

## Campus and Community Partnerships: Assessing Impacts & Strengthening Connections

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*Research on service-learning tends to emphasize student learning outcomes and pedagogical issues and de-emphasize the community voice. To be true to the dual responsibility of service-learning to both campus and community constituencies, research must include both campus and community viewpoints. This paper is based on findings from a research project to assess community agency viewpoints about student service providers, and based on the data, provides suggestions for improving campus and community service-learning partnerships.*

Research pertaining to service-learning as a viable pedagogy continues to expand as higher education institutions and school districts nationwide look to service-learning as a means to enhance students' public participation, active learning, and contributions to communities. Existing literature makes clear that service-learning engages students in meaningful service and provides learning experiences to enhance classroom teaching (Astin & Sax, 1998). Research on student impacts also points out that service-learning enhances students' psychosocial and moral reasoning abilities (Boss, 1994; Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994). Faculty also benefit from involvement in service-learning through the application of theory and knowledge to local problem solving (Lynton, 1995). What is less clear, however, is the community's perspective on campus-based service-learning initiatives.

Service-learning is a way for campuses to strengthen their public service missions, and successful service-learning collaborations between campuses and communities rely on equitable partnerships to meet respective parties' goals (Gugerty & Swezey, 1996). Hollander (1998) elaborates on the "engaged campus" as a place that blurs boundaries between campus and community, as well as between knowledge and practice: "The engaged campus is not just located in a community; it is intimately connected to the public purposes and aspirations of community life itself" (p. 3). Service-learning is a means to make real the engaged campus. A review of the current literature on service-learning, however, reveals a general lack of attention to the community partner in service-learning (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 1997). If the community continues to be overlooked in service-learning research, then ser-

vice-learning may become yet another example of an "ivory tower" approach to community "partnerships" in which the community is merely an educational laboratory and not a true partner (Holland & Gelmon, 1998).

Service-learning originally sought to develop a win-win-win relationship between the faculty, students, and recipients of service because principles underlying service-learning are deeply rooted in *both* the campus and community perspectives (Sigmon, 1979). Yet service-learning research has overwhelmingly tended to emphasize impacts related to student learning and pedagogical issues at the expense of community impacts.

One important purpose of research is to guide effective practice. Thus, the research on service-learning needs to reflect both the original goals of *service* and *learning*. If service-learning researchers continue to ignore the community perspective, then we are perpetuating the hierarchical and potentially destructive relationship between campuses and their surrounding communities that service-learning implicitly seeks to remedy. By failing to look at communities as active partners, those involved in service-learning risk maintaining the status quo in campus-community relations.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the community's perceptions of students and faculty involved in service-learning as well as campus outreach initiatives. In addition, the paper seeks to provide specific recommendations for making service-learning an endeavor that is marked by reciprocity and collaboration.

Before identifying the questions that guided this research, we review some more of the service-learning literature to demonstrate the need for research on

community perceptions of service-learning. We then describe the research design used to complete the study, discuss the study's findings, and offer recommendations for future service-learning policy and practice.

## Literature Review

Research related to service-learning abounds. In recent years, books and edited volumes have been published about community service (Rhoads, 1997), service-oriented faculty development (Howard, 1993), service-learning concepts and practices (Jacoby, 1996), and the history of service-learning (Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999). In addition, there is the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, devoted exclusively to service-learning, and others that have devoted entire issues to service-learning (e.g., *Education and Urban Society*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Journal of Adolescence*).

A review of the literature recently completed by Ward and Wolf-Wendel (in press) identifies four distinct categories of published work regarding service-learning: (1) Schema, principles, and theories; (2) "how to" and campus project profiles; (3) motivations for getting involved in service-learning; and (4) effects of service-learning.

Publications within the realm of the first category — schema, principles, and theories of service-learning — include works that define the essentials of service-learning, provide a framework for good practice, and ground actions in theory (see Cotton & Stanton, 1990; Gugerty & Swezey, 1996; Howard, 1993; Jacoby, 1996). In addition to outlining principles of effective service-learning, literature in this category points to the need for community voice and a reciprocal relationship between campus and community. Community service is recognized as a means for advocating social change and students as active change agents.

