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## Rowan Community Health Center's Ask First Model: Building Authentic & Impactful Community Relationships by Asking a Simple Question

Patrick J. Tempera

*Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine, temperap3@rowan.edu*

Christian DiLiberto

*Abington Memorial Hospital Department of Surgery, diliberc2@rowan.edu*

Ruchi Shah

*Boston University Medical Center Department of Family Medicine, shahr5@rowan.edu*

Daniel Hurst

*Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine, hurst@rowan.edu*

Cooper Rowan Medical Journal: <https://rdw.rowan.edu/crjcsm>

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**Rowan Community Health Center's Ask First Model: Building Authentic & Impactful Community Relationships by Asking a Simple Question**

## **Introduction**

In the spring of 2017, the Rowan Community Health Center (RCHC), a free clinic staffed by Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine physicians and medical student volunteers, launched an initiative aimed at fostering relationships with various Camden, NJ organizations with the goal of helping the Camden community to not only educate community members about RCHC services, but also to collaborate on improving the population of Camden's health. This initiative was appropriately named the Unity Project. RCHC has been a completely student-run, primary care clinic originally located in the heart of the city of Camden, NJ for over 15 years, seeing approximately 300 patients annually. In 2019, RCHC relocated to nearby Lindenwold, NJ, but nonetheless still serves Camden and the greater Philadelphia regions through the Unity Project's outreach efforts. Our clinic has consistently offered the Camden and Lindenwold communities, both located within Camden County, numerous services including chronic disease management, employee and school health physicals, flu vaccinations, disease prevention screenings and workshops, and most importantly, primary care continuity. However, even with our prolonged stay in Camden, before moving to Lindenwold, RCHC still lacked community awareness amongst community organizations as well as community members. The purpose of this paper is to showcase the work of the Unity Project and offer a practical guide for individuals, medical schools, or other organizations who are seeking to implement a similar project.

## **Establishing Relationships: The “Ask First” Approach**

Traditionally, medical student-run health clinics across the country are important providers for both healthcare services and educational programs. Although RCHC has been in Camden for over 15 years, we found that numerous organizations with the same goals and missions as that of our clinic's were unaware of our existence. In addition, there was a staggering internal disconnect amongst these same Camden organizations. Collaborative partnerships between service agencies, grassroots organizations, and healthcare providers are steadily gaining popularity as a means of addressing a variety of community health issues. Thus, the ultimate goal of the Unity Project is to work towards affecting long-term change by forming authentic and impactful relationships with organizations that are already participating in meaningful community work and represent underserved minorities.

To achieve our aforementioned goal, we needed to resist employing the traditional model of medical school outreach, which we found to be short-term and limited. We felt this was due to an absence in the crucial first steps of forming a relationship: asking what the need is. This important question was usually masked by our enthusiasm to ‘help’ and get involved regardless of the

organization's needs as well as debut the student-run clinic's services. Thus, moving forward, when the Unity Project contacts organizations, whether it be a knock on the door, a phone call, or an email, we ask how we can help rather than offer suggestions and/or force inclusion or interject. We have termed this method the 'Ask First' approach.

Prior to the start of the Unity Project, RCHC did not have solidified partnerships within the surrounding Camden community; we instead had superficial ties with organizations. However, by addressing these same organizations by using the 'Ask First' model, the Unity Project had its launch. The 'Ask First' model was employed by email, phone-call, and in-person visits when email and phone calling did not prove effective. We quickly realized that in-person meetings were the factor that differentiated our new partnerships from our previous partnerships. During our in-person meetings we did not advertise ourselves as a clinic with preset options, we instead asked programs if there were any areas of need. Previously, we would supply our potential partnerships with flyers detailing what the clinic offered. We found that this seemingly harmless act would force potential partnering organizations to pick an item off a menu, even if it was something that was not necessarily needed. The 'Ask First' model instead stresses the importance of avoiding materials that define constraints or give the impression that the flyer is a list of options that the organizations must choose from. We wanted our clinic to serve as a blank canvas to give organizations a voice and to better work together as true partners in achieving similar goals and outcomes.

