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How Can Service-Learning Strengthen Tutoring Partnerships?

By Jennifer Arndt and Bob Seidel



Tutoring is usually volunteer service done to benefit learners and their communities. Tutoring should be a partnership between tutor and student. The partnership should also include the teacher, the student's family or household, the school, the tutoring program, and other tutors and students. All of these people and institutions have an interest in the success of the tutoring endeavor. All have something to contribute and something to gain. These relationships might not always be apparent to everyone involved. But if tutoring programs see all involved as learners and teachers, they can illuminate these relationships and strengthen them.

Imagine a situation in which several America Reads tutors and tutees meet with leaders from their community. Together they determine that the community might benefit from communication on local issues that affect residents. The America Reads tutors suggest they work with the students and a community organization to produce a neighborhood newsletter. The tutors help the students with interviews and writing skills. In the process, they discover that one student enjoys creating artwork for the newsletter, while another student enjoys organizing the articles into an attractive layout. Once the newsletter is distributed, local residents begin to contact the students to offer news items, suggestions for interviews, and to place advertisements. The tutors learn more about the students and their community. They find that the interviews often raise questions that lead the tutors and students to the library to learn even more.

In this example, the collaboration that emerges addresses the needs of the tutors, the students, and the community. Tutors find that their understanding of the students is enhanced by working with the community. This knowledge helps them make their tutoring sessions more relevant for the students. At the same time, the students deepen their understanding of their own community, take more responsibility for it, forge new friendships, and find an active role for themselves. They see the value of their time and interests, as well as the skills they are developing. Other community members also begin to see the students in a new light.

One service-learning leader names three essential components of successful partnerships: trust, shared vision, and commitment.

Trust — Service-learning is reciprocal. It empowers both the service-providers and the recipients. For service-learning to work, the tutors have to acknowledge that they do not have all the answers.

Shared Vision — Service-learning addresses the needs of a community as defined by the community. Community members who play an active role in defining a service project will likely contribute to its success. Service-learning is done *with* a community, not to a community.

Commitment — Effective service-learning programs understand that neither meaningful learning nor community development happens quickly and easily. Individuals must be committed to their role in the partnership as a tutor or student and should allow sufficient time to see the results of their efforts. At the organizational level, there must be a commitment to the time required to build effective relationships— person-to-person as well as organization-to-organization. Commitment provides the strength to persevere and work through challenges as they arise.

*Principles and Key Components for High Quality America Reads National Service Program Initiatives** emphasizes the value of service-learning in the tutoring environment. As in the above example, the principles of service-learning value the assets, strengths, and experiences that service recipients as well as providers bring to a service relationship. Service-learning stresses activities to strengthen participants' civic responsibility while enhancing both the academic curriculum and tutoring experience of student participants.

In particular, a service-learning focus acknowledges tutoring as a collaboration between the tutor and the tutee, not a "pouring of knowledge or skill from one vessel into another." It offers students the opportunity to learn in new ways. It offers tutors the opportunity to get involved with the community and better understand the students they tutor. Service-learning emphasizes that effective partnerships take cultural differences into account, creating a richer learning experience for everyone.

For more information and materials on service-learning, contact the Learn and Serve America National Service-Learning Clearinghouse or the National Peer-Based Service-Learning Training and Technical Assistance Exchange (See "Service-Learning Resources" on page 2 for contact information.).

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*Copies can be obtained from ETR Associates at 800-860-2684, ext. 142.