A Brief Guide to Reciprocal Community-University Partnerships

Curricular and scholarly community engagement is a **methodology**—an approach to teaching, learning, and/or research in partnership with those in the community who can bring experiential knowledge, skills, and other expertise to the problem, the research question, or learning goal being addressed. Engagement methodology or pedagogy is chosen because it is the best way to teach or research a particular subject matter or issue. *Service* is always an element of community engagement, but community engagement is **not** synonymous with community service.

A community engagement partnership is collaboration between faculty, staff, students, and our communities that involves an exchange of knowledge and resources in a manner that is clearly defined, measurable, and mutually beneficial.

Partnership Criteria

- Clear benefits for both the partner and for the university
- The community partner plays a meaningful role in identifying the purpose and the results of the partnership
- Each partner (community and university) makes a fair contribution and effort toward activities/outcomes
- On the university's side, the partnership leads to teaching, learning, and/or research outcomes

The following checklist is adapted from *A Guide to Reciprocal Community-Campus Partnerships* from Portland State University. The complete guide, along with other partnership tools, can be found on our website: http://gvsu.edu/community/partnership-development-tools-30.htm)

Exploring partnership opportunities:

- ☐ Why are we here? What question(s) does the project propose to answer? The initiating partner, either community or university, provides information about the opportunity or request
- ☐ Why are you here? Each participant shares intentions, motivations, and desired outcomes
- ☐ What assets and resources do we bring, and how might we combine them to address this opportunity?
- ☐ What challenges might we face?
- ☐ What could each partner contribute and how would each benefit?
- ☐ Decide whether to initiate a partnership

Initiating partnerships, with an emphasis on mutuality:

- ☐ Discussion topics for establishing a partnership:
  - o What ground rules do we agree on?
  - o What are our long-term and short-term goals?
  - o What are each partner's needs and interests related to our overall goal?
  - o What contribution will each make? What roles will each play?
  - o What processes and action plan will we execute?
  - o How will we track and evaluate progress?

- ☐ Provide opportunities to explore similarities and differences more deeply:
  - o Begin meetings by sharing history/traditions, values, needs, interests, or other information to provide additional answers to "Who are you?" and "Why are you here?"
  - o Discuss differences in culture, modes of decision-making, perceived identity, and ways of thinking about knowledge
  - o Distribute partner materials (e.g., program brochure, journal literature)
  - o Compare missions and values
  - o Develop a vocabulary list of acronyms and jargon
  - o Schedule intentional, facilitated discussions of each partner's culture, power differences, expectations, and other elephants in the room
- ☐ Address logistics
  - o Establish contact people and infrastructure to support ongoing communication
  - o Determine location and frequency for partnership meetings

Sustaining reciprocal partnerships:
- ☐ Develop a timeline and regularly chart progress and accomplishments
- ☐ Develop a means to document achievements over time
- ☐ Conduct progress checks using an inquiry approach (for more in-depth and systemic questions, see also *Focus Group Guide for Evaluating and Reflecting on CBPR Partnerships* from the UNM Center for Participatory Research)
  - o What's working well in our partnership?
  - o What's not working well?
  - o What expectations have been met so far?
  - o What expectations have not been met?
  - o What are sources of satisfaction for each partner?
  - o What are sources of frustration?
- ☐ Revise or develop new action plans based on responses to the questions (Strategic Doing methodology could work well for ongoing learning, adjusting, and implementation cycles)

Additional suggestions for cross-disciplinary partnerships:
- ☐ "Think systemically, act interpersonally." F. Ellen Netting, Ph.D.
- ☐ Questions to consider when finding an academic research partner (From Ross, et. al., *The Challenges of Collaboration for Academic and Community Partners in a Research Partnership: Points to Consider*, 2010.)
  - o Does the academic have the skills, experience, and resources for the specific research project?
  - o Does the academic researcher seem willing to collaborate and respect the agency of the community?
  - o Is the researcher committed to long-term relationships with community partners?
  - o Is the researcher willing to pursue the advocacy and policy issues that emanate from the research? If not, can others help in these roles?
  - o Does the academic researcher have some degree of institutional commitment for promoting successful academic-community partnerships?