Reports of Practice

Drawing Partners Together: A Report on the Practice of Responding to Partnership Requests for Community and University Arts Collaboration

Stephanie Mason, NSCAD University

Abstract

NSCAD University is a visual arts university in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, that houses the NSCAD-TD Centre for Community Service Learning (the Centre). The Centre's purpose is to manage and promote community partnership requests with the institution. While community service learning and community–university partnership approaches necessarily inform the Centre's operation, these need to be modified to reflect NSCAD's unique position in art and design education. Each partnership request is assigned to one of three partnership categories, based on distinct criteria that account for NSCAD's mission, the duration of the partnership, the level of NSCAD involvement, and the support capacity of the Centre. Using these criteria, partnerships are addressed in a consistent, sustainable manner that maintains collaboration and affords room to grow more sophisticated partnership arrangements. The Centre allows prospective partners to access NSCAD's extraordinary creativity and skilled artists, leading to receptive partnerships that benefit a range of communities.

Résumé

En Nouvelle-Écosse, l'Université NSCAD est une institution d'enseignement de Halifax se spécialisant dans l'enseignement des arts visuels. Elle abrite le NSCAD-TD Centre for Community Service Learning dont l'objectif est de gérer les demandes de partenariats communautaires avec l'institution et d'en faire la promotion. Bien que les approches de l'apprentissage des services communautaires et du partenariat collectivité-université informent forcément le public quant à l'exploitation du centre, il est nécessaire de les modifier afin de refléter la position unique de NSCAD dans l'enseignement des arts et du design. Chaque demande de partenariat est rattachée à l'une des trois catégories de partenariat fondées sur des critères distincts qui représentent la mission de NSCAD : la durée du partenariat, le niveau de participation du NSCAD et la capacité de soutien du centre. Grâce à ces critères, les partenariats sont traités d'une manière cohérente et durable qui maintient la collaboration et permet d'augmenter l'offre de partenariats encore plus sophistiqués. Le

centre permet aux partenaires potentiels d'accéder à l'extraordinaire créativité et aux artistes hautement qualifiés du NSCAD, menant à des partenariats concluants qui profitent à un éventail de collectivités.

Introduction

The pressure on universities to collaborate with external organizations and communities is mounting. Community service learning and community–university partnerships are two types of collaboration that offer significant learning and engagement opportunities to both partners. However, in the case of NSCAD University, a visual arts institution on Canada's east coast, the challenge lies in applying best partnership practices that take into consideration the university's size and vision.

The customary structures of community service learning and community–university partnership approaches have to be modified to account for NSCAD's unique qualities as a small visual arts and design education institution. This report of practice describes how the university's NSCAD-TD Centre for Community Service Learning (the Centre) fulfills its mandate of partnership creation and promotion between the university and communities across the province of Nova Scotia. Through the Centre, application of consistent criteria results in uniform partnership categories that relate to NSCAD's size and skill base in order to permit NSCAD's creativity to flourish in its community partnerships.

Context

Located in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University (NSCAD) has been in operation since 1887 and is widely regarded as Atlantic Canada's pre-eminent art and design education institution. With a yearly enrolment of approximately 950 students, featuring a student–teacher ratio of 10:1 (NSCAD University, n.d.-c, p. 5), NSCAD is a small university offering art and design instruction to students and community members. In addition to NSCAD's Office of Admissions, responsible for student recruitment, and the Office of University Relations, which manages external stakeholder and alumni communications, the university's School of Extended Studies (SES) reaches out to the community by delivering non-credit adult and youth programming through ongoing art classes and camps.

SES also houses the NSCAD-TD Centre for Community Service Learning, the first of its kind among Canada's visual arts institutions (NSCAD University, n.d.-b). The Centre was established in March 2010, with sponsorship from the TD Financial Group, in response to NSCAD's 2009–2012 Strategic Plan calling for community learning services based at the institution (NSCAD University, 2009, p. 12). The two-year funding commitment for the Centre was renewed in 2012 and again in 2014.

