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Pathways to Partnerships: Building Sustainable Relationships Through University-Supported Internships

Lara Smith-Sitton

Abstract

Relying upon the work of a nonprofit, Food Security for America, this snapshot report explores how internships with undergraduate and graduate students offer opportunities to establish trust and understanding between university partners and community partners, particularly at the start of a relationship or project. The goal of this piece is to provide a framework for reciprocity, as well as exploration of projects for practitioners and stakeholders initiating relationships or interested in ways to incrementally expand existing partnerships with organizations and communities addressing critical food and environmental justice issues. It places the voices of graduate and undergraduate interns and leaders within a national nonprofit in conversation to better understand issues of activism and social justice that can be served through community writing and research initiatives connecting students and nonprofits. Approaches to assessing specific projects and participant engagement set forth a model for measuring the value and impact of internships in community-engaged work.

Snapshot

Town and gown relationships have what Linda Flower describes as a “checkered history” (101). As service learning, volunteerism, and other community-engaged initiatives became institutionalized by colleges and universities in the 1980s, the structure of the partnerships reshaped, often making the importance of working with the community more an example of “institutional generosity . . . [or a] moral obligation” rather than a pedagogical initiative (Hessler 28). It can be quite problematic for all parties when the university situates itself as the partner pursuing the relationship while putting forth beliefs and strategies that the institution is the body that possesses “superior knowledge, expertise, and resources—in sum, they have the ability to transform surrounding communities” (28). Much has been written about this conundrum, and researchers recognize this is not the approach to address community issues. Community engagement activities, including community writing projects, can expose college and university students to a range of opportunities for civic exploration and service, but to avoid the ethical issues caused by a hierarchical delivery of services *from* students and faculty *to* nonprofits and community members, partnerships must be delib-

erately built and mindful of community needs and the role of the university. This can be challenging when projects are large with many moving pieces and the leaders on all sides are still trying to learn about each facet of the project.

While community engagement, including community writing projects, can expose college and university students to a range of opportunities for civic exploration and service, partnerships must be deliberately and collaboratively built. An effective approach to partnership development is one that has universities gaining an understanding of the needs of community partners and members *before* announcing perceived ways universities can provide support or participate in significant projects. This approach mitigates ethical issues caused by a commonplace hierarchical delivery of services *from* faculty and students *to* nonprofits and community members. Paula Mathieu's concept of taking a "tactical approach" to community-based projects is important: "Tactical projects view the community as a source of expertise, foreground specific community needs, involve students in work that has specific rhetorical exigencies, and acknowledge their own limitations" (291). A tactical approach emphasizes "work[ing] within and learn[ing] from the belief that local streets and communities are not controlled by any university" (293). Jumping right in with large-scale community writing projects can thwart the important steps and time needed for faculty and partner leaders to really get to know each other, prepare students for the work ahead, and develop a rapport. Having an understanding of entanglements, priorities, histories, intentions, and goals allows stakeholders to take stock of what each team member can responsibly contribute in response to a community need and focus on the importance of reciprocity.

An essential purpose of this contribution is to describe an approach to establishing, communicating, and assessing community work in the early stages of a partnership. Food Security for America (FSA) and Kennesaw State University (KSU) initiated their community partnership first through student internships to allow for time that provided incremental partnership growth that included gaining an understanding of the programmatic needs of the nonprofit, community members, university, faculty, and students. This snapshot explores three areas of community partnership growth between the organizations: the work of FSA and the structure of the university-community partnership; the ways reciprocity was an essential facet of partnership for the nonprofit and the interns; and the research project that sought to gain an understanding of the value and impact of the partnership and the internships. One student at a time is manageable for both the community partner and the faculty member building the relationship. By starting small with internships, the infrastructure for a partnership was created, and this solid foundation has allowed for future growth into larger community engagement initiatives.

