

# CIVIC ENGAGEMENT HANDBOOK

## Introduction

Student-led civic engagement projects can be rewarding and impactful, positively impacting tens, hundreds and even thousands of people. At Bard College Annandale (BCA), student-led projects which emerged from the Trustee Leader Scholar (TLS) Program transformed into the Bard Prison Initiative, the Bard Early College in New Orleans, and *La Voz*, the largest Spanish language publication in the Hudson Valley. Many of the TLS projects have been going on for a decade or more. Projects of students at BCA, Bard College Berlin, Al-Quds Bard College of Arts and Sciences, American University of Central Asia, European Humanities University and Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. Petersburg State University (Smolny College) have focused on a range of subjects, from providing English language lessons to underprivileged youth in Kyrgyzstan to teaching debate in local schools and running an accessible debate tournament in New York, from creating a discussion club in Palestine, to a recycling program in St. Petersburg, from a program for autistic children in Belarus to an Arabic language library in Berlin. Many of the programs feature an educational component that draws on the liberal arts experience, including the Language and Thinking program.

The best projects are inspired by a combination of idealism, curiosity, knowledge and commitment. Leaders are focused, but learn and adapt. They are driven, but inclusive, and plan for a time when they may pass the torch to others. Most of all they listen, to mentors, to fellow students, and to those in the community which their projects may impact.

Students often have creative and innovative ideas to address a community issue or concern but lack organizing experience. The following is a concise overview of the steps needed for project development.

## Eleven Steps to a Successful Project

### 1. Have an Idea

All projects begin with an idea. The idea may be narrow or broad, a unique opportunity or a solution to a long-term problem. As you brainstorm new project ideas it is important to be ambitious and think big. At the same time, it is necessary to be realistic. The project's success is dependent upon your capacity to launch it, and then scale it in achievable and measurable ways.

#### Questions to consider:

- What is the issue you intend to address?
- What are your goals or desired outcomes?
- How do you plan to achieve them?
- What about your idea is distinct for the community which it will impact?
- How will you know when you have successfully achieved your outcome?

## **2. Research your Project**

You may think you know a lot about issues surrounding your idea, but there is almost always more information that you can find that will help you develop a plan of action or build a justification for potential supporters. While you may think that you are the first to address an issue, it is often the case that others have been doing so for some time, and joining them, or learning from their experience, is often the best approach. It is important in this phase to collect as much information as possible. We often make assumptions that communities are not working on an issue or we make uninformed opinions about how a community or organization is addressing an issue. Researching a project and understanding the community landscape can help you identify allies, financial resources and key stakeholders. It can also inform you about previous successes and failures.

### **Questions to consider:**

- What does research tell you about the nature and scope of the problem or the challenge you are addressing?
- What previous attempts have been made by others to address this or similar issues?
- What organizations or community members are working to address the issue that concerns you or are working on a similar issue that might inform your next steps?
- How can you assess the success of the efforts and the challenges to those steps?

## **3. Consult Stakeholders and People with Experience**

Enthusiasm and ambition are important, but so is direct knowledge and experience. Talk to stakeholders, those who may be engaged with or impacted by your project. Do not assume that you know more than others about the issues that you seek to address: this is particularly important if you are considering a project in a community that is not your own or an international project where you are defining the project as “helping” others.

It is at this stage that you must assess whether it is best to simply join with others to support a project already underway. In a landscape where many organizations are competing for limited resources, it is vital to not reinvent the wheel and set up a project that competes with one that is already successful. You need not lead a project or create your own organization: if you want to address a problem it may be best to join with others. At this phase it is key to reflect on your own motives.

### **Questions to consider:**

- In what community do you want to work? Are you a member of the community?
- Do you know that if the community wants the type of project you are proposing?
- Do you offer a unique perspective, talent or resource that is key to addressing an issue?
- Are you making assumptions about the community you want to help?

- What stereotypes might be at play when thinking through your project. Are you assuming that because you come from somewhere that you automatically possess useful knowledge or “know best”?
- Have you spoken to people with experience and community knowledge to learn more of what has worked and what has not?

#### 4. Determine Feasibility and Sustainability of your Project

Based on your research, revert back to the original questions: What is the issue you intend to address? What are your goals or desired outcomes? How do you plan to achieve them?

As you consider this next step your thinking should remain flexible. It is possible that your idea is not feasible, is already in place or needs additional resources that are not currently available. However, if it seems that moving forward with the project is feasible, then you can outline next steps.

Subsequently, if your project is successful, you will need to begin developing strategies to continue the program beyond your tenure as an undergraduate. College students graduate and young professionals move on to new opportunities, but the projects they initiate may last for a long time. For example, more than a third of Bard College’s Trustee Leadership Scholar Program projects are more than a decade old, and another third are more than five years old.

#### Questions to consider:

- What human and financial resources will be necessary to achieve your desired outcomes? Is it realistic to believe that you can obtain such resources?
- Are there barriers—logistical, legal, ethical—that might pose challenges?
- Are you in a better position than others to address the issues that you raise?
- Are there partners whose assistance can assist you?
- How will you begin and how will you gain community buy in?

**Planning is vital.** This comes in a few key areas.

- **People:** make sure that there are successors in line as leaders, particularly charismatic founders, move on.
- **Partners:** if you have a succession plan it is vital that you introduce people taking over the project to your partners, allies, and funders.
- **Financial sustainability:** be careful growing your project beyond the scope of what can be realistic in terms of funding options.