Literature published within the second category — "how to" and campus project profiles — focuses on how to do service-learning and provides examples of campuses and classes that have established programs. Generally, the literature in this category concentrates on individual campuses with existing programs serving as models for new or expanding programs (see Galura, Howard, Waterhouse, & Ross, 1995; Galura, Meiland, Ross, Callan & Smith, 1993; Howard, 1993; Kraft & Swadener, 1994; Sigmon, 1996). Typically, these articles place an emphasis on describing service-learning from the campus perspective only. This narrow view implicitly encourages campuses, faculty, and students to view service-learning from a campus-centered approach only, instead of engaging the values sup-

ported by the earliest set of principles of good service-learning practice:

1. Those being served control the service(s) provided;
2. Those being served become better able to serve and be served by their own actions;
3. Those who receive service are also learners and have significant control over what is expected to be learned (Sigmon, 1979).

The third category of the literature examines motivations to participate in community service. Publications in this category offer useful frameworks for examining the relationship between student service-learners and those who are the recipients of service (see Morton, 1995; Radest, 1993; Rhoads, 1997; Serow, 1991). For example, Morton offers three distinct paradigms of service — charity, project, and social change. The charity paradigm focuses on the service provider and identifies "the deficits of those served" (p. 21). The project paradigm emphasizes needs, problems, and solutions through service. The social change paradigm is rooted in processes — "building relationships among or within stakeholder groups and creating a learning environment that continually peels away the layers of the onion to reveal 'root causes'" (p. 22). The social change model focuses on empowerment and emphasizes "doing with" rather than "doing for." Morton's model emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the perspectives of the recipients of the service provided, and moving students from a "feel good" service frame of mind to viewing service as a means for impacting communities, especially those suffering from social inequities.

In the fourth category of literature — the effects of community service — campuses are the central focus. Studies have tended to examine service-learning effects on institutions of higher education, students, and faculty members, even though members of the community obviously also stand to benefit from campus service efforts. Nevertheless, the voices of community members are almost completely absent from the discourse on the effects of community service.

Overwhelmingly, the studies related to student impacts report that community service and service-learning lead to positive outcomes for students, e.g. enhancing career goals, social responsibility, personal efficacy, critical thinking, and problem solving skills, as well as helping students link theory and practice (Bringle & Kremer, 1993; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Ehrlich, 1995; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Harkavy, 1992; Hesser, 1995; Kendrick, 1996; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Miller, 1994; Serow, 1991; Weschsler & Fogel, 1995). While many of these note

the importance of community representation, the community voice is overwhelmingly absent. Even though successful service-learning requires effective collaboration and equal partnerships between campuses and communities for successful service-learning, the research tends to ignore the community's perspective on service-learning (Egart, 1998; Lisman, 1998). In the following section we describe a research project that offers the community perspective on service-learning.

## Research Design

The purpose of this study is to learn more about community perceptions of campuses involved in service-learning and other service-based initiatives. This research is directed by the following questions: How do communities and campuses come together to engage in service activities? How do communities perceive the service mission of higher education as manifested in relations with faculty, administrators, students, and campuses as a whole? Are service-learning students a help or a hindrance to community agencies? How can partnerships between campuses and their communities be enhanced?

To address these questions, we utilized a two-phase research design that considers both breadth and depth of community perspectives. The first phase of the study utilized a survey<sup>1</sup> of 65 directors of community service agencies in four towns of a rural northwestern state. The criteria for selection for these four communities was the presence of a college or university in the community and an established relationship with the community service/service-learning/volunteer office on the campus. The survey included general background questions (e.g., How many college students served with your agency?; What types of activities do students engage in during their service with you?), questions related to overall perceptions of the campus (e.g., Does your agency have a positive perception of the college or university in your community?; Do you see higher education as a partner in solving problems your agency faces?), and more direct questions related to student service providers (e.g., Are you satisfied with the work that students do with your agency?; How effective are students in helping your agency meet its goals?). The survey included 16 questions that were both open-ended and Likert scaled. Data from the Likert items on the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. This process calls upon the researchers to read and re-read the data, identify categories in the data, and then collapse these categories into overall themes (Patton, 1980).

The second phase of the study included follow-up

interviews with 30 agency personnel from one community. The purpose of this second phase was to provide a more in-depth community perspective. The interviews were semi-structured and were guided by the use of an interview protocol. The interview guide included specific questions (e.g., How would you describe the student service providers in your agency?; What suggestions do you have to improve upon the relationship you have with college/university personnel?), in addition to more open-ended questions (e.g., How would you define service-learning?; Describe the relationship your agency has with the University). Interviews were transcribed, coded, and content analyzed to identify common themes.

The data for each phase of the study were analyzed separately but yielded common themes as discussed in the following section.

## Findings

The themes that emerge from the data are as follows: (1) Communities have overwhelmingly positive perceptions of campuses in their area, (2) there are both challenges and benefits to working with service-learning students, and (3) agency personnel seek more coordination and communication with those from campus with whom they work.

