

# Partnership Perspectives



Community-Campus  
Partnerships for Health

Volume IV, Issue I

Winter 2007

*Partnership Perspectives* is published by Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH), a nonprofit membership organization that promotes health (broadly defined) through partnerships between communities and higher educational institutions.

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**Correct Citation:**

Seifer SD and Sgambelluri AR (editors). *Partnership Perspectives*. 2007; IV:I. Seattle, WA: Community-Campus Partnerships for Health.

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# Community-University Partnerships to Bridge the Non-Profit Digital Divide

Carin Armstrong, Kris Becker, Kristin Berg, Thomas S. E. Hilton, Donald Mowry and Christopher Quinlan

## Introduction

The economy and society of our country is increasingly dependent on the management of information systems using technology. Nonprofit agencies, including many health related agencies, have increasingly fallen behind the Digital Divide and are not realizing the potential that technology integration can have on the populations and the communities they serve. An evaluation of local nonprofit agencies receiving United Way support revealed that many nonprofits fall far short of the basic benchmarks that are important indicators of information technology integration and that would greatly increase their organizational effectiveness and service delivery capacity (Ryberg, Mowry, Saxrud, Welbourn, & Lor, 2002). Moreover, this study revealed that many agencies were functioning in a reactive versus a proactive manner, and steps such as planning funds for technology acquisition and replacement, updating software (especially security software), maintaining documentation on networks, creating backup and disaster recovery plans, generating long-range strategic plans, formulating staff training and development action plans, and considering compatibility in hardware and software were often not being taken.

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In addition, many past technology-focused initiatives have fallen short of goals to integrate technology in meaningful and effective ways. For example, early on the focus was on improving access of underserved groups or agencies to technology and internet resources. However, access is necessary but is not sufficient to bridge the divide—nonprofit agencies also need assistance in building technology capacity, creating relevant content and information systems, training staff in information systems management, and developing useful applications. Another major mistake has been to focus primarily on technology in ways that amount to asking the wrong questions, such as beginning with numbers of computers, access to the Internet, and other technology-focused questions (Gilbert, 2006). According to Tom Hilton, one of the primary members of this community-campus collaboration, the important questions began with the mission and goals of the organization, and he has stated that (personal communication, April, 2005):

“The Information Systems (IS) field has changed dramatically in the last ten years. Information systems now impact all levels of every organization in every country of the world. People in the IS field now focus less on the technical aspects of an information system and more on how the technology can help an organization solve business problems and achieve goals.”

The goal of this project was to utilize the expertise of students, faculty and staff of the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Eau Claire, in full collaboration and partnership with staff from community-based organizations, to refocus on organizational mission and goals, develop long range strategic plans for technology, and strengthen the information systems of community-based organizations. The project scope necessitated a multi-semester partnership with successive teams of students providing long-term define-design-build-test-deploy-support information systems services. The project included the development of new applications to better serve the overall community as well as the constituents of the community-based organizations.

A second set of goals was focused on enhancing the academic learning of students, engaging them in meaningful community service, fostering civic engagement skills, and forging ongoing community-campus collaborations to address identified community needs.

### **Community-Campus Partnership Development Stage**

The project planning and collaboration development phase of was aided by a Learn and Serve funded planning grant from the Upper Midwest Campus Compact Consortium (UMCCC) in a category of grants labeled “Building Social and Economic Capital.” The structure and process of this grant program could serve as one model for encouraging the development of strong community/campus partnerships. The planning grant was separated from the implementation grant, and grantees were expected to develop “comprehensive partnerships that will significantly impact the economic health of local communities.” The planning grant period was nine months, and it was followed by an implementation grant submission opportunity. Although it was not necessary to have received a planning grant in order to be eligible to apply for an implementation grant, partnerships that did not receive a planning grant were required to demonstrate “substantial collaborative planning” in their proposal (UMCCC, 2003).

