*Excerpt from *Service-Learning in Technical and Professional Communication*, Melody Bowdon and Blake Scott

Identifying Your Civic Interests and Concerns

Most people have significant beliefs, concerns, and contacts that can lead them to a good service-learning project. You can use the heuristics below to help identify some of yours in a kind of self-profile. First, write down any community-related problems you see or encounter in your daily life—whether at work, home, or out with your friends—but haven't had a chance to do anything about. Maybe you are concerned about the homeless people you see walking around the outskirts of campus, or maybe you are worried about the quality of your city's drinking water.

To further generate possibilities, complete the following survey. For each of the community concerns below, rate your level of interest from one (low) to five (high). Keep in mind that you may need to consider several areas of interest before identifying a well-suited agency. The following list is not all-inclusive but will offer you a starting point.

1) Children
   a) Early childhood education
   b) Foster care/adoption services
   c) Mentoring programs
   d) Parent education
   e) Drug and alcohol education
2) Civic/Community Concerns
   a) Art and music festivals
   b) Immigrant education programs
   c) Preservation of historical sites
   d) Sports and recreation
   e) Transportation
   f) Volunteer centers or community foundations
   g) Voter education
3) Civil Rights
   a) Capital punishment
   b) Disability concerns
   c) Race relations
   d) Legal assistance
   e) Discrimination
   f) Reproductive rights
4) Education
   a) Adult vocational education
   b) Art and music education
   c) Charter schools
   d) Literacy
   e) School funding
   f) Special education
5) Environment
   a) Domestic animal welfare
   b) Hazardous waste concerns

   c) Land preservation
   d) Recycling
   e) Solid waste disposal
   f) Wild animal conservation
   g) Water safety
6) Medical Issues
   a) AIDS
   b) Cancer
   c) Health education
   d) Immunization drives
   e) Medical research
   f) Mental health
   g) Reproductive health
7) Social and Family Services
   a) Housing/homelessness
   b) Hunger
   c) Services for elderly
   d) Domestic violence
   e) Child abuse
8) Your College Campus
   a) Beautification
   b) Career and placement issues
   c) Community outreach programs
   d) Crime victim services
   e) Health services
   f) Parking availability and transportation
   g) Recycling
   h) Safety/security
9) Your Workplace
   a) Community support programs
   b) Customer education
   c) Drug-testing policies
   d) Employee crisis assistance
   e) Fairness in hiring and promotion policies
   f) Safety concerns
   g) Smoking policies

After completing the survey and adding the highest-ranking areas to your growing list of concerns, take an extended break. Then come back, and this time reverse directions and begin narrowing. Mark out ideas that seem relatively less interesting; highlight those for which you know you can find a collaborating agency. As you select four or five issues on which to focus your ensuing search, keep in mind the following:

- You may have considered earning potential when you chose your field of study. As you think about your service-learning project, imagine the kind of job you'd love to do if money and job security were not a concern. Maybe you've always wanted to work with children or be an artist. Maybe you'd like to spend all of your time exercising or reading books or fishing. As you identify the activities

that give you the most satisfaction, imagine how they might connect to community efforts.

- If you choose to pursue a project that connects with a deep conviction or interest you have, be sure that you're not selecting something that will be too emotionally painful for you or difficult to work on with others. To illustrate, one student initially thought she'd work with her local organ donor liaison office; she had this interest because her own brother died while waiting for an organ transplant. Despite this deep connection, however, she ultimately decided that she wasn't emotionally ready to spend an extended period of time confronting and addressing the issue with others.

- As you think about your values and beliefs, keep in mind that some organizations might participate in activities or promote values that are in conflict with your university's policies. For instance, don't choose a project that promotes hatred for a particular type of people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. It's also generally best not to work for a particular political candidate's campaign.

- Most of you will be working on your projects in collaborative groups, so you'll want to choose something that others in your class will also find interesting. This doesn't mean that you can't bring in creative and unusual ideas—in our experience, fresh and unexpected kinds of projects are among the most popular and successful. Just don't choose something that would require all members and/or peer reviewers to have extensive expert knowledge in a field or to have certain strong religious or political viewpoints.

