Reaching out to a Community Organization

When working on a project or developing a grant proposal, there are times when you will benefit from, or be required to, partner with a community organization. While there are no shortcuts to relationship building, or forming meaningful partnerships, it is important to develop clarity on how you will engage community in your project.

If you have the time and capacity, we recommend you begin your learning journey with an organization by volunteering with them. You can find volunteer opportunity listings here. Many organizations do not publish their volunteer opportunities but instead post opportunities on their website. If you do not have the time to volunteer, this resource will support you in reaching out to a community organization.

Step #1 - Determining the Need for Engaging Community in your Project

Please ask yourself the following guiding questions. There is no minimum requirement or 'correct' answer. These questions serve as tool to assist you in thinking through the value of community engagement for your project. If you find yourself struggling to come up with answers it could be 1) you need to spend more time thinking through the role community can play; or 2) there is no need (**don't force community organizations into a process if not required**).

1. What is the **specific** problem area that I am trying to seek the organization's support or input on? What am I trying to learn or address? (This is specific to your project's topic, be as specific as possible)

2. Why do I need to engage with community organizations? What do I believe they can contribute? (E.g. knowledge, feedback on experience/lessons learned, general information, resources, etc.)

3. What level of engagement will I need from community to support my project or initiative? (E.g. interview, speaker engagement, collaboration, guidance, etc.)

4. Do I believe the organization will see value in engaging? Is this a topic that will interest them? What is in it for them? (Note: if the answer is no, you may want to rethink your approach or consider not bringing them into the process)

5. What is my project timeline? Will it work for community organizations?

6. What is my/the team's current capacity to take this on? How does this inform the way I/we engage with the community partner?

Step #2 Scoping Community Outreach & Engagement

So now that you have determined there is value to engaging community in your project, you need to scope the type and level of engagement required.

The following questions will aid in identifying 'the who, what, why and how' of your engagement as well as help in framing your request:

1. What type of work do I want to do with the community organization? What would I like for us to do together? [**Be specific**]

2. What types of organizations can provide the information (check on-campus as well)? How many organizations should I engage with? Do I need diversity in their mandate and size?

3. When do I need to formalize the partnership? (Develop a timeline for your project and then work backward from the deadline for when you need your information. Note, the type of approach you take will inform the amount of time you require as will other factors such as # of partners, time of year, etc.)

4. What resources will be required to engage?

5. What, if any, are the obstacles to engaging?

6. How will I engage with the organization beyond this discussion?

7. How will I keep the partner up-to-date beyond this conversation?

Step #3- Preliminary Research

Before reaching out, conducting preliminary research about the partner organization ensures you are able to begin your relationship by asking questions that will elicit meaningful and useful information that can build on what you find online. For example research enables you to shift from asking, "What is your mission statement?" to asking, "I looked at your mission statement online and it states…..how do you think this project will align with your priorities?"

Beginning from a place of **mutual respect** will set a strong and positive tone for the partnership. Before reaching out to a partner, you should have a preliminary understanding of the following:

1. What is the mission and vision of the partner organization?
2. What is the social context in which your organization is working in and what does that mean broadly at local, national and global levels (IE: food security)?

Step #4- Reaching Out

Whether you are reaching out via Email or phone, your goal is to **be succinct and clear** about your request. Communicating the need for engaging with the organization, the scope of the initial partnership/engagement, and how it aligns with the mission, vision, and values of the organization are all important elements to include in your reach out.

Included below are some tips to write a cold e-mail, or make a cold phone call.

Email

- If you are working in a group it is necessary to assign a primary contact person to manage project communication with your community partner.
- Use your ubc.ca email address. Pay attention to make sure your name is displayed in the "from" field, and not an old nickname you may have forgotten about.
- Always fill in the Subject field with content that is descriptive, clear and concise, such as "Re: UBC (Faculty and Course) – Group Project X."
- Format the email in the same way that you would format a letter. However, brief is better. Use bullets to delineate points and/or questions. Always use proper grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Do not use emoticons, abbreviations, or other symbols.
- Preferably, each email should have only one subject, consistent with the subject line. If there are two or more issues/questions in an e- mail, be sure to include a quick summary at the beginning of the message.

- Begin your e-mails with a proper greeting, such as "Hello Mr./Ms./Dr. X". Do not use terms such as Sir, Madam, Miss or Mrs. Sign your e-mails with your full first and last name (and include the names of the other group members and their roles as applicable).
- When replying to a message, refer to past correspondence so that the recipient is clearly reminded of the issues and topic of your message.
- When using the "CC" function please make sure it is clear as to *why* and to whom the partner should respond. Example: "I have cc'd my teammate *NAME* as she will working on our project schedule. If you have any questions please reply to me and CC *NAME* as I will be managing the project communications.
- Be patient for a response. Your community partners are likely very busy. If you do not receive a response after 3-4 business days, call your community contact directly and leave a voice-message. If you do not hear back again after 2 days, notify your Teaching Team point person (Professor, Teaching Assistant Etc.).

By Phone

- Start with a proper greeting, such as "Hello Mr./Ms.". Do NOT use terms such as Sir, Madam, Miss or Mrs.
- Introduce who you are and the purpose of your call.
- If you are requesting a meeting or orientation, have your agenda or schedule ready before you call.
- Prepare a set of documents, plans etc. that you can send out as an immediate follow-up if your partner is requesting / needing more information.
- Be prepared to provide contact information such as an e-mail address or phone number.
- If you are leaving a voice message, speak clearly and slowly. Provide a contact number or email twice – at the beginning and end of the message. Briefly note the time you are calling and the subject of the voicemail. Voicemails should not last more than one minute.

(Adapted from University of Pittsburgh and York University Student CSL manual)