

## Extension/Academic Service-Learning Collaboration: Benefits and Lessons Learned

*Jill Kriesky and Lawrence S. Cote*

### Abstract

The West Virginia Community Partnership Model (WVCPM) fosters partnerships among academic faculty, students, extension faculty (and staff), and community organizations to produce significant community-based student learning; increased university involvement in community service across the state; and cultural change that improves collaboration between the academic and extension faculties for the mutual benefit of all parties. This article describes benefits and lessons learned through the early stage operation of the model. It analyzes these benefits and lessons learned in terms of three apparent characteristics of effective partnerships: (1) goal alignment among partners; (2) adequate time to establish partnerships; and (3) willingness to "give something up" (e.g., adopt only promising ideas) when necessary.

### Introduction

Institutions of higher education in general, and land-grant institutions in particular, are examining ways to ensure that collaboration with and service to communities of place and of interest are high quality, high impact, and increasing in number. The multitude of sessions on this and related topics at the 2000, 2001, and 2002 national outreach scholarship conferences evidence the importance of such outreach to land-grant (and other public) institutions, as does the range of authors and subjects addressed in this periodical in recent years.

West Virginia University (WVU), under the administrative leadership of its provost and Office of Service-learning Programs (OSLP), developed and launched the West Virginia Community Partnership Model (WVCPM) to foster collaborative engagement with local organizations by academic and extension faculty and undergraduate and graduate students. This service-learning format, in which students participate in faculty- and community-designed partnerships using their course-based skills, appears to be one of a few using extension assistance as a key ingredient to connect academic programs to communities. (See Morris, Pomery, and Murray 2002 and Simpson, 1998 for other examples.)

Although the model has been in place only four years, it has produced significant results. In an era of scarce resources, the Kellogg-funded initiative has involved approximately 1,900 students in community-based learning; attracted 125 academic and 25 extension faculty members to participate in 43 partnerships with communities in 25 of 55 West Virginia counties; and sparked culture change that has improved the ability of academic and extension faculty members to work together.

The authors' experiences over time with this initiative and other collaborative projects suggest that successful partnerships include at least three related characteristics: (1) strategic alignment of goals and purposes (i.e., mutual self-interest); (2) investment of time; and (3) giving up something. In the model discussed here, each is present. All three factors have been evident in a variety of ways. As is discussed below, mechanisms are required to ensure that community, academic, and extension cultures, and the goals of each partner will coincide. Yet even with such guided strategic alignments, time is required to develop the trust, communication systems, and guidelines partners must share to make projects succeed. Finally, particularly as the university seeks to improve and expand its service-learning program, partners must agree to give up (at least temporarily) some innovative proposals to focus on those that can establish a record of success and to share credit for those successes.

### Context

Since the appointment of a new president (David C. Hardesty, Jr.) and a new provost (Gerald E. Lang) in 1995, West Virginia University has been driving hard to change its culture. Becoming a student-centered university became the keystone to the agenda for change. (See *Hardesty, Cote, and LeFlore 2002* for a more complete description of these initiatives.) "Student-centered" includes awareness of and responsiveness to the lifelong learning needs of the state, its citizens, and their communities, as well as the needs of undergraduate and graduate students.

On the state level, a five-year period of significant state legislative reform of West Virginia's higher education system has also been under way since 1995. The state has sought to engage higher education more directly in its efforts to transform and diversify its economy, to improve youth readiness for higher education and adult literacy, and to develop a better-prepared workforce. Thus, there is an expectation on and off campus that innovative strategies will emerge to improve the student learning experience and to increase responsiveness to community needs.

### The West Virginia Community Partnership Model

In 1998, as part of a consortium with East Tennessee State University, the University of Texas—El Paso, and Northeastern University, WVU was invited by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to apply for a grant to assist in the transformation to an engaged institution. The invitation to WVU to participate was initially based on a successful transformational process within health sciences at the university in the early 1990s: the West Virginia Rural Health Initiative, a Kellogg Community Partnership Program with Health Professions Education. The goals for WVU were, and remain, aggressive: to build upon and expand the successful, multiyear health sciences initiative throughout the institution to help “transform the University through the systematic adaptation of experience-based, community imbedded, public service undertaken by students,

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faculty, and community partners” (Lang and Hunter 1998, 1). With the four-year, \$1.25 million Kellogg grant, West Virginia University developed a model for service-learning delivery that is a strategic alignment among community partners, its Extension Service, service-learning office, and academic colleges.

