partners are still looking for streamlined avenues such as a portal, database or staff network to help them discover potential university project partners, and still express frustration about finding appropriate faculty/staff or student support without previous personal connections. Many expressed an interest in partnering with UW in new and expanded ways. Some are also interested in being invited into the classroom as co-educators for community-based learning classes, or co-designers for community-based research projects. Partners expressed interest in playing an active role in choosing student volunteers and introducing them to the community organization's work. Additionally, they want ways to easily advertise volunteer opportunities across UW.
- **Communication and relationships:** Community members are still concerned about how communication occurs with students/instructors about time and expectations for project work, and express frustration when students simply are not the right fit for the organization. Community partners desire increased instructor involvement and student accountability. Too often, instructors/faculty do not communicate with community partners throughout the semester, hindering the relationship development between instructors and community partners and placing undue burden on community partners if issues arise with the student volunteer. This was mentioned in 2006, and cited again as illustrated by the following quote from an interviewee: "[we want to be] having instructors and staff know the importance of their role in the partnership and not just dumping that responsibility on the organization or program." Some feel the charity model is still observed, which implies that all expertise comes from UW rather than UW fostering a reciprocal flow of knowledge. Many community partners would like UW to use their resources to act as a convener to connect nonprofits to each other.
- **Logistics (Training, Fit and Capacity):** Community partners continue to invest a significant amount of their time in training--and then supervising--students. Partners want the UW to do a better job of training students to work in the community, including helping students develop self and cultural awareness and understand social identity. Community partners are typically working with students in a variety of capacities (interns, volunteers, etc.), and when students are engaged and excited, they help to build the capacity of the organizations and may even extend their relationships with these organizations beyond their time as students by becoming staff members. At the least, these long-term relationships freed up staff time for new projects and more meaningful work. There is still some mismatch with expectations of time and skills; the level of the task must realistically match for both, and partnerships work best when students can commit to longer time periods.
- **Research focus:** Community partners shared their desire to develop research projects with UW faculty and staff. This interest in research was not noted in 2006. This may imply that community organizations are developing a better understanding about the resources UW has to offer and how they can best be utilized by the community.

Next Steps

As part of this research, the Morgridge Center for Public Service is committed to improving our service in the following programs:

1. **Principles and practices of CBL and CBR:** continuing to offer a course on community-engaged scholarship for graduate students, faculty, and staff.
2. **Faculty fellows program:** we are developing a program that will incentivize community-engaged scholarship for faculty and provide them with training and support so they can better work with community organizations.
3. **Promote and expand the Wisconsin Idea Exchange:** we are working with other centers on campus to further develop and utilize the Wisconsin Idea Exchange (WIE) database, a community-university matchmaking tool. We also plan to be included in several community workshops for nonprofit staff to promote the WIE and help community partners connect to UW. We are working with other outreach units across campus building a flow chart for referrals on community requests, and a “back-end” spreadsheet to track and document the requests so they don’t fall through the cracks.
4. **Develop more opportunities for student and faculty training in cultural awareness and preparation to serve in communities:** we plan to dedicate an undergraduate employee with training and skills in facilitating intercultural dialogues to work with students in CBL courses, and seek funding for the YWCA’s Racial Equity workshop for CBL instructors.
5. **Civic Action Plan:** UW-Madison has committed to develop a Campus Civic Action Plan as part of the Campus Compact’s 30th anniversary. This plan is being developed with the input of hundreds of campus and community partners and will help guide UW-Madison in its future civic engagement efforts.