Best Practices in Software Projects with Community Partners

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Successfully implementing service learning presents many challenges. This is particularly true when working with community partners which are frequently small, understaffed non-profits, lacking in technical expertise. Participating faculty not only manage the student end of the partnership, but often need to manage/educate the community partner as well.

Despite its challenges, community-based service learning is worthwhile for the profound impact it has for students. Many computing graduates only see the utilitarian aspect of computing as a tool to solve technical problems. By presenting and teaching CS as a discipline possessing key insights towards making headway on pressing social, environmental, and economic problems, students can be exposed to the impact of computing solutions on the betterment of their communities and improving the human condition. One step toward accomplishing this is by utilizing community-based service learning projects for non-profits and community organizations. In particular, since the community-based service learning partners are local, the impact of students' efforts is not abstract, but can be directly seen. It is hoped this may lead to a culture shift regarding CS, potentially also broadening participation.

Clearly forming a community of practice for those undertaking or hoping to undertake service learning is an important step towards both greater adoption and approach success rates. It is hoped that this BoF can aid both current practitioners as well as provide a helping hand to potential new adopters. Our goal is to provide an opportunity to share best practices as well as the hard-learned lessons from previous attempts.