Washington University in St. Louis
University-Community Partnerships

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*L*ike most research institutions, Washington University in St. Louis is characterized by decentralization. Such autonomy encourages innovation but can prove confusing for community entities facing requests to partner from multiple departments of the university. In addition, lack of cross-campus communication means that most collaborations grow from referrals or past association, unnecessarily limiting the pool of potential community partners.

Washington University's Gephardt Institute for Public Service promotes lifelong civic engagement and sustained community impact through service initiatives. As one of the few university-wide entities on campus, it is uniquely positioned to overcome the challenges of decentralization and build infrastructures that increase communication, coordination, and efficiency.

In fall 2010, the institute initiated a standardized request for projects process to support community-based courses that engage a number of organizations in St. Louis, Missouri and beyond. The request for projects provides a course description and learning objectives so potential community partners can propose a project consistent with those parameters. This process was designed to give a wider public the chance to take advantage of university resources. The request for projects is openly announced to all, and the review process ensures a standard of quality that increases the likelihood that both community partner expectations and goals for student learning will be met. Moreover, it gives the community, rather than the university, voice in identifying critical needs to be addressed.

The request for projects process was piloted through Olin Outreach, a business course that engages teams of sophomores to work on a business challenge faced by a nonprofit, community, or governmental organization. For example, a community gardening organization asked students to analyze the optimal farmers markets for members to sell their produce. Students performed research and analysis, presented their findings, and participated in a poster session.

The request for projects process was next implemented for Social Work Practice With Organizations and Communities, a required course for over 180 master's students at Washington University's

George Warren Brown School of Social Work. Proposals included the Lighthouse for the Blind, which asked students to assess gaps in services for the visually impaired. To address such questions, student teams engaged with stakeholders, reviewed the evidence, and made concrete recommendations through a final report and presentation.

For both these courses, the institute served as a portal for disseminating and collecting the request for projects, thus providing a centralized point of contact for the university. In addition, institute staff worked with faculty to provide a comprehensive community partner orientation, a memorandum of understanding, course content regarding community partnerships, periodic check-ins throughout the semester, and final evaluations.

The request for projects process has tremendously improved what had formerly been a haphazard approach to community engagement. The vision is to expand it to eventually include all community-based courses at Washington University. Community partners praise the new model, and have used the information provided by students to write grants, expand programs and services, and inform strategic planning. Students have profound learning experiences through these courses, and the university is now more coordinated in its response to the community. The request for projects process ensures a win-win-win: for students, Washington University, and the greater community.

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