Facilitating Authentic Community Conversations

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**Abstract**

Community engagement is an essential component of a successful agriscience program. Meeting the needs of the community that the program is housed within helps to build partnerships and ownership from stakeholders. Building authentic community connections can be a daunting task for educators at all stages and requires intentional strategies to maintain the relationships. Authenticity and transparency from educators about their programmatic goals can help attract meaningful partnerships and experiences from community groups. Through personal interviews with stakeholders, professionals, and personal experiences a guide for fostering authentic community connections was created to help educators find and advance their relationships with community organizations to expose their students to new perspectives. This guide explains the purpose of authentic relationships, strategies to utilize when having these types of conversations and ideas to consider for continued partnership. The goal of this project is to provide a framework to create and nurture intentional community relationships that meet the needs of everyone involved.

**Chapter 1: "What", Introduction, Purpose & Objectives, Need, Definition of Terms**

Fostering strong connections within agriculture, food and natural resources programs is essential to making sure that the needs of the community it's housed within are served. This can be a daunting task for new and seasoned educators alike. Communities serve as strong resources for learning in a variety of contexts (Bauch, 2001; McKim; et al., 2019) and help students to build and maintain social capital that prepares them for successful professional endeavors (Bauch, 2001; Hastings et al., 2011). Degrees of strength can vary between these types of relationships and educators hold a strong sense of responsibility for directing these connections to be purposeful and multifaceted (Lemke, 2020; Takako, 2006).

The purpose of this project is to outline a guide that allows educators to begin identifying and engaging with community partners that provide students with differing perspectives and equitable experiences. When initially exploring and analyzing research on community connections with the context of agricultural education, there were very few recent and relevant writings that encapsulate a variety of strategies or lessons that educators need to keep in mind. Effective communication is needed to convey a sense of authenticity and intentionality behind the curricular goals of the educator and how incorporating a potential community partner could add value to this vision. The objectives of this project were to provide educators with a concise yet comprehensive guide that highlights phases needed to start these connections and questions to consider as the relationship is built and maintained. Secondly, the guide seeks to remind educators of commonly overlooked concepts that can make partnerships feel transactional. Lastly, this guide provides a template for receiving feedback from community groups to make necessary adjustments in the future.

Within the context of this project, the following terms are used regularly and should be interpreted using the following definitions:

- Authentic = Genuine appreciation for the equitable advancement of all participants involved in the experience.
- Intentional = Purposeful and structured interactions or decisions that meet the needs of all participants involved in the experience.
- CTE = Career and Technical Education
- AFNRE = Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources Education
- Community Group = Any group or organization that meets the needs of your shared programmatic location.

**Chapter 2: "Why", Literature Review (Why is it important and what has been done before?)**

Agriscience programs have the potential to explore and meet the needs of the community that envelops them, leading to them becoming mutually dependent on another's resources and contributions (O'Connor et al., 2019). Educators have a responsibility to expose their students to diverse perspectives and challenges that allow them to engage how it may be relevant to their own communities (McKim et al., 2019). It has become common for educators to incorporate stand-alone experiences for their students in order to highlight different careers or community groups. This can be difficult for students when it comes to applying their lived experiences and learned knowledge to address challenges or topics affecting them. When educators fail to be intentional and validate the experiences of underrepresented populations, equity and inclusion can be viewed as an add-on versus authentically incorporated into the curriculum. Challenging our students to engage in meaningful community connections can allow them to address the problems that can occur when equity and inclusion are forgotten. This can lead to impactful learning experiences that give students autonomy for their learning experiences and engage with their own community on a deeper level (Germán, 2021). Our communities are full of experts in all content areas, but we must be willing to co-create and tap into these resources for the benefits of not only our agriscience programs, but for our greater communities.

