Guide for Community Focus

The **purpose** of the Pace Center is to make service and civic engagement a central part of the Princeton student experience so that students can respond to the needs of the world in responsible ways. To realize this purpose, **our mission** is to prepare undergraduate and graduate students to do service well by making meaningful connections through learning, experience, and reflection. Helping students discover service through connecting with each other and communities that they care about creates a strong foundation for understanding what it means to be an engaged citizen. It is **our vision** that Princeton University students will make the world more equitable, creating access and opportunity for all people and communities to thrive. Service and civic engagement are grounded in **the formation of equitable and authentic relationships**, both on and off Princeton University's campus. Partners are an integral part of what makes service meaningful at Princeton. When we connect with others we are able to better understand what our community needs.

One of our four core values is **Community Focus.** Service is a powerful exchange where students have as much to learn as they have to give. The local communities we work in and community leaders we work with are classrooms and professors on par with our campus learning community. Partnerships with communities should be respectful and purposeful. Students' humility and accountability yield equality, inclusion and understanding. Our focus is for students to learn to listen to communities, understand community needs and build community on campus and beyond. Centering community perspectives, knowledge, and expertise in the planning and decision making processes of the Pace Center allows for more co-creation, transparency in communication, and increased reciprocity in our partnerships. This is a **vital practice** for anyone looking to build new projects, programs, initiatives, and community connections.

At the Pace Center, we believe that developing relationships within communities is a lot like developing the relationships you have with your best friends. They take time, effort, and commitment. In other words, we do not view these partnerships as a means to an end, transactional, or extractive. Rather, we see every person and every interaction within a community as an important part of positive social change. To this regard, how we think of community partnerships as broad and far reaching. A community partner can be an individual, a business, an organization, a public official, or a religious leader. At the core of our understanding of a community partner is the notion that *they* are experts with knowledge to share, and we want to learn from their expertise.

REFLECTION: DEVELOPING AN EMPATHIC IMAGINATION

Before moving forward in the first steps of community outreach, it's important that we start to reflect upon what it might look like to *walk in the shoes* of our community partners. Oftentimes, mission-driven organizations will try to be as resourceful as possible to serve the community. This can mean that one staff member might be covering an array of functions at the organization, including fundraising, program development, and volunteer coordination. Consider the sample schedule below to get a sense of what an average day might look like for your community partners:

7:30AM: Neighborhood Alliance Breakfast. Networking with the neighborhood to better understand how to best support our young people.
9AM: Check email, voicemail, local newspapers, and social media sites. Respond to inquiries, triaged by importance.
10AM: Finalize thank you letter and funding report to a local foundation. Email report to funder.
11:30AM: Lunch meeting with staff.
12:30PM: Support youth development programming.
2:30PM: Volunteer de-brief and appreciation after programming.
3:30PM: Meeting with principal at PS 2456 to align on youth support services to be offered in following academic year.
4:30PM: Meeting with executive director to re-evaluate the goals and metrics for program.
7PM: Citywide meeting on drug abuse in district 4 with community partners and religious, public, civic leaders

At the heart of this mock schedule, we hope that you see that each non-profit worker is most likely trying to balance time directly *in* the community – fostering relationships and implementing programs – with time spent on administrative tasks that keep the lights running. Now that you have gotten a glimpse of what a community leader's schedule might be like, how might this knowledge change the way you reach out to your community partners? How might you effectively communicate to someone with this sort of schedule?

Community Focus Tips for Research & Outreach

Undergirding these steps and tips that we included are four guiding values that we think are integral for your journey of service at Princeton:

1. **Gratitude:** A consistent spirit of gratitude, especially for those who partner with you. They are welcoming you into their neighborhoods, into their life's work, and more. It is important to be grateful for these opportunities.
2. **Humility:** Acknowledging that we have so much to learn from our neighbors. Community partners and members are resources whose expertise and knowledge should be valued. Rather than telling a community what they need, learn from and work with them. Those we work with don't need a savior. Our work is to support, not supplant.
3. **Ethical Curiosity:** Come with a spirit to learn and engage with those around you. There is so much to learn from our community partners; the classroom extends well beyond the walls of Princeton. Make sure to practice mindfulness as you learn. Be considerate and careful of your questions, reactions, and assumptions as you engage. We take **DO NO HARM as an everyday practice.**
4. **Reflection:** Fostering a spirit of reflection before we act. When we reflect, we raise our own self-awareness of how we are being received in a community (e.g., intent vs. impact) as well as develop a better understanding of how a community partner operates and creates positive change.

Whether it's an existing partnership or a cold call to a new organization, it's important to start your engagement with research. In this section, we'll share best practices in knowledge gathering as well as how to make that first touchpoint with a prospective community partner. The more informed you can be about the mission and impact of the organization as well as any pre-existing relationship with the University, the better off you'll be.

1. RESEARCHING THE ORGANIZATION

There are several important components you should research in order to better understand an organization.