The United Way of Greater Eau Claire and the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire have enjoyed a long-term collaboration on several fronts. The United Way collaborates with the campus community service office, service-learning office, leadership programs, and it offers numerous and varied internships and volunteer opportunities to students. In addition, many university staff serve important functions within the United Way as members of the board and chairs of subcommittees. Two of the project directors, Donald Mowry and Kris Becker, have a long and productive working relationship dating back to a community-campus collaboration in the early 1990’s focused on formulating comprehensive community goals for the millennium called Healthy Communities 2000.

The working group that met regularly for nine months to form the partnership and plan the implementation of the project consisted of key representatives from both campus and community. The university members included Tom Hilton, the chair, and two other faculty from the Information Systems Department, the chair and one faculty member from the Economics department, and the Director of the Center for Service-Learning. Community partners included the Executive Director of the United Way and representative staff members, most of whom had some responsibility, official or unofficial, for information systems, from five area nonprofits including the Eau Claire YMCA, Regional Enterprises for Adults and

Children, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill-Eau Claire Chapter, the L.E. Phillips Senior Center, and the Epilepsy Foundation of Western Wisconsin.

This planning stage was crucial to the partnership in that it was a time devoted to forming interpersonal relationships based upon knowledge of each other and each agency, trust, and mutual respect. The overall goals and vision of the collaboration were developed, as well as the specific and detailed plan for the project. Finally, the actual second stage implementation grant proposal was developed and refined in an atmosphere of shared decision making, open communication, and flexibility. Although this planning group met regularly, unlike many regular committee style meetings the partners seemed to develop a genuine enjoyment of the process and the time spent together which may be because there was a conscious attempt to fashion the partnership around existing models (Maurana, Beck, & Newton, 1998) or benchmarks (Torres & Schaffer, 2000).

In the fall of 2004, the partnership eagerly awaited word on the acceptance of its implementation grant submission. Although the proposal reached the final round in the review process, ultimately it was not selected for funding. In many cases agencies come together only long enough to collaborate on preparing a proposal for funding, and if the funding is denied that also signals the end of the partnership. In this case, and as an example of the CCPH Principles of Good Partnerships (1998) that good partnerships evolve, in only three weeks this partnership realigned itself and continued with the project with a more focused mission. The new mission included the mutually agreeable departure of the economics faculty along with a new set of goals that did not include furthering the work of an existing Center for Economic Research as part of the project, but it maintained a focus on bridging the digital divide for nonprofit agencies.

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### **Problem-Based Service-Learning Course Implementation**

This realignment also enabled the partnership to successfully apply for a different grant from the UMCCC in the Engaged Department category. The partnership also was successful in obtaining private foundation support from the SBC Foundation to support the acquisition of needed hardware, software and networking equipment that was not possible with the federal dollars from the Learn and Serve grants.

UW-Eau Claire is one of only a handful of public universities nationwide that mandates service-learning as a graduation requirement. Although many students go far beyond the minimum, all undergraduates must complete a service-learning project of at least 30 hours. During the fiscal year 2002-2003, students worked with 333 unique agencies and accumulated a total of 87,445 community service hours. This project gave students an expanded opportunity to give back to their communities, to experience the satisfaction of contributing to agencies that are serving a community need, to experience all stages of an information systems design process from analysis and planning and design to implementation, to grow and develop their teamwork and leadership skills, and to strengthen an ethic of service and citizenship as part of their liberal arts preparation for careers and for life.

In the past, UW-Eau Claire's Center for Service-Learning, students and faculty have worked with various nonprofit organizations to meet information technology goals, but these efforts have generally been very narrow, very focused, limited to only 30 hours, and lacking in comprehensiveness, continuity and follow-up. Through this project, student teams used a project- or problem-based service-learning method that, according to Gordon (2000), "Engages students working in teams in the solving of real, community-based problems ... students are presented with problems and asked to seek authentic and viable solutions. Students organize themselves to use knowledge and skills to tackle these challenges and be of service to their community." (p. 3).