The grant program established two mechanisms to implement this partnership model. Faculty/community partnerships can apply for year-long grants to support course development, travel, materials, and community needs related to the partnership projects. The service-learning planning grant is a second option for communities just beginning to think about how students in various majors might be incorporated into a project. The OSLP organized a request for proposal (RFP) process and, with the assistance of its advisory board (inclusive of the three types of service-learning partners, other advocates, and advisers), evaluated proposals, awarded funding, and administered the financial reimbursement and progress reporting system.

**Partners in the Kellogg-Supported West Virginia Community Partnership Model:** The participants in service-learning partnerships facilitated by the OSLP are academic faculty, students, community members, and extension educators. Each plays a unique role in the partnerships. Faculty are learning facilitators who use the

community-based project as either an application of theories and skills taught in the classroom or a laboratory in which students discover concepts of a discipline while they assist local citizens. Students are legitimate contributors to community projects and active learners, rather than "vessels" to be filled with reading assignments and lectures. These roles are new to students and faculty on many campuses. As noted in the fifth Kellogg Commission report, *Toward a Coherent Campus Culture*, an "academic culture [is] made up primarily of faculty and students, fragmented into its own subculture organized around disciplines . . . ; a distinct and entirely separate student culture, with a bewildering diversity of aims and interests . . ." (Kellogg Commission 2002, viii).

In WVU partnerships, the university's extension service serves as the primary connection to the community, also linking the varied academic/community cultures. Extension's mission, including its long-

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term understanding of and intimacy with local communities and their needs, gives its employees unique capabilities to serve as partnership initiators and facilitators for academic faculty and communities and as "real-world" instructors for students. Again, however, these roles are new ones for many extension educators.

Extension faculty (a.k.a. extension educators) are generally of two types: extension specialists ("state" faculty) and extension agents (a.k.a. county-based extension educators). At WVU, all extension educators are faculty who participate fully in university-wide evaluation, promotion, and tenure processes. *Extension specialists* (often Ph.D. holders, based at the university's main campus, and in some cases with appointments in academic colleges) have the job of conducting and interpreting research that can be transferred to best practices applied in communities, on farms, in families, businesses, non-profit and government agencies, and the like. *Extension agents* live and work in communities. Originally conceived as "leader[s] of change in the countryside" (referring to agricultural agents, Paul A. Miller in 2001, viii), county agents develop relationships with clientele (individuals and groups) and develop and offer (research-based) educational programs designed to improve practices in an array of specialty areas.

The culture of county agents is generally one of considerable independence, given the concept of their purpose (community-based change agents) and immersion in community life. They operate extension offices in about 70 percent of the 3,066 counties of the nation (McDowell 2001, 65). In some cases, they are viewed as (or in a few state cases, actually are) county employees.

Community members in the service-learning partnerships are encouraged to operate as project partners and as "real-world" instructors for students (and faculty). Despite their broad knowledge about their projects and experiences in their locales, the instructor role is one that many have to cultivate. Communities and their leaders

have a need for broad visions to be broken down into opportunities for mini-successes . . . manageable tasks or actions that can address immediate barriers and [be] completed in succession. They do not describe problems in [the] abstract. . . . That which they know is "real," based on their unique experiences and belief, drives their actions. (Richards 1996, 19, 20)

**Projects Undertaken:** Twenty of the forty-three partnerships funded with Kellogg dollars, or 47 percent, included extension partners. Below is a brief overview of the three categories into which the partnerships fall, providing a general idea of the activities on which students, academic and extension faculty, and community organizations collaborated. Full descriptions of all funded projects are available at the Web page "Expanding Community Partnership" <http://www.wvu.edu/%7Eoslp/Kellogg/kellogg.htm>. Table 1 summarizes the three types of projects that included extension educators.

