

## Team-Based Service Model

*by Erin McGrath, Rider Service-Learning Coordinator  
and Jenny Orten, Bonner Foundation Consultant*

### Purpose

- Places teams of students in an after-school tutoring program, an enrichment program for homeless children, a soup kitchen, and a community center for people whose primary language is Spanish.
- Supports as many students as possible at as few sites as possible, encouraging teams of students to take initiative in their own leadership and development.

### Background

The Bonner Leaders Program began in fall 2000 with seven students serving at six sites in a more traditional service placement model. In the summer of 2001 a new director began at Rider. A Middlesex Community College Bonner Leader alumna, she had experience with the team-based service model there, and she replicated the project at Rider University. After summer meetings with students and community partners involved in the program during the first year, she eliminated three sites and retained the three strongest. The team-based model was then implemented in the fall of 2001. In 2002 a fourth site was added.

### How It Works

#### Service Team Sites

Bonner Leaders work at the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen—primarily in the adult education program tutoring GED students and in the art enrichment classes. Students also develop age-appropriate lessons about hunger and homelessness which they present to elementary school children. Because of the variety of services provided and the level of support offered to students by the community partner, the team has many opportunities for leadership and development.

The second site served by Bonner Leaders is HomeFront—an organization that provides assistance to homeless families. Students serve as mentors and provide academic enrichment opportunities for homeless children.

Bonner Leaders currently tutor children and offer enrichment activities at the Trenton After-School Program. The service team also leads an AmeriCorps Classroom which they designed and implemented. Eager for more responsibility, team members also attend staff and board meetings at the site.

The newest site is El Centro de Recursos para Familias. Bonner Leaders are helping this organization develop a program that combines mentoring and ESL assistance. The partnership was a pilot that proved so successful that a full team of students will be serving there during the 2003-2004 year. Students have developed and executed a curriculum that balances the need for adolescent immigrants to receive additional support in ESL while providing a safe space with strong mentors.

#### Service Team Training and Reflection

During each weekly all-Bonner meeting in the first semester and biweekly meeting during the second semester, student service teams plan, debrief, and reflect. A large portion of a second-semester retreat is spent in service teams, planning for the months ahead and presenting goals to the entire group.

### What Makes The Project Unique

In many service programs, especially when service efforts have evolved over time in response to community requests without a long-term vision for sustainable growth, there are as many service placements as there are student volunteers. Such programs can be time-consuming and difficult to

support. Targeted efforts that build upon a student team's strengths, perspectives, collaboration, and energy can prove more successful for campuses, students, and community partners alike.

## **Benefits**

### **To Students**

Since team members share the common experience of their particular site and the issues raised by their work, teams can act as sounding boards for each other's questions and challenges on a regular basis. Relationships among members naturally grow from common, meaningful experiences of service, regular reflection meetings, and conference travel. At Rider, service teams are a close-knit community in social settings outside their service work. In fact, upon their own initiative, students meet twice a month for dinner to keep in close touch. Student teams can return to their sites every year, mentoring new students and participating in progressively more challenging service and advocacy experiences, in accord with the student developmental model.

### **To the Community**

Because students consistently serve at the same site, agencies never experience complete student turnover in the new school year. First-year students perform important direct service work, mentored and encouraged by returning students. Returning students, in turn, have time to conduct research and initiate new programs with community partners. Needed direct service is sustained while students advocate for community partners with increasing knowledge, skills, and intensity.

### **To Campus Administrators**

The team-based model works well for administrators because they have an easier time managing and supporting the program with such a small number of sites that stay the same. Logistics such as transportation, site visits, and materials are easier to manage with fewer sites. Student training can be more relevant and more specific to the work done at a particular organization because there are fewer sites to target.

### **To the Campus**

The team-based approach builds momentum to alter campus culture as teams work together, learn about the community, and create positive change. Their energy, turned inward towards the campus, can inspire and motivate further student volunteer efforts, as other students are made aware of these community issues and needs.

## **Timeline**

### **Summer**

Incoming freshmen are recruited for the Bonner Leaders Program through mailings.

### **Fall**

There is an all-day retreat before students are assigned to service teams designed to address big picture, team-building, and enrollment issues. The first all-corps meeting is organized by returning corps members, who discuss their experience, give a background on the mission of each site, and assist students in choosing their placement. In addition, there are two trainings with other New Jersey Bonner Leader Program schools.

### **Spring**

The semester begins with another all-day retreat. All-corps meetings are held every other week. Currently enrolled students are selected for the program at the end of the semester. The year concludes with a summit that reviews achieved goals and lays the groundwork for the coming year.

## **Resources And Partners**

### **Community Partners**

- The Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, HomeFront, the Trenton After-School Program, and El Centro provide supervision, support, and on-site training for students.

### **The Bonner Foundation**

- The Bonner Leaders program is administratively housed at the foundation, and Rider's proximity enables foundation staff to assist in relationship development with community partners. The foundation also provides funding to many of the partners through Crisis Ministry grants. The Bonner New Jersey network, supported by the foundation, provides networking, training, and group service opportunities with other New Jersey Bonner programs.

#### Rider University

- The University allows Bonner Leaders to schedule their classes before the general student body, enabling service teams to coordinate their schedules.
- The University's budget provides for one full-time director of service-learning, assisted by a part-time graduate assistant and several student workers.
- Through grants and the University budget, students receive compensation for their work, and funds are available for training, transportation, conference travel, and special events.

### **Overcoming Challenges**

It was difficult to decide which community partners to work with since there are many needs and a great number of agencies that want Bonner Leaders to work with them. As the program has grown, another site has been added. The staff hopes to open several more in the future.

### **Evidence of Success**

The team-based model works developmentally for both new and second- or third-year students. Second-year Bonner Leaders embrace the challenge of mentoring and training the first-year Bonners and have taken more responsibility for creating and managing projects. The first-year students respond very well to being part of a unified group and to having their older peers mentoring and training them. This indicates that a team-based approach facilitates a natural student developmental model.

### **How to Make it Grow**

Creating more space for students would increase collaboration, assist in building a corps identity, and offer students resources such as phones, computers, mailboxes, books, and a meeting space.