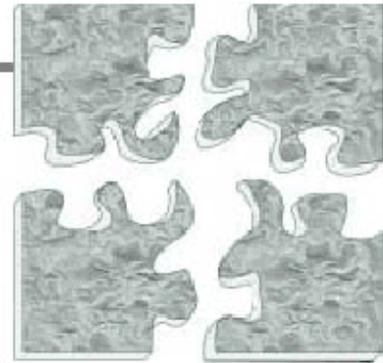


# BEST PRACTICE BRIEFS



No. 32  
April 2005

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## UNIVERSITIES WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES AN EVOLVING PARTNERSHIP

*This **BRIEF** discusses that aspect of university outreach and engagement which translates knowledge for community betterment, i.e., university resources responding to community-initiated requests for either time-limited assignments or ongoing relationships. This **BRIEF** draws on the observed experience of an engagement unit, although the observations are relevant to similar units in the university, or to requests made directly to a faculty member.*

## OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

University administrations promote *outreach and engagement* by faculty and staff to accomplish a variety of objectives:

- To fulfill the mission of the university
- To make teaching more relevant to everyday life and therefore of greater value to students
- To develop public and legislative support for higher education
- To stay competitive with other institutions of higher learning
- To generate resources
- To strengthen faculty research by providing the opportunity for new insights
- To promote evidence-based practices in the community

Depending on the institution, “outreach and engagement” may cover one, some, or all of the multiple activities that faculty, staff or students do off-campus. These include:

- Development, through research in a community setting, of new products, new processes, and new basic or applied knowledge concerning children, adults, families, organizations, communities, and systems
- Translation of knowledge for community betterment, including evaluation, training, technical assistance, and technology transfer related to ongoing community efforts
- Enhancement of students’ education through service learning (see **BRIEFS** Nos. 11 and 12) and student volunteer service initiatives or placements

- Distance learning, i.e., using Web-based transmission of university courses
- Information dissemination (conference presentations, online publications, publications)

## TRANSLATING KNOWLEDGE FOR COMMUNITY BETTERMENT

This **BRIEF** explores translation of knowledge for the betterment of human services, including evaluation, training, technical assistance, and technology transfer related to ongoing community efforts.

### THREE LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT

University involvement in translation of knowledge for community betterment can be defined at three distinct levels (see Table 1):

- One-time efforts involving a single consultation, presentation, or workshop
- Time-limited assignments that may involve a training sequence; evaluating a program or initiative; facilitating the deliberations (group process) of a staff, board, coalition, or collaborative, including problem solving and strategic planning; or collection and analysis of demographic data and outcome statistics
- Ongoing partnerships, working collaboratively over time to accomplish long-term systems change objectives

This **BRIEF** explores considerations related to the second and third levels—time-limited assignments and ongoing partnerships.

### WHO IS INVOLVED

The **community partner** (referred to in this **BRIEF** as “the community” or “the agency”) may be a state agency, a local governmental agency, a non-profit or faith-based community agency, or a community committee involving multiple agencies in collaborative planning for service and system development. Universities may also partner with national or international organizations, businesses, and non-human service agencies.

The **university partner** (referred to in this **BRIEF** as “the university”) may be a faculty member, a multi-disciplinary team of faculty, or a unit of the university that has engagement staff and connects to faculty members. Work with the community will be undertaken by three levels of personnel: faculty, engagement specialists who are non-teaching and non-tenured, and students.

- Faculty and engagement specialists plan, organize, manage, negotiate, facilitate, analyze and report on the undertaking.

**Table 1**  
**THREE LEVELS OF UNIVERSITY INVOLVEMENT**

<i>Level of Involvement</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Requirements for Success</i>
<b>One time effort</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation</li> <li>• Workshop</li> <li>• Consultation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective transfer of information</li> </ul>
<b>Time-limited assignment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training sequence</li> <li>• Evaluation</li> <li>• Facilitation</li> <li>• Community mapping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negotiation and mutual agreement on goals, processes, products</li> </ul>
<b>Ongoing partnership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term involvement to build capacity, accomplish systems change</li> <li>• Multiple time-limited phases and components</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negotiation and mutual agreement on goals, processes, products</li> <li>• Shared resources</li> <li>• Mutual capacity enhancement</li> <li>• Resolution of conflicts</li> <li>• Benefits to both partners (e.g., service, resource, research/publication, teaching)</li> </ul>

- Students, generally but not necessarily at the graduate level, undertake supportive functions, such as collection and processing of data. Students often are the primary contacts with the community in carrying out the project design.

## TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS

University faculty and staff, and community agency staff function in two separate worlds that differ in primary mission, culture, expectations,

and motivation (Table 2). Would-be partners consequently tend to misperceive the parameters within which the other operates. In engaging with communities, university faculty and staff need to understand the context in which community agencies operate. Similarly, communities need to understand the limitations for university faculty and staff and what they can and cannot deliver.

**Table 2**  
**TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS**

	<i>Community Agency</i>	<i>University</i>
<b>Mission</b>	Service	Primarily research and education
<b>Structure</b>	<b>Hierarchical, pyramidal</b> Job assignments, resources, and authorizations are determined by the immediate manager and/or the director of the agency.	<b>Flat</b> Individuals largely determine the primary focus of their work and how they will support their research through grants and contracts. The university structure accomplishes direction through leadership, exhortation and incentives such as contingent funding and promotion according to teaching, research, and outreach performance.
<b>Focus</b>	Staff are primarily outwardly directed, toward clients and community. Agency is oriented toward action.	Faculty are primarily inwardly directed, toward their research, and teaching interests, and toward reflection.
<b>Resources</b>	<b>Nonprofit agencies</b> Resources are obtained through a budgeting process (e.g., United Way) and through fundraising. May also obtain governmental grants, contracts or foundation grants. <b>Governmental agencies</b> Agency obtains federal and/or state allocations through a budgeting and legislative appropriations process. May also obtain foundation grants.	<b>Universities</b> State allocations are obtained through a budgeting and legislative appropriations process (for state institutions), and through student tuition and fundraising. Faculty generally must obtain federal, state, foundation or university grants to underwrite their research. May also obtain community, agency, or organization contracts.
<b>Control of Time</b>	Staff have generally assigned responsibilities and specified work time and place.	Faculty have assigned teaching and committee responsibilities, but generally manage their own time and work site.
<b>Reimbursement</b>	Salary is related to work week. Staff are generally constrained from undertaking parallel work for pay on their own time.	Faculty are paid for products by university (e.g. teaching, committee work) and through grants (e.g. for research). They may be encouraged to engage in outside work.
<b>Reward system</b>	Promotion is based on merit or amount of time in a particular grade level.	Promotion and tenure often are based on publications and other evidence of achievement, such as ability to attract outside funding.

## DOING AN ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Before entering into a partnership, both university and community representatives should assess the viability of the proposed enterprise. This section explores, in turn, the university's assessment of the community, the university's assessment of its capacity, and the community's assessment of the university.

### THE UNIVERSITY'S ASSESSMENT OF THE COMMUNITY PARTNER

Before accepting an assignment, university faculty and staff should assess the likelihood of success in the proposed endeavor. This involves a thoughtful scan of the community situation so that those aspects which are most closely related to success in a university-community endeavor (summarized in Table 3) are understood.

- What is the commitment to participation?
- What is the motivation for seeking the partnership?
- Does the community have the ability to accomplish the expressed expectations and objectives?

An initial environmental scan can identify potential problems.

#### RED LIGHT! WARNING!

- The contact with the university comes from a staff member.
- The contact with the university comes independently from a member of a community committee.

**Question:** *Is the initial contact followed by a preliminary meeting with the person or persons with authority?*

### Commitment to Participation

Who makes the initial contact, and under what circumstances, can be significant indicators of commitment. The first step in a possible partnership occurs when a representative of the community—an agency director, the chairperson or a representative of a committee, a committee member, or a staff person—contacts the university.

It is important to assess the meaning of this contact. Is the person making the request in a position to influence the actions of the group? A request for assistance from the executive officer of an organization is more likely to be viable than a request from a frustrated staff member.

#### EXAMPLE 1

The staff person who had participated in assets-outcome training arranged for training for the members of a community collaborative, but did not sit as part of the group herself. Her non-participation resulted in no provisions for follow-through.

### Who Needs to Be on Board

Regardless of who initiates the contact with the university, multiple persons within a community organization must agree to the partnership if it is to be viable (Table 4).

When concurrence is not obtained from the top decision-making authorities, the partnership has no long-term credibility. Similarly, if concurrence is not subsequently obtained from management lower in the hierarchy, the commitment of top managers will be ignored or sabotaged.