Food Security for America: Organizational History and Mission

FSA is a nonprofit based in Atlanta, Georgia, that focuses on empowering those within a community to be the stakeholders and leaders to organize and run food co-operatives that allow low-income individuals and families to gain access to nutritious,

healthy food at a nominal cost. The model moves away from outside volunteers coming into a neighborhood to deliver or serve food or sending individuals to pantries or banks; instead, through the creation of “food security groups,” members pay a small fee to join a co-op and, in return, obtain one-half to one-third of a family’s total grocery need. FSA believes this approach is a more positive, dignified, and respectful way to combat food insecurity challenges for low-income families.

Founded in 2010 by president and CEO Nancy Yarnell, FSA is a nonprofit that grew from a model created by Chad Hale, the founder of Urban Recipe, which moves food from pantries directly into communities, rather than the community coming to a food bank or other resource center. What makes Hale’s model unique is the focus on facilitation of community-building and self-sufficiency while increasing local, neighborhood-based access to nutritional foods (see UrbanRecipe.org)—not simply providing groceries and food products. Bob Lupton’s book *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Revise It)* influenced the infrastructure for FSA. Lupton articulates familiar narratives about how charity work often does not provide lasting changes that address critical problems in poor, urban areas. Instead, he sees the charity approach privileging a service model where well-meaning volunteers give up their time and energy that in actuality “preserves the power of the giver over the recipient” (43), thus perpetuating an unbalanced system where community members’ voices are often not heard and their involvement or leadership not encouraged. Lupton contends “most work done by volunteers could be better done by locals in less time and with better results” (189).

Building from these premises, FSA has two main foci: first, facilitate the delivery of groceries to low-income food co-ops run by community members every two weeks; second, teach others how to create and maintain co-ops in communities across the country. Recognizing that food security concerns can lead to a range of concerns from stress to social isolation to poor performance in school and at work, FSA sees community-building as an essential component of their program. The structure is effective because it is cooperative and collaborative in nature and led by the individuals who understand the needs of their community members. Unlike a charity-based system, families pay a membership fee, distribute the food themselves to their neighbors, and support each other through interactions through regular meetings and gatherings.

Like many nonprofits, FSA is committed to operating as a lean, cost-efficient organization with little overhead. In line with this, FSA has a three-person staff in its Atlanta office: two truck drivers and a program administrator. A board of directors provides additional support for outreach and growth initiatives. Each week, the drivers collect and deliver food; the co-op members sort food and lead the meetings within their neighborhoods in a shared space. The volunteers are the community members themselves—not outside groups coming into unfamiliar spaces. Yarnell supports and facilitates the group meetings as requested and provides programing and special events as identified by community leaders. FSA’s mission is simple: “Creating communities across America to equip those in need of healthy food.” Yarnell explains how this work can happen through this approach: “The world has gotten a lot more

complex. . . . If you want to be effective with anything—it is all about forming partnerships and collaborations. If you are not willing to reach out of your own comfort zone to form those partnerships, your work will not go forward” (Yarnell). In line with their mission is an organizational vision: “An America where everyone has the certainty of a healthy meal and the opportunity to connect and grow with their neighbors” (“What We Do”). An important facet of FSA’s work is advocating for their model and sharing with others why they believe this works. Yet, with a lean staff, bringing others into the project may present new opportunities for social justice work, but it also could create extra work for an already lean staff.

When a board member from FSA approached me to inquire if there might be some KSU students interested in internships where they could learn skills needed for nonprofit administrative work and help their organization expand public outreach, I was interested. In my role as the newly minted Director of Community Engagement for the English Department, I was responsible for overseeing the undergraduate and graduate internship programs and courses; however, my interests in community engagement extended beyond pre-professional, experiential student learning experiences to finding opportunities for our students to explore public writing and civic engagement projects. I saw internships with FSA practical in the sense that students could put their skills to work while learning how nonprofits perform the public work of rhetoric and advocacy.