Often educators have difficulty orienting their course structure to meet an asset-based perspective that counteracts the negative narratives and connotations that typically envelop community experiences (Germán, 2021). Reframing the community interaction from the perspective of how your community adds value can lead to positive viewpoints from students and aids in increasing social capital. Incorporating community connections in any capacity shouldn't be a stand-alone experience for students. It should be coupled with opportunities for reflection and debriefing that initiates student deeper learning and evaluation of big picture concepts. Co-creation with the community group you are engaging with is essential to making the experience authentic and meaningful for all parties. Being explicit with the group leads to clear expectations and offers time for them to communicate their shared vision. Educators should

remain flexible and avoid making the connection transactional. Evaluating how you can share your respective areas of expertise with one another and collaborate to meet the goals of everyone involved is necessary. Educators should provide participating organizations with a theme or common challenge to speak on that can help to frame their involvement to be organized and thoughtful. This coupled with the intentionality of becoming fully integrated into the community you work within leads to authentic interactions and begins the process of developing mutual trust. Being visible, involved, and active by learning about the community and engaging in activities shows your commitment to meeting their organizational needs (Noel 2011).

**Chapter 3: "How", Methods & Procedures**
The basis for the creation of the guide for authentic community connections was focused on collaboration and discussions with experts who utilize partnerships within their educational contexts. Initial interviews regarding authentic community connections were held with Dr. Phillip Warsaw, Assistant Professor of Ecological Economics and Environmental Justice in the Department of Community Sustainability at Michigan State University. Through prompted questions and dialogue, an outline of strategies for community partnerships was formulated. This in conjunction with prior experiences as an agriscience educator, literature reviews and research were all used to create a guide that educators of all backgrounds could reference when interested in facilitating more community opportunities into their curriculum, with a large focus on authenticity and equity. Upon completion of this guide, several community groups/organizations were contacted to gain clarity and feedback on the effectiveness of this product.  Unfortunately, responses weren't available in time for a thorough analysis and are further discussed in the 'Chapter 5 section'.

**Chapter 4: Results**
Upon analysis of the notes gathered from research and interviews with experts, a guide for facilitating authentic community conversations was created with the vision of it being utilized by educators to begin or foster existing relationships within their own agriscience programs. The guide targets phases that were identified to encourage educators to identify valuable partnerships that meet an asset-based perspective in order to counteract negative narratives that easily become incorporated into curriculum by having students analyze challenges. This guide is meant to provide baseline information that can mold to the many contexts that agriscience education falls within. Educators can interpret the information to meet the specific needs or goals of their partnerships and utilize suggested strategies to maintain strong long-term relationships. The following phases were identified as essential to creating, implementing, and maintaining successful community partnerships:
Phase 1: Identify Partnerships
- Use an Asset-Based Perspective
- Engage in Your Community

Phase 2: Establish Relationships

- Immerse Yourself in the Organization
- Establish Shared Expectations

Phase 3: Maintain Connections

- Reflect on Shared Vision
- Respond to Feedback

The guide provides explanations for each phase and examples incorporating these overarching ideas into the shared experiences of agriscience programs and community groups. The phases are supported by literature and allow educators to start the initial reflection process into their existing practices. Throughout the guide, readers are provided with questions to consider while they work to formulate partnerships and challenges that may potentially occur. These questions are intended to further the reflective experience to ensure authenticity and that the goals for both parties are honored throughout the collaboration.

Further, suggestions are provided on how to increase engagement for students throughout the experience. It can be easy to overlook the impact that student perception can have on the learning process and in turn the experience that the participating community partner may have. The importance of feedback and reflection is mentioned within the guide, attached is a template that provides questions for community groups to engage with to make necessary improvements for the future. Making regular assessments of the needs and ever-changing priorities of the community organization you are working with is critical to remaining transparent and responsive to changing situations. When groups feel their opinions or feedback are valued, the likelihood of future engagement or collaborative experiences increase. Additionally, three community groups that were promoted by individuals interviewed for this project are highlighted with their organizational vision and website. Several themes or topics were suggested on ways these groups could potentially become involved with agriscience programs in the future.

**Chapter 5: "So What"**
Overall, engaging in the topic of authenticity and community partnerships has allowed me to reflect on the level of involvement that my newly re-chartered program has engaged in. Beginning and maintaining strong relationships with community groups can be intimidating for teachers in various stages of their careers. This guide works to provide simple and thoughtful strategies or questions to consider to maintain authenticity and intentionality when incorporating these experiences into your classroom. There is a strong impact that is felt on all stakeholders when intentional school-community connections are made. Nevertheless, transactional approaches may lead to conflicts or exploitation of community resources (Larsen, 2016). Relationships require time to build, and educators shouldn't become discouraged, instead focus on community groups that your program may already be involved with to practice maintaining and fostering long-standing connections. Being patient and mindful of identifying potential partnerships is essential to the process and being respectful of the vision that community groups may have for the experiences facilitated.