The Centre coordinates three ongoing programs to engage the community and the university: the NSCAD Public Lecture Series, the Community Studio Residency program, and

internships in Interdisciplinary Arts, Film, Design, and Art History. Moreover, through word of mouth and referrals, since its inception the Centre has become known as the point of contact for community groups, businesses, schools, and non-profit organizations to inquire about partnership with NSCAD. And there are a substantial number of inquiries: the most recent report from the Centre lists over 30 partnership requests logged between November 1, 2013, and April 30, 2014 (NSCAD University, 2013b).

Such requests are in keeping with the Centre's mission to "provide . . . the opportunity for NSCAD students, staff and faculty to engage and enrich communities across Nova Scotia through art, craft and design" (NSCAD, n.d.-a, n.p.). However, the major challenge arises from navigating diverse partnership requests within the broad scope of the Centre's mission so that there is a consistent decision-making process about partnering. As a result, the Centre has developed means of responding to requests based on distinct criteria that account for NSCAD's circumstances and elements associated with the partnership request. These criteria are drawn from recent literature on community service learning (CSL) and community–university partnerships, and they have been adapted to incorporate NSCAD's strengths and challenges.

Community Service Learning and Community–University Partnerships

It is becoming more common to expect partnerships within academic environments: increasing economic and social pressures are impacting education funding to the extent that partnerships across sectors are not just desirable, but necessary. Hence, institutions are re-examining their policies towards external partners: "many universities have responded to these increased demands by adopting a community-oriented lens toward research activities and forming partnership and engagement relationships with communities" (Hall et al., 2011, p. 4). CSL and community–university partnerships act as models to guide academic institutions through collaboration.

Effective community service learning (CSL) relies on learning acquired through experience and inclusive partnerships with communities. The Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning (n.d.) defines CSL as "a vehicle for experiential education that has clear objectives for both the learning that occurs by the involved students and the service being provided in the community organization setting" (n.p.) Several factors have been identified as affecting the successful establishment of CSL or community–university partnerships, including authoritative concessions (Ting, 2010, p. 21), social development consensus (Collins, 2009), institutional models of education delivery (Cameron, 2010, p. 46), and desired outcomes (Ash & Clayton, 2009). For the most part, these considerations refer to formal agreements that hold partners legally responsible for activities, outcomes, and the division of funds. Since many requests received by the Centre are unstructured, and since such agreements customarily involve several administrative units at large universities, further consideration of these factors is a discussion that lies outside this report of practice.

Institutional support for NSCAD students involved in CSL and community–university partnerships currently consists of credit courses in internships/placements, or in Community Collaboration–design courses (NSCAD University, 2013a). Questions of distinction between internships/placements and CSL are addressed in a document written by the Centre's coordinator:

CSL measures its successes in terms of social responsibility and community outreach, whereas an internship/placement offers students the chance to acquire business skills or professional experience in a workplace setting. Additionally, CSL is often less defined than an internship/placement, so that the location, communities, goals, activities and progress involved in CSL are flexible and ongoing. (Community Service Learning, 2013, n.p.)

Both CSL and community–university partnerships encourage cross-sectoral collaboration in order to offer students valuable learning experiences. However, NSCAD's size and vision necessitate that the Centre adjust the implementation of CSL and community–university partnerships.

Response to Requests

The Centre receives a diverse range of partnership requests, most of which call for artistic expertise or its dissemination among community members: shared projects, event participation, artwork, design services, in-kind marketing, cash donations for art materials, and so on. Once a partnership request is confirmed in writing at the Centre, the Centre's coordinator will assign the request to one of these three categories:

1. *General Notice ("arm's length"):* The request seeks short-term assistance that may be only peripherally related to NSCAD students' skills. The request is circulated throughout the university as a general notice and includes the organization's contact details for interested students to follow up. The Centre takes no further responsibility or action for the request. Several Halifax businesses have contacted the Centre requesting NSCAD students for a single task, such as a mural painting, rather than for an ongoing relationship; these and other such requests are categorized as general notices.

2. *Internship Posting (short-term):* The request is sufficiently professional to qualify for internship/placement course credit. The Centre's coordinator helps the organization compose an internship/placement posting, and interested students make arrangements for the internship/placement with the organization. The Centre's coordinator oversees the student's registration process and acts in an administrative capacity to offer feedback avenues for the student and organization. There are design firms in Halifax that have historically sought NSCAD students for internships/placements because organization contacts are NSCAD graduates themselves and understand the university's approach to art and design education.