Answers to questions that could help me discern FSA’s expectations of interns would help me determine if we could move forward. For example, what kinds of writing and research projects would students engage with as interns? Would students interact directly with community members or only representatives of FSA? How would students be included in advocacy work? And what would be their goals for the interns and the partnership? Responses to these questions would enable me to determine if the internships met the criteria that I felt were in line with KSU’s programmatic goals for student learning in internship courses and community-engaged work. I imagined also that Yarnell and her board members had their own needs that would identify what they had to have in order to work with our students. We also needed to discuss how internships and our partnership would address community members’ needs. Sorting through these kinds of issues allows a partnership to evolve reciprocally through a shared understanding of independent and mutual needs. This was the next step for us to move forward to formally establish a community partnership.

The Structure of the University-Community Partnership and Internship Program

In early communications, Yarnell was very clear in articulating what FSA wanted from a university partner, how the partnership should initially be structured, and why a relationship built upon trust was needed before committing additional time and resources to our students and program. Her vision was to build the foundation for a long-term, sustainable relationship through incremental steps that would be mutually beneficial for students, faculty, the university, the nonprofit, and community

members. While I had an interest in larger, multifaceted community-engaged projects, Yarnell wanted to begin with internships—one student at a time—to explore our program, our students, and future sites of collaboration. This allowed Yarnell, her staff, and board members to become acquainted with our students and their abilities as well as our program goals. Her wise approach shaped the partnership, and KSU's respect for her vision to grow the partnership in this way built a connection that created opportunities for growth in line with organizational and community needs. The slow and deliberate development of the relationship resulted in well-structured, valuable internship experiences, plus a sound foundation for future projects and engagement opportunities.

The one intern at a time plan provided me, as the faculty partner, a way to establish close relationships with students and FSA representatives to gain an understanding of both organizational needs and student interests. For example, the FSA was discerning how to improve their online presence through including community member testimonials on their website and in social media posts. Whereas FSA thought initially this might fall to someone with a different academic background, conversations with Yarnell and Lesa Bell, one of the board members, gave me the chance to explain how this was a project well-suited to English majors. Another intern was particularly interested in connecting her love of storytelling and digital literacy to an internship project. I considered the project and identified the equipment needed to produce the required work. I was then able to obtain funding for resources, including computers, software, and video equipment for our Innovation and Community Engagement Co-working Lab, so that our students could not only create the projects that would advocate for FSA's work but also expand to other digital storytelling projects for other community-based and internship projects.

Another key component to the internship program was supervision and support. Students who worked with FSA were enrolled in our internship courses, which had a syllabus and assignments that provided opportunities for them to reflect on not only what they were learning but also how nonprofits address and support community issues. In addition, I was committed to these internships being learning experiences where students were given time and space to explore the topic of food security, observe the organization's methods in action, and develop materials that articulated the importance of community-engaged work. Students were not interning simply to produce usable work product but to learn and gain an understanding of the hows and whys of nonprofit administration and public advocacy.

Reciprocity in the University-Community Partnership and Internship Program

By understanding what a small nonprofit could provide to interns working with them and what their organizational limitations were, we forged a strong, closely-connected bond that was reciprocal in nature. Students gained valuable professional writing experiences and FSA saw how pedagogical structures can make internships transformative teaching and learning experiences. Of particular significance, students were using

skills and abilities advanced through their coursework to see the impact they could have on a social justice topic such as food security. The internships had both pedagogical and social justice components, which are essential for community-engaged work supported by universities in partnership with community leaders. For example, social justice work requires sharing a message and building public support—these internships expanded the reach of FSA's work to new individuals committed to this work. In addition, as a writing instructor, I needed to connect students' classroom and academic activities to experiences beyond our campus to show the value of what they were learning. Through this emphasis, the students, the nonprofit, and the university gained an understanding of and saw how careful and deliberate structuring, communicating, and assessing keeps reciprocity at the center of the partnership and projects.

Partnerships with nonprofit organizations can bring forward rich possibilities for civic engagement, learning opportunities, research, and solutions for community problems. And carefully constructed projects can benefit students, faculty members, and universities; however, successful partnerships must be grounded with an understanding of reciprocity or mutual benefit: "an open and conscious negotiation of the power of structures reproduced during the give-and-take interactions of the people involved in both sides of the relationship. A theory of reciprocity, then, frames this activist agenda with a self-critical conscious navigation of this intervention" (Cushman 16).

