

Developing Strategic Campus/Community/Corporate Partnerships

Karen Oates and John O'Connor

Abstract

In learning communities, real world, community connections often inform the curriculum. They provide the learning structure and communal face to take on large public concerns. In learning communities, however, the learning process (e.g., of collaboration, responsibility, initiative) is often as important to student development as learning specific disciplinary content. In the best of models students learn the process of collaborative work with peers, faculty, and community entities. They develop the ability to embrace, not fear, ideas that are different from one's own.

“Students’ out-of-class experiences appear to be far more influential in students’ academic and intellectual development than many faculty members and academic and student affairs administrators think.” (Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling, 1999)

“Service learning, internships, community service, and employment offer important opportunities to link students’ out-of-class lives and experiences with what they are studying and learning in more formal instructional settings. More such linkages must be found, and institutional and administrative structures and policies, and status structures must be reshaped to encourage collaboration across academic and student affairs divisional lines.” (Magolda, Terenzini, Hutchings 1999: 618)

These findings by prominent educational researchers are not likely to be surprising or controversial to readers of this journal. Recent research in learning and cognitive development has underscored the importance of students being “engaged” in their learning, finding applicability or relevance of theory to practice, and connecting information and action (Bransford, Brown, and Cooking, 1999; Halpern and Hakel, 2003). Today’s students are interested in community and corporate partnership for learning in a much more engaged and comprehensive way than we have seen before. This increased interest is tied to the changing conditions of students’ lives and a new practicality to their educational needs and approaches to learning about what matters to them. In addition, the changing conditions on our campuses — new student demographics, constrained budgets, greater accountability (Guskin, Marcy, and Smith, 2004; Magolda, Terrizini, and Hutchings, 1999) — make partnerships with external institutions and organizations not only attractive for student learning, but also provide a value-added link to a variety of community resources that leverage the capacity of both campus and community.

In this article we will: (1) explore the topic of strategic partnerships based on learning community goals and structures, offering enough background so you might imagine how your particular institution, whether adopting authentic learning communities or not, can do this work; (2) provide two brief examples of institutions with distinct partnerships that help develop a culture that provides students with distinctive, deep learning experiences; and (3) suggest some steps to get started and advice on lessons learned through our experiences.

In this article, we will occasionally use “community” to refer to both non-profit communities (schools, government offices, service and non-governmental organizations) and corporate communities. While the differences between these kinds of organizations are often important, especially for faculty, they all can be mutually beneficial partners with colleges and universities and all can be sites for learning. The word “strategic” is important in our title; strategic in this context describes an intentional relationship for planning systematically for action. We emphasize both the intentionality in design and the critical role of planning for action. “Strategic community partnerships” means that we are moving beyond individual student service-learning experiences to build on the collaborative qualities of learning communities, and we are putting the community experience in the center of the learning rather than as an application of academic knowledge.

Forming these partnerships, applying the learning research findings, and developing the approaches and practices that move teaching beyond the classroom requires significant commitments and changes by individuals and institutions in our way of working — teaching and learning — in our classrooms and campuses. In addition, the relationship of faculty role as it relates to faculty reward, specifically tenure and promotion, places a burden on us to define the cost of intellectual capital invested in community partnerships and its benefits to the educational mission of our institution.

Learning Communities

For various reasons, learning communities are an apt structure for fostering these commitments and enabling the changes. Learning communities encourage collaborative, engaged, liberating pedagogical approaches and a culture of experimentation. A variety of approaches have been used to build learning communities, all with intentions of restructuring the learning experience. The basic principles of academic learning communities provide the infrastructure to create strategic partnerships. Students and faculty in partnership with community members can develop reciprocal and collaborative interactions with a learning-centered focus. As a result:

- Students become more active in their own learning because it is immediately relevant to their lives, and the lives of others;
- Faculty members see themselves less as experts and more as participants in a learning community of the classroom and a larger community, and model life-long learning skills;
- Campus becomes community as what happens in the classroom becomes connected to what happens in other learning contexts; and

