

Cautious Collaboration: Community and University Partnerships in the COVID-19 Era

Ryan J. Couillou, Beth McGee, Tabitha Lamberth, and Skylar Ball

Abstract

This national study included a quantitative inquiry regarding the impact of COVID-19 on service-learning from 207 participants representing community partner organizations ($n = 145$) and higher education institutions ($n = 62$). Community partners reported a decreased number of students engaged in service-learning after the outbreak of COVID-19. Response patterns emerged between community partners and higher education participant groups. The perceived helpfulness of service-learning for student success and fostering relationships differed statistically among the partner types—higher education participants rated these higher than community partners. Reasons for participating varied among partner types, and community partners identified volunteer procurement among the most helpful support higher education offers beyond service-learning. Changing policies, wearing masks, and virtual communication were cited as main adaptations to COVID-19 but prioritized differently among partners. This study uncovered the emerging and varied perspectives of higher education and community partners regarding service-learning at this significant time in history.

Keywords: service-learning, community engagement, COVID-19, higher education, community partnerships



Since 2020, organizations have been grappling with significant changes due to health risks related to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), such as adapting to a digital workplace (Nagel, 2020) and workplace closures (International Labour Organization, 2021). The challenges presented by COVID-19 are also not uniform and are dependent on many factors, such as geographical region (Almeida & Santos, 2020) and industry type (International Labour Organization, 2021). The impacts of the pandemic on higher education have also been documented, including course delivery (Piotrowski & King, 2020), student mental health concerns (Son et al., 2020), and faculty burnout (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). Challenges have also been present for partners engaged in service-learning delivery during COVID-19, which have required adaptations (Doody et al., 2020; Selvanathan et al., 2020). However, research continues to

indicate that service-learning is a beneficial part of higher education (Lin & Shek, 2021; Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020). The purpose of the current study was to examine both community partner and higher education perspectives in service-learning within the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explored past and recent experiences with service-learning along with how service-learning experiences were adapted due to COVID-19. We also addressed the perceived helpfulness of service-learning and what types of community engagement from universities would best support community partners.

Service-Learning in the Past

Service-learning can be defined as a collaboration “between students and the community that involves explicit learning goals, a response to genuine community needs, youth decision-making and systematic reflection on the part of the students” (Lavery et al., 2018, p. 4). The application

of service-learning may emphasize direct, indirect, research, and advocacy experiences (Bringle et al., 2016). More recently e-service-learning (electronic service-learning) has also been used to facilitate a range of virtual and in-person access to learning and service delivery (Germain, 2019; Waldner et al., 2012). Overall, service-learning represents an array of high-impact and learning activities that can be applied to meet a variety of discipline-specific learning objectives for academic learning, civic learning, and personal growth (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Bringle et al., 2016).

Instructors across disciplines have used service-learning experiences to enhance academic learning outcomes across many competency areas (e.g., Capella-Peris et al., 2020; Midgett et al., 2016; Ramsaroor & Petersen, 2020) and inform a deeper understanding of academic concepts (Hatcher et al., 2017). Benefits that extend beyond direct learning outcomes include student success, retention, and student engagement (Steinberg et al., 2011). Personal growth can also be achieved through service-learning, especially with structured self-reflection activities (see Sanders et al., 2016). Personal growth may also occur in self-awareness, confidence, insight into privilege, responsibility, patience, and respect for others (Gross & Maloney, 2012). Other documented benefits include self-confidence (McClam et al., 2008), cultural learning (Matthew et al., 2018), social responsibility (Gerholz & Losch, 2015), and career benefits (McClam et al., 2008). Furthermore, service-learning “may be one of the most powerful and most effective methods for achieving civic learning outcomes” (Steinberg et al., 2011, p. 19). Civic engagement has been emphasized as a core component of service-learning as projects emphasize social issues and transforming communities (e.g., increasing awareness) to promote social justice (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Steinberg et al., 2011). Overall, research supports that students engaging in service-learning gain benefits related to learning, civic, and personal outcomes.

Community partners are motivated to participate in service-learning by several factors, including altruism to educate students, long-term benefits (e.g., training long-term volunteers, recruiting future staff), building capacity for the organization, and building a relationship with higher education (i.e., forming partnerships that extend outside

service-learning contexts; Bell & Carlson, 2009). Partners have a strong interest in sharing a leadership role in service-learning partnerships and are invaluable in encouraging student participation and educating students in social responsibility, professionalism, and cultural competency (Rinaldo et al., 2015). Though community partners are motivated to engage in higher education partnerships, the outcomes of these experiences appear to be mixed. The literature indicates that service-learning experiences may offer both numerous benefits and challenges for community partners.