Potential extensions that could occur to increase the effectiveness of this tool would be testing the guide with more focused organizations within my community. This guide was created at the end of the academic calendar year and has yet to be fully utilized for its intended purpose with an agriscience program. Upon further use, adjustments or additional recommendations could be made from various community groups to increase the validity of the guide. Expanding the level of feedback from partnership groups will ensure that the recommended strategies work in the context of agriscience programs in Michigan and meet the needs of all participating parties. Building upon the potential extensions, improvements could be made upon further understanding of how this guide impacts interactions with partners in my own agriscience community. Establishing mutual trust is critical and occurs from a culmination of interactions and improvements should be taken into consideration the more the guide is used to maintain the effectiveness and overall purpose of the project.

Facilitating authentic learning experiences centered around connecting with community members, groups or organizations will provide valuable lessons for students. Educators in the role of hosting these opportunities must continually ask themselves, what challenges are valid to the context narrative of my course structure? Failing to identify and revise your practice can sever the trust that is being built between you, your students and the community groups you work with. Recognize and validate how this partnership will align with the rest of your plan.

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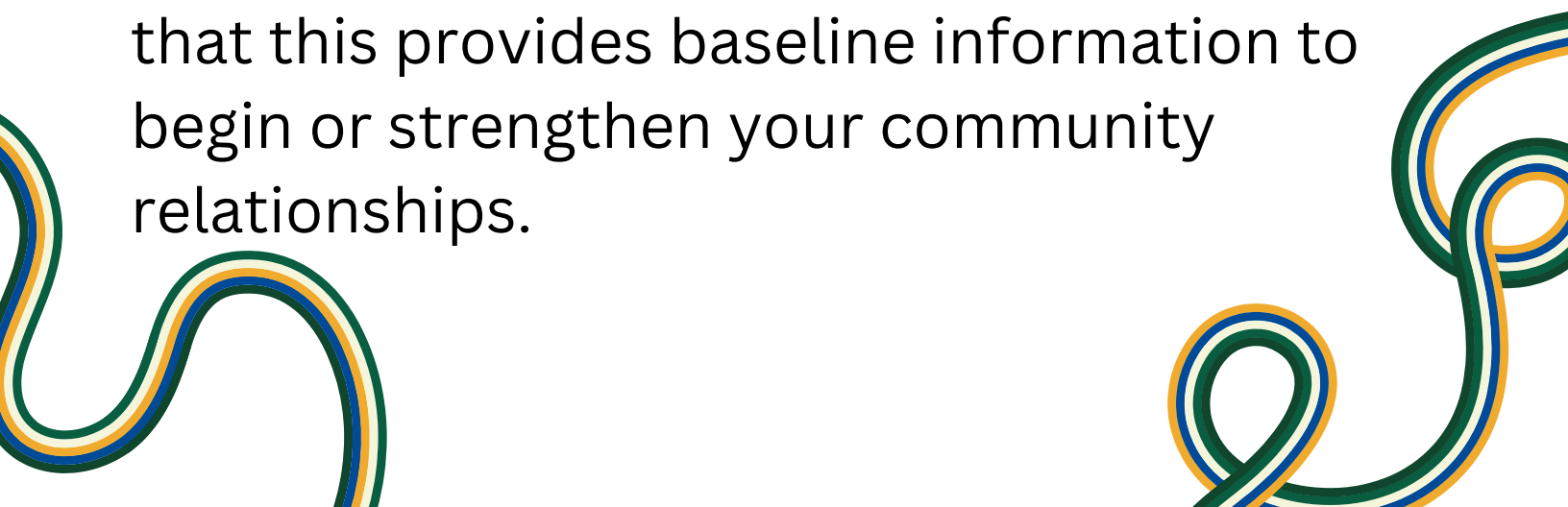
# Authentic Community Conversations

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# Table of Contents

# Using this Guide

The purpose of this guide is to help educators of all experience levels make purposeful connections with community partners to broaden the perspectives and understanding of the students involved within agriculture, food and natural resource programs.