Each semester, five to seven teams of 4-6 students focused on the information systems goals of the five agencies in the project and 1-2 teams worked on the information systems of the United Way. Each team had two faculty mentors (one campus faculty and one community faculty member). The teams were drawn from the senior IS capstone class. Each team met with community and campus faculty on at least a monthly basis, and the community-campus partnership group continued to meet monthly.

The process of accomplishing the goals of the project was carefully linked with what could reasonably be expected of student problem-based service-learning groups over the course of a single semester. By having a continuing commitment to the agencies; comprehensiveness, continuity, and consistency was enhanced over the one semester only projects that had occurred in the past. During the fall 2004 semester, the first teams conducted a strategic analysis and generated a long-range strategic plan for information systems based upon the mission and vision of each agency. In the spring 2005 semester, a new set of student teams conducted an analysis and design of the needed systems to meet the strategic plan, and grouped them on a priority basis. In every case, more than one system was designed by students, and the remaining systems were continued to be designed by students in subsequent semesters.



In each semester student teams implemented part of the systems in the strategic plan, although in the first semester the primary focus was on developing the strategic plan. Student teams in subsequent semesters have continued to develop new systems for implementation until all systems were in place. The spring 2006 final semester in the two-year sequence focused on evaluation, analysis, dissemination, and planning for future cycles that would be managed by the agencies with the support of the United Way. .

This plan for this project included professional development for faculty mentors, student teams, and community partners. Although the original plan was to utilize the resources of NPower out of Seattle, this organization withdrew from an earlier, conditional offer of support as a result of a reexamination of its own mission and goals. Another higher educational agency, the Chippewa Valley Technical College, was able to join the partnership and provide staff development for the area nonprofits including the six that were members of the partnership.

## Overall Project Outcomes

All five nonprofits, plus the United Way, have been able to establish long-term strategic plans for information systems. Since outcomes are highly individualized to the agency or “case study” needs, much more specificity of outcomes has been generated by each unique agency information system plan that was developed in the fall of 2004. In addition, the common goals that have been accomplished across agencies include the acquisition and installation of new systems, database development, network development, security of systems, software application development, training of end users, interactive web site development, and workstation updating, repair and configuration. Following this section is an important set of outcomes demonstrated by student teams, as well as an example of the outcomes achieved at one of the participating agencies.

A final overarching goal was to carefully attend to the process of developing a community-campus collaboration and to institutionalize the relationships, resources and support for the project so that it can be sustained beyond the time frame of the grant. We accomplished this outcome, but recent developments in the IS department have necessitated a shift to recruiting student teams from IS courses that occur earlier in the major sequence. The capstone students have been slated to become a critical part of a departmental effort to expand the support and assistance given to students who are just entering the major through supporting the provision of smaller class sections, mentoring, and tutoring. Once again, partnerships evolve.

The grant also funded the training of staff members of the United Way of Greater Eau Claire and staff members from each of the five nonprofit participating agencies who can, in the future, assume a leadership role within the United Way as well as in the community for facilitating the development of information systems in the 30 plus nonprofit agencies under the United Way umbrella of support as well as other community nonprofits.

## University/Student Outcomes

Although the impact of the service experience on academic outcomes was hard to discern compared to previous semester’s capstone groups, the Problem-Based Service-Learning was judged to have an important and meaningful impact on the students’ understanding of ethical behavior and education for citizenship. The students not only were able to demonstrate an understanding of IS Ethics, but Dr. Hilton found them to have a higher degree of adoption of an IS Major goal of developing a career-long commitment to ethical behavior than past groups of students. Dr. Hilton commented:

“Knowing standards of ethical behavior does not guarantee adherence to them, and in general there is a gap that exists between what we know and how we act. The Problem-Based Service-Learning experience seemed to really help narrow this gap much more than the standard course instructional experience alone.”

