Humanities Engaged
Tips for Campus - Community Projects

CHOOSE YOUR PARTNER WISELY: It's tempting to go with the first great potential partner (organization or college) that you find to get the project rolling or meet a grant deadline. Take the time to really explore if that person/organization has the capacity (staff, time, resources, life situation) to fully commit to the project.

INVEST IN RELATIONSHIPS: The most important ingredient in any university-community collaboration is a strong relationship among partners. Make time early on to develop trust and set up communication and decision-making processes. Agree on roles, responsibilities and a timeline and identify how the project will be mutually beneficial.

ELICIT GOALS AND NEEDS: People get involved in collaborative projects for different reasons. Make sure that there is time for all participants—faculty, staff, community members, students, etc—to reflect on and voice their interests in the project. Otherwise, they may get involved and then find that it is not as satisfying (personally or professionally) as they hoped.

CREATE OPEN SPACE: Our best ideas usually come when we aren't trying for them. Build in opportunities for participants to engage in open-ended conversations about the project outside of formal meetings or agenda items. These unscheduled discussions are often where we are most creative and allow ideas to grow.

PAD THE TIMELINE: Campus-community projects have a lot of moving parts: faculty, staff, students, organizations, residents, life! Build "wiggle room" into the project timeline for the many changes that inevitably arise and need to be accommodated, especially when working with technology—which always takes longer to use/figure out/make work than you think!!!

CALCULATE REAL COSTS: Since community based projects tend to evolve in unanticipated ways, it's tough to figure out just how much staff time, supplies, travel, etc to budget. Add 10% to whatever you think the project will cost, since you will likely make changes along the way that require additional funds. If you want to have community members involved in presenting their work in public presentations, be sure to put a line item in your budget for honoraria to fund their travel and honor their time.

ENGAGE IN GROUP PROCESS: While it's a challenge to get folks out to yet another meeting, whenever possible have project participants come together and do group work (story circles, scripting sessions, rough cut screenings, outreach planning). There is power in small groups getting together to produce and share stories. It builds the learning community, generates stronger products, and facilitates participants' sense of ownership in the project.

STAY FLEXIBLE: Community-based projects have a way of evolving in unplanned ways and taking new directions. Be responsive and adaptable to emerging community needs and wishes. Stay open to coming up with alternatives if something doesn't work out the way you wanted.

BALANCE LONG TERM VISION WITH SHORT TERMS GOALS: Campus-community projects usually take a long time from start to finish. Remind participants of the desired final outcome but identify and celebrate milestones along the way. That way everyone gains a sense of progress and stays motivated in the short term but doesn't loose sight of the end goal.

RECOGNIZE MULTIPLE VALUES: Everyone gets something different out of a campus-community project experience and it's not always what we had in mind. When assessing project outcomes, be sure to ask questions that elicit outcomes/impacts that the project had on participants, their families, partner groups, affiliated organizations, and communities in order to see the full range of values generated through the project.

DECIDE ON PROCESS VS. PRODUCT: In projects where community members or students learn to produce stories (in print, photos, audio, film, etc) there is often a tension between facilitating a capacity/community building process and producing a slick product. It's useful to determine early on where you want the emphasis to get placed. Slick products deliver messages more powerfully and therefore draw more attention to a story. Capacity/community building processes generate personal empowerment and social change. Deciding where to focus the effort helps communicate expectations, shape curriculum and effectively manage the project.

PACE YOURSELF: It's easy to burn out putting so much effort into producing work (writing stories, taking photos, making radio/video, etc) that by the time you have the work completed you have no energy to publicize public presentations or share the work through outreach and engagement forums. Consider ways to phase the project to avoid burn out and ensure that the time spent making the work results in those stories getting shared and used by the widest possible audience.

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