Strategies suggested are an accumulation of personal experiences of the author, interviews with experts, literature reviews, and research. While each reader may interpret the guide differently and use the strategies in varying degrees, the hope is that this provides baseline information to begin or strengthen your community relationships.

# Purpose of Authentic Conversations:

The purpose of authentic conversations for educational partnerships is to foster meaningful, transparent, and mutually beneficial interactions between educational institutions and their partner communities. Stakeholders often hold the key to insights and challenges within the greater community that students can become involved with.

The experiences that career & technical education (CTE) programs provide students are valuable career skills. CTE programming places a strong emphasis on meeting the active needs of the community that it belongs within. Agriculture, food and natural resources education (AFNRE) programs routinely work to incorporate community based partnerships into their curriculum. Connections between educational institutions and the communities they serve have existed for generations. Every opportunity exposes students to new perspectives that add value to the formal curriculum being presented.

Facilitating powerful and genuine conversations lay the foundation for long-term partnerships that could potentially lead to professional opportunities for students. Ultimately, when community groups feel important and included they will have a greater sense of ownership and participation within these programs.

# Steps to Building Connections

**Phase 1: Identify Partnerships**

Use an Asset-Based Perspective: Often educators have difficulty orienting their course structure to meet an asset-based perspective that counteracts the negative narratives and connotations that typically envelop community experiences (Germán, 2021). Avoid identifying problems to solve in the community and rather identify opportunities to support the ongoing interventions.

**Engage in Your Community: Identifying potentially successful**

Partnerships requires active engagement in the community. Create a "resource map" and visit potential groups to "gain a real sense of the work conducted there, and… establish personal contacts with members of the organization" (Favela & Torres, 2014).

**Phase 2: Establish Relationships**

Immerse Yourself in the Organization: Educators should remain flexible and avoid making transactional connections. Be willing to engage yourself into the community through activities, observational and conversational studies, and be visible to begin the process of establishing trust (Noel, 2011).
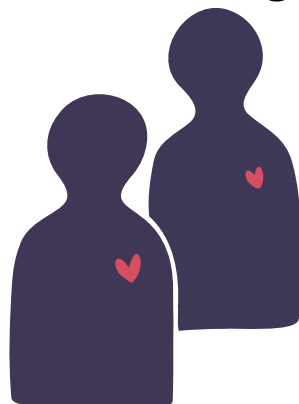
# Steps to Building Connections

**Establish Shared Expectations**: Co-creation with the community group you are engaging with is essential to making the experience authentic and meaningful for all parties. Being explicit with the group leads to clear expectations and offers time for them to communicate their shared vision (Bauch, 2001, Larsen, 2016).
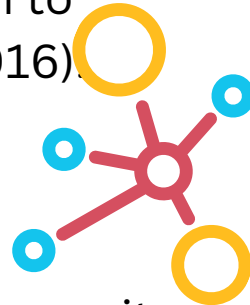
**Phase 3: Maintain Connections**
Reflect on Shared Vision: Community connections in any capacity should be coupled with opportunities for reflection and debriefing that initiates deeper student learning and evaluation of big picture concepts (Konkola, et al., 2007). Additionally, educators and community partners should engage in reflection and open dialog to ensure goals and expectations are met.

**Respond to Feedback:** Relationships with community organizations are reciprocal in nature (Bauch, 2001). Therefore, educators participating in community-engaged work should be open and responsive to feedback as well as willing to provide constructive feedback of their own.  See attached template 'Partnership Feedback Form'.
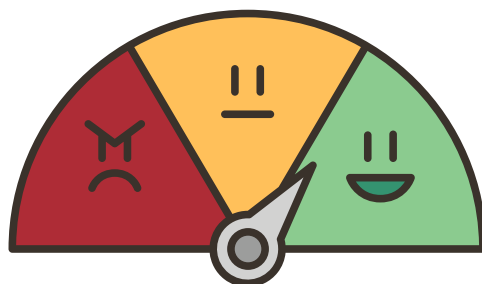
# Strategies for Engagement