The topic of IS Ethics was introduced about four weeks into a 15 week semester. In the 9<sup>th</sup> week, the student teams presented a formal IS project management and design walkthrough to the entire class. At the end of the term the student teams submitted a final, formal project report in a debriefing session to the instructor. The Table 1 presents a summary of Dr. Hilton’s

qualitative, four dimensional scale evaluation of the students' ethics-related remarks at these three time points:

*Dr. Hilton also noted that:*

- ✦ Every student commented on the positive community impact of the projects.
- ✦ Every student was pleasantly surprised at the gratitude expressed by the community partner.
- ✦ Many students reported a new sense of involvement and connectedness to the community.
- ✦ About half the students reported surprising, ethically significant experiences.

Over the course of four semesters of experience, only one team completed their project late with a substandard final project. However, the primary reasons for the poor performance appeared to be attributable to the team's low level of motivation and responsibility, and their resistance to working with both the community partner and the instructor.

**Table 1**

Date	Activity	Ethics-Related Remarks
Week 4	IS Ethics Review	Quantity: Few Insight: Shallow, Bored Altruism: Low Topics: Defense of file-trading by students
Week 9	Project Design Presentation	Quantity: Many Insight: Moderate Altruism: Moderate Topics: Varied, Project-based
Week 15	Project Completion Debriefing	Quantity: Many Insight: Deep Altruism: High Topics: Varied, Client-Related

### **Agency Specific Outcomes—Epilepsy Foundation of Western Wisconsin**

According to Executive Director Kristin Berg, prior to starting the program, the Epilepsy Foundation of Western Wisconsin (EFWW) managed technology like many other nonprofit organizations – only as time and resources allowed. It was the norm to have many different operating systems running at the same time with a menagerie of different devices keeping everything together. When something broke, crashed or had a glitch, EFWW was at the mercy of whoever would come to fix the emergency. The lack of resources, knowledge and infrastructure lead EFWW to view technology issues as an obstacle that was too big to overcome. The problems were getting to be so profound that the staff was spending more time waiting on the technology than they were actually providing services.

The first set of students assigned to EFWW spent the entire semester evaluating the existing technology system as well as the values, mission, goals, and needs of the organization. This knowledge, along with EFWW's current strategic plan, was infused into a technology plan. The technology plan gave EFWW a blueprint for future funding needs and allowed technology-

specific grant proposals to be written to supplement the cost of implementing the plan. In the four semesters that EFWW has benefited from the program, the following upgrades and technological advances have been made:

- Implementation of a stand-alone server system
- Coordination of & upgrades to current software programs
- Troubleshooting and re-formatting of the main database
- Implementation of DSL instead of dial-up internet connection
- Installation of a firewall to protect all EFWW data on the server
- Identified technology volunteer to assist with maintenance and troubleshooting
- Annual allocation of resources for technology upgrades
- Technological needs added to the organizational strategic planning process

The most profound outcome of this program for EFWW has been the shift to forward thinking in regards to technology and resources. In the past it was much easier to simply pass over needs because “we’re nonprofit - we don’t have the money to do that kind of thing.” However, the agency now understands the importance of allocating appropriate resources to keep EFWW relatively up to date with our technology needs. Data must be secure and accurate if the agency expects to be able to provide the level of service that is pledged to the community and planned upgrades are done before emergencies develop. Technologically speaking, the Epilepsy Foundation of Western Wisconsin has finally been brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## Summary

For most non-profit agencies, the principle product is information and effective information systems management is critical to achieving the mission and goals of the organization. This project has demonstrated that community-campus partnerships utilizing a Problem-Based Service-Learning approach with capstone IS student teams can be a very effective way of bridging the nonprofit digital divide.

