Community Voice: Community Partners Reflect on Service Learning
Jo Anna Tauscher Birdsall, Ed.D., Director, Career & Employment Services, Butte College, Oroville, California

Introduction

Service learning benefits educational institutions, students, and the community. Researchers, educators, and community members often inquire why more institutions of higher education are not implementing and institutionalizing this valuable program. Many college mission statements include a commitment to serve the community through providing service-learning opportunities (Berson, 1994). Additionally, these statements reflect a commitment from the colleges to include the community in addressing educational needs, outcomes, as well as the needs of the community that are viewed as vital through service learning. What is missing from this commitment is the community's reflection on the impact of service learning on the community. This paper explores the impact of service learning on the community from a community partner perspective.

Evaluation, as a shared collaborative process and reflection on service brings about the sense of a learning community (Smith, 2002). Through learning communities, participants have the opportunity to talk about ideas and challenges. As a sense of a learning community is felt within the community, the relationship with other organizations and educational institutions becomes more amiable for the growth and development for all those involved in service learning. Community input is vital in measuring the true value and impact of service on the community. Service learning programs are increasing as the benefits to students, academics, and other partnerships come to fruition.

In service learning, a limited number of research studies involving community participation exist (Boyle-Baise, Epler, & McCoy, 2001). The community is clearly a part of the service learning equation in terms of goals and objectives (McCarthy, Tucker, & Dean, 2002). Geschwind, Ondaatje, and Gray (1997, p. 107) added, "the community's perception of the campus is key to ensuring the success of service learning programs." A growing need exists to continue research in the arena of service learning. Jones (2003, p. 156) stated, "the research on service learning has largely focused on student-learning

1

outcomes and university benefits, with much less attention to the nature and outcomes of partnerships from the community agency perspective." Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2000) claimed that the missing link in the literature includes community roles, and the intended outcomes and benefits of service learning. Community partners are the key link to service learning, and they need to be included from assessment to implementation of service learning projects.

The main focus of assessment in service learning with students, faculty, and in the community is reflection. National Helpers Network, Inc. (1998, p. 103) stated, "reflection is the critical element in the service learning program." Reflection is equally as important as assessment and implementation of the service activity. The authors concluded, "the value of effective reflection cannot be overemphasized" (p. 103). Reflection is an opportunity for all participants to obtain and receive feedback (Jacoby, 1998). Building communities is an important partnership for educational institutions, businesses, and organizations. Partnership is an important part of the outreach in building communities (American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1988). Mutual learning and growth (Swick, 2001) can be achieved when higher education, students, and the community work together. Lisman (1998) added that service learning programs provide avenues for building valuable relations between school and community. By providing opportunities for community partners to engage in activities together, community members gain a sense of trust with other community partners and the institutions of higher education. This leads to further assessment of needs, implementation of projects, and overall improvement or impact in the community (Lisman, 1998).

Research Study

The main focus of the research conducted in March 2003 was to determine the impact of service learning on the community. Mixed methods of this research allowed for both qualitative and quantitative data analyses. The use of the Service-Learning Impact Survey, in conjunction with three focus groups, provided a balance for gathering, interpreting, and reporting the data. The impact of service learning was measured utilizing data based on a Likert scale, and was presented for further reflection to

participants in focus groups so that they could discuss benefits, challenges, and recommendations for further action.

  Representatives from community organizations were asked to rate 16 items on the Service-Learning Impact Survey. Twelve of the 16 survey items were recorded on a Likert scale of 1-5, where 5=Always, 4=Often, 3=Sometimes, 2=Rarely, and 1=Never. Two of the survey items were recorded on a Likert scale of 1-5, where 5=Very Satisified, 4=Satisfied, 3=Neutral, 2=Dissatisfied, and 1=Very Dissatisfied with the service experience. Sixteen representatives completed the survey; however, not all representatives answered each survey item. The following identifies the results of the survey items.

