Alternatives ...

Universities as Consultants, Students as Staff

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Since we're talking about external resources, one of the best resources out there is the local college or university. Most offer local residents access to facilities such as libraries (which can include free internet access), and this is quite useful for locating planning reference materials or examples from other communities. Universities may provide local organizations with meeting space if you need it. But the best part about universities is that they have so many other resources they can make available to you, if you know where to look and who to ask.

If you have time, it's probably a good idea to use some of that time to learn about the kinds of programs and services available at nearby colleges and universities *before* you need them, for two reasons:

- First, it can be just about impossible to figure out the organizational structure of a university, let alone who might be interested in or knowledgeable about your problem.

- Second, once you find the right place, you will have to find out what's possible, what it will cost, and when someone will be available to work with you.

Know the University

Universities are notorious for organizing themselves into small boxes that are really important to the people inside those boxes, but irrelevant to people outside the university. Locating someone to help may require that you know the first and last name of a faculty member or center director, plus the complete and official name of the academic department or the institute or the center. Department and center names will not necessarily include the term "planning." You can find yourself surfing around the university's website or scanning the phone directory for hours and hours without ever identifying someone to help you. Therefore, if you have any personal contacts, or know someone who knows someone, take advantage of them!

If you live far away from a university or don't have any personal contacts to use for references, listed below are a few places where communities often find help and advice:

Cooperative Extension Programs. Each state and U.S. territory has at least one land-grant university that receives government funding to support a Cooperative Extension Program [see the sidebar for a brief history of these institutions]. Cooperative Extension must use these funds for specific purposes, such as the county agricultural extension agents. In addition, Extension receives funding for services in several broad categories, but the university is allowed to tailor its offerings under each category so that it addresses the unique characteristics and needs of its service

Cooperative Extension Services

Named for Vermont Congressman Justin Morrill, "An Act Donating Public Lands to the Several States and Territories which may provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts" was signed into law by President Lincoln in 1862 (7 U.S.C. 301). Under the Morrill Act each state would receive 30,000 acres of land for each member of its Congressional delegation (at a minimum, for 2 senators and 1 representative, 90,000 acres). This federal *land grant* would then be available for use as a college campus, or could be sold, with the proceeds used to fund public colleges in agriculture, mechanic arts, and military tactics. The goal of the Morrill Act was to make advanced liberal and practical education accessible and affordable to everyone.

Because it was enacted during the Civil War the Morrill Act originally applied only to Union States; however, after the War the opportunity was extended to the former Confederate States, and later, to all newly created States.

A second Morrill Act became law in 1890 (U.S.C. 322). This law offered direct appropriations (not land) to any state that could show that race and color were not admissions criteria. Southern States chose to establish "separate but equal" colleges, known as "1890 Institutions."

Approximately 70 land grant institutions were funded as a result of the original Morrill Act; these include Iowa State University, Cornell, and MIT. Today land grant colleges can be found in the 50 United States and the U.S. territories, and including 29 Native American land grant institutions.

The educational mission of the land grant colleges was expanded under the Hatch Act of 1887 (24 Stat. 440). This Act funded Agricultural Experiment Stations at each land grant institution. The Experiment Stations were charged with the conduct of original research in areas such as the diseases of plants and animals, soil and water analysis, crop rotation and adaptation, butter and cheese production, etc.

Cooperative Extension was established under the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 (7 U.S.C. 341). This Act called for programs that would disseminate the results of research to farmers and homemakers through training and instruction, demonstration programs, or publications -- all coordinated through the "agents" of the land grant colleges.

Since 1914, the role of the experiment stations and cooperative extension has evolved to include an array of related issues, including environmental conservation, family education, or economic development.

The types of services provided are left to the discretion of each institution, so that some states may include planning technical assistance as part of cooperative extension, while other land grant institutions may only provide publications on planning, or may limit their services to issues that are tangential to rural land use planning, such as agricultural conservation or watershed protection.