#### 5. Write a Project Description

Prepare a concise description of your project that answers the above questions, and in particular addresses the nature of the challenge/opportunity that you intend to address and how you will achieve your desired outcomes. The description

should provide some data, where possible, to illustrate the issue and some evidence that you are likely to be able to succeed in addressing it. Try to keep the description brief, no more than two pages. You can always develop further as opportunities arise.

Have a friend or colleague proofread the document and offer comments on substance. Share with a mentor to make sure it is clear and represents your vision as effectively as possible.

Share your description with stakeholders, including potential partners and allies, and those you have previously identified as having experience in your area. Seek feedback and revise your document. Share again if you believe that your proposal has changed significantly.

The format of the proposal can include variations of the following:

- a. **Summarizing:** in three to five sentences summarize the project explaining the aims, outcomes, significance and benefits.
- b. **Defining:** a formally written declaration of the project and its idea and context to explain the goals and objectives to be reached, the need and problem to be addressed.
- c. **Justifying:** proving that the project meets community needs with evidence based information.
- d. **Evaluating:** identifying the benefits to be gained upon successful completion of the project and how success will be determined.
- e. **Approaching:** selecting, approving and describing a method for implementing the goals and objectives of the project with the community.
- f. **Scheduling:** performing a preliminary estimation of time needed for the project. You'll need to develop a timeline that shows the total estimated time for the project that includes the limits, demands, needs, and other parameters.
- g. **Financing:** costs, proposed resources and potential funding sources to be used.

## 6. Prepare a Preliminary Budget

Prepare a budget for your project. You should start with a slim budget of absolute necessities, then you build out from there. The budget should be done on a spreadsheet using Excel or similar program using formulas as you build the budget so that you can easily make changes when needed.

To get an idea of how much to budget in various cost categories, talk to organizations, campus staff or local organizations. Consider logistical costs like room rental, transportation, office supplies, project supplies, food, promotional

materials, and training costs. Think about how to scale up the budget by anticipating costs for year one into year two.

The budget (and proposal) will be modified as you identify different funders and their interests, but having a general guide helps organizers prioritize services and project goals.

## **7. Develop a Proposal and Budget for Funders**

Fundraising proposals depend greatly on your needs and the nature and expectations of the funder. Some funders only require a brief project description, while others demand a long proposal with detailed outcomes, means of assessment, sustainability plan and a detailed budget that is consistent with the funders' guidelines and budget justification. More importantly, you will need to understand clearly the expectations of your funders, the types of activities that they support and do not support. You will need to craft your proposal to ensure that it addresses the funders' priorities. This does not mean making things up, it means stressing those elements of your project that most directly meet the priorities of the potential funder.

**As you move from Project development to implementation:**

## **8. Recruiting Volunteers and Participants**

Community based projects typically require trained people power to support project goals. Developing a workable infrastructure with other leaders to help with tasks, recruit and train volunteers and maintaining and cultivating important community relationships takes multiple resources. Recruiting volunteers who can provide direct service is likely key to the project's success.

### **Questions to consider (infrastructure):**

- What additional expertise is required to ensure success?
- How can tasks associated with the project be distributed among a group of dedicated organizers?
- How can you recruit for specific needs of the project (volunteer management, social media, content development, etc.)?

### **Questions to consider (volunteers):**

- What is the function of volunteers and what tasks are volunteers suited to?
- What skills and experience do volunteers need?
- How will you go about finding volunteers?
- What type of training is needed to ensure the success of volunteers?
- Do the community partners have volunteer management and policies?

## **9. Publicize your Project**

Supporters, allies and donors should be aware of your progress and be notified regularly of program achievements and progress. Invite them to events that

represent your success, particularly to meet individuals whom they might be supporting. Send special communications to your supporters and make sure to thank them for their support.

Second, publicize your activities and other achievements, where appropriate, more broadly. Create social media accounts, prepare press releases and one page information sheets about your project. Make sure that you are respecting the privacy of program participants.

*Project managers can feel pressure to scale up a project to meet the needs of those not currently within the scope of the project. For instance, a successful mentor project leader might be approached by another community partner to add a second site. It is vital to understand expectations before growing a program. Projects can fail if they grow too big too fast.*

## **10. Project Reporting**

Donors, funders and foundations typically require some reporting that includes analytics and data analysis to determine the project's impacts. Some funders ask for informal narratives while others require detailed financial reports, justifications of expenditures and data to prove the project's success.

It is key when applying for funding, to understand reporting requirements and your capacity to meet those requirements. It is best to request support from campus staff prior to taking funding especially when it comes to reporting requirements, to be sure you can meet funder expectations.

## **11. Identify/Quantify Impacts**

As your project develops, you are going to have to consider how you can quantify the project's impacts. Obviously, in some cases this might take some advanced social science techniques, but in the short run you should carefully keep track of the number of participants in your events, provide short surveys to participants seeking feedback about the activities, and tracking the impact, where appropriate, of people who have participated in your project. For example, a project in high school may examine project impacts on academic performance/grades, likelihood of graduation, or college attendance. The larger the project, the more carefully you will need to consult with people to develop proper metrics. However, even basic information, like numbers of participants and evaluations of participants are a good start.

## **Sample Documents**

### **Sample One Pager**

[Debate Coaching In Schools](#)

[The Arabic Library in Berlin](#)

### **Sample Budget**

[BPYI Sample Budget](#)

### **Sample Proposal**

[Youth Empowerment and Development Project](#)

### **Sample Publicity**

[Recovering Forgotten Conflicts photography workshop by Zarlisht Sarmast](#)

### **Sample Posters**

[Palestinian Village Camps](#)

[Bard Leads](#)

[Debate Coaching in Schools](#)