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# The Coalition of Projects Model

The Coalition of Projects Model describes a type of organizational and operational structure for campus-based community service programs. Generally, this organizational structure is characterized by an umbrella organization of several, semi-autonomous projects each with its own focus on a particular issue or community, and its own set of leaders and volunteers. Frequently, they also include a set of overall student leaders who provide a range of leadership and support functions to all the projects.

Interestingly, most of the strongest programs in the nation, in terms of quality and quantity of service, operate by the Coalition of Projects Model. This is not merely a coincidence but a direct result of certain advantages that come from this model. These structural advantages can be directly tied to the different characteristics within a Coalition of Projects Model.

Many programs fit the basic structure of the model, but not necessarily all the elements of the model in its ideal form.

## Characteristics of the ideal Coalition of Projects Model

1. Umbrella organization of multiple projects
2. Issue or neighborhood focused projects
3. Group coordination of volunteers
4. Cascading leadership structure
5. Coalition-wide support functions for the projects
6. Systematic training of project leaders
7. Systematic exchange of challenges and best practices among projects
8. Systematic quality improvement process ie community service funding board
9. New project incubator
10. Office space that's student-oriented, has a "hang out" quality

### 1. Umbrella organization of multiple projects

In order for a community service program to engage a significant portion of the student body, it cannot be just a single student organization but must be a system of several organizations. The overall program operates as an umbrella to combine resources, expertise, and effective systems.

The greatest number of volunteers or members that can be engaged by any single set of leaders is somewhere between 60-120. The only way to have a program engage several hundred students is for it to be comprised of several organizations each with its own set of leaders and volunteer base. Each project is a distinct student organization. Project leaders feel that the primary responsibility for the successful operation continuation of their project rests with them, not the leadership of the overall service program. They should develop leaders from among their volunteers and groom their successors by giving them key leadership opportunities and access to training.

### 2. Issue or specific community focused projects

Each project has a particular focus whether it's an issue (literacy, homelessness, tutoring, mentoring, arts, sports) or a specific community such as a neighborhood, population, or organizational affiliation (Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs) or both (The Immigrant Tutorial Project, Amigos del Barrio). This focus provides a number of advantages. Recruitment is more effective and clearer when the appeal to potential volunteers is made on the basis of issues and communities than on the general concept of service and volunteerism. Since people are more passionate about particular issues than service in general, project leaders themselves will be more committed to the projects. The focus also allows various elements like orientation, training, reflection, and evaluation to be customized around the issue or community.

### 3. Group coordination of volunteers

Volunteers are organized as groups or teams, rather than through individual placements. Not only is it more efficient for both the project leaders and the community partners, it offers a number of benefits. Most students enjoy the sense of community and support. It inevitably stimulates informal orientation and reflection particularly during the ride to and from the site. It also helps instill service as the norm or the "thing" to do. Lastly, it cultivates a degree of accountability to the group which leads to greater consistency and reliability among the volunteers.

#### **4. Cascading leadership structure**

In order to maximize organizational continuity and consistency, it's important to have successive sets of student leaders who spend 3 or 4 (maybe even more) years with the program. A cascading leadership structure provides different and increasingly more challenging and rewarding leadership roles each year. Students should be able to see a mini career path for themselves within the program. They could start out as a volunteer, become an assistant project leader, project leader, and then serve in some support and leadership role for the overall coalition. If they don't see these opportunities available within the service program, they may look for it in another activity. The developmental path is also what makes it possible for students to gain the skills and experience to run very large, complex, and successful service programs.

#### **5. Coalition-wide support functions for the projects**

There is a cadre of coalition-wide student leaders who lead and support the project leaders in areas such as recruitment, funding, training, etc. Project leaders have a clear understanding of how the coalition-wide leaders can assist them. The coalition-wide leaders are approachable, knowledgeable, and experienced. Ideally most of them have former project coordinating experience.

#### **6. Systematic training of project leaders**

Project leaders participate in a comprehensive training program that covers all the different areas of project management: recruitment, retention, recognition, funding, program development, orientation & training, community relations and needs assessment, reflection, evaluation, and so on. This training program could even be offered as an academic course.

#### **7. Systematic exchange of challenges and best practices among projects**

There are regular opportunities and processes for projects to share successful practices and challenges with each other. It's a great way for projects to improve all areas of their project, particularly the quality of service. Each project taking different approaches continuously uncovers innovative and effective practices. These are documented and shared.

#### **8. Systematic quality improvement process**

The program should have some systemic process for qualitative program development each year. For example, projects should be required to submit annual proposals and regular progress reports. An ideal system for this would be to institute a community service funding board external to the program. This allows the coalition staff to play the role of coaches and advocates rather than the final evaluator and allocator of resources.

#### **9. New project incubator**

The program should have a clear system for adding or developing new projects. Periodically, students with a new idea for starting a project will approach the coalition about joining. There should be a clear process including criteria and expectations. The coalition staff should be able to articulate the value of joining the coalition. Also, if there is an issue or community whose needs are not being addressed, the program ought to be able to initiate a new project and help launch it successfully.

#### **10. Student office space for the community service program.**

The community service program's office should be comfortable and welcoming enough to serve as the main "hang out" for the coalition staff and project leaders. It should look and feel like student space that's busy around the clock. It should provide a sense of community and a home base on campus. Students feel drawn to come back to the office between classes and activities. The extra bonding and informational conversations that result will help to strengthen communications and support among the student leaders.

Each project should have its own identifiable space in the office, ideally including a phone and a desk. At a minimum, it should have a secure place to keep files and supplies. Without this, a project's files end up residing in the dorm room or apartment of the project coordinator for that year. Complete transition and transfer of files year to year becomes jeopardized.

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