Yarnell understands the demands of public work and how to scale responsibly using grants and community resources. She has also seen where bringing in outside help can create extra work and distract the leadership from their priorities. Although I had ideas for other projects and ways to engage more students in the work of FSA, instead I listened to what Yarnell thought the organization could support and how that would be mutually beneficial for FSA, KSU, students, and community members. The partnership grew from these understandings, which also aligns with Cushman's emphasis on acknowledging and respecting the complexities of power struggles and individual agendas. When we established the relationship, the internship description was created jointly. For example, whereas I had thoughts about the internship course design related projects, FSA had needs for specific intern assignments, and this prompted revisions to my syllabi. I wanted to establish pedagogical structures that would help students ascertain important skills in line with what nonprofits need from their future employees.

FSA specifically desired assistance on projects related to writing grants, creating board member biographical sketches, collecting stories from community members, and developing a communications plan. FSA also had a strong interest in sharing how advocacy work surrounding food security occurs in a range of spaces in order to reach diverse audiences. Meanwhile, our interns had their own needs, including personal and professional interests in nonprofit administration and the acquisition of writing skills and expertise that would allow them to find jobs upon completion of their degrees. Here, FSA, the students, and KSU found common ground through intersections of our individual goals. At the same time, all of us were cognizant that our

concerns were the community members—we had to make sure that reciprocity extended beyond the nonprofit and university and students to clearly address the larger social issues. As we built this partnership, I learned about the kinds of projects most needed by nonprofits to address food and nutrition concerns in low-income communities, and FSA gained insights into the kinds of skills English and writing majors bring to nonprofit work. Even more importantly, the students gained valuable exposure to the topic of food security and used their writing skills to support community work. Each stakeholder’s needs were considered and efforts were made to strike a balance in the what was produced through this partnership for maximum impact.

Reciprocity Through Research Measuring the Value and Impact of the Partnership

The establishment of this partnership and the construction of an internship focuses on the benefits each stakeholder could obtain through our collaboration for student internships. Service learning, community writing, and other community-based learning have inherent, reciprocal benefits; however, the interviews completed as a part of the research project to gather information about the perceived value and impact of the internships added another layer of reciprocity. As Dirk Remley explains, “As an interviewer gets to know more about the participant, he can come to understand at a given moment that he may provide some information the interviewee did not know about or never considered. When the researcher offers that information, there is reciprocity” (120).

To gain an understanding of the value and impact of our partnership, four research questions were developed to provide a framework for learning about how the internships and partnership impacted FSA, the students, and community members. Yarnell shared that she believed the internships were transformative because it exposed the students to the realities of the problems discussed in theory in the classroom: “I don’t care how good the research, professors, the papers—the university is not the real world. How many times has someone been taught something and they come out idealistic, but they don’t understand what is on the ground?” She sees engagement with colleges and universities as a valuable way to let students to explore the tension between theory and reality. Yarnell further explained,

Our mission is to create communities to equip people in need of healthy food. We are about building community and solving a social problem. Students get an opportunity to engage with people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, not people necessarily just like themselves, but get access to new understandings on a personal level. It can be transformational and change lives for years to come. (Yarnell)

When asked how the internships benefited FSA, Bell focused on the impact it had within the community: “We expanded the ways we could serve the community because of the leverage factor. For example, the website was up and running faster because of the intern.” She also believed a partnership with a university builds the cred-

ibility of the nonprofit as well, “Though we are in the business of giving, we are giving back by providing opportunities for students to intern and learn. It allows us to affirm ourselves as an established, stable nonprofit.” Bell clearly saw how the partnership benefited FSA not only because of the writing support provided by the interns but also because it allowed them to broaden their community outreach to KSU through the interns.

