COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS REPORT:
INVESTING IN COLLABORATION, COMMUNICATION AND STUDENT PREPARATION

June 2024

Introduction

The Centre for Community Partnerships (CCP) presents its fourth annual Community Partnerships Report. This report provides a snapshot of the current state of partnering organizations working within the nonprofit sector in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). It outlines practical strategies that University of Toronto course instructors and staff can implement to make community-engaged learning (CEL) courses and programs more responsive to community partner priorities and less taxing on their time and resources.

In the 2022 Community Partnerships Report community partners suggested that University course instructors and staff could strengthen their partnerships in future CEL initiatives by increasing the frequency of communications between students and community partners, scheduling more planning and follow-up meetings, setting clear timelines, clarifying the division of rights and responsibilities, and providing more guidance on best practices for supervising students. The 2023 Community Partnerships Report built on these findings, considering the evolving social landscape and the ways in which community organizations have been impacted by, and continue to, adapt to structural challenges in the nonprofit sector alongside their partnerships with the University of Toronto. Some of its recommendations included building relationships with community partners as early as possible and asking partners what kinds of preparation and learning opportunities they might want access to in order to prepare for the partnership.

This year's report draws from a range of data sources, including recent research on the sector, the insights of community organization representatives at CCP events, and interviews and a survey conducted in April 2024 with 14 community organization representatives who partnered with University of Toronto CEL initiatives in 2023-24.

We hope that University of Toronto course instructors and staff will be able to use the information in this report to design CEL opportunities for the 2024-25 academic year in ways that are responsive to the priorities of community partners.

Background

Ontario nonprofits provide critical support and services to ensure access to food, housing, and employment for a wide range of people (Ontario for All, 2023). As the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) observes, they also "sustain local quality of life" by providing education, funding the arts, organizing sports leagues and recreational programs, protecting the environment, and so much more (ONN, 2023, p. 5). However, the Ontario nonprofit sector is at a "tipping point" (ONN, 2024). Due to the social and economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and an intensifying affordability crisis, service demands in the sector have spiked, rising 29% since 2020 (ONN, 2024). This increase in demand has put unprecedented strain on an already overtaxed sector. In response, organizations are struggling to keep up. Unable to meet rising demands and increasing operational costs, along with persistent HR and volunteer shortages, many organizations have closed or are facing closure (ONN, 2023; ONN, 2024). Managing these challenges alone as a sector is unsustainable. As the ONN explains,

> Nonprofits are putting patches on enormous systemic problems, and it is not realistic to think the sector can continue working in this manner. While we are known to be resilient and practical, we cannot keep running on fumes into an uncertain future (ONN, 2024, p. 1; see also Macdonald and Winchell qtd. in Rodney, 2023).

Short- and long-term strategies involving all levels of government are needed to address the sector-wide crisis (ONN, 2024; Ontario for All, 2023). However, political uncertainty due to an upcoming federal election is putting additional strain on organizations as they attempt to manage operations and programs while preparing for potential cuts to funding (CCP, 2024b).

As organizations manage these significant, systemic, and sector-wide hurdles, working with students as part of a CEL course or program can ideally help to alleviate some of the day-to-day operational and programming challenges that organizations are facing. The results of the 2024 Community Partner Survey reveal that working with students in a CEL course or program can be a meaningful experience that benefits community organizations and community members themselves. "Students added to our work in wonderful ways," one survey respondent explains (CCP, 2024c). For instance, an interview respondent indicated that working with University of Toronto students contributed extra capacity that allowed their organization to advance a project that they would not have been able to do otherwise (CCP, 2024c). When organizations grapple with complex problems, students can also provide critical support, share new insights and provide subject matter knowledge. As a CCP Roundtable panelist states, "I found ... partnerships with courses were valuable in helping us

to move further along on a complex problem in community" (CCP, 2024b). Students can also help to fill gaps in organizational resources by gathering evidence, conducting research and refining strategies for funding proposals.

While the experience of working with students in CEL courses and programs can be beneficial for community organizations, it can also create more work for organizations, further stressing resources and organizational capacities. If students are unprepared, communication is unclear, or partnerships drain time and resources, CEL courses and programs can exacerbate the challenges that organizations are already facing. To address these concerns, this report highlights key strategies that University course instructors and staff can take to ensure that placements and partnerships continue to have a positive impact on community partners and students alike.

Summary of Findings

1 - Anchor CEL partnerships in reciprocal relationships between course instructors, staff and community partners

When asked how University course instructors and staff could improve the experience of working with the University of Toronto to ensure that partnerships are mutually beneficial, 50% of respondents stressed the importance of relationship building. Whether community-university partnerships are new or long standing, respondents suggested that an active commitment to fostering and maintaining relationships over time was integral to successful partnerships now and in the future. A panelist at the CCP Community Partner Roundtable concurs:

> I have a preference, actually, for placements that come with a broader partnership rather than just a placement ... The opportunities that I want to say "yes" to are reciprocal. So, you as the academic or the university, have thought about what you are bringing to the table and what you are offering that is of value to the organization or community. That is really important ... you tell me the value and how you've thought about it and that you've done your research on the community and know that this would be valuable (CCP, 2024b).

Some practical ways course instructors and staff can do this work well, respondents explain, include learning about the organization's mandate, history, and challenges; showing interest in the organization's work; taking the time to do site visits and in-person meetings; centering community partner priorities; inviting community partners to work with your courses over multiple years; and being respectful of community partners' time.

