Working with Community Agencies and Partners

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Abstract
Tertiary education institutions need to be part of the local community and build relationships to support and encourage one another to build critical thinking and community mobilization. This paper details how Criminal Justice faculty and students at Humber Polytechnic in Toronto, ON, were able to build relationships with local businesses and social agencies and gain practical experience working on real-world issues. The students work with community partners to solve a current local problem, providing students with valuable experience, and the agencies receive new ideas, methods, and techniques for addressing the issues they face.

Introduction

Innovation is critical to making education engaging and effective (Serdyukov, 2017). One of the advantages of Humber Polytechnic is its small class sizes, which allow for innovative small-group projects and more interaction between professors and students. For the author, innovation is not about using AI or high-tech methods to create courses, but about creating spaces for students and others to interact face-to-face and apply their theoretical knowledge to societal issues. This demonstrates to students that they can create and execute innovative projects using their creativity, personal experience, and insights.

Innovation Description

This project redefines innovation in the polytechnic context by focusing on human connection and applied collaboration rather than high-tech tools. Students learn to design community-based solutions to real problems through teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, which are key competencies within applied education. By bridging classroom theory and community realities, the project demonstrates how innovation can be achieved with minimal resources and maximum impact. With proper support, school-community partnerships can assist faculty in developing innovative learning opportunities for students that address current public concerns and social issues (DePetris & Eames, 2017). As community agencies often do not have large budgets or extensive resources outside the funding cycle, ensuring that projects are low-cost and easy to set up and run is critical.

This requires a structured plan for students and agencies to collaborate, enjoy the process and derive something useful from the experience.

Method

The approach is built around structured collaboration between students and community agencies. Each student team (4–6 members) is assigned a community partner and guided through stages that include defining a problem, developing a theoretical intervention, and presenting proposed solutions. The professor facilitates initial meetings, ensures alignment of expectations, and monitors progress through weekly check-ins and peer evaluations. The course design intentionally mirrors real-world project cycles, emphasizing accountability, teamwork, and interactive feedback.

Community agencies are selected based on their willingness to work with students and the complexity of the issue. Contacts for partners are often made via a snowball effect, with one partner telling another. Local Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) have been fruitful partners. They often have a range of crime-related issues they wish to solve but have limited resources to do so.

The student-generated projects are theoretical in nature, but must be designed for practical, low-cost implementation within agency constraints. The community agencies are clearly informed that they will receive a theoretical plan, sometimes with a working online component or printed pamphlets, which they can use if they wish.

Community agencies are contacted and meet face-to-face with the professor first, then meet with the student team. Spending half an hour talking with an agency allows all stakeholders to establish clear expectations and goals. With the community agencies, a clear line of communication must be established and maintained between them,the professor and the student teams they will work with.

There are three important questions that guide the collaborative work:

1. What is the problem you are trying to solve?
2. What are the deliverables (i.e. what is going to be done)?
3. What does success look like?

Asking the agency these questions at the beginning limits the scope and scale of the work. Often, the agency will either present multiple problems or communicate uncertainty about the general situation and its possible issues. In this phase, the professor helps to ensure that the issues align with criminal justice course outcomes, are solvable problems, are narrow enough in focus and that the deliverables will not create additional problems.

Partnership and Process Setup
Agencies

Collaboration with agencies is an important component of knowledge exchange and creation, and it helps identify one or more problems that can be addressed with minimal cost and minimal impact on the built environment. Agencies must be made aware of that students are not implementing the project; they are only providing a theoretical plan for the agency. When mapping out which organization to work with, it is helpful to locate an agency that the student group can visit relatively easily to observe the physical and human environment.

Students

The students are given intensive lectures on the basics of project management and theoretical crime prevention. An emphasis is placed on examples of innovative, sustainable, community-focused projects to provide students with ideas of what can be achieved. For instance, the Iron Fish project, originating in Canada, helps address iron deficiency in low-income countries. Additional examples include the use of murals to reduce graffiti and innovative 3-D pedestrian road crossings. Projects that are low-cost, subtle and involve the community are more likely to succeed (O'Meara et al., 2007). Innovation does not need to be complex. Students are placed in teams of four to six, and each team is allocated a community partner and a specific issue that they are trying to resolve or deal with.

The course lectures are designed to demonstrate innovative solutions and techniques from multiple disciplines, including:

- advertising in England to reduce cell phone theft (UPSI, n.d.),
- encouraging pro-environmental behaviour (Hartmans et al, 2024),
- dealing with invasive fish in the Caribbean (Chapman et al., 2016),

- the impact community gardens have on reducing crime (Ohmer et al., 2009),
- the Lucky Iron Fish project in Cambodia (Charles, 2012), and
- the impact trees have on reducing crime (Troy et al., 2012).

