

Australian Catholic University and Parramatta Mission Partnering to Provide Meaningful Engagement for both Students and Community

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Introduction

This case study examines the Australian Catholic University's (ACU) program of community-engaged learning across various undergraduate disciplines, with a particular focus on the partnership with Parramatta Mission. At ACU, community engagement is regarded as

"building capacity and affirming human dignity through sustainable and reciprocal collaborations with communities, particularly those experiencing disadvantage or marginalisation". (ACU Engagement, n.d)

This approach is integral to advancing the University's mission to serve the common good and enhance the dignity and well-being of people and communities. ACU is committed to ensuring that all students and staff have opportunities to contribute to their community in ways that are feasible, meaningful, and respectful.

Principles of community engagement

Community engagement at ACU is underpinned by five principles which were co-developed by the centralised community engagement office, ACU Engagement and the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy. These

principles, derived from Catholic Social Thought, encompass five aspects of community engagement:

1. **Building connections;**
2. **Developing understanding;**
3. **Affirming dignity;**
4. **Pursuing justice; and**
5. **Acting with humility (Pink et al., 2021).**

These principles guide the ACU Engagement staff in seeking new partnerships that align with the university's mission and values and underpin preparation of students for their community placements.

Overview of community-engaged learning at ACU

Community engagement at ACU signifies a two-way, mutually beneficial relationship of collaboration with diverse external communities, who bring their own knowledge assets and experiences to their interactions with the university. For students, this primarily occurs through discipline-

To support community-engaged learning experiences, a community engagement team on each of ACU's campuses in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Canberra, is tasked with establishing and nurturing partnerships with organisations that serve communities experiencing disadvantage or marginalisation. Each semester, approximately 1,000 students are connected to over seventy-five community partners. Through

transformative for both their learning and personal growth.

The Carnegie Elective Community Engagement Classification

In 2023, ACU became one of two Australian universities to receive the Carnegie Elective Community Engagement Classification (The National Tribune, 2023). The Carnegie Classification allows universities to demonstrate their commitment to the communities they serve and share best practices within the sector. The Classification represents the best practices in the field and encourages continuous improvement through periodic reclassification. ACU is actively using the Carnegie Classification to engage more deeply with local communities to ensure that these relationships are grounded in reciprocity, mutual benefit, and respect. Receiving the Classification provides a framework to critically reflect on existing partnerships and identify opportunities to deepen those partnerships.



based community engagement units of study, embedded in nearly every undergraduate degree. Students spend between 20-100 hours in the community over a semester undertaking some form of direct service.

community-engaged learning, students develop a deeper understanding of the world they live in, build empathy, and compassion, and enhance their interpersonal and professional skills. These experiences often prove

Partnership with Parramatta Mission

In 2020, ACU opened a new campus in Blacktown - its third in Sydney. A key aim of the campus was to be embedded in the community and

responsive to local needs. The creation of strong community-based partnerships in Western Sydney has been critical in achieving this aim. One such partnership is with Parramatta Mission.

Parramatta Mission is part of the Uniting Church of Australia. Their Meals Plus Programs serves over 46,000 meals each year to the local community. The organisation provides many essential services to the

increasing number of people in the community who are doing it tough. Over the last few years, the cost of living has increased and a lack of affordable accommodation in the Parramatta area has meant an increase in the number of people accessing their services.

In 2022, ACU reached out to Parramatta Mission to assess interest in building a partnership to enable our students to assist with their service. Initial conversations revealed an alignment in mission and values between our two



organisations. Parramatta Mission had a high need for volunteers with meals being served Monday to Friday. This provided the flexibility required to accommodate students and a year-round supply of much-needed volunteers for Parramatta Mission.

Since establishing the partnership, 20-30 students per semester have undertaken their community engagement placement with Parramatta Mission. Students take part in the Meals Plus program, helping with food preparation and serving, as well as

providing conversation with people experiencing homelessness. They also support the many events that are held during the year. Other students participate in the CALD community playgroups where students can participate and develop activities for the playgroup as well as an English conversation class.