*Communities overwhelmingly have positive perceptions of campuses in their area.* This finding is supported by data from both the surveys and interviews. 92% of those surveyed have a positive perception of the college or university in their community. In addition, 87 percent agree or strongly agree that the college or university is perceived positively by members of the community.

The content analysis of both the interviews and the open-ended survey items also revealed that community agency personnel who work with students involved in service have positive perceptions of the campus in their area. For example, one respondent noted, "I see higher education as a bridge between our organization and solving the hunger problems in our community." Another expounded upon the nature of these perceptions by adding, "We see them [the university] as a partner and a great source for ideas, people, and resources." When asked to describe the relationship the agencies have with the college or university in their area, many said it is a positive one, as indicated by one respondent: "We are becoming more widely known to the professors due to our contact with the service-learning office. This has been most helpful to our program. Having university students has been a positive experience all the way around. It has restored our faith in the future generation." Another respondent stated, "We are proud to live in a community with such a wonderful

university that is so dedicated to helping its community.” Others indicated the relationship is more fragmented and that they only work with specific departments such as the service-learning centers and departments of education and social work.

*There are both benefits and challenges to working with student service providers.* Several variables from the survey were included to measure the impact and effectiveness of college student service providers. Of the 65 agency directors who responded to the survey, 46% indicated they worked with one to 15 college student service-learners in the previous two years, 31% worked with 16 to 50, 11% worked with 50 to 100, and 8% worked with more than 100 students (see Table 1). The students primarily engaged in service to help meet the needs of youth, elderly, and people with disabilities.

Overwhelmingly, agency directors in the interviews shared positive perceptions of the students and indicated that students were very effective in contributing to the agencies’ respective goals. 77% of the respondents indicated that students were very effective or effective in helping the agency meet its goals, 13% said they were somewhat effective, and 3% believed they were not effective. 82% of respondents were generally satisfied with the work that college students provided.<sup>2</sup>

In describing the advantages of having college student service-learners at their agencies, respondents said the students’ enthusiasm, energy, and new ideas/perspectives, as well as their ability to get work done, were positive attributes. Other respondents believed the real-world experience provided valuable learning opportunities for the students, and the students were good role models for youth. Written responses indicated that the students’ “enthusiasm for life is contagious.” Other respondents cited the students’ “enthusiastic energy” and declared that “they [the students] bring passion to the job.” One respondent explained, “[service-learning students] filled a program gap; we couldn’t afford all the people that we would need to provide individualized services.” A director of a nursing home also referred to the one-to-one attention that her clients receive: “The elderly residents in the nursing home just love it when college students

come to visit. It’s attention the residents would do without if we didn’t have the students.” With regard to the real-life benefits of service-learning, one respondent explained:

They [students] may think of service-learning as a valuable service, but I also think it is practical experience. So it’s not just getting feel-good strokes because you went and read to some homeless kids; it is because you are getting practical real-life experience. This is why I think it is very important for many disciplines at the university to be involved in service-learning.

When asked to characterize the service-learning students, agencies described both positive and negative attributes. On the survey, in rank order, agencies described the students as enthusiastic, reliable, skilled, needing supervision, unprepared, and inconsistent. Agencies consistently identified three challenges they face in working with students — their schedules, the short-term commitment, and the amount of training the students require. With regard to student schedules, one respondent indicated, “Their schedules change all the time” due to school breaks, class schedules, and homework loads. Another added, “A challenge can be the university schedule versus our schedule. Some students will work within the school’s schedule, and others have the day off, or a test, or it’s a break. Sometimes, those things don’t jibe, that makes it difficult.” Scheduling conflicts were an issue for another respondent who shared, “Many students work, are going to school, have families, and scheduling them for a time that works for them and for us is a challenge.” Clearly, the semester schedule presents a challenge as do the increasingly busy schedules of college students.

Students’ lack of long-term commitment to the agency added another challenge. For instance, one agency director explained, “Most of the things I would like to use students for are longer than the service requirement... We are always looking for someone who will start in September and stay for the whole year so the service-learning requirement in some classes is limiting for what we need.” Another added, “Some of the more immature students don’t

TABLE 1  
*Select Survey Data*

# of students with whom agencies work	Agency perceptions of effectiveness of students	Agency level of satisfaction with students
46% 1 to 15 students	35% Very Effective	34% Very Satisfied
31% 16 to 50 students	42% Effective	48% Satisfied
11% 50 to 100 students	13% Somewhat Effective	11% Somewhat Satisfied
8% 100+	3% Not Effective	2% Dissatisfied

realize the level of commitment we need and sometimes flake out on their responsibilities.” One also shared, “We need a regular commitment from all of our community service providers, and that is tough for everyone.”

