

## **Community-Based Learning: Valuing Grass Roots Educators**

*July 2013, a reflection and report by Elan Shapiro and Anne Rhodes on lessons from an Ithaca College Food Systems Course and a growing partnership between Ithaca College Environmental Studies and the Tompkins County community in New York.*

### **Goals of the Initiative**

- Identify small interventions from community-engaged learning that help community organizations accomplish their goals or make needed changes.
- Design the content and structure of the food systems course to bring maximum value to community members and community organizations, as well as to students.
- Identify and provide the preparation and support that is needed by agency staff and community educators who work with students.

### **Context: Community-based Coursework in Environmental Studies at IC**

Each semester Ithaca College Environmental Studies department offers a 3-credit community-based learning course guided by Elan Shapiro and community educators, focused on issues in social justice and sustainability. In the Fall of 2012, the theme of the course was “Building a Just and Regenerative Local Food System.” The course met twice a week for two and a half hours, once a week at Ithaca College with Elan and community educators, and once in the community, where students worked in teams on a community project. This course typically has 12 - 18 students enrolled. Community members are invited by Elan to design a project for a team of 2-4 students that will help with the work of their organization. Community members are also invited to be presenters in class and on resident-led field trips. Students are expected to put in 5 hours a week each for about 11 weeks of the semester. There is extensive training for the students before and during their work in the community - in racism, classism, systems thinking, and sustainability, as well as in process skills such as team work, communication, cultural competency skills, and leadership.

The courses are designed and implemented as a partnership between Ithaca College’s Committed to Change program and Environmental Studies Department and the Tompkins County communities; between the faculty and community organizations; and between students and community members. True partnerships include co-developed goals and plans, with mutual learning and benefits at every level.

From the Project Guide Handbook 2012 used in the course: “It’s a challenge to foster closer connections between young people and communities and organizations, when the students are pulled between idealism and disempowerment, and the communities are resource-deprived but understandably cautious or even cynical about university-based efforts. Often, though the university’s efforts are well-meaning, they have paternalistic, top-down, “charity”-oriented frameworks or components. The quality of faculty guidance and community-based guidance students get is, I think, a crucial factor in the success of this collaboration ...”

The intent of this work is to “...move away from the ‘service learning’ model, that often overwhelms understaffed and underfunded community organizations without adequately addressing their short and long term needs, towards ‘community-based learning,’ that provides the orientation and support to assure that campus involvement advances the goals of the

community organization and values them as educational partners.” (Final Report on Community & Cultural Competency Pilot Modules, 2010)

### **Process: Design and Implementation**

A number of course elements are intended to create a better balance between benefits to the college, faculty, and students and the benefits to the community members and organizations who were collaborators in the course:

- **Provide meaningful, ongoing interactions between students and a variety of community members.**
  - Probably the greatest impact on the students was the contact with twenty-plus community members who shared their experiences and interacted with them both in the classroom and in the community.
  - Community members were from all class identities, all ethnic identities, both urban and rural, in different employment, and of different ages.
  - Presentation by community members and/or resident-led field trips happened nearly every week, plus at least an hour a week with the Project Guides
  - Collaborating community members provided students with an immediate application of the academic content they are working on
- **Integrate Community Members into the course in multiple ways.**
  - Presenters in the classroom, designers and leaders of field trips, presenters at field sites, and Project Guides
  - In the classroom and in the community, at work sites, agencies and organizations, farms, community kitchens, and food pantries.
  - Presenting content-based information about the food system, skill development, personal stories, analyses of community problems and solutions.
  - Appreciation dinner and party for community educators and students late in the semester, includes informal socializing and an appreciation circle
  - Follow-up interviews with guides focuses on benefits and challenges for the community and the guides
- **Prepare students for authentic interactions with community members by doing skill training in the classroom.**
  - Communication skills, including listening, interviewing and giving feedback; cultural competency skills; facilitation, leadership and collaboration skills.
  - Systems thinking and strategies, and the conjunction of sustainability and equity
- **Compensate community members as professional educators.**
  - Project Guides (who are not paid by an agency to work with students) – paid by the hour, depending on the time they have available, including their prep, approx. \$500-900 for the semester
  - Presenters in the classroom – paid by the hour (\$20-30), based on experience , circumstances ,including prep, time, approx. \$80-150
  - Field trip organizers paid in the range of \$80-150
  - Presenters at field trip sites paid \$75
  - People who contribute as part of their paid job can have their fee donated to a project of the agency, for example scholarships.

