
**A Service Partnership Institute:
Supporting Community Partnerships on Regional Campuses**

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Regional campus faculty and students engage in meaningful community partnerships through a year-long Service Partnership Institute (SPI). Community partnerships benefit faculty, community and students. Yet, there are potential barriers to building meaningful partnerships. The authors describe experiences and perspectives while participating in a year-long SPI developed by the Regional Campus Center for Social Impact. The four SPI stories demonstrate the potential impact of this initiative on university-community associations by providing structured support, resources, and accountability.

There has been a growing view that colleges and universities have failed obligations to ensure students make it to graduation and attain the knowledge and skills necessary to secure a well-paying job.¹⁻⁴ Regardless of where people and political parties stand on the relevance and effectiveness of higher education, according to a recent national survey⁵ of 1,389 potential 2020 voters, a majority of Americans view higher education as a necessity. Brewer, Nicotera, and Veeh⁶ suggested that civic engagement by students contributes to reducing risky behaviors, and increases academic success while developing confidence, leadership, and critical thinking skills. This type of active learning may help students to both attain their desired degree and to learn and practice the soft skills essential for landing their first job out of college.⁷

Beyond the potential benefits to student learning and soft skill development, providing programs and resources encouraging faculty and students' participation in civic engagement serves to strengthen the relationship between the university and the community, synergistically strengthening both entities simultaneously.^{8,9} To this end, colleges and universities have been devoting more efforts to creating community partnerships.^{9,10} However, there are multiple barriers impeding faculty – especially regional faculty¹¹ – from establishing and maintaining meaningful community partnerships and involving their students in such endeavors.¹²

Mosier and Ruxton¹² suggest that barriers to establishing community partnerships include a multi-layered, institutional “bureaucratic maze” (p. 488) and increasing workload requirements on faculty. Likewise, many community agencies are required to do more with less. In order to address these barriers, Miami University’s Regional Campus Department of Social Impact began hosting The Service Partnership Institute during the 2017- 2018 academic year. The main goal of this year-long program was to *“bring the innovative research and teaching of Miami Regionals’ professors together with the vibrant, community-driven work of local nonprofits in order to develop sustainable partnerships that would help to address real needs in Butler County in unique and strategic ways.”*¹³ Interested faculty could apply to participate in the SPI and they either identified a community partner with shared interests or the SPI facilitators identified a community partner based on the faculty member’s interests and expertise.

The Service Partnership Institute

The year-long curriculum of the Service Partnership Institute was arranged in monthly meetings beginning at the start of the fall semester. The meetings were held at an on-campus conference center. A shared server allowed each partnership access to all program materials and a central place to post their presentations and work on their projects. During the first meeting all partners received a book from which relevant readings were assigned.⁸ The first few meetings included planned activities that assisted the partners in reflecting on common values and goals to build a solid foundation for a long-term sustainable partnership. It might be assumed that faculty and community partners already know how to create a strong relationship just by the nature of their positions. However, Eddy and Amey address the fact that, on occasion, attempted partnerships fail because partners do not expend the initial effort to know each other’s

motivations and goals and consequently have expectations that are not met.⁹ It is for this reason that the SPI program emphasizes the importance of taking time to establish strong relationships prior to beginning work on a project. Mosier stresses that taking this time helps to establish trust, an often-overlooked element in forming partnerships.¹³

In addition to the assigned readings and planned activities, there were several guest speakers. One of the first speakers was a representative from the Institutional Review Board who provided information for partnerships interested in conducting research as part of their community project. Then the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs presented on how faculty partners could best fit their SPI experience into their portfolios for reappointment, promotion, and tenure. The Regional campus grant writer provided information on identifying funding resources and on writing a grant proposal. Each partnership was required to write a brief grant proposal for a small grant to help with project related expenses. This valuable exercise also helped organize and compile the partners' project ideas and plans.

The groups presented their projects at the end of the academic year. The first cohort (2017 – 2018) presented in a poster-session style in an open-house format. Tall tables were set up to encourage conversation and networking over light refreshments. Each partnership presented a poster representing the project from start to finish and shared their experiences as people visited their table. The second cohort (2018 – 2019) presented a short oral description of their project at the beginning of a community service and engagement awards ceremony and presented a poster to discuss their projects in greater detail.

Each of the following stories present a brief background of their SPI partnership, a description of the partners involved, ways in which students were, or will be, engaged, and a synopsis of the project.

