Planning and Running Focus Groups with Community Partners

A Strategy to Identify Partner Interests and Potential Capstone Projects

February 6, 2016

Overview

This document outlines a suggested process for arranging and carrying out focus groups with community partners or other community constituents. While written with staff as the main audience, it is also foreseen that this process could involve student leaders and faculty.

This memo, therefore, includes a brief facilitator's guide and sample agenda for the focus groups. Additional materials and text for handouts is also provided (in several other documents). We suggest that this spring, you campus might plan and carry out 3-4 focus groups involving 9-12 partners. In doing so, you will identify potential projects, some of which may later be engaged capstones. Concurrently, your center (campus) should agree on a system to store, manage, and potentially share (especially with faculty) these partner needs.

We recommend you also skim these additional documents, which provide more help and text for you to modify:

- **Integrating Community-Defined Interests with Capstones:** This longer (23 page) handout introduces a broader set of steps to conduct focus groups and expand the integration of Community-Based Learning and Research (CBL/CBR). Originally written to help campuses recruit partner interest and to conduct faculty outreach, this guide also covers more nuanced strategies for translating partners' ideas into academic projects. It also covers how to record these ideas in a database or other format to share. We will be talking about these issues on upcoming webinars. Here is a useful synopsis of the steps:

1. Introduce CBR to community partners and generate/identify projects (focus groups)

2. **Simultaneously recruit and identify faculty** (have them on deck) who are interested in advising projects.

3. **Turn the need into a tangible research question and project,** connecting the partner with students and/or faculty to carry it out**.**

4. **Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** for the project, especially so that the focus, scope, timeline, and deliverable for the project is clear.

5. **Manage the project.** Once the project is underway, the roles of the staff and faculty member are dependent on the research project itself.

6. Assuming things are going fairly well as the team involved completes the work, **ensure that the deliverable (from MOU) is met** and project completed.

7. **Make sure to share and disseminate the results** in a way that is useful to the partner and to addressing the community need or concern.

8. Remember, these projects are **part of a long-term, developmental, sustained partnership.**

- **Generic Text for Partner Focus Group Handouts:** This packet has some of the same text as this memo, but in a handout form. Its purpose is to provide generic text to modify for your own focus groups. You can cut and paste contents.

- **Sample Handouts for Allegheny College Partner Focus Group:** This packet used the Generic Text packet above but customized it for partners in Meadville as an example. You can do the same. We'll discuss some of the key choices to make (which partners, whether to start faculty outreach, which concepts to introduce) on our call.

Introduction: Definitions, Examples, and Goals

This resource guide has been developed for use by campus-based community and civic engagement staff, faculty, and student leaders. It has especially been designed in light of the Bonner Foundation and Program's focus on integrating Community-Engaged Signature Work into the academic trajectories of both Bonner Scholars and Leaders and other students. While aimed to support the work of the Cohort Learning Community involved in this initiative, it is applicable for any Bonner Program interested in identifying the needs and wants of community partners that may be addressed by students and/or faculty. Many of the approaches that it outlines have been successfully used by campus professionals in conjunction with planning for Community-Based Research (CBR) as well.

Definitions

Capstones with Impact
In a capstone project, students can integrate, apply, demonstrate, reflect on, and communicate their cumulative learning in a project or activity lasting at least one semester. A Capstone with Impact involves community-identified project. It might address an issue (such as by researching or developing solutions). Or it could improve the quality of life for a given population or build the capacity of a partner organization or program.

Community Engaged Signature Work
is simply a name for a capstone-level engagement and academic project that is built around a community-defined interest. The name draws on the work of the Association of American Colleges and Universities and its efforts to improve undergraduate education.

Community-Based Learning (CBL) or Research (CBR)
is a collaboration between researchers and community members in the design and implementation of research projects aimed at addressing community-identified needs. In capstones, the researchers are likely to be students, working with some guidance by faculty and staff.

Capstones with Impact (or Community-Engaged Signature Work) may be individual or team-based. Some might even involve students working across several disciplines. These efforts mesh with the **capacity-building needs that nonprofits, schools, government agencies, and other external partners have.** Hence, a capstone like this also could help a partner fulfill a range of needs that strengthen the organization, program, reach, and/or impact of their work. Examples include:

- **A traditional research project** (but one that answers a question or produces knowledge that the community constituency posed. Examples can come from many disciplines. For instance, a student team might research plans for local lighting and bike paths for a City Council. Those students might be in Engineering, Geography, and Environmental Sustainability, to name a few.)

- **Policy research** (a student might research the best approach to working with a given population or to identify program models for a specific issue)

- **Oral history** (a student could listen to and document the stories of a particular population, which might also be tied to a qualitative study)

- **Needs or Specific Assessment** (a student might help identify the needs of a low-income population within given county or the quality of water in a particular city)

- **Program Evaluation** (a student might assess the impact of a specific program on its client population)

- **Program Design** (a student might use a range of disciplinary knowledge and skills to develop a business or launch plan for a new program to address a community need)

- **Curriculum Development** (a student might create new curriculum for a local high school and even have it shared in a statewide system, as a Warren Wilson College senior did)

- **Technology project** (a student might develop a website or develop a paper and proposal about how the agency can reach more volunteers by integrating web-based technologies)

- **GIS Mapping** (a student might do an environmental scan of the businesses and economic developmental opportunities in an area)

These are just some of the examples. The handout in this packet can be used in the focus groups to help partners brainstorm their needs.