- The funds to pay presenters and Project Guides came from the Committed to Change Program and the Environmental Studies Department.

## **Challenges**

Identified issues that make the balance of benefits to the community more difficult to achieve:

- The projects didn't make the substantial capacity-building contribution that was planned and hoped for.
- Semester not long enough to complete some projects
- Project Guides find it difficult to scale a project to the time available
- Considerable planning time required to design a project that is useful and manageable by the agency, doable in the time frame, and appropriate to the students' skills and awareness.
  - Elan has started the planning process months, rather than weeks, in advance.
- Unforeseen demands on project guides' limited time, energy and attention
- Students' need for on-going coaching, supervision, accountability, and communication
- Substantial work required from faculty beyond the academic course work - to identify community participants, create relationships with them, and help to design and implement projects and presentations.
- Difficulty of finding funds to appropriately pay community educators.

## **Successes**

- Project guides and presenters felt validated having their wisdom and expertise recognized, appreciated, and compensated.
- Compensating Project Guides and community presenters recognized them as valued educators, gave them more motivation to contribute, supported their needs for well-paid employment, and established a model that may influence other faculty and institutions.
- Students received a more in-depth, relevant, and integrated learning experience than can be provided by relying exclusively on the lecture and exam model as well as a stronger, more personal connection with the community, with the justice and sustainability work being done.
- For students, the chance to move off the hill and be directly engaged in community development work linked to their academic learning, and to experience ownership of and success/achievement in that work is a singular experience in their academic life.
- Students came to see themselves differently as a result of the immersion into experiences with community members. Their lives expanded beyond the campus life to a bigger set of concerns.
- Many students continued to contribute after the semester was over, volunteering and staying engaged.
- The work of understaffed community organizations got a boost from extra hands, even though the capacity-building aspect of the projects fell far short of the hoped-for outcomes.

## **Promising Practices to try**

- Create and implement an agreement form for students, faculty, and Project Guides to sign, outlining their commitments to each other.
- Institute an intermediary coordinating function (through a campus-supported community engagement center embedded in the community or a dedicated nonprofit serving area colleges and organizations) which could help support the partnerships that lead to the projects, match projects and courses, support community educators and project guides, help with project design and development, supervise students, facilitate on-going communication, etc.
- Make a long-term commitment to work with the same Project Guides or organizations over a number of years in order to accomplish something more substantial for them.
- Make the benefits to the college, faculty, and students of community-based learning more visible to the institution, in order to get more support. Make sure the college can see the rich source of education that community members are providing to their students.
- Create a separate endowment at higher education institutions for community engagement learning and research. Otherwise, these highly rewarding and impactful but labor-and-cost-intensive efforts will remain piecemeal experiments with limited systemic impact .
- Substantially increase compensation of faculty for doing community-based learning classes.
- Set up college shuttle transportation for students to be able to get to community sites, especially in rural communities.

With so many resources, and such a variety of resources existing on campuses, colleges can afford to appropriately honor the contributions of community members as valued educational partners. There are probably many other ways in which the institutions could respectfully partner with community organizations and initiatives. It is theoretically possible to augment both tangible and intangible benefits – for the individual and for the community organization – so that the money is not the only way the college recognizes community contributions. It would be a useful activity to reflect on what kinds of non-economic benefits students, faculty, and the institution of higher education could deliver. Maybe it would include a long-term commitment to ending systemic racism and classism in the community, delivering the time, attention, and energy of faculty, administration, students, staff, alumni and trustees to that task.

***“This lesson [value of developing relationships of trust with people who are different from me], along with many others that I have received this semester, will stay with me throughout my life.” (09)***

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