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PURPOSEFUL PARTNERSHIPS: COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION, & COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

**NASPA**

Lead Initiative

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The call for civic engagement has awakened renewed interest in promoting institutional citizenship, building new campus-community initiatives, and promoting a broad sense of civic responsibility in higher education. The relationship between the campus and the community is foundational to civic engagement, and all collaborative activities or projects stem from that relationship. The [Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement \(https://www.ecu.edu/cs-studentaffairs/volunteer/\)](https://www.ecu.edu/cs-studentaffairs/volunteer/) (CLCE) at East Carolina University (ECU) partners with nonprofits, schools or programs in the regional area that provides both services to community members and also provides service and learning opportunities for ECU students, faculty, and staff. Recently, the CLCE team made efforts to improve our partnership development process to ensure that these partnerships are sustainable, strategically focused, and nourished through consistent communication.

Our local community relies on dynamic, active partnerships involving students, faculty, and staff to help achieve a common mission. Many of these partnerships have long histories, deep roots, and varied stakeholders. As a [regional institution committed to enhancing the overall health and well-being of our community \(http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/strategicplan/our-commitments-public-service.cfm\)](http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/strategicplan/our-commitments-public-service.cfm) -- a community that struggles with high levels of material poverty -- these partnerships are critically important to the success of our collective work as a campus community. In large measure, these community-campus partnerships are place-based, centering around eastern North Carolina communities and their unique cultures.

At the same time, there are significant pressures on our regional campus to provide support and resources being situated within an area that has minimal capital. We are strong in cultural resources, but our surrounding communities have seen [population decreases \(http://demography.cpc.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/10-NC-Counties-with-Smallest-Growth-Rates-2010-2014.png\)](http://demography.cpc.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/10-NC-Counties-with-Smallest-Growth-Rates-2010-2014.png) and [stagnant economic growth \(http://www.ncjustice.org/sites/default/files/SOWNC_map.png\)](http://www.ncjustice.org/sites/default/files/SOWNC_map.png) over the past several years. This means that fostering a close relationship between community organizations and the university is both beneficial and necessary. In a sense, the entire region succeeds when all work together (or, “a rising tide lifts all boats”). According to Bob Williams, executive director of [Community Crossroads Center \(http://www.communitycrossroadscenter.org/\)](http://www.communitycrossroadscenter.org/) in Greenville, NC, “our ongoing partnership with ECU has proved to be valuable as we try to promote health within our homeless population. ECU has a wealth of knowledge and expertise that they willingly provide to us as needed. Without ECU, our homeless population would be less fortunate and less healthy. We need to continue to work together to benefit all.”

With these stakes in mind, our CLCE team recently committed to defining and setting parameters for these partnerships, implementing a partner intake process, planning for assessment, and improving ongoing communication with community partners through a liaison model. For the initial step in this process, the work team identified the who, what, and how by defining community partnerships, crafting guiding principles of partnership, and laying out the practical expectations of our department and our partners. From the start, we made sure we

included the language of “partners as co-educators.” As co-educators, CLCE community partners support the beneficial exchange of knowledge, information, and resources for ECU students, faculty, and staff through meaningful experiential learning opportunities that support leadership, academic, and civic growth. The [Community-Campus Partnerships for Health Guiding Principles \(https://ccph.memberclicks.net/principles-of-partnership\)](https://ccph.memberclicks.net/principles-of-partnership) served as a reliable resource as we developed our own parameters and expectations -- both of ourselves and our friends in the community.

Secondly, CLCE focused on the intake process for new community partners and detailing a liaison model to improve communication, support transformational learning, and promote leadership development. Within this model, partnership ownership is shared among all professional staff members. A liaison is a CLCE professional staff member who serves as a resource to specific community partners. Their role is to develop engagement initiatives regularly focused on communicating with and supporting assigned community partners through the process of intake, mid-year check-ins, and end-of-the-year reviews. In addition to serving as one of the primary university contacts for assigned community partners, liaisons collaborate with other faculty and staff who are working with specific community partners to ensure seamless communication and consistent support.

Lastly, we developed a comprehensive plan for ongoing assessment of community partners which will better inform all stakeholders of strengths and opportunities for growth. This process includes liaison check-in meetings each semester focused on specific, forward-looking questions. These check-in meetings include a discussion of short-term and long-term goals, how the community partner perceives themselves (and feels valued) as a co-educator, and an evaluation of the partnership. Liaisons also meet with their community partners each summer for a further evaluation of the partnership and an opportunity to set goals for the coming year.

This new process has allowed for a streamlined approach to communication, building upon meaningful relationships that existed in our office and allowing for new relationships to develop. The process has also initiated discussions around co-education and what that means in concept and in practice for our community partners. Partners encourage members of the ECU community to help in their work and to learn about the community’s vision for its future, thus allowing students, faculty, and staff to fundamentally expand their understanding of a range of community issues. These beginning stages have proven to be helpful in clarifying our partnership expectations and addressing the concerns of our community partners. Because of this new process, we can identify some gaps in community partnerships, assisting us in pursuing new opportunities for the future. While the entire process is rather time-consuming and labor-intensive, it has proven to be beneficial and challenges us to structure our work differently. In the end, prioritizing the development of community partnerships is evidence of ECU’s commitment to regional transformation and public service. More importantly, these

partnerships are fundamental to our identity as an engaged university community.

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