Process

Student self-select into groups of 4-6, and each group is assigned a problem by the professor. The professor explains the problems they will be working on and what the community agency is requesting. While in class, the teams research the geographic area, the nature of the community and how this type of problem has been addressed in other cities and countries. The students need to research the issue and develop ideas for solving it. Only once they have done this step can they meet the agency partner. It is important that when the students meet with the community partner, they are knowledgeable about the problem and can propose some ideas. After meeting with the agency, the team creates a workable plan to meet the agency's requirements. As the professor, you need to ensure that the plans are neither too complex nor too simple and that they will not create additional problems. Often, the solutions will be too complex, or expensive or unintentionally cause more problems—such as painting a mural of "famous locals" that included a convicted criminal or planting a garden with toxic plants.

During the next six weeks, the students design their solutions, with a weekly check-in and feedback from the professor. At the 4-week mark, the teams present their ideas to other teams for peer evaluation. A second meeting with the agency is also encouraged to gather their feedback on the projects.

At the end of the term, students must present their work both in class and to the agency. Teams can get innovative—creating websites, QR stickers or simple yet effective mural designs in the community created by local school children.

Project Considerations
Students

Establishing clear project guidelines helps to narrow the scope of work. Students often try to take on too much or engage in scope creep, wherein more goals are added to the project. With each added goal, more deliverables and risks are introduced. Keeping the project simple means that it is more likely to work.

Project engagement varies across students as not all are enthusiastic about working in the field. One negative team member can significantly undermine the group's overall success. This is where pre-emptive work is required. All student groups must write and sign a Team Charter. This document outlines who is responsible for which tasks, who acts as the primary contact for the agency, how often the team will meet and exactly what to do in situations of group conflict. I have found that codifying student actions significantly reduces the impact that disinterested or uninvolved students have on a group. If a student does not do their allotted work, then it is a case of "You violated the Charter," rather than "You are lazy." Depersonalization reduces team conflict.

In each group, one person acts as the primary point of contact with the agency. They coordinate meetings and communication via desired channels. Their email must be professional, i.e. no slang or unprofessional email addresses. This reduces confusion with the agency and makes tracking easier. The professor is copied on all emails with the agency.

Agencies

Ensure community partners understand that students will not implement the program or its ideas; rather, they provide the ideas and methods to achieve the goals. Be cautious of the agency wanting more work, changing their ideas, or misunderstanding the project's scope—agree on the problem at the beginning and stick to it.

A clear scope of practice is necessary to communicate with agency partners. Reminding the agency that this is student-level work—while this varies across groups, agencies are not receiving advanced work output, but it can exceed expectations in many cases. The projects produce a strong social return on investment, agencies receive innovative ideas and solutions, and students apply their course skills in real time.

Outcomes

In the final stage of the project, students present their work in class to their peers and the community partners. This produces knowledge exchange in the classroom, where peers can learn about real-time problems in the community and how each group devised their solutions. A paper copy of the final report must be provided to the partners, as along with any links, handouts or other works created. Table 1 shows the examples of previous student projects.

Table 1. Examples of Student Projects

Problem	Solution	Why it works
Disused wall with graffiti in Mimico	The local school runs an art competition, and the winners paint the wall. Change every 3-5 years	Local pride in creation. Families will come to see the art
Low co-operation in the business community	Safety and inclusion survey of businesses	Finds what businesses' concerns are. Increases knowledge of the local Business Improvement Area
Concerns about street-involved people and conflicts with residents	55 PAWS – website and community hub for dog owners. Provides links to resources, park ratings, and a donation hub for "less fortunate dogs."	Both residents and the street involved have dogs. Get both to share a common love of dogs. Sets up dog events in parks for "All dogs."
Club and bar patrons feel unsafe getting transport	Rocky the Raccoon Safe Zone. Designated Safe Space patrolled by police, Website details contacts for safe transport, security, police, etc.	Simple QR code links to a site. High-visibility areas encourage people to stay in safe areas. Police & security work is less complex

Student Perspective

It is also important to get the insights and perspectives of the students who went through this course. The following are the perspectives of three students who successfully created a community safety audit with a local Business Improvement Area (BIA). BIAs are agencies that represent local businesses to promote their interests and the community in general.

Students' Perspective on the Project

What originally began as an assignment in our third year turned into a hands-on thesis, thanks to the opportunity to work with the Mimico Village BIA. It was more than just an academic project that needed to be completed, but rather a working relationship developed with community partners to help their community. This process focused heavily on collaboration and understanding the realities of the residents and store owners within Mimico Village exploring ways to enhance their sense of community safety. Our experience working with the Mimico Village Business Improvement Area (BIA) transformed our understanding of what it means to conduct ethical,community-informed research.

