**COOPERATIVE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

**BUILD A STRONG FOUNDATION: *Plan Together***

   

Too often, community members or organizations are asked to work with professors and students as “test users,” “labs,” or research participants. This kind of relationship places the expertise and effort of the community in service of research or pedagogical goals.

In these structures, “engagements” are often multi-day feedback sessions, workshops, or “charrettes,” or even just surveys, where researchers and their students solicit community input for research, teaching, and analysis. This approach tends to objectify community members, giving them little autonomy over the questions being asked, the methods utilized, or the ways in which the research will be used after the single engagement

Cooperative projects aim to change this structure by treating community members and outside organizations as *partners*.

***To establish a “cooperative partnership”:***

1. Plan to make decisions through an intentional democratic process with clear definitions and rules. Depending on the size of your group, you may choose to make decisions based on consensus or, if you are larger, based on agreement (meaning everyone agrees even if the choice wasn’t their preference) or a specific voting procedure
2. Seek out community-based partners that value inclusion, have principles of open membership, and represent the stakeholders in the community
3. Structure the relationship so that all members are given equal opportunity to shape processes and to present and amend proposals
4. Create a teaching and learning environment in which the knowledge and expertise of the community is valued equally with scholarly forms of knowledge and expertise

**EXAMPLES OF COOPERATIVE PARTNERSHIPS USED IN COURSE PROJECTS**

**Renters State of Emergency**

In the summer of 2016 Georgia Tech Planning professor Anna Kim taught a course that co-created a project with the Housing Justice League of Atlanta. The resulting research conducted by students in partnership with HJL members was turned into a 15-page report called “The Renter’s State of Emergency,” designed and written by students and HJL members for HJL’s advocacy work. This project was created through a cooperative partnership intended not simply to serve the students but also to support the organizational goals of the community partner. For more information, see:<http://www.housingjusticeleague.org/atlanta_declared_a_renter_s_state_of_emergency>

**HWCAC Community Historians:**

Beginning in 2012, Georgia Tech professor Christopher Le Dantec began a multi-year partnership with the Historic Westside Cultural Arts Council. The goals of the partnership were to understand the role of digital technologies in supporting community engagement and capacity building within the context of Historic Westside Neighborhoods. Each semester, Le Dantec and his students worked with members of HWCAC to scope and implement different projects that used community narrative, public performance, and digital media to capture, share, and curate resident-created content. Each project advanced HWCAC’s goals of building capacity within their community, while also allowing Le Dantec and his students to develop participatory design research methods and novel digital media interventions that focused on community identity as a platform for engagement. For more information, see: <http://ourcommunity.is>

**Westside Atlanta Community Landtrust (WALT):**

Georgia Tech professors Carl DiSalvo and Ellen Zegura and researcher Amanda Meng have been working with the Westside Atlanta Land Trust (or WALT), a nonprofit program of the HELP Organization for the past several years in a series of ongoing civic data and design projects. The common basis of these projects is the collection and use of data to advocate for permanently affordable housing for Westside residents. Concentrating our focus on the English Avenue and Vine City neighborhoods that are threatened with gentrification. Throughout these projects, WALT has taken the lead in setting the agenda — our work has been to accompany WALT in pursuit of their goals. This has resulted in the design of digital media and partnership in processes of data modeling, and analysis. The projects have contributed directly to WALT's advocacy efforts, while also providing the basis for scholarship in design, media and computing.

**Engaging the Latino Communities in Atlanta:**

Since 2016, Georgia Tech professor Juan Carlos Rodríguez has created various community engagement opportunities for GT students in his courses Span 4150: Spanish Service Learning and Span 4813: Latin American Documentary, with the purpose of learning about the Latino communities in Atlanta. In the Spring of 2016, students in the Spanish Service-Learning course collaborated with three community organizations that provide tutoring and mentoring services to K-12 Latino students (La Amistad, Agape, LAA's Youth Program). As a final project, students developed games in collaboration with Latino students. In the Fall of 2016, students in the Latin American Documentary class, along with students from professor Yanni Loukissas's Data Design studio, participated in various community engagement events with organizations that serve the Latino community in Buford Highway, such as Plaza Fiesta, The Latin American Association, Cross Keys High School, Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Emory University, and Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights. From these events, students created video materials for their final projects: three data documentaries focusing on housing, education and family objects in Buford Highway's Latino community. Community leaders from participating organizations attended the final screening of these data documentaries and provided valuable feedback on the projects. The Buford Highway Data Documentary Project received a third-place award at the showcase organized by the Digital Integrative Liberal Arts Center. In the Spring of 2017, students in the Spanish-Service-Learning course collaborated with three organizations (Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights, Cross Keys High School, and The LAA's Family Service Program) and created two participatory interview projects about different aspects of the Latino experience in Atlanta. In addition to these teaching activities, Professor Rodríguez provides support to various Latino organizations in Atlanta. He organized a community immersion tour of Buford Highway in partnership with GT Center for Serve-Learn-Sustain and Los Vecinos de Buford Highway. And, in collaboration with the Latin American Association, he produced and edited two videos advocating for the protection of DACA students.

**FAQS ABOUT COOPERATIVE PARTNERSHIPS**

**Why is it important to build collaborative partnerships?**

Teaching and conducting research is part of an academic professional’s job description. However, for community organizations and other agencies there are no set benefits to working with a scholar or with students in a course. Therefore, it can often be viewed as a burden. This is why it is important to develop a cooperative partnership where the benefits for both parties are clear and decisions are made cooperatively.

**What are possible benefits of cooperative partnership for community groups?**

Along with sharing research or project findings with organizations in a format they can use, you can also share funds from grants with the community partner. You and/or your students can also provide your expertise and time outside of the project as a volunteer on another of the organization’s projects.

**What are some of the challenges to partnering with community groups?**

Cooperative partnership is time consuming. This is largely due to the relationship building required, but seeking consensus also takes extra time. With already busy schedules, you might see co-partnership as too time intensive. However, keep in mind that much of the time can be invested up-front and then, once trust is built and processes agreed upon, less time is required. Another common barrier teachers and researches often face is community burnout due to previous negative experiences with university partnerships. This is often due to poorly structured engagements (that are not collaboratively worked out based on the parties’ mutual interests), or scholars or students who have viewed the community as non-active participants in their projects. Explaining your plans to use a cooperative partnership structure can go a long way in addressing this challenge.

**What are the possible benefits for teaching and research?**

Cooperative partnerships give you the opportunity to teach students while producing knowledge that is relevant to the needs of the community. For those doing linked research, it can give you the opportunity to take findings to those who need them the most and it may also help increase the relevance and trustworthiness of the research questions, data, and programs that you have devised and implemented as a result of the work.

**How can you ask a community partner to work with students without burdening them?**

Community organizations are often overwhelmed with work, often beyond their staff or volunteer capacity. Therefore, asking them to work with students can seem like too much. Another way to address this issue is by finding other creative ways to support partners, by, for example: providing the organization with funding, trainings for their staff or volunteers, new software and extra research staff such as student interns. This is also where it helps to have in place a tight process for the project, for communicating with students, and creating accountability measures to ensure student work is high quality.

**How do I begin the process of establishing a cooperative partnership?**

When approaching the community about a research or course project, it is best that you begin by simply learning about the community and their needs. This can be done through your participation in community events and simply by being present. Often local organizations, churches, and schools are a great place to start. The only way to identify connections between your work and community needs is through communication and relationship building.