

Chapter 7

Crossing the Red Tape: Service–Learning Relationships With Government Agencies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the processes used by faculty and administrators at a regional comprehensive university in the South to develop partnerships with bureaucratic agencies including a criminology course partnership with local law enforcement agencies, a multidisciplinary partnership with the local juvenile court, and a public administration local government course partnership with a public housing agency and homelessness task force. The intention of the chapter is to provide a roadmap for the development of service or experiential learning processes with government agencies. The nature of developing service-learning partnerships with bureaucratic agencies can often create unique challenges during the development including establishing contact with appropriate agency contacts, developing plans to effectively managing the time and capacity of government agencies, as well as managing the additional legal and risk management requirements that are inherent to collaborating with bureaucratic partners.

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INTRODUCTION

According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, “service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2023). The purpose of these community engaged projects is to create partnerships between learning institutes, in our case higher education, that pairs university knowledge and resources with members and organizations in the community to enrich the value of classroom curriculum, the create engaged citizens, to strengthen civic engagement and responsibility, to instill democratic values, and overall contribute to the public good and well being of the community. It creates relationships between students, faculty, and community partners and agencies. These partnerships can take many forms and can vary significantly in the commitment of time and energy needed to create positive and beneficial outcomes for all the parties involved.

In this chapter, we describe the process to creating a less traditional, but no less rewarding, opportunity for engagement in service-learning with local government agencies. Our discussion includes three cases studies of partnerships with local agencies: (1) a criminology course with local law enforcement agencies for courses about police-community relations, (2) a multidisciplinary partnership with a local juvenile court system that helped to create community-based programming for court-involved youth and their families, and (3) a local government public administration course paired with a city homelessness task force and a public housing agency. Each of these case studies provides a unique roadmap for faculty thinking of building service-learning partnerships with government agencies including considerations regarding student outcomes, alignment, and development of course objectives, value to the service-learning partnerships, as well as some of the limitations or concerns that could arise when establishing these partnerships. All the cases included here in the chapter also include details of course planning, including discussions of how building trust with government agencies may differ from nonprofit partnership development, the importance of identifying appropriate agency contacts for service-learning partnerships, recommendations for communicating expectations within the partnership, and tools for managing the time and capacity of government partners.

In the implementation of our cases, government partnerships helped achieve course learning objectives for students across disciplines including public administration, political science, criminology, sociology, occupational therapy, creative writing, and more. The cases discussed here all took place at a regional comprehensive university in the South with a student population of 10,400 undergraduate students and roughly 1000 graduate students. The student population is 62% female and 38% male. Given that the university is in the rural south, the student population is 67% White/Caucasian with the largest racial or ethnic minority group, African American/Black, making up 16%. While partnerships with government agencies may come with additional legal and risk management requirements, clear communication between faculty and government partners in advance of the service-learning partnership can contribute to a smooth implementation process. Additionally, government agencies have unique goals and intended outcomes for service-learning projects, which may differ from those of nonprofit agencies or nongovernmental organizations.

To effectively analyze the effectiveness of the service-learning project design, all the cases explored in the chapter include reflection assignments as a required component of the course, and the faculty participated in institution-wide assessment of service-learning outcomes for students and community partners. Student outcomes are assessed using a rubric applied to learning artifacts, such as student re-

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