Yarnell also recognized many benefits to the community partner, but of particular interest was her focus on how a sustainable relationship enables future growth and organizational goals: “We can plan ahead because we know there will be resources to help. When resources are a total blank, nonprofits can be reluctant to make plans. From a strategic perspective, it lets us think bigger and bolder. We believe we can have a bigger impact because we have a relationship that allows us to forward our mission.” She also sees how providing solid internships and a stable community partnership are beneficial to the university. If FSA provides strong internship opportunities, the university can grow community writing and engagement projects in the future because they have students interested in the work. And, as this partnership continues to grow because of the strength of the foundation established at the beginning, Yarnell is willing to support faculty research agendas—this is beneficial to faculty members, students, and universities.

The students focused their responses on the new knowledge acquired about food security issues and how to perform advocacy work. In addition, they made direct connections between their internships and the professional opportunities both received in the nonprofit sector after their work with FSA. Through the interviews, the students, FSA, and KSU were able to affirm the value of the partnership, and by inviting community members and students to participate in the research, each were “able to recognize the value their voice brings to the scholarship that enhances the field” (129). The research itself advanced the goals of reciprocity beyond the labor expended and deliverables produced by students during their internships.

Conclusion

As a faculty member building community partnerships for departmental initiatives, building a relationship first through a single internship gave me an opportunity to gain an understanding of the work of the organization while also facilitating an experience for students to better understand the complexities of food security work and engage social justice initiatives. Letting the community partner direct partnership and student projects yielded a strong, rich relationship. Taking an approach to first understand the nonprofit’s needs, desires, and limitations prompted me to adapt university resources and student skills to the projects at hand. But it can be difficult to find information about how to construct these relationships and how to assess if they are working for all involved—community members, community partners, students, and faculty members. As a faculty member committed to moving students from classrooms to the community for engaged learning, it is important that I collect data that measures the value of this work and confirms its impact. This not only allows com-

munity-engagement and social justice projects to gain needed support but also allows me to revise and develop meaningful partnerships and projects.

When initiating the research phase connected with this community partnership, I considered how to explore how this research in and of itself had reciprocal components: “The more researchers and students understand those potential opportunities and use their agency to act upon them, the more those participants and others can benefit from the research” (Remley 130). This research project has created just such reciprocal opportunities: the interns learned the value of their role in establishing a viable community partnership and experience impactful advocacy work; the community partner saw how their investment of time in our students and the KSU program brought more individuals into the important public work of their organization; and I, as the researcher, affirmed the approach that starting small has created new pathways for further partnership growth and engagement. The assessment of the impact and value of the social justice work through interviews with the community partner and students allowed me to see ways to revise and improve the course design and partnership needs.

As community partners and program administrators consider how to develop meaningful, sustainable relationships for community-engaged work, starting small through individualized projects or an internship allows relationships to develop and assessment structures to emerge that allow for strong foundations for future work. At the same time, it is important for individuals pursuing or participating in community writing, environmental and social justice projects that involve our students, consider and articulate some key points: first, how these partnerships form around the issues of justice; second, how faculty members and universities can meaningfully participate with and contribute to mission-driven nonprofits; and third, how focusing on the importance of reciprocity in social justice and community-based learning is essential for future work. This snapshot describes a framework, at the start of a project that addresses outreach, engagement, and assessment into internship program and partnership development that can provide a pathway forward for strong programs, projects, and partnerships.

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Author Bio

Lara Smith-Sitton is the Director of Community Engagement and Assistant Professor of English at Kennesaw State University. In this role, she directs the internship program as well as provides administrative support for other community-engaged activities within the department. She obtained her PhD from Georgia State University and focuses her research on community engagement, 18th- and 19th-century rhetoric, as well as professional writing pedagogies. She is the co-editor of *Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories from an Atlanta High School*, which is a community-engaged project featuring the essays of young immigrants and refugees who have settled in Georgia. Her community writing initiatives primarily focus on partnership development in the areas of immigration and refugee support, food security initiatives, and jail/prison writing projects.