

SALSA-Southern Allegheny Learn and Serve Alliance



The Southern Alleghenies Learn and Serve Alliance (SALSA) is new in many ways. Our member institutions of higher learning are just beginning to embrace the practice of course-embedded service learning and assessment. Our community partnerships, while long-term in several instances, are new to an attempt to coordinate and to collaborate on a regional level with colleges and universities. The original organizers of SALSA are new to one another, although one or two specific persons have worked together on earlier projects or programs. This newness is both an asset and a liability.

A certain naiveté marked the enthusiasm with which three representatives from the member institutions of higher learning (Helen Marie Burns, RSM, Mount Aloysius College; Paula Craw, St. Francis University; and Shauna Morin, Juniata College) determined at the PA Campus Compact Conference in March 2007 to explore the possibility of greater collaboration and coordination of service learning

in their region and the possibility of a PA Campus Compact grant to assist in this effort. Paula Crow, Director of Service Learning at St. Francis University, facilitated further discussion by hosting an initial meeting in May 2007 with several community partners and representatives from our respective institutions. Thus, the birthing process for SALSA was underway.

Several meetings, e-mail correspondence, and telephone conversations later – May 23, 2007, to be exact—the collaborating group had a name, a mission statement, and a proposal to submit to PA/NY Campus Compact Consortium: Establishing and Expanding Regional Networks. **Learning #1:** The press of time was difficult, but the press also solidified a working coalition in which every member contributed a piece of the project, received graciously suggestions for revisions, and worked with administrative leaders to secure the necessary endorsements for the proposal and project.

The founding members of the Southern Alleghenies Learn and Serve Alliance are Juniata College, Mount Aloysius College, and St. Francis University, Communities in Schools of the Laurel Highlands, Goodwill Industries, and Pennsylvania Mountain Service Corps.

SALSA began immediately to build an infrastructure and organizational systems capable of sustaining this initiative beyond the grant period. The **selection of a name** was necessary in the completion of the grant proposal. **Lesson #2:** Members wanted to choose carefully so that the name would accurately describe the network while also providing a recognizable acronym.

Shauna Morin, Community Service/Service Learning Coordinator at Juniata College, suggested the Southern Alleghenies Learn and Serve Alliance (**SALSA**). All agreed that this name allowed for clear identification and, in its acronym, a sense of the dream of the Alliance to bring energy and variety, vitality and harmony to service learning activities in the southern Alleghenies region.

This dream moved a step closer to reality on August 28, 2007 when Pennsylvania Campus Compact notified the Alliance that they were **recipients of a \$48, 125 grant** from the Corporation for National and Community Service's Learn and Serve America – Higher Education program. These monies will be matched by member institutions and organizations. **Lesson #3:** The establishment of matching funds in higher education budgets is an art and a science. Members of the Alliance are still learning how to record and account for in-kind services: supplies, room rental, personnel time, donated expertise.

Members meet quarterly to build and sustain the network, jointly identify priority needs in the region, strengthen service-learning within member organizations, and develop public awareness of and participation in service learning experiences. Alliance members also hope to collaboratively develop an Alliance manual, including mission, goals, policies and member responsibilities. **Learning #3:** The establishment of concrete, measurable goals/objectives helps to focus energy and to sustain a sense of purpose. Accountability for each goal/objective must go hand in hand with an effective and accurate tracking system.

At meetings held between May 2007 and November 2007, SALSA created a mission statement:

To foster collaborative service-learning between k-12 students, community based partners and higher education institutions for the benefit of the Southern Alleghenies region.

The Alliance also developed goals/objectives for its first year of operation:

Goals/Objectives for November 2007 – November 2008

Goal #1 - Meet quarterly to build and sustain the SALSA network.

- Meet in November, January, March, and May
- Plan two to three network-wide activities prior to November 2008 (**Lesson #4** – difficult to meld several agendas)
- Add one or two new members prior to November 2008 (**Lesson #5** – organizations/higher education institutions seem eager to join)

Goal #2 - Identify and address top priority needs in the region.

- Develop a needs assessment tool to be used by community partners and service learning courses
- Analyze the data received as well as other regional data to determine a list of five top priority needs
- Encourage service learning faculty to address relevant top priority needs as part of their first year courses
- Encourage service learning faculty to focus their improvement efforts in the second year course on issues related to these five top priority needs
- Assess effectiveness of service learning courses in meeting community needs
- Assess effectiveness of service learning courses and service activities in providing opportunities for students to connect theory to practice

Goal #3 - Develop SALSA capability (i.e. personnel, skills, finances, etc) to effectively meet top priority community needs

- Begin to develop a database of resources available through SALSA (personnel, finances, etc.)

- Identify possible funding sources for a new salaried part-time SALSA coordinator position
 - Work toward identification of a part-time coordinator of SALSA activities
 - Develop organizational records (meeting minutes, letters, reports, etc.)
- Provide relevant development opportunities for all SALSA members on an on-going basis
- Organize relevant networking opportunities to facilitate communication between faculty and community partners

Goal #4 - Institutionalize service-learning with member organizations.

- Identify six to eight faculty and service learning courses at each higher education institution; twenty persons total across institutions
- Propose possible top-administrator activities to encourage upper-level continued support for service learning activities
- Create a system for awarding the appropriate number of stipends for development of service learning courses at each higher education institution
- Identify possible incentives to encourage faculty to offer service learning courses and to develop their skills beyond the grant funding period
- Identify contact person(s) and needs-based projects within each community partner organization using results of the SALSA needs assessment results

Goal #5 - Develop public awareness, understanding and participation of service-learning in the region.

- Continue to work with The Tribune Democrat to provide monthly content for their "Making Connections" feature
- Select a logo for SALSA
- Launch an interactive web page and plan for its continual maintenance

Current Alliance members rotate responsibilities for chairing and hosting meetings and are working toward expanding current membership. Eventually, the Alliance intends to hire a service learning regional leader to

assist in the ongoing discovery of new Alliance members and to facilitate communication among and between members. The “value added” aspect of the network lies in its coordination of activities and communication system for identification of needs/skills. Each of these will be enhanced by the hire of a service learning regional leader who can devote full attention to nurturing the Alliance.