Community partners may perceive many types of benefits to service-learning. Service-learning provides free labor and important human capital to complete daily tasks (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Jordaan & Mennega, 2022; Rinaldo et al., 2015; Worrall, 2007). Staff also seem to benefit from working with service-learning students, as these interactions can boost morale (Jordaan & Mennega, 2022; Rinaldo et al., 2015) and staff learn new perspectives from students (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Worrall, 2007). Service-learning students may also be more reliable than volunteers (Worrall, 2007). Other benefits of involvement in service-learning may include having access to a steady source of volunteers, recruiting interns or future staff, long-term partnerships with higher education, and access to higher education expertise and resources (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Service-learning has the potential to serve community partners in a variety of ways that support daily operations and organizational missions.

However, the many costs and challenges of service-learning partnerships can outweigh benefits for community partners. Community partners may be exposed to considerable risks, such as harm to vulnerable clientele or students misrepresenting the organization (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Service-learning and other university-community partnerships can require a significant investment of partners’ time and energy (Racin & Gordon, 2018; Vernon & Ward, 1999). Unfortunately, partners may gain little benefit after investing resources in the partnership (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Working with students can also be challenging, as some students may not understand the community and organizational needs (Jordaan & Mennega, 2022), lack interest (Worrall, 2007), or focus only on the project and not the context in which it is

occurring (Jordaan & Mennega, 2022). The academic work cycle may be misaligned with partner organizations, as some agencies would prefer to work on projects during the summer when service-learning classes may not be taking place (Racin & Gordon, 2018). Limited time commitments and continuity issues have also been a concern for community partners (Vernon & Ward, 1999; Worrall, 2007). Community partners have reported communication issues with higher education and problems with understanding the purpose of service-learning and required duties (Bell & Carlson, 2009; Vernon & Ward, 1999). Some partners also perceived that faculty had little knowledge about or interest in partner organizations (Worrall, 2007). Negative impacts for community partners range from an inconvenience to substantial risks and hazards; however, some partners elect to continue service-learning despite considerable challenges (Worrall, 2007).

The literature indicates that service-learning is an established high-impact learning method that offers benefits and challenges for students, higher education, and community partners. Overall, the potential benefits motivate many to pursue or continue service-learning partnerships.

Service-Learning and Disasters

Service-learning literature has documented experiences during natural and human-made disasters (Shillingford et al., 2020). For instance, post Hurricane Katrina, service-learning and higher education courses were developed to provide natural disaster support where college students provided valuable skills, knowledge, and effort that helped the recovery process (Johnson & Hoovler, 2015). Research indicates that some specific qualities of these experiences emerge for students engaged in disaster-related service-learning. Students have reported feeling unprepared to assist during disasters; however, such participation appears to yield more robust learning experiences. Benefits include increases in student empowerment, desire to inspire others, motivation to volunteer in the future, and desire for additional training to volunteer after assisting with a natural disaster response (Turner-McGrievy et al., 2018). Another study found that students demonstrated great interest and dedication and were able to learn a broad set of skills, though the project was perceived as intense and impacted students emotionally (Evans-Cowley, 2006). Though there is limited information

available about community responses to service-learning during disasters, one study conducted post Hurricane Katrina found that overall community response was favorable and appreciative despite initial resistance from some community members (Evans-Cowley, 2006).

Distance service-learning opportunities in response to disasters have also been documented (see Evans-Cowley, 2006; Weisman, 2021). This type of experience may require flexibility, creativity, the ability to adjust to community needs, appropriate technology infrastructure, and student access to certain technology resources (e.g., reliable internet, hardware; Weisman, 2021). Weisman's approach included proactively reaching out to partners to check well-being, inquiring about remote needs, and providing ideas about how students could assist. Students were able to assist with many remote service-learning activities, including written translations and interpretations of virtual meetings, writing informational materials, making videos, providing instructions, grant writing, social media, funding strategies, and helping develop plans for mergers or shutting down.