The training required to prepare the service-learners also created a hardship for the agencies. One respondent said, “It takes time, energy, and money to train them, all of which are limited at nonprofits...” Another said, “We put a lot of time and money into their training, supervision, and administration.” When scheduling problems and lack of commitment cause students to shirk their service responsibilities, the agencies’ investment of time and resources is lost.

The agencies’ responses provide valuable insights regarding their perception of the benefits they receive from working with college student service-learners as well as the challenges and frustrations they encounter. Overall, the data collected indicates largely positive support for the effectiveness of college student service-learners in helping community agencies meet their goals.

*Agency personnel seek more coordination and communication with those they work with from campus.* When asked to provide suggestions for ways in which the campus can better meet the needs of the agency and the community, the majority of responses pointed out that communication needs to be increased so that the campus is more aware of the agency’s needs and student skills can be better matched with these needs. One obstacle in the way of effective communication, according to one respondent, is the fact that “colleges need to find dedicated, responsible leaders to work as contacts between our agency and the campus; we have found that at times the contacts in place seem to be as if they are not truly dedicated to the position they have and just float for a year.”

Other respondents indicated their desire to be invited on campus to present to classes, to encourage more community service, and to promote their agencies to the students. For example, one respondent wanted the campus to “provide more chances for agencies who utilize college student service providers to speak to groups or classes on campus to help recruit.” Another respondent shared the same concern. “I would like to see more opportunity for agencies to speak on campus and work more closely with classes.” Community service fairs were recognized by the agencies as being an effective means to get the word out to students.

Another communication issue identified by agencies related to the difficulty in distinguishing different types of programs from which students come. Some students engage in community service as an

extra-curricular activity, others as part of a service-learning class, and still others for a practicum or internship experience. In addition, many service agencies now have students supported by federal work-study. Agency personnel find the array of respective student needs and, when applicable, course requirements, difficult to manage.

What has happened is that there are so many programs on campus now that sometimes you aren’t sure which ones the people are from, and I think it gets very confusing on everybody’s side. Coordination is very important, and so I think folks who are at my level [the agency] need to be in on that coordination so that we are not all tripping over one another.

Communication between agencies and professors of service-learning classes was another issue addressed by agency respondents. The director of an adult learning program that uses service-learners every semester indicated a lack of understanding of her responsibilities regarding the students. She said, “I would like clarification on what I’m supposed to do. Does she [the professor] want me to inform her? Would she like me to call students in the middle of the semester to see how things are going? Should I follow through a little closer?” In some instances, communication is so poor between the campus and the community that agency directors do not even know that students are fulfilling a service-learning course requirement. For example, one director explained, “Sometimes I get a lot of calls from one certain class, but students call me separately and say they have a requirement, and if I knew ahead of time how many people might be coming over, I could set up a group project instead of individual programs. It would help to know it was a class.”

Although the data revealed a generally appreciative set of agencies, clearly they want and need more communication with the campus. The campus-based service-learning centers serve as an important initial contact for the agencies, but this relationship needs to be enhanced to help clarify different types of student servers and to establish better links between agencies and faculty involved in service-learning. In the following sections, we discuss the above findings and provide recommendations for improving campus and community partnerships.

## Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that campuses and communities, for the most part, enjoy positive relationships. Relationships, however, need to be enhanced in the areas of communication and collaboration. Campuses and communities collaborating on service initiatives need to work in ways that are

marked by genuine reciprocity and equality. Morton (1995) describes a continuum of service that includes charity, project, and social change paradigms. Morton's continuum implies that campus partners must pay attention to the perspectives of the recipients of the service in order to move from a helping frame of mind to viewing service as a means for mutual engagement in social issues.

This study also identifies problems centering around lack of communication and lack of long term student commitment. It also illustrates a lack of clarity regarding the different types of students involved in service. These problems could be addressed through relationships that are more collaborative between the campus and community stakeholders. Service that is done under the guise of helping can lack the investment required to move from more immediate solutions (e.g. stocking shelves at the food bank) to examining underlying causes of social problems (e.g. why is there a hunger problem in our community?). Certainly, it is important to address both of these needs, but if service-learning only focuses on the former, it lacks the intent needed to contribute to community change.

