Community Partner Engagement and CEL Course Strategies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Guide for Instructors

About this document

This guide provides strategies for effective partnership-building with non-profit, public and grassroots organizations and initiatives for the purposes of CEL course design and delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. It gives an overview of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the non-profit sector; reviews principles and processes for community engagement; and offers suggested strategies for course instructors. This document is a companion to **"Community-Engaged Learning in Online Spaces: A Guide for Instructors"**, which identifies recommended models for online CEL course design.

Impacts of COVID on the non-profit sector[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted partnership-building for CEL courses in four key ways:

1. Organization closures
   - The Ontario Nonprofit Network forecasts that 1 in 5 Ontario non-profit organizations will have disappeared by December 2020 due to the financial strains of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some segments of the sector have seen increased demand for their services, such as health, social services and housing, others such as sports, culture and the environment have seen debilitating financial losses.

2. Re-prioritization of organizational activities

   - Given increased community demand on some types of services, organizational emphases may have shifted to addressing poverty, food security & health, resulting in pauses on other programs
   - Many volunteer programs where students might typically be engaged have been halted, limiting opportunities for students
   - Planning horizons have been shortened, making it difficult to know well ahead of time what community engagement activities for students may look like

3. Reduced staff capacity
   - 30% of Ontario nonprofits have had to lay off staff because of the COVID-19 pandemic
   - Staff lay-offs and strains of working from home are coinciding with increased community need for non-profit services, leaving staff with less capacity for student placements
   - Staff who typically propose student project and placement ideas have less capacity for this vital part of the partnership-building process

4. Heightened power and resource imbalances
   - University of Toronto has been better able to weather the economic strains of the COVID-19 pandemic than many nonprofits, heightening resource disparity in community- university partnerships
   - Large nonprofits have been better positioned to adapt than smaller organizations, many of which have had to shutter their operations
   - Grassroots initiatives pick up some of the burden at the community level and can be especially responsive in times of crisis (while always struggling for adequate funding)
   - Digital literacy disparities and access to digital equipment, tools and resources currently pose unique challenges to organizations and their communities

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[1] Assemblée de la Francophonie de l'Ontario and Ontario Nonprofit Network. "Risk, resilience, and rebuilding communities: The state of Ontario nonprofits three months into the pandemic." August 2020.

Principles of community engagement for equitable partnership building

The principles underpinning best practice in CEL are particularly important when workingwith community partners during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Commitment to community-identified priorities

   Student engagement should be designed to respond to community-identified priorities andshould minimize the burden on the time, and other resources, of community partners.

2. Commitment to reciprocity

   The community partner should benefit from student contributions to its priorities. Studentsshould also benefit through opportunities to reflectively integrate what they are learning in their community engagement with what they are learning in the course. Safeguarding reciprocity at the heart of CEL requires patience, flexibility and adaptability more than ever. For example, community partner priorities may shift unexpectedly mid-way through acourse, requiring students and instructors to adapt and be open to a change in focus.

3. Commitment to equity

   Given exacerbated power imbalances between the University and community organizations, CEL courses should foster resource-sharing, through honoraria for community partner guest lectures, through recognition of, and transparency about, contributions of time, resources and expertise, and through setting clear expectations.

Process for exploring and establishing partnerships

Building relationships with community partners takes time. When securing partnershipsfor courses, the Centre for Community Partnerships typically begins communication with prospective partners four months in advance of a course's start date. During the COVID-19 pandemic, securing partnerships requires even more time and labour, with less certainty.Longer lead times on relationship-building may be required, with shorter lead times to arrive at specifics of placement activities.

The Centre for Community Partnerships can support instructors with some of the following recommended steps for securing partnerships:

1. Inventory your existing relationships with prospective community partners based on your research, teaching, personal and community ties
2. Ask a few trusted potential partners for ideas about how student projects and placements can be most relevant and useful to their work, ask for suggestions of other potential partners, and for general feedback on your ideas
3. Create a proposal for prospective partners based on your initial consultations
4. Compile a broad list of prospective partners
5. Circulate your proposal to prospective partners
6. Follow up with partners who respond with interest to review expectations such as how partners will be connected with students, desired project outcomes, start date, communication schedule and best ways to reach one another if issues arise
7. Complete all necessary paperwork before placements begin.

