

Community Connections

by Doug Renalds, Bonner Scholars Director

Purpose

- Connects community needs with campus resources through a central service office modeled as a clearinghouse.
- Provides student staff with extensive leadership experience.

Background

In 1996, the Bonner Foundation encouraged Bonner schools to brainstorm on ways to improve connections between the campus and community. From those discussions, the need for a centralized office at Carson-Newman emerged. Students convinced the College that this new office should be student-led.

The Community Connections staff was originally compensated with work-study funds. Later, a Bonner enrichment grant covered this cost, and the number of staff members was increased from three to five. The College has since reverted to covering the scholarship costs for the five staff positions.

How It Works

Clearinghouse Model

Community Connections serves as a clearinghouse for about 60 agencies that need volunteers and for Carson-Newman students who are looking for a place to serve. Students are usually placed in long-term volunteer positions, although Community Connections occasionally recruits for onetime service activities, such as assisting the Neighborhood Center with distributing government commodities to the elderly. Though the office does sponsor a few projects, its purpose is to develop a culture of service by promoting existing service opportunities.

The Team

The Community Connections team consists of five students, one director, and four assistants. The director serves eight hours per week and receives a \$1,000 scholarship each semester. The assistants work five hours per week and receive a \$600 scholarship each semester. While everyone on the team performs in-office tasks such as meeting with potential volunteers, the Community Connections director assigns a broader area of focus such as publicity and flyers, campus clubs, faculty, or local agencies.

Bonnors and Community Connections

Bonnors are not placed at sites through the office, although they do explore options through a database of service opportunities. Of the five current staff members, four are Bonners.

Training and Reflection

The Community Connections director conducts an orientation each year, and one overnight, midyear retreat is held to rejuvenate the group. Periodically, the team meets with similar groups from other campuses to share best practices. They attend monthly interagency meetings where they have the opportunity to network with nonprofit organizations and share challenges and needs.

Connecting Students and the Community

There are two ways that students find service opportunities:

Scenario One:

A local service agency calls Community Connections looking for volunteers. Staff members contact

students via flyers, posters, and campus mail. Approximately 80 percent of the placements are direct, where students contact agencies on their own. Others are indirect, meaning that students first contact Community Connections in response to the publicity for additional information or screening. The office contacts the agency within one to two weeks for follow-up to see if their needs have been met.

Scenario Two:

A student calls Community Connections about volunteer opportunities. A staff member discusses options with the student using a database of service opportunities. Within one to two weeks, the office follows up with the student to see if he or she has found a rewarding volunteer position.

What Makes The Project Unique

The office is entirely student-led. Participation in Community Connections helps the student staff gain confidence in interpersonal interactions and make a concrete difference in the community.

Timeline

A new office team is selected in March. Current members must re-interview each year.

Resources And Partners

Carson-Newman College

- Provides office space for the team at the Appalachian Center and covers the team members' scholarships.

Community Partners

- The office works with 60 agencies but works most closely with the Boys and Girls Club, Carson-Newman Tutoring Center, YOKE Youth Ministries, Office on Aging, Meals on Wheels, LifeCare Nursing Home, Life Outreach Pregnancy Crisis Center, Samaritan House, and Appalachian Outreach Construction Ministry.

Overcoming Challenges

At first, the College wrestled with how much clout Community Connections could have in the community. The president's office was concerned that a student-led group might send out letters that misrepresented the College. Community Connections agreed to provide volunteer placements in the community, and the Bonner Scholars director would oversee issue-based letters sent by the Community Connections office. Perfunctory letters about the nuts and bolts of recruiting or placing volunteers are not screened.

Evidence of Success

When Community Connections first began, they did not receive many requests for placements. Now it receives constant inquiries from both students and community service agencies.

How to Make it Grow

The office is considering having student volunteers at each agency who serve as "recruiters."