Table 1
Rating of Impact of Service-Learning on the Community

	M	SD	n
Coordination	3.92	1.04	13
Input and Planning	3.86	1.03	14
Goals Set	2.93	1.54	14
Set Goals With Community Partners	2.38	1.12	13
Community Goals Explained	4.09	1.30	11
Student Objectives Explained	3.85	1.46	13
Volunteers Trained	3.36	1.36	11
Ongoing Training Provided	3.50	1.45	12
Students Supervised	3.38	1.50	13
Goals and Objectives Met	4.10	0.74	10
Evaluation Conducted	3.40	1.51	10
Reflection Conducted	2.80	1.32	10
Effectiveness of Partnership	3.50	1.40	14
Effectiveness of Networking	3.08	1.04	13

  Community organization representatives were asked to rate their satisfaction with services received through the service learning program, and the impact of service learning on the organization. The results are illustrated below.

Table 2
Satisfaction of Services and Overall Impact of Service

	M	SD	n

Satisfaction of Services Received	4.00	0.91	13
Impact of Service	4.15	0.90	13

Qualitative data items were drawn from the comments and open-ended survey items to which the community representatives responded on the Service-Learning Impact Survey, and from the three focus groups. The written comments received from the surveys and focus group discussions were aggregated, analyzed, and placed into the following categories: Networking and Relationships Within The Community; Networking and Relationships With The College; Service-Learning Components (Coordination and Coordinators, Input, Planning, Assessment, and Goal Setting, Orientation and Training, Placement of Volunteers, Service Projects or Activities, and Reflection and Evaluation); Volunteers; Impact of Service-Learning; and Additional Comments.

Networking and Relationships within the Community

One component identified was the networking and relationships within the community. Group networking and board participation, public relations, and networking through non-service learning (board) opportunities were identified as the three most valuable components. The building of strong relationships, sharing of program resources, exploring of other potential resources, partnering as a tool for networking, public relations, and the opportunity to be proactive were identified throughout the comments of the community partners.

Community partners addressed the challenges with networking and relationships within the community. These comments were categorized into three main areas: lack of communication and understanding about service learning, cutbacks, and inconsistent goals and processes. Two community partners indicated that networking and relationships within the community does not occur. Community partners provided recommendations for improving networking and relations within the community. The two primary recommendations made by the community partners included the need for contact and communication, and the need to create opportunities for partnership.

Networking and Relationships with the College

Relationships, connections, faculty buy-in, and support for projects were common themes noted through the data in this category. Community partners identified two primary challenges: lack of involvement in networking with the college, and the gap in the support needed between the college and the community. Community partners made two recommendations for improving networking and relationships with the college: Communication needs to be improved, and opportunities for connections need to occur as a result of service learning.

Service learning Components

Six service learning components were identified by community partners: (a) coordination and coordinators, (b) input, planning, assessment, and goal setting, (c) training and orientation, (d) placement of volunteers, (e) service projects or activities, and (f) reflection and evaluation.

Coordination and Coordinators

Community partners identified connections to service and coordinator attributes as the primary strengths of coordinating service learning programs. Coordination was viewed as the connection to service. This connection was viewed as being important from initial contact to organizing to evaluating the completed project. The community partners identified three main categories of challenges: connecting and following-up, obtaining administration and faculty buy-in, and meeting community needs. The overall recommendation made for improving coordination of service learning programs involved continued coordination. This continued coordination encompassed all areas of service learning.

Input, Planning, Assessment, and Goal Setting

Communication is an important part of input, planning, assessing, and goal setting in all programs, including service learning. The community partners valued the communication as an opportunity to provide input in the planning process. The primary challenges involved lack of communication and follow-through. Four community partners indicated that input, planning, assessing, and goal setting does not occur.

Community partners are willing to participate in the planning process. They identified focus on the purpose, clearer goals, better communication, identification of the need, and bringing all partners together as the primary recommendations.