- Be explicit with the organization that you are working with.
  - Negotiate with the organization coming in.
  - What do they want to gain from the partnership? What are your mutual goals for the experience being planned?
  - How can students prepare for any visits beforehand? Should they pre-read articles, prepare discussion questions, etc.?
  - What can I provide as an educator? (Example: Facilitated/moderated discussion)
  - How do I as the educator envision their experience?
  - Avoid making the partnership transactional. Be flexible and willing to try new things. They are experts within their own fields, allow them the opporutnity to co-create.
- Don't make the potential visit with the community group a stand-alone experience. This can be perceived as transactional and can leave students with difficulty connecting to remaining coursework.
- Focus less about getting precise content from the experience and instead think about the bigger picture. How does this group fit into the wider thematic sense of my course?

# Engagement with Students

- Creating a comfortable learning environment for the students involved in the experience is essential when working with potentially challenging community topics.
  - Clear expectations are needed for not only the students involved, but also with the community group you are working with.
  - Don't add equity into your curriculum without intentionality.  Reflect on how it aligns with your existing coursework and how you will merge them together.
  - When analyzing challenges within the community be mindful of speaking from all contexts that may be impacting your students.  Students will be more engaged in discussions when they can hear similar or parallel experiences.
  - Often times you will hear educators using the term "safe space" when crafting comfortable learning environments, reframe by using the term "brave space" (Warsaw, 2023). This encourages students to prepare and share their lived experiences.
  - Don't be afraid to speak about difficult topics, be open to hearing about things that are challenging.  When you facilitate these conversations and perspectives, it works to build trust.

# Questions to Consider

- What challenges are valid to your context? In what ways can we connect the lived experiences of our students to these challenges within our greater community? Through deep reflection and observation, what is our community facing on a daily basis?
- How can I be sure to honor the perspectives of both rural and urban contexts? Do we face similar issues in different ways?
- What are over arching themes of your class and how do they fit into this concept of incorporating community groups into your curriculum?
- What are big challenges? Where do they come from? How can we demonstrate that these specific challenges manifest into other contexts?

# Organization Highlights

Examples of community groups to include in programatic experiences for students are listed below. Short explanations of each group is provided and an example is given for how they could potentially be partnered with for agriscience programs in Michigan.

## Growing Hope Urban Farm- Ypsilanti, MI

Vision:
"Ypsilanti is a community where all people–particularly those with barriers due to race, class, culture, language, ability, and mobility–have access to nourishing local food that is culturally appropriate and affordable, can grow and prepare their own harvests, and may earn a living as a food grower, producer, or entrepreneur."

https://growinghope.net
*Topics/Themes to incorporate: Farm to School, Urban farming challenges

## Allen Neighborhood Center- Lansing, MI

Vision:
"A diverse, equitable, and welcoming Eastside where a rich mix of neighbors enjoy access to everything they need to build an outstanding quality of life, a deep sense of belonging and community pride, and a strong voice in shaping a vibrant, sustainable, healthy future together."

https://allenneighborhoodcenter.org/about-us/

*Topics/themes to incorporate: food justice/soveriengty

## MSU Center for Regional Food Systems- East Lansing, MI
Vision:
"Our vision is a thriving economy, equity and sustainability for Michigan, the country and the planet through food systems rooted in local regions and centered on food that is healthy, green, fair and affordable."

https://www.canr.msu.edu/foodsystems/

*Topics/themes to incorporate: Equity & Access, Sustainability in rural vs. urban

# Partnership Feedback Form

| COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION: | DATE: |
|---|---|

In what ways did the partnership with our agriscience program benefit your community group?

What additional support or resources would be beneficial for your community group to continue engaging in educational initiatives?

Were there any challenges or areas for improvement in our collaboration with your community group? How can we address these challenges in the future?

How can we maintain and strengthen our partnership with your community group in the long term?

Did the educational programs or initiatives align well with the needs and priorities of your community? If not, what adjustments could be made?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience working with our educational institution?

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