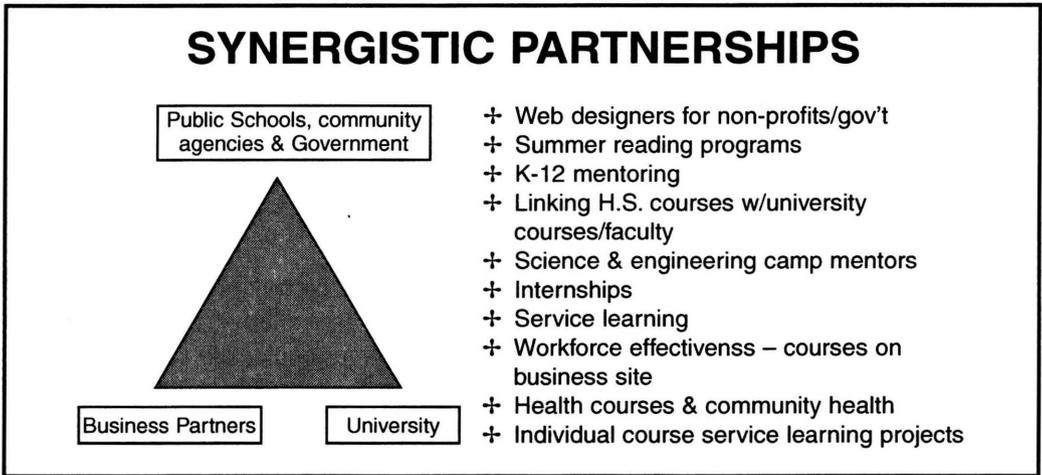
- Communities develop a new emphasis on group learning and self-reflection. These learning community partnerships differ from traditional academic offerings in that they are issue-oriented rather than discipline-based and often address complex, unresolved problems. Students address these problems through active engagement in various experiential learning opportunities. To unravel these complexities takes time, effort, and risk, working outside the comfort zone of the conventional classroom.

Experiential learning fits well into learning community instruction because of the shared focus on interdisciplinary understanding, the value placed on community-building, and the emphasis on reflective practice (MacGregor, 2003). Experiential learning can occur in traditional courses such as “Psychology in the Community,” or interdisciplinary and theme-based courses such as “Poverty and Homelessness,” or through intense immersion experiences such as alternative spring break, or those created by the national organization Break Away, which sends students to underserved areas of the country to study a particular situation.

At their best, strategic partnerships foster stronger learning communities and a more complex sense of identity for students when the out-of-class experiences raise issues of authority, leadership, and organizational practices. For example, the community work, ideally and intentionally, is built on a partnership with all parties identifying and developing the issues to be addressed in the classroom and the community. Students collaborate with faculty members and community agencies or local businesses to create learning objectives and experiences related to course goals. This reciprocal process is consistently recognized as fundamental to successful service-learning in the various lists of good practice (Mintz and Hesser, 1996: 28–44; Oates and Leavitt, 2003: 11–14). In addition, the inclusion of experiential learning partnership arrangements allows students to think about their academic study through an interdisciplinary lens, recognizing the complexity of contemporary issues and the focused perspective of traditional disciplinary expertise. Together, students, faculty members, and community partners ideally confront questions of what is expertise and who is an expert, what makes a right answer or action, and why multiple perspectives are not only possible but also preferred. Such questions are fundamental to citizenship in a diverse democracy.