Training and Orientation

Community partners reported that both training and orientation were positive aspects of service learning programs. Training of students occurs, according to the community partners, prior to students beginning service or while students were working with the community partners during service. Orientation was also viewed by the community partners as being important to beginning the service learning experience. Community partners identified two main challenges concerning training and orientation: coordination of the program and time constraints. Due to the limited time for the college, the student, and the community organization, training becomes difficult to manage. Involving community partners in the process was the primary recommendation for training and orientation in service learning. The community partners indicated that they had ideas, and they were willing to participate in this process.

Placement of Student Volunteers

The challenges associated with placement of student volunteers fell into two categories: coordinating placements, and identifying project needs. Community partners felt that the coordinating of placements was challenging due to communication barriers, time constraints, and coordination issues. Community partners also felt that the project needs were organized, according to the needs of the student or the project to be accomplished. They recommended the need for more involvement and program needs. The second recommendation was based on program needs centered on contacts and communication, and capacities for student volunteer placement.

Service Projects or Activities

Community partners were asked to reflect on projects and activities offered through service learning. The positive aspects of projects and activities were related to

supervising projects and activities, and program activity type. The challenges related to service learning projects and activities were discussed. The main challenge centered on the lack of consistency of the service learning program. This included follow-up, supervision, and components of service learning. One recommendation was made in relationship to service learning projects and activities: the community partners want a better description of projects and orientation times.

Reflection and Evaluation

Community partners made comments about the reflection and evaluation components of service learning. The responses focused on the evaluation process, the reflection process, and the difference between evaluation and reflection. The primary challenged faced by the community partners was the fact that reflection and evaluation did not occur as part of the service learning process. The recommendations provided were in the areas of structure and follow-up.

Student Volunteers

Community partners reflected on the positive aspects the student volunteers bring to their organization. Common threads noted as positive aspects were student volunteer attributes, connections between education and the community, and benefits to the community. The connections that the student volunteers make between their education and the community were noted as a valuable component of service learning. These connections, community partners implied, prepare the student volunteers for further community involvement. With the connections, the community benefits from the service the student volunteers provide. The community partners viewed this relationship as a win-win situation. The challenges that community partners identified were related to working with student volunteers. They included the lack of goals and clear expectations, the lack of connection to service and community need, and time conflicts. The community partners provided recommendations to facilitate student volunteer development. These recommendations included the need for program structure, more follow-up, the need for students to commit to service, and communicating more effectively.

Impact of Service learning

The impact of service learning has been noted in several areas. Community partners discussed the overall impact, organizational impact, and the impact that service learning had on families. Community partners addressed the challenges in the area of the impact of service learning, but did not make any recommendations.

Additional Comments

Additional comments by community partners were affiliated with service learning. These responses were related to defining service learning, organizing, and identifying services, reflecting, and clarifying how the organization is involved with service learning.

The findings that have surfaced as a result of this research study are addressed in the following areas: definition of service learning, connections, process and consistency, the stakeholders, the volunteers, and the impact of service learning. Enos and Morton (2003, p. 20) concluded that "in our view, campus and community partners must come to understand that they are part of the same community, with common problems, common interests, common resources, and a common capacity to shape one another in profound ways."

Definition of Service Learning

Based upon the Service Learning Impact Survey and the discussions from the three focus groups, the results illustrate the need to more clearly and consistently define service learning. The definition(s) of service learning was unclear to the community partners. Community partners defined and categorized *service learning* to mean *community service*, and often used these two terms interchangeably (Chapin, 1998). Community partners also were unfamiliar with the term, *service learning*, and were unaware of their own participation in service learning activities.

Connections

The ability to network and connect within the community was noted as a valuable resource for the community partners. This research suggested that community involvement is needed and wanted in all aspects of service learning. Further connections and open communication are vital. Through open communication, clarification regarding the community partner's connection to service learning would be further defined. As noted by Lisman (1998), connections bring community members together, resulting in further planning, implementation, and improvements within the community. Jacoby (1999) further observed the new energy, a broadening of service available within the community, problem solving opportunities, institutional resources, and opportunities for expanding teaching and learning are among the community benefits for service learning. These opportunities connect the educational institution, the students, and the community together.