SPI Story #1 – Dr. Murphy and Building Blocks for Kids

The inaugural year for the Service Partnership Institute (SPI) (academic year 2017 – 2018) and this community partnership paired Building Blocks for Kids (BB4K), a local non-profit organization, with a faculty expert, Dr. Laila Murphy. They identified a meaningful, year-long project to help spread awareness about BB4K with the goal of increasing community donations and support.

The Partners

Building Blocks for Kids (BB4K) is a non-profit organization founded in 2003 to address the lack of financial resources and support available to parents of children with developmental disabilities and special needs. Over the past 16 years BB4K has seen a tremendous increase in the number of families needing assistance but the amount of support they were able to garner had not met this increased need.¹⁴ For BB4K, the main goal of this partnership was to increase awareness of the organization and to increase capacity and sustainability by drawing traffic to their websites. The objective was to increase donations including, but not limited to, volunteering of time, donations of vehicles and medical equipment, increased support, and identification of any additional development resources.

Dr. Laila Murphy is a full-time, tenure-track, Assistant Professor in the Department of Education and Society on Miami's University's Regional campus in Hamilton. She has her degree in Child and Family Psychology and has conducted research in Human Development and Family Studies. Additionally, Dr. Murphy has conducted a two-day workshop for families with children with disabilities.

Student Engagement

Research suggests that students benefit more from an active learning classroom.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ This partnership provided a great opportunity for Miami University's Regional students to engage in Service Learning (SL). Instead of using hypothetical cases to apply the various family theories that students learned in their Diverse Families Across Lifecycles and Child Development classes, BB4K connected students with real families for them to interview. While the course textbook gave students great detail about what families of children with developmental challenges experience it could not give them a genuine sense of the challenges and joys experienced by families with children that have developmental disabilities. In order to create a stronger presence within the community BB4K and Dr. Murphy identified the need for BB4K to be able to better share the stories of their families. The students enrolled in the courses mentioned above participated in developing materials and content that helped to tell the stories of the kids and families that BB4K serves.

Project Synopsis

This project was supported by a small SPI grant to assist with project expenses and was conducted for 3 semesters with 2 different classes taught by Dr. Murphy. The focus of her classes was the application of what students had learned from the textbook to real-life scenarios. For the project, the students conducted an interview in person or via phone with parents of BB4K kids to learn more about the child(ren). Students then developed a concise but compelling narrative to be used in the BB4K videos on their website, for print materials, and for their social media sites. In fact, BB4K printed the family's pictures with their stories as flyers and handed them out during their organization's events. These stories significantly helped donors to see BB4K clients as families instead of just cases.

This project exposed students to real-life issues and heightened their awareness on the function of organizations, particularly in social sciences. One of the students indicated that *"This assignment confirms what I want to do with my life."* Given how enriching and beneficial this partnership has been for all of the partners, this community-faculty-student partnership continues to this day.

SPI Story #2 – Dr. Cady and MetroParks of Butler County Ohio

Based on similar missions, the SPI facilitators matched Dr. Cady with MetroParks of Butler County (MPX) for the second (2018 – 2019) cohort of the Service Partnership Institute. Through the exercises organized by the SPI facilitators, Dr. Cady and the MPX Manager of Volunteer Resources quickly identified their shared goals and developed a plan to establish a sustainable relationship via the development a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and a Service-Learning Contract (SLC).

The Partners

MetroParks of Butler County (MPX) seeks to engage citizens, and especially the institutions representing the citizens of Butler County, in productive, educational, and sustainable endeavors advancing the mission of MPX which is *"...to provide an exceptional park system that maximizes the community's quality of life through conservation, education, and recreation"*.¹⁸ Dr. Alan Cady is a full-time Professor in the Department of Biological Sciences (BSC) on Miami University's Regional campuses and the Department of Biology on the Oxford campus. He has been working with

numerous community partners since 2007 while teaching an Integrated Studies course with a Service Learning (SL) component.

Student Engagement

The Bachelor of Science degree in Applied Biology offered by the Department of Biological Sciences at Miami University's Regional campuses and is housed within the College of Liberal Arts and Applied Science (CLAAS) has service-learning (SL) as a component of its curriculum. While students were not engaged in this SPI partnership, they will benefit from the MOU and SLC agreements that were created to underpin their enrollment in SL courses as part of the BSC degree. They will have the option to participate in various seasonal and other ongoing projects MPX sponsors as part of their curriculum. The students would have their own project within the MPX activities. Potential projects might include conducting surveys and interviews with users of the trail systems and working on various jobs within MPX events such as publicity, logistics, and fund raising.