- **About The Organization:** Make sure to review an organization's mission statement, vision statements, values, etc. These will give you foundational information about the partner, what they do, and why they do it.
- **Key population the organization seeks to serve:** Who is the organization primarily serving? Youth? Low-income youth? Low-income youth from a particular neighborhood? Be as specific as possible while trying to understand the key population served.
- **Program Model:** How does the organization serve the community? What is their model of change? Is it through after school programming? A community garden? Advocacy? Try to get a thorough sense of *how* the organization is advancing its mission statement.
- **Social Impact:** It takes a lot of resources and hands to advance positive social change within a community, and organizations are proud of the work they've done! Be sure to get a sense of their social impact, typically found either directly on their website, in an annual report, or

strategic plan. It will be important for you to have this knowledge such that you can communicate this information back to the organization in your meeting.

- **Key contact:** Different organizations take on different organizational systems. As a student interested in setting up a service opportunity with the organization, first look to see if there is a Volunteer Coordinator/Director on staff. If there is not, try reaching out to the Program Coordinator or Director of the particular work that piques your interest. Lastly, sometimes email addresses for staff members are not listed and only a general email address is provided. If this is the case, be specific in your first outreach email to who at the organization you'd like to speak to, giving their name *and* title.
- **Use Non-profit Databases:** You can use databases and websites like Charity Navigator, Idealist, GuideStar and the NJ Center for Nonprofits to search for potential partners or find additional information on them that may not be on their website.
- **Google the Community Partner:** In addition to scouring the partner's website, you might also conduct a quick Google search to see if there have been any recent articles or noteworthy events about the partner in the media. If you're able to highlight to a partner that you found and read something they accomplished in the community through a third source, they will know you did your homework!
- **Networks & Alliances:** You might also consider researching networks or alliances related to the partner's particular social issue. Who else is the partner talking to? Are they part of a larger coalition of organizations working holistically to solve a problem?
- **Staff as a resource:** Pace Center staff and others around campus can be great resources to help you search for potential partners. Ben Thornton is Pace's Assistant Director for Community Partnerships and has a wealth of experience and knowledge about local organizations. You can connect with any staff member to assist with your ideation and research.

2. HISTORY OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Once you've done all the research you can about the organization through their website or other collateral at your disposal, there is one more very important place to research: **The Pace Center!**

- First, check with your program's partner spreadsheet (or Pace's database of community partners) to see if the organization is already connected to a program or project at Pace.
- Second, double check with a staff member at Pace if you do not see the organization within the partner spreadsheet.
- If this organization is already a partner, it's important to understand the nature of the relationship with the University to date so that you know how to best communicate with the organization. For instance, if the organization partnered with us a while ago, but there seems to be lapsed communication in the past few years, you'll want to craft your introductory email in such a way to reflect this knowledge (more on email communication in the next section). If they already work with a Pace Center program or another office on campus they may not have capacity to work with you. Or

you may find an existing opportunity that fits your interest area. It is easier to join a program than to build one!

- Here are a few questions to consider answering as you investigate the University's history with the partner:
    - Is this organization already a partner? If so, for how long?
    - What's the nature of the partnership? What program or center on campus are they associated with?
    - Have you checked with a variety of campus partners other than The Pace Center? You might want to prioritize speaking with someone at the following offices (depending on your work): Program for Community Engaged Scholarship (ProCES), High Meadows Environmental Institute, or the Office of Religious Life (ORL).
    - Did they have a generally positive or negative experience with the University?
    - Who has been the main contact?

3A. BEST PRACTICES ON EMAIL COMMUNICATION

The way we communicate can be a source of inspiration or the root of misunderstanding. Effective communication can help you build strong rapport with others and generate support for your work while starting a dialogue about the issues you are passionate about. While it is important that we share our experiences with others, it is vital that we do so thoughtfully, strategically, and humbly.

As you craft your introduction email to the prospective community partner, it's important to take a step back and reflect about the following questions:

- What is the goal of my message?
- What is the intention behind my words?
- Is my point clear?
- Am I representing myself and my community well?

An introductory email to a new partner should be crafted to demonstrate your understanding of the partner's mission and work, concisely communicate who you are, and clearly illustrate next steps in communication. When you're crafting these emails, it's always important to step out of your shoes for a moment and imagine the person on the other end. **What kind of information do they need to know? How do I present this information? Do I have a clear and thoughtful approach to partnership?**

Consider the following outline for your email:

- Always take **a formal approach** when addressing your first email. When your contact person emails you back, check to see how they sign their name and follow suit in your next email.
- **Introduce yourself, your affiliation with Princeton and/or Pace, and "the why" behind your outreach.** Hyperlink the Pace Center and any other relevant information about your proposed project, organization, or initiative.