Process and Consistency

Responses from community partners indicated an inconsistency in the service learning process (e.g., assessment, planning, orientation, training, placement, project implementation, evaluation, and reflection). Many of the responses from the Service-Learning Impact Survey ranged from rarely to often, indicating that not all processes of service learning are consistent across program models. The need for members of the community to participate as key partners in service learning, in establishing goals and objectives, is critically needed (McCarthy, Tucker, & Dean, 2002). This will have an impact on consistency in assessing and planning for service learning activities. This research illustrated the need for consistent contact and communication between all stakeholders. The service learning process belongs to all partners involved (Riley & Wofford, 2000). The involvement of all stakeholders in the process will lead toward consistency in the service learning process, and will assist in meeting the unmet needs of the community. Evaluation of the service learning process, including the activities, will aid in strengthening the service learning program.

Stakeholders

The stakeholders identified their need to contribute to the service learning process. Although Geschwind, Ondaatje, and Gray (1997, p. 107) stated, "the community's perception of the campus is key to ensuring the success of service learning programs," the community partners, as stakeholders, valued service learning, and wanted to participate in service learning activities with the colleges. This is consistent with the recommendation by Riley and Wofford (2000) for service learning programs to allow all of the partners to contribute to the process.

The community partners, according to this research, identified improved communication, program consistency, and buy-in from administration and college faculty as primary areas for consideration and improvement. The college service learning programs with coordinators were identified, by community partners, as a critical need for the success of service learning programs. As noted by Harkavy and Romer (1999), the colleges offer a unique opportunity for addressing and solving the community's needs. For the university and community partners, reciprocity is achieved when partnerships are equally formed (Gugerty & Swezey, 1996).

Student Volunteers

Community partner responses indicated that service learning serves as a preparation for students to engage in further community involvement. The community partners also viewed service learning as an opportunity for students to gain employment. Consistency and structure, however, are needed in terms of student time, schedules, and programmatic structure. Service learning needs to be part of the student's overall experience, rather than an add-on. When service learning becomes part of the student's overall experience, educational objectives and community outcomes become more clear (Liu, 1995).

Impact of Service Learning

One of the impacts of service learning is related to community needs. Although quantitative and qualitative data overall suggested that community needs were being met,

some participants were concerned that deep community needs were not being met. These deep community needs may include, but are not limited to, homelessness, illiteracy, food shortages, and housing issues. Community partners also expressed the need for service projects and activities to be organized and collaborative. Ongoing community service projects are critical to the unmet needs of the community. In order to determine the impact that service learning has on the community, reports of impacts made and follow-up are needed. The meeting of community needs gives the community a voice—a valuable need expressed by the community partners.

Summary

Gelmon (2003, p. 46) stated that "a partnership is not only an entity; it is a process." From evaluation and reflection, action for change can be created. Evaluation and reflection in service learning also lead to assessment and identification of additional community needs. The evaluation, reflection, and assessment lead to all partners identifying strengths and challenges within communities (McCaleb, 1994).

Research on the impact of service learning and sustainability are critical in today's political and economic climates. With budget restrictions at local, regional, and national levels, evaluative research demonstrating impacts is critical. The impacts and implications based on today's political and economic climate are noted with three main partnerships in service learning. The community will benefit from service learning, particularly in times of budget reductions when community partners have limited resources. Research at the local level will aid in sustainability of programs within the community. The sustainability of the community programs is critical for growth and development of future programs. Educational programs will also flourish in that the learning students encounter in the classroom will be magnified through their hands-on experiences in the community. For students, service learning provides an avenue for career exploration. Continued service within the community will lead toward stronger future leadership. Service learning opportunities for students will also strengthen the community as students continue their service past the classroom into building communities.