3. *Community Service Learning Opportunity (long-term):* The request lends itself well to academic inquiry and complements existing NSCAD courses. Occurring over several months or semesters, this request calls for multiple participants and an ongoing close affiliation between the university and organization. The Centre's coordinator meets with interested NSCAD instructors to support a related assessment within a relevant course and helps facilitate associated activities; overall, the request feeds into future study and course creation. NSCAD's courses in Community Collaboration fulfill this function well.

In connecting with prospective partners, the Centre's coordinator explains these partnership options and recommends the most appropriate category for the request. This conversation ensures that all partnership requests are handled consistently and that partners recognize the distinctions between categories, while affording them the option to alter their request if they would prefer to partner with NSCAD in a different capacity.

The coordinator ensures that partnership categories are thereby determined objectively, that partners feel confident in the Centre's and NSCAD's credibility, and that similar support is available for similar requests. Confusion between these categories is avoided by applying four criteria developed from factors that have been found to affect the Centre's response to a partnership request: the request's art and design demands, scheduling, complexity, and the Centre's capacity.

Criteria Affecting Collaboration

While it would be desirable to agree to all partnership requests, the Centre's position within NSCAD University and its funding capabilities prevent this from occurring. The Centre is based at the School of Extended Studies, which sits outside academic divisions and is therefore at a remove from students and faculty who may wish to engage with these opportunities. Furthermore, the Centre does not generate revenue, which makes project expenditures difficult to justify. In light of these realities, criteria determining partnership action are based on NSCAD's unique features within the field of art and design education:

- *Alignment with NSCAD's vision/artistic mission:* According to NSCAD's mission statement—to "foster . . . close creative relationships among artists, designers, academics and the public at large and assume . . . leadership responsibilities in the regional, national and international cultural community" (NSCAD University, 1999, n.p.)—partnership requests should feature activities appropriate to NSCAD student or faculty skills. Simple arts and crafts activities offer little benefit to students, given NSCAD's specialized art and design training. One non-profit health organization, for example, was dissuaded from seeking a NSCAD student to repaint their office walls.

- *Timing/duration of activity:* NSCAD's academic schedule consists of full-time classes delivered during 14-week semesters in fall, winter, and summer. A request for several NSCAD participants during peak class hours is unlikely to attain a full complement. For instance, an unfeasible request was received from a literacy program volunteer seeking NSCAD students to mentor youth using NSCAD facilities during school hours. The duration of the partnership request is also a factor; CSL opportunities planned over months or years demand continuity not presently afforded by the Centre's 24-month term agreement.

- *NSCAD student and faculty degree of involvement:* In contrast with partnership requests that undervalue NSCAD students' skills, other requests assume unrealistic experience in conceptualization, planning, organization, and resource allocation. For example, a non-profit community group requested NSCAD partnership to create, produce, source, sell, and expand a burgeoning jewellery business run by their clients. In discussion with the Centre's coordinator, the request was amended to production support more in keeping with NSCAD participants' skill sets.

- *Centre's capacity for support:* Since staffing consists only of one full-time coordinator, the Centre's capacity for following through on partnerships is constantly a factor. One proposal to deliver metallurgy instruction in a rural location expected significant support for instructor selection and materials cost-sharing. Again, along with addressing partnership requests, the coordinator oversees three concurrent programs: the NSCAD Public Lecture Series twice a year, the Community Studio Residency program in

four sites across the province, and internships/placements in Interdisciplinary Arts, Film, Design, and Art History divisions. Confidence in the Centre to administer these programs and address partnership requests would quickly erode without careful coordination of all of these commitments.

A number of partnerships do fit these criteria and function successfully through the Centre. Collaborations with local arts organizations, such as Visual Arts Nova Scotia, and regional art movements, like La Ruche d'Art, in Montréal, result in valuable information sharing. Ongoing and appropriately timed requests for student placements have been received from institutions like Mount Saint Vincent University and the Institute for Applied Creativity. There is a well-suited partnership with St. George's YouthNet for NSCAD students to teach in its after-school programs. More substantial partnership requests, like Inglis Street Elementary School's recruitment of NSCAD students to participate in their 2014 Nocturne/Art at Night project, are buoyed by faculty support and strengthen the Centre's ability to contribute meaningful partnerships with organizations. By administering these criteria, the Centre can respond to partnership requests consistently in order to demonstrate NSCAD's partnership opportunities.