**Table 3**  
**THE UNIVERSITY'S ASSESSMENT OF THE COMMUNITY PARTNER**

	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Actions if Negative</i>
<b>Commitment to participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the person making the contact in a position of authority?</li> <li>If not, has the contact been authorized by the person(s) in a position of authority?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the person making the contact in a staff position?</li> <li>Is he/she making the contact without prior authorization?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Obtain concurrence from CEO and governing body</li> </ul>
<b>Motivations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Survival issues</li> <li>New administration wants assistance</li> <li>Problem solving</li> <li>Expand agency capacity</li> <li>University perceived as having knowledge, special skills, objective outside viewpoint</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Required by funding source</li> <li>Good public relations</li> <li>Free resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarify expectations</li> </ul>
<b>Developmental status</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands what is involved in planning, evaluation, data collection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lacks understanding of, or is unwilling to accept requirements for, planning, evaluation, data collection</li> <li>There is no agreement concerning basic parameters</li> <li>Community situation does not match the faculty member's focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess and clarify</li> <li>Withdraw</li> </ul>
<b>Ability to accomplish task</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service design is consistent with best practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service design has major flaws</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Withdraw</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time frame permits undertaking steps needed for good evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enterprise is already underway; decisions cannot be changed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Withdraw</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants include supervisors who can authorize or carry out the endeavor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants do not have authority to carry out the endeavor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure participation at necessary level of authority</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The person responsible for follow-through is identified and committed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No one is responsible for follow-through</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure that responsibility is assigned</li> </ul>
<b>Community capacity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Additional time commitments are realistic and understood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff are overwhelmed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep additional work to a minimum</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff is well positioned to carry out additional tasks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agency and staff do not understand basic requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess need for initial training and periodic monitoring</li> </ul>

**Table 4  
WHO NEEDS TO BE ON BOARD**

<i>Type of Situation</i>	<i>Concurrence is Required from</i>
A single agency or organization and its various components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CEO and board of directors</li> <li>• Supervisors (must be in agreement with the action plan)</li> </ul>
A school building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent and school board</li> <li>• Principal and teachers (must be in agreement with the action plan)</li> </ul>
A collaborative committee involving representatives from multiple agencies and sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chairperson and a majority of participants</li> </ul>

**EXAMPLE 2**

A university undertook training, directed at changing practices, for the staff of a state agency. The staff sent to the training did not have the authority to change policies and practices.

**Motivations**

While the underlying reason for a community’s request may not be immediately evident, it is imperative that university faculty and staff correctly assess and understand the underlying dynamics. The community representative may have one or more of the following reasons for seeking assistance from a university:

- The funder may require a university connection.
- The funder may expect logic models, outcome data, and an evaluation report that suggests the merit of continued funding.
- Survival issues such as competition with other agencies or resource limitations provide a reason for rethinking and redirection.
- A new administration or committee wants assistance in changing practice to improve services and outcomes.
- The requesting organization has a problem to be resolved related to the effectiveness of its planning, implementation, or evaluation processes or service delivery.
- Contracting with a university expands agency capacity in a time of limited staffing.

The community representative’s motivation for seeking university rather than consultant assistance may include both accurate and inaccurate perceptions of university capacity:

- The university is perceived as having knowledge about cutting edge practices and expertise that can be helpful in accomplishing the agency’s mission.
- The university is a resource for skills that the agency does not have.
- Being engaged with a university can provide prestige; it is good public relations.
- An objective outside viewpoint is desired. A university connection can be perceived as one way to shift a community’s or agency’s balance of forces, to break out of a deadlock or a pre-existing mode of operation.
- There is a mistaken perception that a university can provide free resources in the form of students and faculty whose time is already “paid for” (See Reimbursement under Table 2). While the university may contribute some resources, or assist the community to obtain grant funding, in general the university requires reimbursement for services.

*Communities that see the university as a source for free services ordinarily disengage at an early point in the conversation.*

**EXAMPLE 3**

A city commissioner approached the university to facilitate strategic planning by a committee considering the allocation of a foundation grant. Despite numerous meetings and development of multiple tools by the student assigned, the group seemed to make no headway. An exploration of the situation indicated that: (1) the commissioner’s motivation was to get the funds for his ward; (2) the group had no chairperson; and (3) the group had no common understanding about their mission or agreement about the role of the university.

## Developmental Status

In delivering their services (e.g., training, facilitation, evaluations, reports) university partners may assume a certain level of development and understanding that in fact may be lacking in the community agency.

- Community partners may lack familiarity with planning, evaluation, and sound data collection techniques.
- They may explicitly or implicitly disagree on mission, problems, causes, resources, etc.