When consulting and doing outreach, communicate answers to the following questions, avoiding disciplinary jargon where possible:

- Can you describe your course in 100 words?
- What are its main themes?
- What do you want students to learn from their community engagement and/or in the course overall?
- What kinds of partnership arrangements are you imagining (i.e. hours per week students should spend on placement activities; whether students would work in pairs, groups or individually; how much involvement you imagine for placement supervisors)?
- What is the level of study of your students, and what concrete skills can they offer?

Can you give concrete examples of potential student projects or activities?

Strategies for CEL course planning and delivery

To adapt to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on non-profit organizations, CEL instructors might:

1. Take on more placement and partnership visioning, management and supervision than was typical in past
2. Offer community partners the opportunity to participate at different levels of intensity and engagement
3. Consider designing courses around multiple levels of community partner engagement
4. Be flexible and willing to change direction unexpectedly as community partner needs shift
5. Uncouple student learning objectives and assessment from specific activities at/with organizations, in case community partner priorities change or circumstances become untenable
6. Consider integrating peer evaluation to offset decreased host supervisor involvement and increased instructor supervision workload

Strategies in Action: Case Study

PCL389H1F: Understanding the Role of Pharmacology and Toxicology in Society
Professor Michelle Arnot has offered PCL389 since 2008. (She and some of her previous students reflect on the course in this recent Toronto Star article.) The course integrates pharmacology and toxicology with social, health and political issues as they relate to drug use and addiction. Third- and fourth-year students work with community health outreach and harm reduction organizations on initiatives dealing with drug use, substance use disorder and mental health, often in marginalized communities. Learning outcomes include the ability to articulate social, economic, environmental and physiological factors that affect people's exposure to substances, and to develop critical thinking skills regarding evaluating associated health and social policies.

Considerations for this year

With COVID19's disproportionate impacts and its coincidence with the opioid crisis, student research skills and up-to-date knowledge on drug action, interaction and contraindications can be valuable to frontline workers. However, frontline organizations are overwhelmed with crisis response. Even with many existing long-term relationships to leverage, communication with prospective host organizations for student placements was slow, and partner ability to commit with clarity well in advance of the course start date was reduced. Adaptation to online placement models was new for the course and for past partners. Student exposure to organizations' daily activities is greatly reduced, with students largely working remotely.

PCL 389: Two strategies for course adaptation

1. Devise a course plan that integrates multiple points of entry for community partners.

Pre-COVID19: Thirty to forty students work individually or in pairs at approximately ten to twelve off-campus organizations. These opportunities include assisting peer workers with outreach activities (exchange kits, lunch programs), participating in peer group meetings, interacting with clientele and program participants as needed, as well as researching information on drugs and their interactions in order to create education and awareness materials for frontline workers and clients.

Adaptation: Thirty-two students work on remote student group projects supervised by seven off-campus organizations. Instructor develops and, along with teaching assistant, supervises seven students in three knowledge translation group projects for university department outreach and community partner use. Seven community partners and experts attend class three times for interactions that include: information about harm reduction, panel discussion to offer lived experience perspectives, and discussions on opportunities and barriers associated with community research methodologies. Student projects include tool creation, literature review, communications, survey collection and analysis, education and awareness document production, and creation of a wellness fair.

2. Evolve student assessment

Pre-COVID19: Students must reflect on their own assumptions about and perceptions of the organization's interactions with its community, as witnessed through personal experience at the placement.

Adaptation: Students must reflect on their own assumptions about and perceptions of harm reduction and drug use based on the content invited panelists share, and/or through analysis of language in media.

Pre-COVID: Lively student debates provide insight into diverse perspectives on contentious issues associated with drug use and harm reduction.

Adaptation: Debates are replaced with group projects and class discussion.