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## About the Authors



Carin Armstrong is the Director of Administrative Services at the Eau Claire YMCA. Carin has worked for the YMCA for 12 years and prior to that was an auditor for a regional public accounting firm. She oversees the finance, technology and general administrative functions. Carin also volunteers at church, community events and a youth leadership program. The YMCA's mission is to build strong kids, strong families and strong communities. The YMCA accomplishes these goals through extensive programming and facilities. The YMCA also collaborates with many community agencies such as UW-Eau Claire, United Way, Literacy Volunteers, Headstart, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Eau Claire Schools, and numerous other non-profit organizations



Kris Becker has been the Executive Director of the United Way of Greater Eau Claire for over nine years and she manages a staff of six employees and an annual budget of approximately \$2,000,000. United Way's role in community impact is strengthened by the numerous initiatives and proactive collaborative projects with the University of WI-Eau Claire and the corporate sector. Among them are the Emerging Leaders Program, Hmong Refugee Resettlement Project, a community-based Non-profit Grant Initiative, Youth United, Community Assessment, Gifts in Kind, Day of Caring, Children's Council and Healthy Communities. These initiatives position the United Way to create sustainable long-term positive changes in the community by enhancing the capacity of local non-profit organizations.



Kristin Berg was diagnosed with epilepsy as a young child and she struggled for many years before gaining control over her seizures. Kristin's struggle with epilepsy has spilled over into her professional life, as she is eager to give back to a cause she is very passionate about. Kristin began work with the Epilepsy Foundation of Western Wisconsin in the fall of 2000, first as an intern through the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, and as Executive Director since 2005. Since 2002, Kristin has also served as an epilepsy representative to the Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities and in 2005 joined the Executive Committee. She is also a member of the Council's committees on Governmental Affairs, Citizen Empowerment, and Consumer Caucus. She is a longtime volunteer for the Girl Scouts of the USA and has been active with the local chapters of Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Special Olympics since moving to Eau Claire in 1998. Kristin received her B.A. in English from the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire and has undergone professional training in grant writing, legislative advocacy and leadership development



Thomas S. E. Hilton is a professor of Management Information Systems (MIS) and chair of the MIS Department in the College of Business at the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire. Dr. Hilton has been active in the field of business computing for over 25 years. His areas of expertise include information security, ethics, data communications, and human interface design. Prior to coming to UW—Eau Claire, Dr. Hilton was a professor of Business Information Systems at Utah State University. There he served as the director of BIS graduate programs, taught undergraduate and graduate courses, led ongoing curriculum reform, and performed research. Before beginning his academic career, Dr. Hilton worked as a system designer for what is now Accenture

Management & Technology Services ([www.Accenture.com](http://www.Accenture.com)). There he worked on an inventory management system for the U.S. Navy, a wide area network for IBM retail outlet managers in Europe and the Middle East, and other system projects. He developed training materials on system development, trend analysis, and small system configuration. He also helped define the METHOD 1<sup>®</sup> information system development methodology. Dr. Hilton holds a PhD in system design and a BA in English, both from Brigham Young University.



Donald Mowry has been the Director of the Center for Service-Learning at UW-Eau Claire since 2001, although he has been active in the service-learning movement for over 15 years. A primary focus of the Center for Service-Learning in the past few years has been moving from a clearing house model to a partnership model advocating for fully collaborative, egalitarian, and ongoing partnerships with the community and students to meet community-identified needs. Successful programs developed thus far include Jumpstart Eau Claire, First Book Eau Claire, and the Eau Claire Literacy Action Network. Another focus has been advocating for the civic education and civic engagement of students, and the campus has been active in several initiatives including Campus Compact's Raise Your Voice, Wisconsin Campus Compact, Democracy Lab, and the American Democracy Project.



Christopher Quinlan is Director of Community Impact at United Way of Greater Eau Claire. In this capacity he works with numerous local non-profits to affect long-term, sustainable community change. Christopher holds a Masters degree in International Development and French Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and BAs in International Studies and French from Brigham Young University. In addition to his work with United Way, he is also a volunteer for Heifer International and serves on the board of a local community-based organic farm.

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