*Unless the university understands, accommodates, or confronts these disjunctures, the result will be a poor outcome for the partnership.*

### EXAMPLE 4

A county agency proposed to use VISTA workers as home visitors promoting school readiness for young children in high risk families. The university indicated that this approach, given the research on home visiting, would be ineffective in accomplishing defined objectives. The county refused to change the design on the grounds of cost. The university proceeded with an evaluation anyway, as an opportunity for students.

## Ability to Accomplish the Task

Is this a viable situation? Elements in the community partner's situation that are immutable and flawed from the beginning will seriously constrain the effectiveness of the enterprise.

- Does the design of the intervention depart from the tenets of best practice?
- Are the basic conditions for an acceptable evaluation missing?
- Do the participants include the persons influential within the agencies who can authorize or carry out the endeavor?
- Is there a person identified who will follow through on the decisions made or tasks identified?
- If the partnership involves a coalition, do the individual members have a history of working well together?
- Are there other factors inherent in the situation that will promote or impede success?

### EXAMPLE 5

A state department requested proposals and assigned a grant for a statewide evaluation six months after local grantees had received funds and initiated services. It was not possible to establish common definitions. Grantees varied in the extent to which they were able to collect and transmit data. As a result, many of the analyses were based on limited numbers. The university provided a preliminary research report, which was then rewritten as a policy report, then as a power point presentation, and finally as a single page of policy recommendations.

*Do seriously flawed situations provide appropriate learning opportunities for students? University capabilities are a scarce resource and should not be wasted on flawed enterprises.*

## Community Capacity

University faculty and staff will make the assumption that the community partner sees the joint enterprise as a primary activity. For the community partner, the recruitment of volunteers, training, strategic planning, community mapping, and commitment to a change process is likely to be one among multiple competing interests. For agency staff, this joint project is secondary to service and management obligations.

While management may be committed to the project, agency staff may look upon their participation as simply an overload on an already overburdened desk, an overload for which they receive no compensation and perceive no payoff.

- Attendance at meetings or training sessions takes time away from management and service.
- Collection and transmittal of data is an added burden for staff who may not see any benefit from their participation.
- Even a sophisticated agency may not have the capacity to manage an information system and deliver heretofore uncollected data. The requirements for initial training and periodic monitoring to determine whether needed tasks are being accomplished should be carefully assessed.

### EXAMPLE 6

The university undertook to evaluate involvement of foster children in a youth development program delivered by volunteer leaders. Because of the inability to recruit and sustain volunteer leaders for community troops, only those children in group homes could be reached.

University partners need to assess the resources and capacities of assigned staff that the community partner proposes to make to the shared enterprise. University faculty and staff tend to overlook or overestimate the extent to which communities can fulfill their part of the agreement.

### THE UNIVERSITY'S ASSESSMENT OF ITS OWN CAPACITY

A parallel inquiry should be undertaken with respect to the university's capacity to enter into an effective partnership (Table 5). Prior to committing limited university resources, the university should make an assessment of the skills and competencies available to meet the community's needs and expectations.

- Is the university's hammer suited to this particular nail?
- Does the community situation match the faculty member's focus?
- Can this assignment be undertaken effectively in view of other commitments?

### THE COMMUNITY'S ASSESSMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY PARTNER

Before entering into a relationship, community representatives should have an understanding of the university culture. A clear understanding of strengths and differences promotes the effectiveness of a university-community partnership. This understanding includes:

- The university's motivation for working with the community
- Limitations on university involvement with communities
- Characteristics of the university work style

#### Motivation

The university's primary mission is to educate students and to expand the boundaries of knowledge. The value system of higher education, reflected in annual performance reviews, provides rewards to faculty, i.e., tenure and recognition, for published research and the ability to obtain outside funding. Community connections will be assessed within these contexts. Thus, faculty will be interested in community connections that test knowledge and provide experience that can inform teaching, be communicated via traditional scholarly outlets, and attract funding for further development. For senior faculty responsible for graduate students and young PhDs looking for an academic career, one interest in community connections is to provide experiences that will be useful to young

**Table 5**  
**ASSESSING THE UNIVERSITY'S CAPACITY FOR PARTICIPATION**

	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Actions if Negative</i>
<b>Appropriateness</b>	Faculty talents and/or interests are appropriate to the request	Faculty are not suited for this assignment, or have no interest in it	Withdraw
<b>Developing new knowledge</b>	Partnership offers a context for developing new knowledge	Partnership will not advance scholarship	Withdraw
<b>Availability</b>	Faculty and staff capacity is available	Faculty and staff are overcommitted	Withdraw
<b>Students</b>	Capacity to oversee students is included	Faculty are overcommitted	Withdraw
	Students appropriate to the task are available	Available students lack necessary skills	Provide training and oversight

investigators as they develop their careers. Engagement specialists are likely to be more focused on facilitation of community processes and products, and the promotion of community change.