Another difficulty that the Unity Project wanted to address was continuity of care amongst the medical students in charge of staying in touch with community partnerships. Medical school executive boards transition yearly and to prevent loss of institutional memory within the RCHC Outreach Department, we made sure to introduce new RCHC student members to organizations to maintain an established continuity of care. As part of the 'Ask First' model, it was important for new incoming outreach members to think about the established partnerships as inheriting clients and becoming invested in nurturing the already present partnership. This mentality helped RCHC and its partnered organizations maintain a relationship when RCHC moved from the heart of Camden, NJ to Lindenwold, NJ. The distance between our physical clinic and the majority of our partnered organizations had increased and the Unity Project's model was put to the test. Despite our move, we have been able to maintain all partnerships and we feel it was largely due to the strong initial relationship we had formed and built upon due to the 'Ask First' approach.

After the initiation of the Unity Project, we started with a list of 6 organizations, which quickly grew into 13 organizations over the next few months, and we are continually growing. Currently, the Unity Project's partnered

organizations tally a total of 38 organizations, now both located in Camden and Lindenwold. Some of our partnered organizations include New Visions Homeless Day Shelter, Joseph's House of Camden, Camden Area Health Education Center, Respond Path, Covenant House of New Jersey, Camden County Women's Center (CWCC), IMANI Partial Care, HomeBase, Promise Neighborhood, Services Empowering Rights of Victims, and Urban Promise. Examples of ways RCHC factored into our newly established partnerships varied depending on the organization's needs. In addition, the Unity Project coordinates a bimonthly newsletter in which we include each organization's flyer and highlight special events or services offered for each participating organization while also serving as a list of resources to best serve the needs of their clients. This newsletter aims to facilitate communication between RCHC and our partnered organizations as well as between the participating organizations.

Most often, organizations will propose an idea and the Unity Project will determine if such a service is possible. If this is the case, we take the necessary steps to produce our partner's request. This type of execution follows our 'Ask First' model, which enables us to provide a variety of services that are genuinely helpful rather than simply 'feel good' acts. The 'Ask First' approach allows community organizations' needs to be the focal point of RCHC's ability to help, instead of the community organization forcing to make RCHC services fit into their already established structure. Some examples of the services we have provided include health educational presentations, basic necessity donations, preventative health and vital-sign screenings, and monetary donations for emergency funds. Respond Path and New Visions Day Homeless Shelter both asked if RCHC could introduce ourselves to their guests, educate them on the services and purpose of our clinic, goals of the Unity Project, and provide blood pressure readings. The Unity Project also handed out bags of basic necessities to guests, that included socks, toothbrushes, band aids, and other essentials. The Unity Project was also able to make two monetary donations to the CCWC for the purposes of emergency funds that can be used to help women and their children fleeing from domestic violence. In addition, we have provided a series of educational classes on nutrition, exercise, and mindfulness to the youth of IMANI Partial Care Program, addressed ADHD and advocacy to the parents and children of Promise Neighborhood, and counseled on medical management to the staff of Joseph's House. The Unity Project newsletter allows us to promote the services we have provided so that if a similar service is desired by another organization, they need only to reference their monthly newsletter from the Unity Project.

The goal of the Unity Project is to work towards affecting long-term change by forming authentic and impactful relationships with organizations that are already engaging in meaningful community work. The 'Ask First' model changes the narrative and establishes a new tone in the conversation to allow the

organizations a chance to describe their challenges and discuss how RCHC can be a part of the solution. This new approach has given us great success- we have been able to provide a variety of services that benefit our partnered organizations, and more importantly the people they serve. Collaborating with our membered organizations and making not only our clinic services available but also our creative problem-solving abilities, has enabled us to establish a trusting relationship and work towards bridging the gap between a community in need and a medical institute more than willing to help. The 'Ask First' method has proven effective for RCHC's outreach efforts and we hope that other student-run free clinics can expand their community partnerships by following this same approach. If you would like more information on Rowan Community Health Center's Unity Project and the 'Ask First' model, please do not hesitate to contact us using the provided email address: [RowanCommunityHealthCenter@rowan.edu](mailto:RowanCommunityHealthCenter@rowan.edu).