Strengths and Challenges

The process described here generates achievements and produces uncertainties for NSCAD's community and university collaborations. An obvious benefit is flexibility: prospective and current partners have the option to partner with NSCAD in ways that meet their own organization's needs. The flexibility also suits NSCAD, so that changes to the university's vision or the Centre's priorities allow the Centre to resume past collaborations. The Centre can operate continuously for 12 months of the year, yielding a greater understanding of areas that indicate future growth; for instance, the number of requests for NSCAD students to teach art and design skills to non-profit groups acts as convincing data to develop teaching partnerships.

The Centre's ability to interact equitably with all of NSCAD's divisions is another strength. For this reason, there is a significant advantage in basing the Centre within an administrative service unit. Instead of experiencing volunteer fatigue through partnership requests constantly directed at a specific division, the Centre is able to canvass the NSCAD community at large to form relationships across a range of students and faculty.

However, despite its accomplishments in partnerships, the Centre faces its share of challenges. This process was established in 2012, and although informal feedback suggests it is effective, more thorough evaluation is required to gauge its performance in detail. Another challenge is the unpredictability of differing degrees of engagement from NSCAD students and faculty with respect to any partnership request, which can prove disappointing for a community group desperate for volunteers with skills in art and design.

Of equal concern is student understanding of practicalities associated with non-profit organizations: "[Whereas] university faculty and staff try to accommodate students whenever possible . . . [i]n service-learning the relationship becomes more mutual, with students also accommodating the limited time and resources of community organizations" (Schwartzman, 2007, p. 10). The Centre does not educate students in effective interpersonal communication, which can influence a partnership's success or failure.

Finally, from NSCAD's perspective, policy guidelines are needed to designate the Centre's intersecting responsibilities with other administrative units, including the Office of Admissions and the Office of University Relations. Partnership requests reaching more than one of these offices can be negotiated by communication and systematic referral.

CONCLUSION

Arts-based partnerships have the capacity to educate, inform, inspire, mobilize, nurture, heal, build, and improve (Cleveland, 2002, p. 7). This report outlines strategies for developing arts-based community and university partnerships by adapting CSL and community–university partnership approaches. For NSCAD, the potential for partnership is met by alignment with institutional goals, timing of requests, level of commitment required from participants, and the Centre's capacity to support partnerships. These criteria activate partnership categories: arm's length (a general notice circulated throughout NSCAD), short-term (an internship/placement within a workplace setting), and long-term (courses with embedded CSL recurring over a substantial length of time).

     The Centre's process for applying criteria and determining categories of partnership offers the advantages of flexibility, ongoing responsiveness, programming indicators, broad canvassing, and equitable placement within the institutional structure. The challenges evoked are equally robust: lack of formal evaluation, uncertainty around uptake, lack of understanding about non-profit management, and overlapping institutional responsibilities for partnerships.

     Articulating the Centre's process for partnerships helps to shape future plans for its growth. The Centre can use this process to set up grant competitions, allowing community applicants to apply within a specific partnership category and raising awareness of the Centre and its existing partnerships. Alternatively, the Centre can act as an internship/placement site where CSL and partnership development can be experienced first-hand. The NSCAD-TD Centre for Community Service Learning's flexible partnerships signify the university's unique qualities and illustrate how community and university arts partnerships can thrive.

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Biography

Stephanie Mason works in the School of Extended Studies at NSCAD University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In addition to degrees in lifelong learning education (MEd, Mount Saint Vincent University) and English literature (MA, Dalhousie), Stephanie has experience in postsecondary teaching and administration at non-profit organizations in Canada and New Zealand.

Stephanie Mason est employée de la School of Extended Studies de l'Université NSCAD à Halifax, en Nouvelle-Écosse. Dotée d'une maîtrise en Lifelong Learning Education (MEd, Université Mount Saint Vincent, 2013) et d'une autre en littérature anglaise (MA, Dalhousie, 1998), Stephanie a travaillé en enseignement postsecondaire et en administration pour des organismes sans but lucratif au Canada et en Nouvelle-Zélande.