1. **Community well-being projects:** The largest number of projects including extension partners fall into the category of community well-being. These projects meet daily needs of citizens in a community of place (i.e., geographic area) or a community of interest. Several of these have provided resources for children's programming or guidance for those who deliver it by establishing or enriching school-based and after-school activities. For example, through the Spanish Language and Cultural Education project, WVU students design lesson plans for elementary school teachers during the academic year, and direct a Spanish immersion day camp for elementary children during the summer. Other community well-being projects seek to meet resource needs

of all residents in a given area. The Community-Based Journalism project has published newspapers in collaboration with residents in three West Virginia counties. A few partnerships are more focused on serving populations with specific needs; for example, the SAFE Domestic Violence Prevention project enhances the services and information available to victims of domestic violence in southern West Virginia. In all, twelve projects fall into this category.

2. Economic development projects. Four other projects examined here have been more specifically focused on the economic development needs of communities. In two separate projects in the towns of Spencer (Roane County) and Logan (Logan County), for example, merchants engaged WVU in efforts to determine how their local businesses could attract and retain customers after the establishment of "big box" stores (e.g., Wal-Mart) in their communities.
3. Recreation and tourism projects. A specific form of economic development undertaken by four partnerships including extension faculty is recreation and tourism. Two projects, Bulltown Tourism Development and Forest Heritage Web Design, are helping communities with established tourist destinations to improve access and the quality of information available at the sites. Two other projects are attempting to establish new sites for visitors interested in trail riding and local history, respectively.

### Preliminary Lessons Learned from Service-learning Partnerships

The three apparent characteristics of effective partnerships discussed earlier are useful in describing benefits and lessons learned during the initial four years of operation of the WVCPM.

***Strategic Alignment of Goals and Purposes:*** Understanding the importance of goal alignment is perhaps the foremost lesson learned thus far in the context of the Kellogg-supported West Virginia model. Three separate observations, respecting training, project and community goals, and faculty development, are considered in turn.

1. TRAINING—Although the concept of putting students into a community project to learn how to apply academic skills is not particularly difficult to grasp, the steps needed to implement service-learning are more complex than is sometimes acknowledged. As service-learning has

**Table 1. Topic Area of Grants Including Extension Educator Participation\***  
(EPG = Extension planning grant)

**Community Well-being**

- Water Quality Testing on the Mud River
- One-Room School House Community Centers' Resource Sharing (EPG)
- SAFE Domestic Violence Prevention (EPG)
- Agricultural Literacy Training Public School Teacher Training
- 4-H Leadership Guide Development
- Spanish Language and Central American Cultural Education
- 612 MAC Community Center Development (EPG)
- College of Agriculture, Forestry, and Consumer Sciences Internships in Extension Offices
- Community-based Journalism in Pocohontas County
- Project CHOICE Housing Options Resource Center Development (EPG)
- Grant Facilitator Development for Keyser, WV\*\*
- Westover City Revitalization\*\*

**Economic Development**

- City of Logan Shopper Survey
- Competitiveness of Rural Retailers in Spencer
- Vision 2020 Economic Development Planning (EPG)
- Doddridge County Economic Development Planning (EPG)

**Recreation/Tourism**

- Bulltown Historic Site Tourism Development
- City Cemetery Reclamation and Restoration
- Forest Heritage Communities' Web Design
- Bunner's Ridge Horse Park Trail and Facilities Planning and Development

\* Projects may arguably fall into more than one category. Here they are placed into the category in which the authors believe their impact is greatest.

\*\* Designed to include extension educator support, but due to extenuating circumstances, the project was not undertaken.

become an increasingly established pedagogy, practitioners have developed guidelines for communications among partners; designing community-based course activities; the roles for community leaders (and for this model, community-based extension faculty) in course instruction; discussion of civic engagement; and student evaluation (e.g., *Heffernan 2001*). Aligning the understanding of academic and extension faculty and community partners about how to implement these elements of a service-learning partnership is key.

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The Bunnors Ridge Horse Park project, which in its first year managed only to recruit student volunteers to assist in site development, now has three courses enlisted in the work. Students in these courses meet with riding club members for an orientation session and write reflective essays analyzing their experiences on the project.

2. **PROJECT AND COMMUNITY GOALS**—In the early days of the grant program, the OSLP purposely erred in favor of funding project proposals, even if the likelihood of full integration of service-learning principles into required course assignments seemed uncertain. The more important initial goal was to increase interaction among communities, extension faculty, and academic faculty and their students, and to introduce all parties to service-learning partnerships. County-based extension educators are keenly attuned to community needs and generally focus first on securing resources to meet them. They were primarily responding to community needs as a first priority.