Resources:

Cooperative Extension Services, State-by-State

population. Technical assistance related to land use planning might be incorporated under the category "Community and Economic Development" at one institution, or it could be part of "Environment and Natural Resources" at another university. Land use planning services may not be offered under any category.

If you are trying to find assistance through Cooperative Extension, the county extension office is a good starting point because the staff there will have contacts throughout the extension system, as well as contacts elsewhere at the university.

Design Centers. Many universities with design programs (i.e., architecture, industrial design, landscape architecture, interior design or graphic design) also have a design center associated with them. These design centers offer services to the community -- usually at cost -- with the goal of providing a professional experience for students. Services can range from relatively small, short-term projects (e.g., logo design for a new organization), to larger and longer-term collaborations (e.g., park feasibility study to park master plan to detailed park design to park development cost estimates to project management during park construction).

The role and mission of each design center is different. Some centers are connected to a specific course or academic curriculum. Some centers are associated with a particular jurisdiction or geographic area. Some centers have a specific design focus and limit the types of work they do. Others have a broad mission and will work with all kinds of communities on many different sorts of projects. Not all design centers are tied to a university. To locate a design center near you, and to learn more about its mission and services, visit the website for the Association for Community Design.

Research Centers. Every university supports a wide array of research institutes and research centers. Research centers can have very narrowly-defined responsibilities that don't include community service, but some research centers have a broader mission that covers consulting, research, and even student internship programs. Most universities have a survey research center which has the capacity to organize and administer an entire community input process, from questionnaire development to mail out or phone calls to data analysis. These services are generally provided at cost.

Unfortunately, there is no easy way to identify the research center(s) you may need, aside from a keyword search on the web, or some good personal contacts. Make sure you are prepared to talk about costs, budgets and funding as well as your research needs before you contact any center staff. [See sidebar on next page.]

Planning Programs. There's an obvious connection between academic planning programs and community planners. In preparing student planners for professional careers, most academic programs include studios or applications courses where the students are confronted with "real" problems. How these courses are organized and taught depends on the faculty member, and possibly also on the mission and goals of the academic department. Understanding this is key to making a connection between your project at the community level and the planning curriculum. [This is discussed in greater detail in the next section, *Know What's Possible*.]

A list of accredited planning programs is available through the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. It is a good idea to learn as much as you can about the nearest planning program. Then contact the planning department and propose a collaboration. The department secretary should know enough about faculty and courses to connect you with the right person.

Student Internship Programs. Just about every academic department encourages or requires students to complete an internship. These can be paid or unpaid positions, with placements during an academic semester or over breaks. Some universities offer extended internship experiences that are full-time positions and last for an entire calendar year.

Generally, internships are offered for academic credit, though this is not always the case. Academic credit carries with it some minimum requirements regarding the number of hours of work, and the types of tasks or projects assigned to the student. There is an expectation that the sponsoring organization or agency will take responsibility for providing a quality experience, and this includes substantive

Resources

The Association for Community Design

Resources:

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning

There's No Such Thing as a Free Lunch: The Myth of Free University Services

For some reason people believe universities provide services for *free*. It's true that some community service is provided on a volunteer basis, but many university design centers, research centers, and academic departments will only offer services for a fee -- and this can actually be very expensive.

Your cost will be determined by a variety of factors that are often beyond the control of an individual faculty member, research center, or academic department, and may include: (a) contributions to university overhead (otherwise known as "indirect costs"); (b) stipends, tuition and fees for work by graduate students; (c) salaries and benefits for wage work by students; (d) a portion of faculty salaries for time contributed to the project; (e) travel expenses; (f) technology and computing services; and so forth.

Because every project and every university is different, it's difficult to know what you will be confronted with, but you need to be prepared for a tough but honest discussion about budgets and costs. Here are a few items to consider:

You may not need the university -- or a consultant -- to do everything for you. If you take some time to organize your project into phases or tasks, you may find that you need assistance with only a few tasks or maybe just one phase of the project. You'll cut costs by only paying for the tasks you need.