Because of the emphasis on reciprocal partnerships, students have substantially more freedom, responsibility, and accountability in these programs than in most learning activities and volunteer opportunities. We often hear that they are “treated like adults” and have important responsibilities that transcend the self to the other. Academic study and experiential learning are dynamically related as two ways of knowing; a view of learning different from one that privileges study/theory, then applies it to work/practice (Oates and Gaither, 2001: 14–42). When the academic expectations are clear going into the course or learning experience and revisited through practiced reflection, most students flourish under this challenge. In the most challenging and generally most rewarding learning communities, students become aware of the intersection of knowledge, skill, and attitudes in public problem solving. Learning communities such as “Global Warming” (The Evergreen State College), “Chemistry and the Environment”

(Santa Clara University), and “Race, Class, and Gender” (George Mason University) are intentionally designed to create knowledge at that intersection. Through group and community activities, students “practice” commitments to democratic principles of diversity, social justice, equality, and access often with that as an unintended consequence to the experience designed around a specific “content” objective. They develop a greater sense of personal efficacy while recognizing the context of their participation in the classroom, in communities and in corporations.



Synergistic partnerships, in this case between a university, non-profit, and corporate business (three-way synergism), can be extremely powerful learning tools for students. In the above diagram we marshal the energetic and creative resources of university students with the professional standards and approaches of practicing business leaders to develop innovations for non-profit organizations or agencies. The side bar list of activities represents a variety of initiatives, projects, and products that may result from this three-way partnership. Students clearly benefit as they are exposed to and engage in work, which is in their words both “authentic” and “real-world valued.” In addition, corporations can preview a potential new employee. Often corporate leaders involved in these partnerships can contribute to boards and advisory panels and can speak from example and observation on student preparedness for the profession and suggest areas of academic enrichment for the university curriculum.

Our triangle model can be tilted to either the left or right to have both non-profit agencies and university students working toward a corporate goal or, if tilted the other way, corporate and non-profit agencies working toward a university product with university students. In all cases, there is a win-win-win scenario.

Examples of University Partnerships

Harrisburg University of Science and Technology— Corporate Partnerships

The University motto is: *“Three inseparable elements — one vital economic mission.”* Harrisburg University of Science and Technology was designed as a 21st century “New Urban University” with an intentional approach to partnership development. The university integrates through strategic partnerships an affiliated regional math and science high school, called Harrisburg University SciTech High School, and business incubator, called the Harrisburg University SciTech Business Center, within its university infrastructure. These are the three inseparable elements. Harrisburg University’s “new” approach to higher education — celebrating the synergy of a high quality academic institution (including its high school) and business including its incubator — focuses on economic development. This unique structure reflects Harrisburg University’s mission to be an economic development engine for the region by providing a quality education for the students. Clearly this cannot be achieved without ongoing dynamic partnerships.

The Harrisburg University approach of development from high school through college to work promotes student success through strategic learning experiences that anticipate the skills and needs for the future. All efforts at Harrisburg University are aligned in support of learning, diversity, and research and innovation. The university seeks input from regional business and community partners in order to determine what graduates should know and should be able to do, and the university collaborates to align efforts with their needs. Collaborative alignment is the key to a student’s experience at Harrisburg University. These partnerships are deliberate and intentional for this new urban institution.

“Integration by design” means the university intentionally integrates three historically separate entities: a high school, a university, and business startups. The programs of study between a high school and a university are well integrated to create an educated, adaptable workforce skilled in technology. This facilitates students moving from one to the other, from their educational life to their professional life. It also makes sense that students and researchers working together in a university or high school setting will come up with ideas that should have an opportunity to contribute to the economy. Conversely, it makes sense that students should have access to those professionals throughout their academic careers by participating in the business community allowing real-world experience. These experiences directly relate to developing our students’ career related abilities and skills. By focusing on experiences that are crucial to those abilities, students know what success looks like.

Because of this character and curriculum, Harrisburg University the institution fits a niche not now occupied by other regional institutions. Strategic partnerships and collaborations have naturally emerged from this niche development. University

courses in high school, shared faculty with community colleges, 2 + 2 programs, dual enrollment, and specific certificate courses are developed and implemented with Harrisburg University's neighboring institutions. These intra-higher educational partnerships are a special form of strategic collaboration that benefits both the bottom line and student learning. These academic partnerships supplement and allow for robust community and organization-based research collaborations. Although a new institution, Harrisburg University of Science and Technology has already negotiated various synergistic partnerships. Two such partnerships are described below.