Project Synopsis

Through a series of meetings and using a template from an existing similar document, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between BSC and MPX was developed formalizing and cementing the partnership into the future. The Service-Learning Contract (SLC) used the well-established Internship Contract from Miami's Department of Biology as a template. This document explicitly states the interactions, expectations, and a timeline for the SL project relative to the student, MPX, and Miami's BSC. It includes an explicit outline for the timing and extent of expected written reports by the student, faculty, and community partner. In addition to the MOU and the SLC, a survey instrument was developed by MPX to assess students' and supervisors' experiences and perceptions of the outcomes versus the initial proposed project and coursework.

Although approval of the MOU is pending, we see our efforts so far serving as a prototype not just for future BSC and community partner associations, but also as a 'blueprint' for the future partnerships. In fact, the MOU and SLC are planned to become the exemplar for the University-wide reorganization of SL processes. Additionally, activity within SPI has led to increased contacts with other community partners as potential SL sites for students to gain varying experiences.

SPI Story #3 – Dr. Neumann and the National Voice of American Museum of Broadcasting

Dr. Caryn E. Neumann partnered the Director of the National Voice of America (VOA) Museum of Broadcasting, to increase awareness of and attendance at the Museum. Through the 2018 – 2019 Service Partnership Institute, this partnership aimed to promote the importance of the museum and to train Docents as a means of improving attendee experiences.

The Partners

The Director of the National Voice of America (VOA) Museum of Broadcasting sought assistance to help increase the public's awareness of their facility. During World War II, the U.S. government sought to broadcast unbiased news to countries under fascist control. Bethany Relay Station, the site of the museum, became the world's most powerful radio station when the Voice of America began in 1942.¹⁹ As the Voice of America's authorizing legislation only permitted it to disseminate information outside of the United States, people overseas are more familiar with the VOA than people living within a few miles of the station.¹⁹

Dr. Caryn E. Neumann is an Associate Teaching Professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary and Communication Studies at Miami University's Regional Campus in Middletown Ohio. Dr. Neumann is a Certified Interpretive Guide as well as a book review editor for H-FedHist whose purpose *"is to provide a forum for the study of the history of the United States federal government and to serve as the voice of the federal historical community"*.²¹ Dr. Neumann also has extensive experience as a docent in various settings.

Student Engagement

While this project did not include students and may not provide opportunity for their future involvement, it is nonetheless relevant. Faculty engaging with community partners helps to enrich the faculty member's teaching and simultaneously helps to resolve some challenge within the community.⁸⁻¹⁰ Both of these benefits indirectly support students.

Project Synopsis

The museum had been publicizing its existence through a partnership with a brewery and radio advertisements. However, Dr. Neumann suggested that publicity would only help if visitors had a good

experience at the museum. Following this suggestion, the Director of the VOA sought to improve the design of the museum. In order to assist in improving visitors' experience Dr. Neumann suggested tweaking the images in the museum to include people who looked like the visitors. This meant fewer images of older white men in suits and more images of children, women, and people of color. Visitors who cannot connect emotionally to a museum will not learn from the museum. A woman who can imagine herself as the Greek bride of an American Navy intelligence officer or a young electrical engineer will be more likely to enjoy learning about the VOA and more likely to recommend the experience to others.

Another point of concern regarding visitor experiences involved the museum Docents. In past VOA feedback surveys, visitors noted that the Docents would sometimes focus more on the exhibits than on the visitor experience. The museum docents, all volunteers, generally possessed a strong interest in technology or community service, but lacked experience in teaching. Therefore, Dr. Neumann led a training session with volunteer Docents to discuss the principles of interpretation, first identified by National Park Service Administrator Freeman J. Tilden²¹ who sees interpretation as focusing on the whole rather than parts.

This partnership benefited the museum with recommendations for improving museum displays and Docent training to help them to better connect and draw-in visitors in the hopes of increasing their visiting and recommending the museum in the future. Dr. Neumann has also helped to increase the overall awareness of the museum within the SPI community and within her own Department on the Regional campuses. Given that the docents now have a general understanding of interpretation, the remaining docent education will focus on museum content and arrangement and on modifications of presentations. Additionally, future collaborations may include the formation of jointly-sponsored lectures or student internships.