What Happens Next?

The overall goal is to begin to collaboratively **generate tangible ideas for capstone projects with community partners.**

- Some of these may turned into **future student capstone projects** by linking the ideas with students' Bonner positions or their formal capstones next year. For instance, we'll also talk about meetings with students (or you might involve your rising seniors in these focus groups) to identify some pilots for next fall.

- Others might be **channeled into service-learning or CBR courses** with faculty. This might mean that you also conduct outreach this spring and discuss how to link these ideas with courses.

- How you do this will be dependent upon your **institutional capacity.** It's okay to start small and build the systems over time.

What's the Goal?

Let's say that this spring, your campus (with some investment of time by a few staff and two student leaders) is able to do three focus groups with 12 partners. Let's say that each partner identifies roughly 5 potential projects, but you're also able to then create a timeline about their feasibility. You might have identified 60 potential projects for the next 3 years, and out of those maybe 12 are priorities. While you will be able to clarify throughout the process that your campus can't guarantee their completion, by going back to your Bonner Program students and core faculty allies, you might easily be able to plan on getting most of those projects in the works next year, either as capstones or through links to other students and courses.

Setting Up the Focus Groups

Ideally, your focus group will include key staff members from several community partner agencies. Campus staff members who have run these focus groups have found that it is helpful to involve representatives from more than one school, agency, or nonprofit. They suggest inviting partners who have the same issue (such as mentoring programs or agencies that serve the homeless). Focus groups need not be too large; each one might involve just a few partners and 6-15 people.

Use whatever ordinary channels work best with community partners (i.e., email, phone calls, social media, student site leaders, etc.) to arrange the meeting. Here are some helpful steps to consider:

1. **Determine a target set of partners.** You may want to do this by:

a. Issue
b. Neighborhood (if you wanted partners to connect across issues)
c. Other team structure (such as working with a common liaison on campus)

2. **Determine a location.** This could be:

b. Hosted by one of the agencies
c. A neutral community space (like a county building)
d. At a location on campus (i.e., your office, a library, etc.)

3. **Determine who can help facilitate.** This could include:

a. A staff member from your center
b. A student leader, such as the site team leader
c. A faculty member
d. A VISTA member or leader
e. Others you deem appropriate

3. **Carry out necessary logistics.** Keep in mind that you CAN USE Bonner Community Funds or Junior/Senior Funds for these purposes. This could include:

a. An invitation and RSVP
b. Directions
c. Snacks and/or lunch

d. Technology (if you'll use slides or want to incorporate BWBRS)
e. Handouts
f. Supplies (stickies, markers, flip chart paper)

4. **Review the longer CBR guide together to discuss the facilitation strategy.** At the core of this are activities through which you will:

a. **Introduce the range of project types that partners might consider** (using handouts and slides). Note: while these introduce the language to partners, it matters more that they have a chance to simply brainstorm their needs. However, the intentionality of this is important because often times, partners might not know that they can ask for more than program volunteers.

b. **Allow partners to brainstorm** the kinds of projects (research, evaluations, data, etc.) that would be useful for them. Later (it doesn't have to happen during the session, although it can), your team can type up the lists and work on getting them into a spreadsheet, database, BWBRS, or other formats.

c. **Figure out your follow up strategy and timeline.** Will it take you a few weeks to get back to partners? The semester to connect map out what is next? Incorporate that into your session.

How-to Conduct Focus Groups [Facilitator's Guide]

The focus groups themselves are meetings during which time you'll engage the group in a few activities. The outline below explains this all. It is followed by handouts that you can modify and use. A sample agenda that you can customize is found after this guide.

Basic Outline and Overview

1. **Welcome (15 minutes)**: Provide time for partners to meet/network and talk with each other. Have a simple round of introductions (if this is the first time) or focused question. Consider having some student leaders run a warm up activity that sets the tone and also allows partners to experience students' passions and talents. That might use a current news article to celebrate something that happened or update partners on an upcoming opportunity.

2. **Introduction of the Concepts and Goals (10 minutes):** Using handouts and/or slides, introduce key language like Community-Engaged Signature Work, capstones, community-based research, service-learning, etc. Briefly explain your intentions (to identify their needs with the hopes of later integrating those needs into students' positions, capstones, and faculty work).

3. **Inspiring Example (10 minutes):** Have a student, faculty member, recent graduate, or partner provide a testimonial featuring a great example. For instance, you can have an alum present using a capstone display from a past project or

4. **Small Group Work (45 minutes):** Using handouts and prompts, engage partner staff in identifying potential needs in these areas (which also correspond to the Capacity-Building focus and form):

   • Volunteer Recruitment and Management

   • Training and Program Development

   • Fundraising and Resource Development

   • Communications and Technology

   • Research

- These questions below are **designed as prompts to use during the sessions.** They can also be **handed out or emailed before** the meeting. If people are stuck or need more prompting, the following questions (on the handout also) can be used to help them:

    - What do we as an agency, school, or organization need to know?

