An Introductory Guide for Community Groups and Organisations

CampusEngage

Network for the Promotion
of Civic Engagement
in Irish Higher Education

Campus-Community Partnerships

Communities and Higher Education Institutions working together for social change

How to partner your organisation with a Higher Education Institution

This guide has been written by experienced community and higher education partners, with a decade of direct experience of campus-community engagement. The aim of this guide is to help the community find meaningful ways to access and partner with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ireland.

There are a myriad of ways in which community organisations can engage with HEIs;

- **hosting students and staff as volunteers;**
- **HEI staff offering pro bono advice or information to community partners;**
- **HEI staff formally siting on boards of management;**
- **identifying community issues that could become potential research projects undertaken by students, academic staff, or a mix of both;**
- **engaging students through community based or service learning within the curriculum and enabling the development of community identified projects through engineering, law and medicine for example.**

What we know

We know that the community engage with higher education institutions for a variety of reasons. In some instances it is to avail of additional human resource supports though student volunteers; other times it will be for the undertaking of a research project related to a community need; on other occasions it might be to raise the profile of the organisation through student driven activities or to develop advocates for the future. Partnership with a HEI involves an investment of time and effort, but the rewards can far outweigh the investment. These partnerships can bring new audiences and advocates for your social issue. Partnerships can bring a fresh perspective to community work, can enable the development of tomorrow's professionals, and present ideas to students on possible career paths they may not have considered.

There is a limited but growing body of scholarly work on HEI partnership from the perspective of the community. Within the last decade a number of studies have emerged to ascertain the perspective of the community partner in HEI Partnerships. The emergent issues and themes identified by the community in scholarly work include:

- **Strong relationships are central to successful community HEI partnerships;**
- **Community dedication to student learning and take on a teaching or educator role;**
- **Long-term partnerships are favoured over short-term or once off activities;**
- **Community in general look for sustainable relationships with a HEI;**
- **Community tend to value the relationship with the HEI more so than a particular project;**
- **Effective communication is key to successful partnerships;**
- **Students can sometimes be ill-prepared for community engagement and HEIs needs to attend to this.**

(Birdsall 2005; Bushouse 2005; Byrne and McIlrath, 2011; Clarke 2003; D'Arlach et al, 2009; Ferrari and Worrall 2000; Hart et al. 2007; Jorge 2003; McIlrath, 2012; Miron and Moely 2005; Sandy and Holland, 2006; Stoecker and Tryon 2009; Vernon and Foster 2002).

Top tips for community engagement and partnerships with HEIs

- Have a clear understanding of what your community organisation or group wants to gain from the partnership with the HEI.

- Have a clear brief and goal in mind for the potential partnership.

- Ensure you have commitment from the senior team in your community organisation or group as it critical that you have top down support for the partnership.

- Nominate one point of contact or liaison within your community organisation as it makes the partnership process easier for the HEI if they have one 'go to' person.

- Ensure your point of contact or liaison has the capacity for the role, in terms of time, passion and personality. This person will need to champion the benefits of engaging with a HEI.

- Encourage, where possible, the HEI to nominate one point of contact or liaison. While you may be dealing with different schools a central contact can guide you. This liaison can become your critical friend advising you where the low hanging fruit is in terms of who to engage with.

- Be patient and manage the expectations of your community group as it can take time to develop relationships and output from partnership.

- Be mindful of the level and ability of students, and consider the extent of partnership work that post-graduate versus undergraduate students can undertake.

- Ensure that you see your role as an additional learning resource to students and guide them in terms of creating within them a deep understanding of community and the challenge of social change.

- Be honest with the HEI and be prepared to have frank exchange of views. Partnership expectations vary and outputs from the partnership can be vastly different from the perspective of the community and HEI.

- When committing to partnership draw up a written partnership agreement with the HEI as this will help develop shared values, agreed deliverables, time lines and support you to manage the relationship.

- The partnership should be viewed as long-term, with trust and the building of the relationship core to the process.

- As the community partner, understand your responsibilities and play an active role in minding the partnership.

- When engaging with students create meaningful learning opportunities and give constructive feedback. Also do your utmost to involve them as team members and important to the organisation.

- Take the time to formally review the partnership with the HEI and embed the necessary changes so that genuine engagement is embedded within the practice.

Case study
COPE Galway

"During my time with COPE Galway we developed a very strong relationship with NUI Galway. As part of our strategic plan for COPE Galway we identified research as a key deliverable for the organisation - research that could inform and support our policies and work. However, we also recognised that as an organisation we were not in a position to fund such research and looked at other ways to achieve the research. We identified NUI Galway as a potential strategic partner and set about investigating how we could engage with them. Following meetings between our senior management and members of staff from NUI Galway we agreed a number of initial projects. We formalised our relationship in 2010 and COPE Galway was the first community group to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with NUIG in the area of Community Based Research and Learning. It has been a very fruitful relationship but was not without its challenges - particularly in the first year when the two organisations were getting to know each other.

Fintan Maher,
Director of Public Engagement
Trócaire, and former Director of
Fundraising COPE Galway

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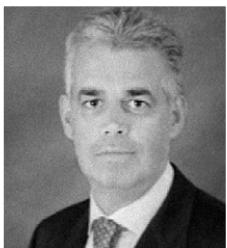
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