Best Practices for Community Engagement at Oklahoma State University
Suggested Best Practices for Building and Maintaining Relationships with Community Partners

Creating and maintaining partnerships with off-campus groups and organizations can be challenging. As institutions, universities often operate at a unique pace and style, different from potential off-campus partners. Even the most community-oriented faculty, staff member, or student may therefore encounter unanticipated roadblocks in their community-engagement efforts. With that in mind, as you begin to explore off-campus partnerships, please consider the following recommendations from a community-engaged faculty member at Oklahoma State University.

- **Learn to see us through their eyes.** To many Oklahomans, OSU is a big institution with deep pockets that always gets what it wants. For some people, OSU therefore presents exciting opportunities for collaboration, but for others, OSU may be a bully, hoarding resources and crowding out others' views. No matter your own view, be sensitive to how others see OSU.

- **Don’t have meetings, build relationships.** You can often get more done over a beer at 5:30 pm than you can in many meetings. Many community groups are small organizations of passionate people who are used to working in both formal and informal settings. Help group members trust you by meeting and working with them in ways they are familiar with.

- **Be sincerely interested in your potential partners’ passion.** Most community groups have clear, practical, and often difficult goals that powerfully and personally motivate their members. Talk with group members about those goals and how you and others at OSU can help the group succeed. Share in the joy of a community’s successes as well as the distress of a community’s challenges.

- **Let others take credit whenever possible.** Letting a community member or group take all or part of the credit for a partnership activity will likely make them more enthusiastic about and committed to your partnership. Look for opportunities to share credit in ways that will not affect your larger professional goals such as future journal articles or tenure documents.

- **Teach people how to “breach” OSU.** Help community members and groups know how to begin a conversation with OSU. Identify faculty and staff members with interests similar to the community’s and arrange a conversation.

- **Find a local guide.** When you first enter a new community, recognize and respect its preexisting structure and practices. Find a group member who is willing to introduce you to key community members, expected behavior, and common ideas.

- **Don’t make promises you can’t keep.** Community groups are often small, have relatively few resources, and face firmer deadlines than are common in academic settings. Such groups therefore often have little room for error.

- **Create enduring communication channels.** Establish regular communication patterns with all stakeholders. Even after major partnership activities have ended, share updates with one another. Maintain your community partners' connection to and confidence in OSU as an institution.
- **Create partnerships to last.** Many campus-community partnerships are grounded on one or a few personal relationships and can break down when a key member moves to another organization or institution. Avoid this by creating deep, multilayered relationships between OSU and your community partner(s). Whenever possible, include colleagues at OSU in partnership activities and conversations. Help ensure the partnership's work can go on without you.
Suggested Best Practices for Community Engagement

What is Community Engagement?

Oklahoma State University is a Carnegie Community Engagement Classified University and as such works towards meeting the Carnegie Foundation’s definition of community engagement:

“Community engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of collaboration and reciprocity.”

Tips for Faculty/Staff/Students Collaborating with Community Partners

1) **Identify potential community partners** – Who works on related issues?
2) **Respect, honor, and learn about community partners** – Get to know in detail three aspects of potential partners:
   a. Their organizational structure and practices, especially regarding scheduling and communication;
   b. What forms the core of the communities they work with; and
   c. The cultures their members identify with.
3) **Connect with potential community partners** – Spend time with each organization/group on their terms, help them achieve their goals.
4) **Propose an equitable collaboration** – Do not bring a fully formed project to an organization. Instead, propose a relationship through which a mutually beneficial project can grow.
5) **Identify all stakeholders and communities that should know or be a part of your project** – Ask: “Who’s missing?”
6) **Clarify expectations in writing** – Very early in the relationship, create a memorandum of understanding (MOU) addressing all collaboration elements.
7) **Share leadership and expertise** – Include each partner in all major decisions at all points of the project, but jointly distribute tasks according to each partner’s expertise—including those from OSU.
8) **Be honest and open** – Clearly communicate goals, motivations (e.g., a journal article), and expected timeline for the project.
9) **Honor the wisdom and perspective of community members** – Remember that they have likely lived through the issues/topics the project addresses, potentially for an extended period of time.
10) **Continuously reflect and adjust** – Always be aware of what your impact is on the community and be willing to make changes to ensure that you have a positive impact.
11) **Share and translate broadly** – Be sure each partner has relevant, specifically useful results and products at the end of the collaboration. Translate any jargon or difficult academic language/data for them.

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Tips for Community Partners Collaborating with OSU Faculty/Staff/Students

1) **Clarify expectations in writing** – Very early in the relationship, create a memorandum of understanding (MOU) addressing all collaboration elements.

2) **Share leadership and expertise** – Include university partner(s) in all major decisions at all points of the project, but jointly distribute tasks according to each partner’s expertise.

3) **Be honest and open** – Clearly communicate with university partners your goals, motivations, and expected timeline for the project.

4) **Address power dynamics** – Share with university partners your perspective of the power distribution and decision making dynamics in your collaboration as well as any other university collaborations you have previously been a part of.

5) **Provide explicit timelines** – Recognize that faculty, staff, and students all have somewhat different schedules and pre-existing deadlines—and that they each may be different than yours. Be clear about what your needs and calendar are.

6) **Provide communication guides** – Specify the form and frequency of communication that best supports your organization’s efforts. Again, your needs may not be the pre-existing standard among your university partners; help them see the differences.

7) **Clarify your resources and availability** – Help university partners fit into your established workflow and procedures.

8) **Discuss your supervision capacity** – Clearly communicate with university partners your capacity to work with students, faculty, and staff.

9) **Introduce your partners to your community** – Share relevant information about community members and history with university partners.

**Further Reading**

For more on best practices in community-engaged teaching and research, visit the following organizations’ online resources:


- Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning ([https://sites.google.com/a/umich.edu/mjcsl/](https://sites.google.com/a/umich.edu/mjcsl/))


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