    - What are your dreams for this group/agency in the future?

    - What is your biggest concern/need for the next month? Next year? Next five years? Next ten years?

    - What changes may your organization see in the future? How will your agency need to adapt? What do you need to know to more about in order to make these changes effective?

    - What is it that you might want to know about your clients' needs or your work that you don't have the time and resources to find out?

    - What do you wish you knew about the outcomes, results or effects of your work?

    - What items, materials, or information do grant funders demand of you?

    - What types of best practices would you like to know more about?

5. **Use a simple facilitation and recording strategy:**

    - Have people write on their handouts or use post-its.

    - As the end approaches, have people prioritize (star, cluster) what is more immediate or help to sequence potential needs. (This is something you might need to come back to with follow up.)

    - Collect the completed handouts or the ideas on post-its.

6. **Bring it to a close with thanks and next steps:**

    - Restate any future expectations (i.e., to submit final list via email) if desired.

    - State what you will be doing next and the timeline.

Focus Group Agenda [Sample Text]

[We encourage you to customize text, logo, and photos]

Date and Time

Purpose:

Provide an opportunity for you as community partners to learn more about how students at the college/university can work with your agencies and schools on capstone-level projects. We think of these as "Capstones with Impact." Then, we will brainstorm the projects that you could foresee being helpful in the coming few years. Capstones are generally done in the junior or senior year. Through capstones, students engage in carrying out advanced projects that are needed by your agency and its programs. This also allows students to connect the projects with academic study, often with the advising of a faculty member as well.

1. **Welcome (15 minutes)**:

    • Introduction by Bonner Program staff and student leaders

    • Networking: invite partners to say a word about themselves and their agency, school, or organization (mission, purpose, population).

2. **Introduction of the Concepts and Goals (10 minutes):**

    • **Introduction to the concept** of Capstones with Impact and Community-Engaged Signature Work (*provide handouts and examples*)

3. **Testimonial (10 minutes):**

    • **Share 1-2 examples** *through short presentation(s) by a student and partner. You may want to emphasize both the student development (learning) and community impact (product) of such work.*

4. **Small Group Work (45 minutes):**

    • Small group work to generate ideas for what your organization/site wants and needs (in the upcoming 1-3 years).

Examples:

Through capstones, your nonprofit, school, or government agency may be able to have a student (working individually or possibly with a small team) engaged in work that **builds your program or organizational capacity.** Hence, a capstone project could help a partner fulfill a range of needs that strengthen the organization, program, reach, and/or impact of their work. Examples include:

- **A traditional research project** (but one that answers a question or produces knowledge that the community constituency posed. Examples can come from many disciplines. For instance, a student team might research plans for local lighting and bike paths for a City Council. Those students might be in Engineering, Geography, and Environmental Sustainability, to name a few.)

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Questions and Examples to
Help You Generate Needs

The college/university cannot guarantee that we are able to have students take on all the projects you need. Still, by identifying potential projects, our program and center will be better able to either: (1) help students that work with your site to incorporate some of these needs or consider doing a capstone: (2) identify other students or faculty who might be able to address some of your needs.

So, please keep this in mind when you generate project ideas.

Questions: These questions can help you think more broadly.

What do we as an agency, school, or organization need to know?
- What are your dreams for your agency/program in the future?

- What is your biggest concern/need for the next month? Next year? Next five years? Next ten years?

- What changes does your organization or its programs foresee in the future? How will your agency need to adapt? What do you need to know to more about in order to make these changes effective?

- What is it that you might want to know about your clients' needs or your work that you don't have the time and resources to find out?

- What do you wish you knew about the outcomes, results or effects of your organization and its work?

- What items, materials, or information do grant funders demand of you?

- What types of best practices would you like to know more about?

Products: While the student may need to produce a paper or conventional work for a capstone course or credit, s/he may also do the work that can help produce one of the following:

- Surveys
- Interviews and summary of findings
- Business Plan
- Marketing work (such as brochures, websites, etc.)
- Website or social media development
- Information analysis
- Data analysis
- Assessment or evaluations
- Best practice research
- Needs assessment
- Policy research

- Data or figures for a grant proposal
- Popular education projects
- Curriculum development
- Oral histories

Form for Recording Your Ideas

As you generate ideas, write them on this form. We encourage you to label them by the categories of capacity-building that you and your site may already be familiar with from the Bonner Program's capacity building survey.

Volunteer Recruitment and Management Projects (*Examples*: conducting research on volunteer needs; studying volunteer retention)	
Training and Program Development (*Examples*: developing a volunteer training program according to research and best practices; developing curriculum based on the program issue)	
Fundraising and Resource Development (*Examples*: researching for a needs statement in a grant proposal; developing an annual giving campaign; writing a business plan)	
Communications and Technology (*Examples*: doing research on the reach of your program online; developing a website or social media)	
Research (*Examples*: client or community surveys; GIS mapping; program evaluations; policy research; oral histories; original research)	