Respondents to both the survey and interviews call for more collaboration, coordination, and communication in service endeavors. If service-learning fails to move toward a social change model, then the "movement" is at risk of doing exactly what it has intended to avoid; that is, use communities as laboratories where students are sent to serve without reciprocity and personal investment. Hill (1998) predicts that the demise of service-learning will be at least in part due to the failure of campuses to become equal partners with community agencies. He sees that "partnerships [are] dominated by school people who looked on agencies only as places to send students" and that "community agencies [are] rarely invited to participate or help shape the process" (p. 30). Although Hill's dire predictions are only precautionary at this point in time, his perspective is partly substantiated by the findings of this study.

## Recommendations

In the following paragraphs, we provide recommendations to address the issues and problems found in our study.

*Communication lines need to be opened between different parties involved in identifying service opportunities for students.* Increased discussion between agencies and service-learning professionals on campus, including faculty, administrators, and service-learning coordinators, will allow for goals

and objectives of each partner to be identified and agreed upon so that from the start everyone is clear about the expected outcomes of the service-learning project. If the standard for open communication is set early in the partnership, problems and concerns can be more easily addressed and solved, which will help to keep conflicts and disappointments to a minimum for all parties involved.

*Campuses need to open their doors to community partners.* Campuses must find innovative ways for agencies to come to the institution and directly interact with students and faculty to increase campus awareness of community needs and the various ways in which viable service-learning partnerships can be formed to address them. Community service fairs and class presentations help to increase the community visibility on campus. Activities such as these should be supported by the campus, and service-learning professionals must take additional measures to ensure that members of the campus community are made aware of the various opportunities for them to connect curriculum with community service to meet crucial needs. By increasing direct partnerships between faculty and agencies, service-learning will better meet the needs of the agencies, students, faculty, and community.

*Campuses and communities need to jointly approach issues associated with recruitment, training, and retention of service providers.* In order to address the disadvantages that agencies identified in the survey related to student service-learners, campuses need to more accurately determine appropriate placements for students. Service-learning professionals on campus must consider the students' commitment and schedules, as well as training required by the agencies. Again, communication is the key. Faculty must discuss the class learning objectives with the agencies and the agencies must convey their needs, requirements, and resources to the faculty member. For example, if a faculty member is requiring students to perform 15 hours of community service related to poverty issues, the agency must communicate whether or not it has the resources to accommodate the requirement. Conversely, if the agency has specific training requirements for student service-learners, they must be clearly communicated to faculty members. A stronger emphasis on communication and an increase in agency accessibility on campus are steps toward achieving stronger collaborative service-learning relationships that give genuine balance to the community perspective.

*Campuses need to develop guidelines that clearly outline the purpose and expectations of different campus-based service initiatives.* Agencies are often host to students involved in a myriad of pro-



jects. It is not unusual for a work-study student to engage in tasks similar to those done by interns and service-learners. It is important for agencies to be able to distinguish between the different purposes students have for their community involvement. Again, increased communication between the campus and community would help alleviate confusion that exists about who the students are and the roles they are there to fulfill.

### Conclusion

Service-learning in higher education has typically followed the charity model approach that views service as an "add-on" in the curriculum and has perpetuated a hierarchical, ivory tower approach to social problem-solving. As the movement advances, service-learning at many campuses has become more project-oriented, and many in higher education are recognizing the power of partnerships between campuses and communities. Now is the time for campus service-learning programs to take the next step on the continuum and achieve a social change model in which the campus and community are equal partners and in which students are engaged actors for social justice (Morton, 1995; Rhoads, 1997).

By inviting the community service agency to have a voice and become an active partner in the academic service-learning process, higher education can more fully realize its public service and outreach mission, actualize a social change model for service-learning, and achieve the ideals of the engaged campus. The community voice needs to be heard by those involved in service-learning on campus to engage in meaningful community-based problem-solving and social change. The community perspective allows those involved in service-learning to gain new insights about what it takes for successful and effective outcomes for the students, faculty, and the community.

The literature review and findings from the study support the proposition that a successful service-learning experience is one that involves clear communication from all partners and clearly emphasizes proactive measures to ensure community needs are met. Service-learning is at a crucial juncture on many campuses and is ready to move forward on the continuum from a charity model to one that utilizes service-learning as a means to impact social change. Greater communication between campuses and the communities they serve will enable service-learning to fulfill its promise and potential as an agent of social change benefitting institutions, students, and communities.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The survey included questions directed at both service-learners and volunteers. Agencies work with large numbers of students each year, and we did not think it possible for them to separate out their answers for each type of service provider. As an initial study, the purpose was to learn more about perceptions in general, so service providers for the purposes of the survey included service-learners and volunteers.

<sup>2</sup> Percentages do not equal 100 due to missing responses.

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