

Community Engagement Fellows Project Report: Amanda Martin, Spring 2016

Initially, I signed up to be a Community Engagement Fellow because I saw a way to dovetail two of my professional selves: an English instructor at WCC, and a horse instructor at Animals as Natural Therapy. Perhaps serendipitously not quite understanding the goals of a majority of the other fellows—improving the service learning component within a college course—I went into this project with the goal of helping ANT improve its relationship and access to the quality students our local institutions support.

While my initial project was more ambitious, including researching existing faculty partnerships and composing every job description or potential internship ANT might offer to students, the ending project is much smaller, but also more manageable for both the organization and potential faculty partners. Titled “ANT Guide to Engagement with College Faculty and Students,” the handout I created, still in its drafting phase and needing review by ANT administrators, introduces ANT to potential faculty partners by providing ANT’s mission statement, its philosophy and expectations for engagement, possible levels of engagement and “leaning opportunities,” the process of forming a partnership for both faculty and students, and a few examples of available internships. After final editing and approval, this eight-page document will hopefully provide a quick and easy way for student and faculty interested in working with ANT an introduction to the organization, and a menu of potential ways to form short and long-term partnerships. It will save time for both sides by quickly allowing faculty and students to determine if ANT meets their course and career goals, and what level of engagement is desired to meet those goals. If this document works well, it will hopefully be used as a model for similar documents in other community organizations.

While composing this document I found myself using many of the terms introduced by the fellows program, specifically engagement. The older term of service-learning is perhaps now a misnomer, because I knew the opportunities that ANT offered went beyond just learning through the act of serving. Much of what ANT does IS engagement: with students, with faculty, with its participants and staff, and all these stakeholders serve, and are served, in turn. ANT already made use of many of the deeper levels of engagement proposed by our fellowship materials and sources, and it was enlightening actually seeing how those levels had evolved at ANT over the past decade because the partnerships didn’t work well otherwise. I also found it useful to again take what had evolved out of practice at ANT in creating the levels of engagement ANT could offer, as not all students and not all courses want or need or are ready to handle the deep, intimate engagement of a long-term commitment. It made me think of what could be done to good effect with short, single-project partnerships, balanced against more intimate relationships.

The fellowship program also taught me there is much we don’t know, and much to be done, in progressing past the desire for service to the desire for engagement. For instance, how does knowledge transfer to other courses, and to their careers and citizenship, for students participating in these courses? Does one type of engagement work better in terms of student learning than another? And how do we equal the playing field for institutions and community partners so it IS an equal partnership, and not one in which the faculty and institutions have more of the power? I am hopeful these questions will still be percolating as this year’s fellows move into their new learning cohorts next year.

I’d like to give a shout out to Travis and April and my cohorts, especially my Friday 9:00 am peeps, for giving me some great suggestions and news ways of looking at my project. Thanks all!