The Whitaker Science Museum and Center Partnership

With the good fortune of having a science museum in the neighborhood of the university and high school, Harrisburg University developed in conjunction with the Whitaker Science educators a program of peer and public "communicating science." Here, Harrisburg University students will work with high school students to create a professional display to be shown at the science museum. Both high school and university students will have the opportunity to leverage the knowledge of the science museum directors, scientists, and communicators for the physical display with accompanying written information. Topics, space, experiments, and assessment of the projects for display are jointly developed. SciTech High students also will serve as "guides" at the museum for younger children exploring the displays. This three-way partnership benefits the high school and university students, the science center, and the general public with learning taking place at all the intersections of collaboration.

Harrisburg Young Professionals Partnership

Establishing a new university in the capital city of Pennsylvania can stir a great deal of excitement. The Harrisburg Young Professionals (HYP) have, in collaboration with HU's admissions and Harrisburg Development, a local development company, engaged in partnership to welcome and orient prospective and new students to the area through introductions to the arts and local sites of interest while providing mentoring and transitional support to students. Harrisburg University is an institution without alumni; HYP has stepped in to fill that role with the hopes of connecting these new even younger professionals to the city they love. This partnership in the works is a good example how a university with a need (and without enough resources) can have that need filled by local organizations to benefit students, the organization, and, in this case, the city.

New Century College at George Mason University— Non-profit and Community Partnerships

"Connecting the Classroom to the World" is the motto of George Mason University's nine-year-old interdisciplinary college, New Century College (NCC). The "connecting" can happen in many ways: community-based courses and research, internships, study abroad, extra-curricular projects, service-learning, and joint programs with local organizations are a few examples. The connections provide a practical dimension to what is learned in the classroom, but more importantly

represent experiential forms of learning and ways of knowing. The connections have both personal and institutional implications as they encourage a more socially responsive and personally reflective community within New Century College's curricular structure, which is predominately organized around learning communities. Two cases of extensive partnerships that result in multiple activities and courses are with the local Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at George Mason University and a neighborhood revitalization effort, Urban Alternative, initially funded by a HUD Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grant.

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at George Mason University is a non-profit organization serving the region by "providing intellectual and cultural experiences for residents in their retirement years. OLLI-GMU is an affiliate organization of George Mason University and is a member of the Elderhostel Institute Network of similar organizations at colleges and universities in the United States and Canada" (<http://www.olligmu.edu>). The OLLI-GMU offers classes to its members, taught by members and GMU faculty. One course, "Generations," is co-sponsored and co-taught by NCC. NCC students work with OLLI-GMU members in small groups on issues that challenge generational perspective, such as health care. Out of this class and various extra-curricular activities, students have developed informal mentorship, collaborative community research projects, and independent studies. The OLLI-GMU has written in a "close working relationship" with NCC as part of its contract of affiliation with GMU. This relationship has also resulted in a student scholarship sponsored by OLLI-GMU for a NCC student who has done extraordinary community service. The student is recognized in a jointly sponsored reception where students, faculty, staff, and OLLI-GMU members reinforce their network.

Urban Alternative, located in Arlington County in northern Virginia and focused on a neighborhood elementary school and revitalized community center, attempts to rebuild and deepen a neighborhood identity as that integrated black and white neighborhood faces an influx of immigrants from Somalia, Cambodia, and Nicaragua; a move from home ownership to rental properties; and the looming pressures of gentrification at its borders (Sockett, 1998). The NCC commitment, based on community-identified needs, has been to mentor and coach elementary school students in an after-school enrichment or recreational program, staff a computer center in a large apartment building, support a voter registration drive, staff a senior center, help with English as a second language and citizenship classes for adults, and work in a child care and community center in a converted grocery store. Unintended results have been the formation of a PTA at the local elementary school and a tenants' union at the neighborhood's largest apartment complex.