You may be able to negotiate around some of the costs (a through f, above) by agreeing to supervise a student intern, or by hiring a student yourself as an hourly wage employee (or asking the university to use hourly wage students), or by contracting with a student as a "consultant." These options save you, for example, by eliminating the cost of tuition and fees that can be associated with using a graduate research assistant.

You may be able to negotiate a more acceptable indirect cost rate. Indirect costs include human resource/personnel services, purchasing, libraries, contract management, utilities, and other expenses. Rather than calculate the exact amount attributable to each project, the university's auditors estimate a percentage for all similar projects on campus. Thus, indirect costs, or overhead rates, vary by type of project (i.e., research or outreach), and by the project location. Off-campus projects will have lower overhead than on-campus projects because presumably they don't use as many campus resources.

Some non-profit organizations simply refuse to pay for overhead or indirect costs, but the powers-that-be at the university may also refuse to sign an agreement for the project if you won't pay for overhead.

You may be able to reduce or eliminate travel costs by providing meals or lodging or other items yourselves. [I once worked with a community where a town council member ran a B&B, and she provided rooms and breakfast to the students free of charge. On another project, the mayor negotiated special rates with one of the local motels and charged the rooms directly to the locality.]

You may not have to contribute to faculty salaries if your project is part of a class curriculum rather than a research or outreach project.

 responsibility for providing a quality experience, and this includes substantive assignments, integrating the student into the day-to-day operations of a department, and ongoing supervision of the student's work and performance. Housing may be required as well, especially if the internship placement is for an extended period and/or located at a significant distance from the university (or the student's home town).

For internships, it is the community's responsibility to give notice that an intern is needed or that an internship placement is available. A good starting point for disseminating this information is the university's career services office. Other options are academic departments, service-learning centers and, outside the academic world, professional associations, such as the state chapter of the American Planning Association.

Service-Learning Centers (or Outreach Centers or Volunteer Centers). Service-learning has become an important component of higher education. The goal of service-learning is to integrate public service into the curriculum. The link between a planning-related major and community service is relatively straightforward because most planning students will be moving into careers where community involvement is a key component of their professional responsibilities. But service-learning can be offered in academic disciplines that don't immediately suggest engagement with the community or a link to planning. A few examples may be helpful:

1. English or Communications -- technical writing, compiling reports, preparing grant applications
2. Geography -- mapping and geographic information systems
3. Math and Statistics -- surveys and data analysis
4. History -- historic preservation, oral histories
5. Economics or Business -- public finance, budgeting, economic development.

Service-learning thus gives you options if you are near a small college or a university without a planning program. Many colleges and universities have a service-learning center (or outreach center or volunteer center) with staff who can help you to frame your problem statement or project scope, and then link you with the most appropriate faculty member(s) and course(s).

Student Organizations. Every university has a variety of student organizations that are interested in participating in community service. This includes fraternities and sororities, student chapters of larger nonprofit organizations (e.g., Habitat for Humanity) or professional associations (e.g., student chapter of the American Planning Association), and other student organizations with related interests. If the university has a large contingent of student organizations and associations, it probably also has an administrative office that oversees these activities. Look for references to the dean of students, or student unions, student activities, or student associations, and contact the administrative office for advice on the most appropriate student organization contacts.

Individual Faculty. Every faculty member has an area of expertise that can be "mined" for information, advice and assistance. Most of the time the expertise is easily discovered, but some faculty have past experiences unrelated to their current work, which is more difficult to uncover. Community projects must fit within the responsibilities of a faculty position, which means the faculty member will be looking for funding, opportunities to publish, or a link to teaching. Searches of faculty publications may help you locate an appropriate contact. Also, academic departments

often note teaching and research interests of faculty, or include curriculum vitae for each faculty on their websites. (A curriculum vita is a faculty resume.)

#2: Understand What's Possible

Universities are great places with great resources, but they can not and should not -- and don't want to -- compete with or take opportunities from private consultants.

How do you decide between a consultant and a student intern or a studio class? In general, private consultants are always necessary under at least two conditions: when the project requires special expertise or professional licensing, and when a project is complex and doesn't fit into the academic calendar (See the side note on the next page).