SPI Story #4 – Dr. Kinney and the Envision Partnerships

Dr. Dee Kinney previously identified a community partner through networking that aligned with both personal interests and her professional focus of student health and well-being prior to applying to be a fellow of the 2018 – 2019 cohort of the SPI. The community partner, Envision Partnerships, is a non-profit agency located in Butler County and is considered to be a "*...region-wide leader in school and community based high risk behavior prevention programming...*"²² The focus of their project

was to address the public health concern of alcohol use, misuse, and abuse among adults.

The Partners

Envision Partnerships mission since inception over 50 years ago has been to educate the public and special interest groups regarding substance abuse. Alcohol use and its potential for abuse and dependency has been the cornerstone of their work. However, with the rise in opiate addiction, their focus and funding have, out of necessity, turned towards those issues. Consequently, they had been unable to update a low-risk drinking curriculum that had been developed and published in 2011 to address the concepts of low-risk alcohol use among those legally of age to purchase and consume alcohol. The goal of the partnership with Dr. Kinney was to review, revise, test, and publish a 2nd Edition of the *Minimize Risk ~ Maximize Life: Low Risk Drinking Curriculum for adults*.²³

Dr. Kinney is a tenure-track, Assistant Professor on Miami University's Regional campus in Hamilton Ohio. She is a Registered Dietitian with her Masters in Social Work and her Doctorate in Health Promotion. Her research and service agendas revolve around college students' health and well-being making this partnership a natural fit for her and which supported all of her tenure-track goals relating to teaching, service and research.

Student Engagement

One of the early SPI activities had partners focusing on what strengths each brought to the table and what each partners' values were in terms of their expectations for the project. Discussing synergistic relationships based on our assigned readings⁸ had us considering each of our resources available to support the project. Dr. Kinney identified Miami University's Regional Students to be an excellent resource for energy and creativity. She identified a senior level Public Health student excited to participate in SPI and to apply her newly learned skills.

Through two, 3-credit Independent Studies, the student attended and actively participated in all SPI meetings and extra partnership meetings. She also read and summarized the key points of the required reading⁹. This student played a key role throughout the project by assisting in conducting facilitator focus groups on the effectiveness of the current curriculum. She also updated the curriculum presentation slides to cite the most current

research and to incorporate more relevant pictures and new engagement activities based on facilitator focus group feedback.

The student reported that the experience helped her refine her skills and to build confidence in preparation for graduation; *"Working with Envision Partnerships through Miami Hamilton's Service Partnership Institute (SPI) has allowed me, as a Public Health student, to apply what I've learned through my program. I was able to offer our partnership my knowledge of health education and promotion."* In fact, Envision Partnerships was quite impressed with this student and created a position just for her; *"SPI gave me the opportunity to gain hands on experience, to form wonderful working relationships, collaborate with others, and to solidify a job for after graduation – with Envision Partnerships!"*

Project Synopsis

With the guidance and accountability that SPI provided, we had a very productive year and made great progress on our project. In fact, we were able to host two facilitator focus groups to gain valuable input on what was currently working with the curriculum and what needed changes. Our public health student largely revised the project presentation and a senior facilitator from Envision Partnerships delivered the new curriculum to the intended audiences to gain their feedback. Our SPI experience helped us to build a strong, mutually beneficial relationship and we will definitely continue working together.

Future plans include creating assessments and facilitation protocols that will enable us to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum in changing adult health behaviors around low-risk drinking. The ultimate goal is to have a program that will be considered gold standard and will drive evidence-based practices.

Conclusions

Through the Service Partnership Institute, the commitment of the Social Impact office at Miami University Regional campuses has enabled multiple partnerships to flourish into long-lasting commitments serving the community, the institution, individual faculty, and present and future students. The focused exercises programmed into SPI brought partners together and assisted them to create strong relationships exploiting each partners' strengths and resources. These SPI stories exemplify the variety of benefits accrued through colleges and universities supporting civic

engagement by dedicating time, space, and resources to best support their faculty.

Equally important is the benefit to the students. The SPI program provided them practical, hands-on experiences to apply their knowledge and skills in the real-world and excited them about their chosen field. These experiences help to keep students interested and motivated to successfully complete their degree of choice. Additionally, the SPI experience helped to increase their confidence and potentially their ability to land their first job (demonstrated in the fourth SPI story). The public understands the value of attaining a higher education, yet feels that institutions of higher education may be failing to prepare students adequately.⁵ Engaging students in community partnerships is one way to help allay the public's concerns and to strengthen the institutions' value and standing within the community.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

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