The vehicle for NCC's commitment is a six-credit learning community called Neighborhood, Community, and Identity. Two credits are service learning. An urban historian, a community psychologist, an anthropologist, and faculty members from education and conflict resolution have taught the learning community. When the partnership first began and the new learning community created, the faculty and students had to work through issues of authority as the faculty members came to

understand the course involved a complex web of larger partnership. Not all of the initial faculty participants shared the view that “we move the academy away from seeing the community as a learning laboratory and toward viewing it as a partner in an effort to increase each other’s capacities and power” (Mintz and Hesser, 1996: 36). One result was that the students were negotiating their roles and responsibilities with community members as well as with their teachers. In addition, students found immediate relevance in their community work and began to doubt or question the value of the classroom study. The potential conflict was resolved through a series of honest dialogues with key community leaders and some faculty development around truly effective and sustained community-based research. Out of these conversations grew a foundation of shared purposes and experiences, and the students began to appreciate the challenges of bridging academic culture and community action. As a result, they learned powerful lessons about the related but distinct forms of academic and experiential learning and about the difficulties and importance of collaboration among diverse groups (Morgan and Streb, 2003).

While the partnership is dependent on a couple of very dedicated faculty members, a tireless visionary community activist, and a progressive elementary school administration, it is being strengthened by GMU students and youths in the community who have gained from the various activities and are now taking on new roles in community-building. They have participated in the successful Camp Alpha Adventure, a first collaboration between Glencarlyn Elementary School, Arlington County’s recreation department, and GMU to establish a summer program for children that was a hybrid of a summer school and a play camp; and the Arlington Mill Community Preschool, a collaboration between Arlington County’s recreation department and GMU to provide a high-quality preschool experience for children in the neighborhood. With student assistance, the community center now has a community arts program and gallery, organized around community issues, and offers cross-ethnic and cross-generational learning activities.

Learning communities provide both the learning structure and the communal base to take on large public concerns. A six- to nine-credit learning community provides enough time and depth for students to become immersed in details of complex issues. And when learning community participants are self-reflective about issues of roles and authority, the communal base becomes strong enough to explore more deeply diverse and divergent perspectives. With some continuity of faculty, staff, and community partners, a trust develops that encourages various co-curricular service activities and that allows a new semester to build upon the work of a previous semester.

Getting Started

Goals and objectives one wants to achieve by forming a partnership vary with local conditions and contexts. We offer these first steps as a means to help identify goals and actions. We present them *as examples* of the strategic approach to partnering for student learning.

Objective: To provide hands-on experience with an authentic problem facing your potential partner.

Action: Identify your own ability in commitment, logistics, and expertise to pursue a partnership.

Objective: To expose students to the complexity and social dimension of dealing with a given issue.

Action: Require an experiential learning-site-specific component within the learning community model that requires making connections with the appropriate community (Gelmon, et al., 1998; Maurasse, 2001).

Objective: To find the partner who might help accomplish goals cited above.

Action: Meet with potential partner to explore a reciprocal, synergistic relationship, look for examples of how students will be mentored and given feedback, consider the expertise and the will and commitment to deliver.

Objective: To elicit multi-stakeholder voices in developing a strategy for the partnership work, allowing all options to be considered.

Action: Come to meeting with suggestions for options and strategies, and not with a one way/your way approach. Leave plenty of room for the partner's voice as well as for shared decision-making.

Objective: To implement the mutually designed community partnership.

Action: Develop a mutually respected relationship and shared responsibility guideline document. Take advantage of the distinctive talents of all stakeholders (Sockett, 1998).

Objective: To assess the experience for student learning and achievement of goals.