In 2024, Parramatta Mission worked with ACU Engagement to develop opportunities for law students, who complete an 80-hour pro bono placement as part of their law degree.

Students have been involved in drafting documents, policy reform research and review and research into issues including temporary migrants and homelessness.

In 2023, ACU students accounted for over a quarter of their total volunteer hours. The partnership has been strengthened through nominations for awards, through inviting Parramatta Mission on to campus to engage in networking and professional development workshops and co-presenting at the Engagement Australia Conference. The Carnegie Framework provides suggestions for deepening the partnership and some of the ideas under consideration are ways to include more community voice, connection to other areas of ACU and opportunities for staff to be involved to volunteer alongside students as part of ACU's 'community-engaged time release' program, which allows staff up to 35 hours a year to volunteer in the community

Student engagement and feedback

Student feedback is crucial in evaluating the success of ACU's partnerships. Students placed with Parramatta Mission appreciate the organisation's shared values, noting their direct work in assisting marginalised communities and fostering participation. Students appreciate the support they receive



from the staff, community, and fellow volunteers.

In ACU's annual student community engagement survey, students who spent time at Parramatta Mission have described their experience as 'eye-opening,' 'fulfilling,' 'challenging,' 'interesting,' 'positive', and "emotional". When asked about the impact on them professionally or personally, one student commented that the experience taught them the importance of

"Remaining non-judgemental of people who access the service as you never know what someone is going through".

Another student remarked,

"It opened my eyes to how many

people are experiencing poverty and homelessness. Personally, it has made me a stronger and more empathetic person. Professionally, it has improved my communication skills".

Students often report that whilst the experience is 'intense', learning to work alongside people with mental and physical health challenges, and those experiencing homelessness, they also report significant benefits from their placements, including increased empathy, compassion, interpersonal, and professional skills. Many students continue to volunteer with Parramatta Mission even after their placements have concluded.

References

Pink, M., Rosing, H., & Jones, S. (2021). The Australian Catholic University and DePaul University (Chicago) service-learning partnership. *RIDAS. Revista Iberoamericana de Aprendizaje-Servicio*(12), 136-148.

The National Tribune. (2023). Australian Catholic University earns historic Carnegie classification. Retrieved 2024 from <https://www.nationaltribune.com.au/australian-catholic-university-earns-historic-carnegie-classification/>

<https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/community-engagement/what-is-community-engagement>

Feedback from Parramatta Mission

Parramatta Mission has highlighted several benefits of the partnership with ACU:

"The continuous flow of students throughout the year has been essential in maintaining service operations, particularly during times when other community organisations were forced to shut down or reduce operations. Students bring unique skill sets and youthful energy, which are invaluable to the community. In 2023, ACU students contributed nearly a quarter of the total annual volunteer hours at Parramatta Mission. Students from diverse backgrounds bring skills that enable capacity and service building. Recently, the partnership has expanded to include law students who complete an 80-hour pro bono placement. These students contribute to policy updates and ongoing policy campaigns in areas such as renter rights, energy, and support for temporary migrants."

The organisation has also highlighted the range of benefits to students:

"The partnership also offers substantial benefits to students, including hands-on, practical experience, ongoing training, and opportunities to develop professional skills and confidence. Students have opportunities to network with community

members and the business community through various events. One student has completed placement of 60 hours over 8 weeks, contributing through physical work and emotional support for clients in crisis. The student was able to observe how social workers and other volunteers handle volatile crisis situations, from which they could identify missing areas in their own skill set. The experience allows him to develop his own communication skills and to gain more confidence advancing his own field of study. The student also expressed interest in doing more volunteering work in the future. In a community meals kitchen serving around two hundred meals daily, students are able to practice a range of skills including hospitality, social support, as well as organising and professional skills."

Conclusion

Mutually beneficial community partnerships are crucial to the success of ACU's community-engaged student learning program. Through an alignment of missions and values, ACU and Parramatta Mission are working towards creating a reciprocal, impactful collaboration that benefits the community, students, and the University.