Identifying Possible Community Partners

Community partners are organizations or agencies – for example, the local food bank, or parks department, or homeless shelter – that facilitate service and service-learning experiences by providing a site or focus for student service, or by serving as issue experts, connecting young people with identified community needs and priorities.

The most successful – and sustainable - service-learning experiences engage community partners early on in the process. The following suggestions were compiled over time by community partners, and may help you identify and bring partners into your Semester of Service™:

Prepare for your Meeting

- Before you reach out to the partner, do some initial research. Get to know its mission, specific goals, policies, resources, etc. (Most will have this information posted on a web site.) Brainstorm with your team how you and the potential partner could support one another.
- Community partners appreciate being included from the beginning of the planning process. A face-to-face planning meeting makes all the difference – and helps with the development of trust.
- Prepare information to share about how your school functions, your school schedule, etc. Do not assume that your community partner will already be aware of this information.

Goals and Expectations

- Be explicit and clear about your goals and expectations.
- Look to your partner as a resource for your academic goals. Because partners are so familiar with the elements of the service component, they may be able to provide you with suggested opportunities for making good academic connections.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Communicate roles clearly. Be explicit about the partnership and the process.
- Discuss opportunities for student voice and leadership.
- Note any "barriers" – such as types of work that students should not be doing.

Logistics

- Be organized about your dates –give your community partner plenty of advanced notice.
- Be clear about follow-up to meetings - who calls whom next?
- Always come through on your time commitment to the partner – arrive on time, and stay through the time allotment you discussed in advance.
- Bring the number of volunteers you promised - no more, no fewer. The partner will plan a workload dependent upon the number of anticipated volunteers and the amount of time available.

Supervision

- Clarify and confirm staffing and supervision early on. MOST organizations do not have staff dedicated to working with students; do not assume that the organization will provide staff (or volunteers) to fulfill a required adult/student ratio that your school may have.

Sustaining the Partnership

Send copies of written student reflections or "thank you's" to the organizations they partner with. Partners can use these to attract support from current and future donors, increasing their potential to provide you with future opportunities.