Action: With your community partners, design and implement evaluation of goals as they relate to learning objectives. Give stakeholders the opportunity to evaluate success from their perspective (Holland, 2001; Maurasse, 2004).

Lessons Learned

Our collective experiences have led to a list of lessons learned when designing synergistic partnership activities and experiences to enhance student learning.

- *Plan in advance.* It takes time to identify community partners who have the capacity, inclination, skills, and desire to provide a rich learning environment for students. Partners who have authentic problems to solve and programs to institute are at a premium.
- *Provide an orientation and articulate expectations; invite students.* Community partners need to know the expectation of faculty and students. In return, faculty and students need to know and understand the expectation and mission of the partners. Consider a half-day orientation on campus for prospective new partnerships.

- *Put everything in writing that can be.* Often the ability to go back to the objectives and desired outcomes can clarify the responsibilities of each partner. Sometimes we stray from our goals. Having them in front of us helps bring things back.
- *Provide students a foundation in work ethics.* Each partnership site will have a unique culture and code of conduct as well as professional ethics that are essential to articulate to students and the faculty who work with them for re-enforcement.
- *Focus on the integration of knowledge.* Program partnerships cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, academic, and local knowledge. Experiential learning demonstrates in a holistic manner the integrative nature of knowledge and our understanding of human behavior and decision-making.
- *Communicate, communicate, communicate.* Reflection and communication are essential to gain a perspective for all the stakeholders.
- *Provide time for oral and/or written feedback with reflection.* Give students a voice in their experience. Make sure you provide an environment that allows freedom to express ideas, thoughts, concerns, and areas of confusion.
- *Require a standardized comprehensive assessment instrument.* Using a portfolio for student assessment, including evaluations by partners as well as students' evaluations of the partnership from their perspective, can provide an occasion for all to learn from the experience.
- *Provide all stakeholders with information on risk management.* Make sure students are covered by the university as well as the site (if possible) in case of a medical situation. Each site may be different so that a good record keeping system may be necessary, including risk management forms approved by the university and the partners in appropriate cases.
- *Develop a culminating event.* It is never a bad idea to celebrate a significant event, group learning, good work, successful collaboration, and new connections.

Faculty Development

If there is a single essential ingredient necessary for these partnerships to succeed, it is faculty participation. Success cannot be achieved unless we employ faculty members who understand that their role is different from one as expert in the traditional hierarchical, individualistic, and passive classroom. Faculty members have to have the will and expertise to be successful collaborators. In NCC and HU, these partnerships are fundamental to our concept of education in the future. One does not “connect the

classroom to the world” or engage in “inseparable elements” without a faculty development plan that is comprehensive and ongoing.

In opening up the decision-making process in the learning community, faculty members demonstrate a more democratic leadership. This is a fundamental example of modeling the process for students and an essential element for long-term sustainability. Faculty and staff participation in experiential-based learning communities must mirror and model what we expect of our students. Discovery and understanding are collaborative, inquiry-based, and continual. Learning communities become “communities of practice,” building upon the collective insight and skill of the group to create new knowledge (Wenger, 1999). One result is that faculty teaching and scholarship become more integrated as well as more public.

In genuinely collaborative approaches to problem solving, all participants bring their skills, perspectives, and resources to the table and participate in assessment and evaluation. This shift from the expert model in which someone who has the knowledge helps someone who doesn’t is difficult in an academic environment in which expertise is the coin of the realm. In the most inclusive partnerships described above, the corporate and community partners join with faculty members to design solutions to problems. This epistemological shift concerning who gets to ask the questions, decide on ways to answer them, and communicate the results alters fundamentally the role of authority. This is not to say that faculty members are any less expert in what they bring to the problems but that faculty members recognize that other kinds of expertise are necessary to answer the problems. Intensive experiential learning demands a broadening of what a discipline does and who participates in that disciplinary work.