References

American Association of Community and Junior Colleges. (1988). *Building communities: A vision for a new century*. Washington, DC: National Center for Higher Education.

Berson, J.S. (1994, June/July). "A marriage made in heaven: Community colleges and service learning." *Community College Journal*, 14-19.

Boyle-Baise, M., Epler, B., & McCoy, W. (2001). Shared control: Community voices in multicultural service learning. *The Educational Forum*, 65(4), 344-353.

Chapin, J.R. (1998). Is service learning a good idea? Data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988. *The Social Studies, 89*(5), 205-211.

Enos, S. & Morton, K. (2003). Developing a theory and practice of campus community partnerships. In B. Jacoby & Associates (Eds.), *Building partnerships for service-learning* (pp. 20-41). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Gelmon, S.B. (2003). Assessment as a means of building service-learning partnerships. In B. Jacoby & Associates (Eds.), *Building partnerships for service-learning* (pp. 42-63). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Geschwind, S.A., Ondaatje, E.H., & Gray, M.J. (1997). Reflecting on campus community relations. In Corporation for National Service (Eds.), *Expanding boundaries: Building civic responsibility within higher education* (pp. 107-111). Washington, DC: Corporation for National Service.

Gugerty, C.R., & Swezey, E.D. (1996). Developing campus-community relationships. In B. Jacoby & Associates (Eds.), *Service learning in higher education: Concepts and practices* (pp. 92-107). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Harkavy, I., & Romer, D. (1999, Summer). Service learning as an integrated strategy. *Liberal Education, 85*(3), 14.

Liu, G. (1995). What national and community service means for higher education. In C.D. Lisman (1998), *Toward a civil society: Civic literacy and service learning*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Jacoby, B. (1998). Service-learning in today's higher education. In F. McGuicken (Ed.), *Volunteerism* (pp. 14-28). New York: H.W. Wilson.

Jacoby, B. (1999). Partnerships for service learning. *New directions for student services, 87,* 18-35.

Jones, S.R. (2003). Principles and profiles of exemplary partnerships with community agencies. In B. Jacoby & Associates (Eds.), *Building partnerships for service-*

learning (pp. 151-173). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Lisman, C.D. (1998). *Toward a civil society: Civic literacy and service learning*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

McCaleb, S.P. (1994). *Building communities of learners: Collaboration among teachers, students, families, and community*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

McCarthy, A.M., Tucker, M.L., & Dean, K.L. (2002). Service-learning: Creating community. In C. Wankel & R. DeFillippi (Eds.), *Rethinking management education for the 21st century* (pp. 63-86). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

National Commission on Service-Learning (2002). *Learning in deed: The power of service-learning for American schools*. Washington, DC: National Commission on Service-Learning.

National Helpers Network, Inc. (1998). *Reflection: The key to service learning*. New York: National Helpers Network.

Riley, R.W., & Wofford, H. (2000, May). The reaffirmation of the declaration of principles. *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*(9), 670-672.

Smith, P. (2002). A reflection on reflection. *Primary Voices K-6*, 10(4), 31.

Swick, K.J. (2001, May/June). Service-learning in teacher education: Building learning communities. *The Clearing House, 74*(5), 261-264.

Ward, K., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2000). Community-centered service learning. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, *43*(5), 767-780.

About the Author
      Dr. Jo Anna Tauscher Birdsall is the Director of Career & Employment Services with Butte College in Oroville, CA. She is also a Faculty/Facilitator with Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, CA. Dr. Birdsall completed her doctorate in Educational Leadership & Change from Fielding Graduate University in 2003 where her dissertation emphasis was on the impact of service learning on the community. You can reach Dr. Tauscher Birdsall at: Director of Career & Employment Services, 3536 Butte Campus Drive, Oroville, CA 95965; Email birdsalljo@butte.edu; Telephone (530) 895-2340.