- Start your next paragraph with a statement **about what you've learned from the prospective partner and why you're interested to learn/serve from their work**. If you found something noteworthy from a third source (e.g., local newspaper), feel free to call that out in your statement. Then, lead directly into your inquiry about partnership.
- Your last paragraph should **list several times in which you're open to chat or meet with them at their site** to learn more about their work.
- End with a quick **word of thanks for their time and for considering the opportunity** for Princeton University students to learn from their work.

There are also best practices regarding what to AVOID in your email communication:

- **Stay away from acronyms and Princeton University jargon.**. You want to minimize any confusion in your communication to the partner. If you want to mention Pace or other departments or centers be sure to write them out and offer a short bit of context.
- **Do not start your email with Hi!** How you address someone matters. Though there are various schools of thought on how to address someone in an email, it's better to err on the side of formality. Hi! is a great way to start off an email to a friend, but not an external partner you have not yet met. Consider starting an email including any specific titles as well as their first name and last name: *Dear Dr./Mr./Ms. First Name Last Name.* When your contact person emails you back, check to see how they sign their name and follow suit in your next email.

4. PHONE ETIQUETTE

What you say on the phone should reflect the same kind of output an email would serve. If, after doing your research, you've decided that calling the organization first is the most effective touchpoint, consider jotting down a script that reflects the email draft above. That way, you have a sense of the most important talking points for your discussion. Here are a few points specific to phone communication:

- Be specific in your introduction about who you are and who you are hoping to speak to.
  - **EXAMPLE:** *Hi, my name is Wendell Berry and I am an undergraduate student at Princeton University as well as a student involved with the University's civic engagement center, called The Pace Center. I'd like to speak to Dr. Tom Brady, the volunteer coordinator, to learn more about your organization and discuss the possibility of partnering to create a new service project with Touchdown at the Pace Center.*
- Don't forget to provide contact information for the partner to follow-up with you if you end up leaving a voicemail.
  - **EXAMPLE:** *You may reach me on my phone at, 6-0-9-2-5-8-5-5-5-7. I'm typically available to connect on Wednesdays and Fridays and look forward to speaking with you to learn more about Touchdown's work in the Trenton community and beyond. (It's a best practice to repeat your phone number for the person on the other end!) Again, my number is 6-0-9-2-5-8-5-5-5-7. Thank you for your time.*

5. PRO-TIPS FOR YOUR OUTREACH

Keep a pulse on community events that your partners might attend.

Expand your research well beyond the community partner to the community at-large. What kind of festivals, talks, and city-wide initiatives are open to the public? When your schedule allows, go to these events! It will help you get a stronger pulse for the conversations happening in the community, and for those investing their time and resources in collective impact. You might even stumble across one of your community partners at an event *or* have the opportunity to network with other like-minded organizations.

UGH. I reached out a few weeks ago and I still haven't heard back. What should I do?

The first thing you should do is just take a step back and reconsider the empathic imagination reflection piece at the beginning of this guide. Community partners tend to be very busy, juggling many different hats (e.g., programming, fundraising, administration) at the same time while receiving a deluge of email everyday. Oftentimes, they might triage the work they receive and in prioritizing their work in the community, or in not recognizing your name, they just did not get around to your email yet.

- Follow-up with a phone call and then another email if you couldn't reach anyone. Use the same content and tweak it to say that you reached out a few weeks ago and that you wanted to follow-up. Following up twice on your original email is absolutely fine and might even be appreciated by a busy community partner who didn't mean to overlook your email.
- Lastly, consider generational differences in communication. Do your parents or grandparents communicate in the same ways you do? Reflect and consider what ways of communication older folks may prefer, and follow-up accordingly.
- If that doesn't work, try reaching out to another staff person at the organization and if that doesn't work, then you might want to move on, but keep the organization in the back of your mind as new connections may come up as you connect with other community partners.

Timing matters

Timing on when you send your outreach email can matter. Take the following into consideration:

- Business hours of the organization. Are they open outside of 9am-5pm? Are there staff there on weekends? How do those hours overlap with your schedule?
- If you're connecting with religious organizations consider religious holidays. If you have questions about whether or not it's a religious holiday for a sacred space, go to [ORL's religious holiday calendar] for a full list of religious holidays.
- Check out their calendar! In general, many partner organizations, like schools, have event calendars on their websites that can give you a sense of whether or not an organization is in a busy season.
- Schedule your emails! You may be working on outreach whenever you have time as a student, but your partner may not appreciate 11:30pm emails or emails that come in on weekends. Play it safe and draft the email and schedule it to be sent on a weekday during mid-morning, or other convenient timing depending on the organization's schedule. If the contact person is out of town, schedule the email to arrive again in their inbox one day after they return from vacation.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Take a moment to reflect on what your outreach has looked like thus far with community partners.

- What was well received by the community partner?
- What was confusing to the community partner in your communication? How might you change your language and/or framing to clarify your message in the future?
- Did your intent match the impact?
- How did your communication to the community partner align with your service program's values, vision, and goals?
- Are there any voices from the community and/or the University that might be missing as you think about your social issue holistically? If so, who are they? How might you consider including them into your service work?