Project Timing. Project timing can be a deal breaker. Students and faculty organize their work around the academic calendar, and that calendar doesn't always coincide with your schedule. You may have work to do during the summer when students are away from campus, or a project for the spring when the appropriate course is only offered in the fall. You may need something immediately and there's an interested student, but that student won't begin working on a thesis for at least a year.

Your faculty contact may have class projects lined up a year or more in advance, so even if someone is interested, and even if it's January and the course is offered in the spring semester, your project can't be scheduled until next spring, or maybe even the spring after next. (Even so, a really interesting project with a well-organized community has the potential to displace something already in the queue.)

There's only one way to handle this problem: meet with your contact, talk about the project and see where things go. Start the conversation as soon as you have an inkling you may need help, and then work with your contact to develop the scope, set up a schedule, and maybe even look for outside funding sources. If you can't reconcile schedules and work programs, then you need to hire a private consultant.

Internships & Employing Individual Students If student resources are an option, then you have to ask, *how many students do you need, and who is the most appropriate person to supervise those students?* Small, narrowly-defined, task-oriented problems are better suited to individual students. When those tasks are part of your day-to-day activities (e.g., assistance with intake for site plan, subdivision, and rezoning applications) you probably need to supervise an hourly wage student intern in the government offices. If you have a stand-alone project (e.g., data entry for a survey), you may prefer to sign a fixed price contract with a student for those services. Interns become your responsibility; contract students can be supervised by the community or by a faculty member.

Projects that rely on students have their own unique challenges. You will find yourself working with students of all types: different educational backgrounds, different races/ethnicities/cultures, different personalities. You'll discover that some students are easily distracted by their personal lives (and some, unfortunately, by partying), by their other courses, by work schedules, by illness, etc., while others are always on task, on time, and completely dedicated to their work for you.

Students are part of a world where interim deadlines are easily missed or rescheduled, where the end of the semester grade is all that counts, where a poor quality product this time is acceptable because a bad grade can be overcome by a better grade on the next assignment. Students never really experience the same sense of urgency you get when you think about your problem or project. They don't understand your community and they don't feel the way you feel about it.

As the client -- and especially as an intern supervisor -- you have a very important role to play. You are part of the process of turning students into professionals, which
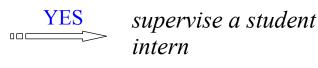
A Guide to Choosing a Student/Class Approach or a Professional Consultant

Does the task require professional experience, special expertise, licensing/certification?

YES → *hire a consultant*

NO ↓

Is the task closely integrated into or associated with the day-to-day operations and duties of the department? (Or does it require close internal monitoring?)
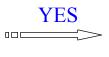
YES → *supervise a student intern*

NO ↓

YES

Does the task involve a narrowly defined question that must be answered within a short time frame?

→ *contract with a student for the project*

NO ↓

Is the task exploratory in nature, one that would benefit from multiple perspectives on the problem, creativity in problem solving, or an examination of best practices (and without significant engagement with the public)?

YES → *collaborate on a "life-like" individual or studio project*

NO ↓

Can the work program/scope (including any public participation) be scheduled to coincide with the academic calendar, and can it be completed over the course of a semester?

YES → *collaborate on a "real life" individual or studio project*

NO ↓

hire a consultant

requires setting high standards and establishing professional level expectations. With the exception of a few mid-career students, most students are still learning and have little or no planning experience. They are working on your project to gain that experience. You have to keep the project on track and provide honest feedback about progress and overall direction. You don't need to lower your expectations because these are students. If work does not meet your needs or your standards, *demand a better product*! Don't just take what you get. If you do, you are doing a disservice to yourself and to the students.

Studio Projects. The same is true if you are collaborating with a faculty member on a studio course; however, the learning objectives for the course and the educational goals for the curriculum take priority. Your work plan or scope isn't as important but it's still achievable. You need to meet with the faculty member and figure out what's possible *before* you get started because if you can't agree on your objectives -- or accomplish seemingly incompatible objectives -- then you can't work together on this project at this time. And that's OK. (This may be another instance where you need to work with a private consultant.)