This dedication to the relational elements of community-engaged learning allows all involved to work towards mutually beneficial and robust experiences. As one Community Partner Roundtable speaker explains,

> We put so much effort into supporting placement students. What we don't want is for them to walk away not having had a great experience. And what we don't want is to put that time in and for us not to have a great experience. And we also have invested the time to get to know you as faculty, so we don't want you to have a bad experience. So I think coming in with that mindset of win-win-win, and really taking the time ... upfront to build those relationships, to talk about your values, to talk about what are we going to do when things go sideways ... that's probably going be the best approach to take (CCP, 2024b).

2 - Invest time in preparing students for the engagement

The need for more student preparation emerged as a key finding in the 2024 CCP Community Partner Survey. Fifty percent (50%) of respondents indicated that if students were better prepared for their placements, both community organizations and students would benefit. When students are not adequately prepared for their placements, this can place an undue burden on community partners, taxing their already limited time and resources. It can also cause harm and damage relationship building, as this CCP Community Partner Roundtable panelist remarks,

> The other piece that I think is important [is] ... what's being communicated to the students before they participate in a placement ... The expectation is that you're coming in willing to learn, that you're curious, with empathy ... A lot of our placements are sort of like hands on just working with clients and not necessarily project based ... The irritation for me personally is ... when some professor is like, "Oh, go fix this problem, develop an app, end hunger" ... We need to couch these conversations around student placements with, "What exactly are you telling these students they're going to be getting out of this? Is it that they're going to come in here and solve all our problems?" ... When you start a conversation with, "We just want our students to gain the experience of being in this situation, seeing what's going on and learning from the expertise of the staff that you have on site," those have been our most successful placements by far (CCP, 2024b).

Ideally, student preparation should begin well before the placement starts and include both a clear and respectful framing of the purpose of the student engagement and an attention to

what skills students will need to have to successfully complete their placement or project. Preparation can also include learning about the organization, their priorities, and the clients they serve; understanding the nature of the commitment and placement; learning about specific placement contexts; and reviewing practices for communication, time management, independent work and professionalism. As one CCP Community Partner Roundtable panelist notes, "[w]hen students had a better understanding of the community, we found that that's where we had the best experiences" (CCP, 2024b).

When students show up on a regular agreed-upon schedule, show interest in learning, are attentive, dependable and flexible, it helps reduce the burden on community partner supervisors. As one survey respondent simply states, "[m]otivated and reliable students are the best!" (CCP, 2024c).

3 - Communicate clearly and manage expectations

For respondents, clear, consistent and proactive communication – between instructors, staff, students and community partners – is paramount for a successful CEL partnership. Importantly, communication should be ongoing throughout the course or program and should make clear the expectations of community partner supervisors in the CEL course or program. Understanding expectations helps community partners to better prepare for students, to supervise or manage student placements, and troubleshoot if issues arise. For example, community partners note that advance information about the number of students they can expect each semester, or having access to shared documents for volunteer communications where students and staff can record placement hours or log any issues, are two ways to improve communication and clarify expectations (CCP, 2024c).
To engage in clear communication, consider the following practices: 1) send partnership invitation emails to partners that have as much detail as possible about the partnership request; 2) create a shared document that outlines the responsibilities of the partner, the instructor, the student(s) and the university staff involved; 3) share a timeline for how the partnership will proceed, including when students are expected to begin, when instructors and/or university staff will be checking in with partners, and any end-of-term invitations to attend presentations; 4) share course syllabi and assignments; 5) coach your students on how to also communicate clearly with their community partners.

4 - Involve community partners in your course development

Engaging community partners in all elements of your course design can ensure your students' contributions to their community partner organization will truly address both community priorities and student learning outcomes. This co-creation can also help to ensure resources are shared and power imbalances are addressed from the very foundations of the course and the partnership. This approach recognizes and values the expertise and lived

experience of community partners, and in doing so, can help to strengthen the relationship between instructors and community partners. As a panelist from the CCP Community Partner Roundtable suggests,

> Opportunities to co-create are exciting. I love projects when they haven't already been developed, [rather than the projects that are developed] without the community and the not-for-profit partner, and you're just looking for someone to plug into your plan. I love opportunities where we can bring the [the project idea] to the community and say, "What does … this look like for you? How would you like to see it work?" I think that's a really amazing kind of component [of CEL], and it definitely makes me want to say "yes" [to a partnership] when there's an opportunity for [co-creation] (CCP, 2024b).

Co-creating CEL with community partners can include inviting community partner feedback when first imagining a course, working together to co-develop the curriculum and student learning activities, or inviting community partners to co-teach a course (CCP, 2024a).

Contact Information and Further Resources

The Centre for Community Partnerships (CCP) collaborates with community partners, faculty, staff and students to advance community-engaged learning and research at the University of Toronto through building community, enhancing capacity, and learning together.

The CCP is available to consult on your CEL course development and partnership needs. Please contact us at info.ccp@utoronto.ca to schedule a consult or request access to the CCP's Faculty CEL Resource Site. Please also visit the CCP's website for more information about our programs and events or to sign up for our faculty newsletter or our staff newsletter.

Recommended Resources:

CCP Faculty Guides

CCP Faculty CEL Resource Site

CCP Community Partnerships Reports

CCP Roundtable Recordings

- Co-Designing CEL with Community Partners Roundtable - Sept 2022

- [Respectful and Reciprocal Partnerships with Indigenous Community Organizations Roundtable - Apr 2023](#)
- [What Your Community Partners Want You to Know CEL Roundtable – March 2024](#)

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