A thesis is about more than sending out surveys and putting the data into comprehensible graphs. It is about conducting research that has a genuine impact in the field we have been studying for the past four years. Working with the Mimico Village BIA began before our thesis and partners were finalized and involved multiple meetings to determine what exactly the community needed. Our original understanding

of the crime problems in the area proved incorrect after a single meeting with our community contact. Working with a community partner requires the ability to adapt and adjust existing plans or goals. The month of research we had completed and the crime prevention strategies we had begun to develop had to be shifted into ones relevant to the BIA.

Students' Perspective on the Limitations and Challenges

Working with a community partner tackling sensitive social issues brings potential ethical issues and bias. One cannot avoid bias altogether, especially when working on a project that involves community members' opinions. A community partner will often unconsciously express their own opinion on the area, meaning it falls on the researcher to examine data beyond what is provided. We made a point of visiting the BIA multiple times, both with and without our community contact. We found that both the data and participants' willingness varied. A project such as this requires the involvement of community members; otherwise, the full extent of the issue will be overlooked.

Communicating with stakeholders, anticipating hurdles, and holding team members accountable were essential in completing this project. Along with the BIA, the business owners', residents', and workers' input were valued as it directly involved their community. The Mimico Village BIA recognized the importance of community safety, which is why they had collaborated with us to survey the community

on certain occasions. Like any project, this one also faced setbacks, but they were overcome through discussions and consistent communication among all parties. As mentioned earlier, constant community engagement, regular observation updates, and transparency were crucial to the project's continued success. Through the BIA, we learned more about the community and its stakeholders, structure and culture. This helped shape our perspective and provided insight into potential improvements. It was not just about business or the economy, but also about community members and their safety.

Working with local community partners is crucial, which is why one needs to be mindful of their approach. Our approach focused on:

- Openly communicating thoughts and ideas through discussions to ensure everyone is working towards a shared goal.
- Constantly updating stakeholders on minor or major changes, so everyone is prepared for setbacks and adjustments.
- Avoiding biases because they can impact the project's real initial and final goals. Researchers will perceive a new community differently than its community members, which is why there needs to be a wide range of input and observations.

This project was more than an academic requirement for us; it was a way to build connections. We grew as researchers and professionals, gathering various tools to help us engage more effectively with our communities. Working with the Mimico Village BIA taught us that a researcher's job is not limited to extracting data, but to listening and observing our surroundings and assisting accordingly. The two most important lessons that we learned from this project, and our subsequent thesis project, are that: 1) done is better than perfect, and 2) being open to change is crucial. Over time, our data collection methods and overall plans underwent significant shifts, requiring us to adapt quickly and thoughtfully. Through this experience, we also came to understand the power of communication and the tangible impact of our work on the community.

Thank you so much to Allison Juda from the Mimico Village BIA for your assistance and guidance throughout this process. Your dedication made this project successful.

Impact

The innovative projects created in the Crime Prevention course at Humber Polytechnic brought about positive outcomes and lessons learned for both students and community partners. The students from the above section were able to develop their project into not only a fourth-year thesis, but also multiple paid consultancy contracts. Furthermore, students who are new to collaborative community projects received guidance and direction from an experienced faculty member. When students learn the value of their skills early in their careers through practice, as well as receive constructive criticism from multiple parties, they are better prepared for future projects.

Additionally, community partners have the opportunity to implement new strategies that can bring about a positive impact in their organization or community. The community partners can implement solutions that are attainable, now or into the future. Students go into projects knowing that cost can be a major barrier to success and are instructed to consider inexpensive ideas throughout the planning stage, meaning they develop a secondary goal of providing deliverables the partner can implement without significant impact on their budget. The Student Perspective section discusses the work done with the Mimico Village BIA. That particular project brought about changes within the community in less than 12 months. Although these changes were minor, community members noticed positive differences during that time period, and the deliverables had minimal cost.

Discussion

The inclusion of community partners in Criminal Justice students' projects has yielded many benefits. In a program that is broad in terms of future career paths, the collaboration between students and community partners in the Crime Prevention course has allowed students to find their own niche and apply their knowledge to the real world. They are presented with the real issues communities face, rather than assuming what those issues are based on statistics alone. These students can learn the skills needed for future research projects, including conducting interviews and developing surveys.

Nonetheless, there are some challenges that must be overcome during this course. Some community partners are very invested in the project and bring their own ideas to the

table. While this is ideal in most community research projects, students have difficulty distinguishing what is a good, sustainable idea and what is not. However, these challenges can be easily overcome with guidance from the faculty responsible for the course.

Future applications of this course model should include a wider variety of community partners and can be the basis of a capstone project. As more projects succeed, stronger bonds with community partners are formed, thereby creating more opportunities for innovative projects for future students.

Note on Contributors

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