Identifying Possible Sponsors

After you've narrowed the field to several community concerns, it's time to start looking for agencies that address them. Use some or all of the heuristics below to find organizations whose interests intersect with yours. You can apply these lists to several interest areas.

First, Inventory Your Existing Contacts

- Organizations you're familiar with that deal directly with your top interests from the survey above
- Organizations you worked with (even indirectly) through high school projects
- Organizations your parents, siblings, spouse, or other family members have worked with
- Organizations you've received assistance from
- Campus organizations you or someone you know is a member of
- Community organizations your church or other place of worship is affiliated with
- Community organizations affiliated with your employer
- Organizations supported by businesses you might like to work for someday
- Organizations led by community members whom you respect

Next, Do Some Research to Expand Your List

When comparing your list of interests with the organizations that you have identified so far, you will probably find interests for which you still don't have matches. Even if you have found some promising matches, you may not be aware of other suitable

organizations on your campus or in the surrounding community. We often have our students do some field and web research to expand the list of sponsors they might target. Here are some types of resources to utilize:

- Talk with your *professors and classmates*. If you're looking for a project that relates directly to your field of study, ask your teachers, mentors, and peers in that field for suggestions of an organization that has a good reputation and that might be doing the kind of work you're looking for. It isn't necessary to reinvent the wheel in order to find a good project. Take advantage of the local knowledge base.

- Go to your *city phone book*. If you are interested in a particular social problem, chances are there will be a list of local resources that address it in the directory. Look at community resource sections, government pages, and the yellow pages to find leads.

- Search your *local newspaper's website*. Most major newspapers have websites. Using a variety of keywords, search the site to find stories related to your area of concern.

- Check out your *newspaper's local or community section* for human-interest stories featuring projects by local agencies. Most newspapers contain such a section on at least a weekly basis. This might include profiles of individuals or groups working to address local problems.

- Contact your *area's volunteer center*. This might also be called a community alliance or community foundation. Most areas have such an agency, which provides information about local agencies and offers services that coordinate potential volunteers and organizations with needs. Community foundations also help to manage and distribute money for service agencies. If your area doesn't have one, ask a librarian to direct you to a database of regional, state, and national volunteer centers. Consider contacting the closest agency in your general area that addresses your area of concern and asking them where they would refer clients with such needs in your town.

- Check out your *county's United Way website or publications*. This nationwide agency serves as a clearinghouse for a large number of community service agencies, distributing funds to them and aiding them with projects. Most United Way websites have links to or at least information about local affiliated agencies, from well-known organizations such as Big Brother/Big Sisters and Planned Parenthood to small, lesser-known organizations such as a local consumer credit counseling service or community food bank. If you visit the local United Way office, you can collect not only its print publications describing affiliated agencies but also brochures produced by the affiliated agencies themselves.

- Contact your area *Chamber of Commerce*. Most local chambers have websites with the contact information of and even links to member businesses and other organizations in the area. Most chambers also publish directories with information about their members; you can usually purchase such a book for a few dollars. Finally, your Chamber of Commerce may provide other publications such as a newsletter or brochures that tell about community services provided by local companies.

- Contact a *volunteer center on your campus*. More and more colleges and

universities are integrating service into their general missions and curricula. Your campus might have a volunteer or service office connected with the office of student services or affairs. At the University of Florida, an organization called TreeHouse links students to local agencies looking for volunteers and helps instructors develop service-learning projects.

- Search for *campus organizations from the website of the office of student services, the student activities center, or the student union*. At the University of Florida, for example, all three have websites with information about or links to the web pages of numerous student organizations. If student organizations have offices in the student union or another place on campus, you might visit them to collect brochures and other print publications.

- Do *other online research* using a good search engine like Google. Enter keywords related to your issue and your geographic area. Explore the results—even those that don't point you to an organization might give you some hints about where to look or what kinds of projects you might pursue once you do find the right site.

- Though Internet research is important, don't forget to *look beyond the Web*. Many nonprofit agencies don't have websites or haven't registered their sites with search engines. Don't restrict your research to these sources.