Studio projects that are heavily constrained by the learning objectives for the course are "life-like" projects. Life-like projects are appropriate when you are interested in exploring multiple issues, gaining multiple perspectives on a single issue, or looking at an old problem in new ways. Life-like projects engage students with a real problem in a real place, but because curriculum objectives are so important, students may never meet with local residents or, if they do, the students may not be expected to consider public needs and goals. Two examples may be helpful:

- Students in an architecture studio are helping you with a project related to historic preservation design guidelines and infill development. Because of where they are in their education as architecture students, in this particular design studio they need to design buildings that demonstrate their ability to incorporate various systems (such as HVAC) and to use different types of materials or construction methods. The students begin the semester by documenting the existing character of your community and providing you with measured drawings, scale models and beautiful sketches of what's already in place. Then they choose vacant lots and design infill structures. Their designs don't reference the historic character you are so worried about, but that's because "character" is not the goal of the course.

- You need a revitalization plan for an area of your community that is in decline and decide to collaborate with a landscape architecture studio class. The university's landscape architecture curriculum organizes its studios around problems at a particular scale (i.e., site scale, neighborhood scale, regional scale, etc.). Each student in this studio is asked to approach the issue of neighborhood revitalization in a way that is of particular interest to him or her. This results in projects and reports on interconnecting green/open spaces, organizing and reweaving neighborhood character through infill development, creating a hierarchy of streets through redesign, and several other topics. You end up with a lot of good ideas about a lot of different things, but you don't get an overall plan for the future of the neighborhood.

Unfortunately for you, in the end you may feel as though the collaboration has been a waste of time and energy (and possibly resources). One thing you should keep in mind: students can come up with ideas that seem completely crazy to you at the

time, but later evolve into interesting and workable concepts. A good example is the Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga, which was originally suggested by a group of architecture students from the University of Tennessee (and not necessarily well received by the public and local officials). So a semester spent with students who are free to think outside the box may not meet your immediate needs, but might start some interesting conversations over the long term.

"Real Life" Projects. If your needs are more focused then you really want to work with a faculty member to develop a "real-life" project. Real-life projects make community needs and goals the first priority. You can expect the students to address a well-defined scope of work, with specific tasks (e.g., door-to-door surveys, community meetings, environmental analysis and mapping, etc.), leading to a specific set of deliverables, such as a comprehensive plan update.

Real-life projects are difficult for students because they are not necessarily prepared for the chaos and messiness of real life. They haven't been trained to mediate controversies, and they aren't prepared to shift in new directions based on community input. These types of projects require a lot of faculty supervision, and a lot of oversight and input from the community client. It's really important to create a work program that is within the capabilities of everyone involved. If the project gets too complex, it may need to be divided into phases and completed across several semesters -- or, again, it's possible you really need a private consultant. Sometimes you can divide the work between students and a consultant, and this may be the most efficient approach of all.

There are some things you just can't expect students and faculty to do. Two immediately come to mind. They will not be able to travel great distances more than once or twice in a semester. And they will not be able to do a significant amount of community organizing in a place they don't know well -- especially if this place is quite far from the university. A weekend spent on door-to-door surveys may be possible; a series of meetings with different community groups, membership organizations, homeowners associations, and community nonprofits is probably out of the question, unless these folks are next door or just down the street.

To summarize, a well-planned and well-executed community/university collaboration can be invaluable to all of the partners involved. The following items are key to success:

- If you are interested in working with a university, you must be able to clearly state your goals. This means you communicate what you need to accomplish and what else would be nice to have, if you could get it done.

- You have to be prepared to negotiate everything from the scope of work to the schedule to the budget.

- You need to get involved with the students, stay involved with the students and provide meaningful feedback throughout the project. You can -- and should -- establish high standards and you can -- and should -- expect students and faculty to meet those standards.

Attention to these items will help you to use the university as a consultant and students as staff.