In community-based research, the scholarship of engagement calls for a realignment of local and academic knowledge (Rice, 2003). Pure research that is objective, abstract, and analytical is most highly valued and has legitimacy because it can be peer reviewed by cosmopolitan colleagues, in national and international refereed journals, independent of place. Community-based research is of necessity local, rooted in a particular time and setting. The most knowledgeable peers might well be representatives of the local community, not tenured members of the academy. Community-based work calls for shared expertise and challenges established academic criteria. It also needs to be collaborative and requires that the learning be multidirectional, not university centered and campus bound. In order for a successful partnership to exist, the human element and social context must be respected and influence decision-making.

Conclusion

At a time when communities are challenged to improve their capabilities and colleges and universities are challenged to demonstrate their public accountability, community-based teaching and learning strengthens community capacity and expands higher education’s contributions to the community in ways consonant with academic values. In contrast to past community-based work, in which community members were simply

“human subjects” and passive recipients of information, these learning communities involve all the faculty members and all community members whose expertise and experience are necessary to do the work that meets pressing societal needs along with developing students as apprentices to both active citizens and academic scholarship.

New Century College (NCC) at George Mason University is a degree-granting academic unit in its eighth year of operation. Its mission is to offer degree programs that integrate interdisciplinary knowledge with workplace and lifelong learning skills. Students engage in active learning, conduct independent inquiry and research, and prepare to be active citizens in a multicultural world. The Integrative Studies BA and BS degree programs are composed of four elements: a first year of common interdisciplinary learning community courses and integrated learning; upper-level, inquiry-based learning communities; an interdisciplinary concentration or major; and a graduation portfolio based on nine liberal arts competencies (<http://www.ncc.gmu.edu>). Students in the Integrative Studies Program are also required to participate in 12 credits of experiential learning, which can be service-learning, co-ops, internships, or study abroad.

Two centers in the college support parts of our experiential learning program. While serving the whole university, they are administratively in New Century College because of the close connection between the goals and missions of the centers and the college. NCC provides the critical mass of students to make the centers viable, and the college faculty and center staff work closely to create a continual, extended learning community.

The Center for Service and Leadership promotes civic responsibility by combining academic study, leadership development, and direct community service. The center offers credit and non-credit leadership development and service-learning courses, workshops, seminars, and conferences; support for faculty integrating service-learning into their courses; and sponsorship of campus-wide service and leadership programs. The center’s web site address is: <http://www.gmu.edu/student/csl>.

The Center for Field Studies provides a broad range of field-based experiential learning opportunities within a strong, academic framework. The Bahamas Environmental Research Center (BERC) is part of the center, located in the settlement of Staniard Creek, Andros Island, The Bahamas. The center’s web site address: <http://www.ncc.gmu.edu/cfs/>.

Harrisburg University of Science and Technology grew from the planning of the 150-member Envision Capital Region task force, which met in 1997 to identify the strategies that would guide central Pennsylvania through the next 20 years. The group studied issues of government, private sector leadership,

education, quality of life, economic development, and infrastructure in its sessions. Their four benchmarks were regional cooperation, job creation, individual earnings, and education. Working in collaboration with the Harrisburg School District, the high school was conceived as an integral component of Harrisburg University.

The task force saw education as one of the keys to the 21st century economy. They emphasized the partnership between business and education and workforce-ready graduates.

Conceived in 2001 by a group of business leaders and Harrisburg Mayor Stephen Reed, Harrisburg University was designed to be an educational catalyst for this revolution. Operating initially as the Harrisburg Polytechnic Development Corp., its goal was to “pursue creation of a non-traditional public university in downtown Harrisburg that will fulfill a ‘niche mission’ of addressing region-specific needs not currently served by existing colleges and universities.”

Beginning with ninth grade students, our enterprise plays a central role in changing the climate, aspirations, and achievement level for the city’s youth through three unique and supportive learning structures. Our environment focuses on student achievement, hands-on experience, and active mentoring.

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