



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres
Community Development Renewal Initiative

Transferable Strategies & Case Studies
December 2008

Mobilizing Student Placements for CD

Issue:

What are ways community agencies can use student placements to connect with their local community around systemic issues?

Background:

The Riverdale Community Development Institute (RCDI) is a program of the Ralph Thornton Centre focused on community development and learning. RCDI's mission is to improve the quality of life for people in South Riverdale. It pursues this mission by undertaking actions and projects that enhance the capacity of local residents' groups and organizations for social and economic development.

RCDI is a model for supporting local resident's groups and organizations with their own community development agendas by providing these groups with supervised and well-supported university student placements.

Solution:

The RCDI is a student placement model which provides community development support for the initiatives of local groups by matching them with students from a variety of disciplines.

To select community groups an advertisement is placed in the Ralph Thornton Community Centre newsletter. Contacts are also made with groups that have been involved in the placement program or that RTC has work with previously. These groups are then screened for initial consideration using the *host project criteria*, and *host questionnaires* that groups use to outline their project and the role they expect students to play. About 5-7 successful projects are selected each year to participate in the student placement program. Past host projects have focused on issues relating to land use, health, housing, youth, and environment.

Students are recruited via college or university programs that require students to complete internship or independent study in a community setting to graduate. Students come from undergraduate and graduate levels, and from diverse areas of study including social work, urban planning and nursing. RCDI staff reviews student resumes, giving special attention to students that have experience in activism and community development. The *student questionnaire* is used interview students. Students are awarded placements based on how their

experience and interests match with host projects' goals and needs. Approximately 8-10 students are placed in projects each year. In addition to their individual placement, all the students are convened each week for learning seminars and reflecting together on their placement experiences.

Results:

- Community groups benefit from free support which enables them to work towards their community development goals.
- Students gain valuable field experience with real community issues and have the opportunity to work and learn in an interdisciplinary team.
- The local community may experience some benefit or improvement as a result of the community development initiatives undertaken.

Analysis:

Student placements are a great way for community agencies to collaborate with community groups to address community challenges and better understand key actors involved in local issues. Community groups can reflect on the theoretical dimensions of their work and gain fresh perspectives on their activities. Students have the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in community development and bring energy to the process.

Reflections/Conclusions:

For the model to effectively achieve its goals, the following are some key things for agencies to keep in mind:

- Maintain close contact with community groups and agencies in order to know their activities and to keep abreast of emerging trends and needs.
- Be aware of the student placement schedules for different schools in order to be prepared to make timely contact with them for students.
- Prepare standard host and student questionnaires and evaluations ahead of time.
- Provide students opportunities to evaluate their placement experience.
- Give special attention to students with experience in activism and community development to ensure appropriate project support.
- Match students with host projects depending on their experience and interests.
- Designate staff to act in a support, supervisory or advisory role at the onset and during placements, in areas that relate to their work.

Ralph Thornton Community Centre has found it useful to designate one key staff person to liaise with students and community groups and to manage administrative responsibilities related to placement requirements of academic institutions.

Contact:

Joanne Fisher, Coordinator, RCDI, Ralph Thornton Centre