The 612 MAC community center development project has made the transition from primarily gathering resources for its community partner to achieving its goal through service-learning. In its first year of funding, the extension representative and a political science graduate student worked with community members to provide structured after-school

activities for children at the center and to secure computer resources. With the increased emphasis on service-learning outcomes, the extension partner has now recruited an education faculty member and her students specializing in reading instruction to strengthen 612 MAC's programming.

3. **EXTENSION FACULTY DEVELOPMENT**—Where an extension educator facilitates the alignment of community needs with service-learning goals, he or she is also likely to find that the project will fit with professional development opportunities. Kellogg partnerships have so far produced two significant professional development outcomes and a third related "lesson learned."

Extension agents often must deliver programs across a broad range of topics. Working with academic students and faculty gives agents an opportunity to engage in a project with their more discipline-focused perspective. For example, as mentioned previously, when agents (and business owners) in two counties were struggling to keep small businesses afloat in the wake of "big box" store openings, marketing and rural retailing students provided new options for merchants based on analyses of the complementary or competitive nature of the goods and services, hours, and other conveniences they offer. The results of such in-depth and theory-based projects can provide a community-based extension faculty member with tools for more sophisticated analysis, and sometimes, a more objective view of his or her community.

In addition, the entire process of proposal and partnership development and project completion often provides extension faculty with opportunities for documented outreach scholarship. They have participated in presentations at a wide variety of academic-related discipline conferences, including the multistate Appalachian Studies Conference, the Southern Foreign Languages Association, and the International Conference on Virtual Systems and Multimedia. The extension partner involved in the latter presentation was also a co-author on a related published article. In three cases, extension participants have led successful efforts to prepare additional grant proposals. (Academic faculty were likely to leverage their projects more quickly for such purposes.)

A third professional development "lesson learned" emerges based on observations of the twenty projects

reviewed here and the additional twenty-three that did not involve extension educators. Again, goal alignment is key. Academic and extension faculty alike are evaluated annually for tenure, promotion, and performance-based salary adjustments. All must provide evidence of achievement in teaching, research, and service. The peer committees and administrators who evaluate the work completed in the partnership must recognize and indicate that it fits into one (or more) of these mission/faculty performance categories. One extension educator explained that she had chosen not to follow through on her role in a partnership when competing demands on her time arose because she believed that her supervisor didn't care about service-learning, only research. While this reaction may be extreme, explanations by key administrators about how service-learning partnerships align with professional evaluation categories will encourage involvement by faculty across the university.

***Investment of Time:*** The involvement of many project partners at various stages and in varying capacities helps to create wonderful synergy and worthwhile experiences for those involved. Yet it is a challenging and time-consuming process to establish the goals of a program, the measurable outcomes of pursuing them, and the benchmarks (such as the number and type of students, faculty, and courses participating); to ascertain the number and type of community members and groups involved; and to determine source and amount of funds for sustainability. The initial phase—in which partners are developing trusting relationships, establishing communications mechanisms among multiple partners often separated by significant distance, and handling logistical issues on their projects' start-ups—particularly requires significant time and energy. For extension and academic faculty, making a realistic estimate of the time needed to develop these aspects of projects (and obtaining written agreement from the chair or supervisor) is key.

The extension specialist who has spearheaded the Spanish language and culture program in a remote Wayne County elementary school has built a successful project in large part because of attention to time allotment and goal setting that addresses multiple facets of the project. When the partnership began to develop, capacity building in language and cultural education was already part of his annual faculty assignment document (FAD). Once he secured Kellogg funding, the time dedicated to the program increased in his next FAD. With sufficient time allotted to the effort, the results

have been impressive. With his project colleagues, this faculty member has expanded the programming in Wayne County to a second elementary school; undertaken a research project on parental involvement in the program in West Virginia and Guanajuato, Mexico; made presentations at national 4-H and regional academic conferences; and presented the model to the West Virginia Board of Education to advocate for language instruction in elementary schools across the state.

**Giving Something Up:** The process of organizing service-learning partnerships is complex. It requires all partners to have strong communication and organization skills in order to coordinate classroom- and community-based activities. It becomes more complex, albeit likely more rewarding, as extension faculty and their unique cultures and perspectives are added to the mix. While partners

can be educated to develop skills as effective service-learning partners, success is far more likely if partners exhibit some or all of these traits from the start. Partners must also listen, learn, and accept guidance from one another when engaging in mutual learning within a largely unfamiliar pedagogy. In short, neither all faculty with an interest in innovative pedagogy nor all communities with interesting projects are good candidates for service-learning.