### Limitations

Is the university's product appropriate for the environment and capacity of the community agency? The product may be too complex, too costly, or otherwise inappropriate for the community setting or the agency's stage of development.

University connections with communities generally emphasize trying a new approach or pushing the boundaries of understanding. Generally, faculty are interested in replication of service models or evaluations at additional sites only to the extent that this increase in experience will deepen understanding and expand concepts.

Replication or dissemination of a developed product has characteristically been left to persons who come across the article in a scholarly publication. In recent years, emphasis on evidence-based practice has resulted in a movement, initially fueled by federal or foundation grants, to disseminate developed processes or service interventions. This consultant or franchising role directed at dissemination may be carried out by the innovator from a special unit within or outside the university.

### University Work Style

In engaging with the university, the community needs to be clear about the mode of operation most characteristic of faculty.

#### ■ Who will be doing the work

Although negotiations are undertaken with, and contractual documents designate, senior and prestigious faculty as investigators, the likelihood is that the major part of the work will be done by graduate students and junior staff. The role that senior faculty may be expected to play can range from consistent direction and oversight to occasional involvement when there are problems or a public presence is called for, to involvement primarily in critiquing the final report.

#### ■ Realistic expectations

Faculty generally are specialists. They should not be expected to undertake something beyond their specific area of expertise.

#### ■ Timely fulfillment of commitments

It is not uncommon for faculty and staff to be overcommitted. Characteristically, faculty tend to file applications for opportunities that are relevant to their talents. As a consequence, multiple projects can be in play for the same time period, which creates a time crunch in balancing commitments. This can result in delays in completing work and submitting required reports.

*Expected events that dictate time frames for submission of reports should be clarified in discussions. The community may reasonably ask about competing commitments.*

#### ■ Useful reports

University faculty are trained to organize academic reports, with emphasis on research methodology. Community agencies need: (1) short reports that are organized to respond to the policy questions for which answers are desired; and (2) timely reports that enable them to respond to deadlines set by funders or appropriation committees.

*The issue of university reports for communities will be discussed in more detail in the next **BRIEF**.*

## PUTTING IT IN WRITING

The understandings and expectations of a university-community partnership should be incorporated into a written document. This document takes the form of the work plan attached to a contractual agreement, or it may be the university's response to a request for proposal, negotiated modifications, and a contractual award document.

Conflict and disappointment will be avoided if these written materials include:

- A clear statement of the questions for which answers are desired or the expected products/activities
- The date(s) on which reports must be submitted, and possibly a penalty for lateness
- Expectations for, and limitations on, data collection, including confidentiality restrictions relevant to the university and to the community agency

### A SUCCESS STORY

The newly appointed director of XYZ Community Agency, a social services agency with many separate programs, came to the university requesting assistance in creating a "teaching agency." An initial literature review identified the characteristics of a "teaching hospital" and the information that efforts from the outside to create this mechanism in other settings had not endured. After a discussion was held, a contract with the university involving the School of Social Work and University-Community Partnerships provided for outcome-focused sessions with supervisory staff, placement and supervision of interns in the foster care component, an event to which the community was invited, and "Grand Rounds" to explore topics of interest and discuss case presentations. Over time, these activities were fine tuned, and a similar sequence was initiated with other components of the organization.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This BRIEF was written by Betty Tableman and reviewed by Michigan State faculty and engagement specialists Hiram Fitzgerald, University Outreach & Engagement; Laura Bates, Institute for Children, Youth and Families and University-Community Partnerships; Bob Brown, University-Community Partnerships; Patricia Farrell, Families and Communities Together (FACT) Coalition and University-Community Partnerships; David Knaggs, School of Social Work and University-Community Partnerships; Esther Onaga, Institute for Children, Youth and Families; Celeste Sturdevant Reed, University-Community Partnerships; Francisco Villarruel, Family and Child Ecology; and with appreciation for the comments of Joan Abbey, Eastern Michigan University, and Mary Ludtke, Michigan Department of Community Health.

**BEST PRACTICE BRIEFS** are a product of University-Community Partnerships @ Michigan State University, connecting university resources to the community.

**BRIEFS** are reviewed by participating faculty, Partnerships staff, and an advisory group of potential users. Responsibility is assumed by Betty Tableman, Editor, at 517-432-7138, or e-mail: [tableman@msu.edu](mailto:tableman@msu.edu).

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