For example, the extension faculty who initiated the One-Room School house project had innovative ideas on how to electronically link the resources of five isolated community centers in impoverished counties in the southern part of the state while developing the local citizens' leadership capacity. They understood how computer science service-learning students could assist in this project. But the time (and travel) required to establish relationships with academic faculty, to structure specific projects for students, and to figure out the logistics of getting the students into the centers was too great given the attention needed for mentoring the emerging community leaders. The project succeeded in attracting significant funding from a regional foundation. But the OSLP determined that it was not "ripe" for a service-learning project at its current stage of development.

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### Summary and Preliminary Assessment of Model

The ambitious goal of the West Virginia Community Partnerships Model, "to transform the University through the systematic adaptation of experience-based, community-imbedded, public service undertaken by students, faculty, and community partners" is still very much a work in progress. WVU leaders continue to assess the combined impact of the many university-wide campus culture change initiatives under way. One clear insight gained is that it is indeed the wide array of specific change strategies, not any single one, that together are producing real, measurable change in the student-centered, engagement-oriented culture at WVU.

The service-learning that has occurred within the model discussed here has had an impact as significant as in other institutions. Students recognize the value of the experience, as is reflected in the following comment by a social work major:

[T]he class forced me to actually get out and see the real world. . . . It also forced me to appreciate volunteering and drove home the point that it is your responsibility to do more in the community as a social worker and a citizen . . . I feel that this has probably been my best experience to date at the Division of Social Work.

Community members understand the immediate and future value of these activities, as reflected in this observation about the civic engagement goal of this pedagogy:

I feel certain [this student] will continue volunteering with [our community group] and that he greatly understands not only the benefits he has gained through volunteerism, but has seen first hand the benefits it has on his surrounding community and its people. I believe his experiences with [our organization] and the new relationships he has developed through his volunteering will help him to become an even more productive citizen in the future.

For extension faculty and the communities they serve, real needs are being addressed through a new form of collaboration with their academic faculty counterparts and their university students. As one extension partner noted:

The project has served as a catalyst for the neighborhood immediately surrounding [it]. Through collaboration and coordination, a movement is afoot to enhance programming

possibilities for the youth and senior citizens of the area. A single phone call from our community partner involved us in planning and facilitating community meetings, and has led to the commitment of further Extension [and academic] resources and personnel both at the county and state levels.

These early successes, coupled with the lessons learned along the way, support the viability of the academic service-learning—extension collaborative model still being developed at this land-grant university. Benefits accrue to all parties. For the faculty, the task of working across the traditional boundary between academic departments and extension units represents a culture change that requires faculty to share responsibilities in ways unfamiliar to them. A recommended next step to help facilitate such change is for extension organizations and offices of service-learning in land-grant institutions to begin to share the training and relationship-building techniques that they are using to advance service-learning partnerships.

The model described here, in combination with many other strategies developed and implemented with the deliberate intention of creating a more student-centered, responsive campus culture, will help to achieve the desired shift toward a culture of mutual learning through engagement with communities of place and of interest.

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## About the Authors

- Jill Kriesky, Ph.D., served as an extension coordinator for the W. K. Kellogg-West Virginia University Expanding Community Partnership Program before becoming the director of the Office of Service Learning Programs in July 2001. She administers the Kellogg grant, directs other resources to community-university partnerships that incorporate service learning, and assists faculty in related curriculum development. She is also the executive director of West Virginia Campus Compact. Kriesky's academic appointment is as an extension professor (tenured) in the Institute for Labor Studies and Research at WVU.

- Larry Cote, Ed.D., has served as the associate provost for Extension and Public Service and director of the West Virginia Cooperative Extension Service since 1997. He strongly supports collaboration between extension and academic faculty to expand WVU's outreach and community engagement potential, including the growth of service-learning. His experiences in doing so have made Cote keenly aware of the potential challenges that partnerships hold. Cote is an extension professor (tenured) of community and economic development and a past CEO of a regional Penn State University campus, where he led the development of an innovative outreach campus in suburban Philadelphia.