Overall, research involving service-learning during disasters indicates that students gain benefits that may extend beyond course objectives. Service-learning students are able to learn skills and assist communities in multiple ways during disasters, even at a distance. This prior work during times of disasters can inform how service-learning may apply to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Service-Learning During COVID-19

The impacts of COVID-19 have caused global disruption and impacted the way that both higher education and community partners operate (see McMurtrie, 2020; National Council of Nonprofits, 2020). At the global level, the response to COVID-19 has been diverse in terms of policy decisions and public response. For instance, most countries' responses to COVID-19 included some form of social distancing; however, implementation and public responses to these measures have varied between countries and are culture-specific (Milani, 2021).

The degree of experientiality that service-learning offers has also been impacted. Higher education and community partners have been adapting to COVID-19 while engaging in preventive strategies to mitigate

future pandemics (Beaman & Davidson, 2020). For instance, researchers documented adaptations to an interdisciplinary service-learning project that involved screening children for developmental delays that occurred in spring 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Doody et al., 2020). These authors discussed the implementation of an alternative, online assignment where students applied the screening activity to a training video in lieu of screening a child in person. The quantitative results of the modified assignment indicated that students believed that they gained skills; however, when examining qualitative data, students identified deficiencies of the alternate assignment in the areas of flexibility, communication, and collaboration. Doody et al. noted a further limitation with the alternative assignment in that, although students were still able to learn skills associated with the original service-learning project, the alternative assignment did not provide a service to the community.

Universities and community partners have encountered numerous recent challenges during the pandemic. Operations were affected in substantial ways that impacted their partnerships and approaches to service-learning.

COVID-19 Challenges to Partnerships

According to emerging literature, primary challenges for service-learning partnerships due to the COVID-19 environment are communication, logistics, and health and safety (Grilo et al., 2021; Lin & Shek, 2021; Piotrowski & King, 2020; Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020). Logistical challenges to partnerships that existed prior to COVID-19, such as time, resources, task assignment, supervision, and evaluation (Karasik, 2020), have likely been further strained by COVID-19-related complications. Some of the challenges of service-learning for partners include health and safety adaptations, along with reduced or eliminated in-person communication protocols, such as travel bans, social distancing, the use of face masks, and transitioning to digital communication (Lederer et al., 2021; McMurtrie, 2020).

Communication. Due to the impact of COVID-19, both higher education and non-profit organizations resorted to virtual communication to continue operating (National Council of Nonprofits, 2020). For higher education, many instructors were forced to move quickly to emergency remote teaching

in spring 2020 (Hodges et al., 2020). Planned online learning incorporates instructional design within a systematic model (Hodges et al., 2020; Protsiv et al., 2016); however, the rapid shutdown of college campuses across the world left instructors with little time or support to convert their traditional classes to fully online courses.

Though the emergency switch to online learning has passed, some trends toward online learning may be sustained in the future. Virtual communication is efficient and effective; it provides easy access from anywhere in the world and is adaptable to the learner's schedule. Virtual communication provides worldwide exposure for students and teachers, creates a more personalized learning environment, and sharpens digital skills. However, several barriers to virtual communication also limit accessibility. Access to a computer, a steady internet connection, and technological literacy are requirements for virtual classrooms and may prevent access to some students (Alhat, 2020). It is unclear how these trends toward online learning will impact service-learning in the long term.

The various strategies that organizations have implemented to maintain operations while navigating COVID-19 have likely affected communication patterns. Like higher education, community partners experienced many interrelated communication and collaboration challenges that were exacerbated by stay-at-home orders and school closures (Deitrick et al., 2020). In 2020, employees faced a wide range of challenges, including working from home, becoming an "essential" worker (e.g., medical personnel), or being furloughed or laid off (Kniffin et al., 2021). Even those businesses operating significant online aspects prior to COVID-19 were not necessarily prepared for full virtual operations (Newman & Ford, 2021; Szelwach & Matthews, 2021). The transition had negative impacts on high-quality social interactions and reduced the quality of assessment and feedback opportunities for leaders and employees (Kniffin et al., 2021). Emerging literature suggests that best practices for virtual-based work may include increasing conscious efforts from team members regarding the nature and structure of communication and increasing the frequency of nontask interactions to improve quality bonding among employees (Kniffin et al., 2021). Given the pattern of advantages and disadvantages of online learning and remote

communication, more research is needed on how these trends impact higher education, community partners, and their partnerships.

Logistics. Researchers have started exploring the many logistical challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education for students, faculty, and university administration. Logistical issues for faculty and administration included the lack of guidance and support for transitioning to online delivery, inability to hold laboratory assessments, and disruptions or eliminations of graduate assistantships and student internships. Students were faced with logistical challenges such as attempting to learn from poorly prepared materials; having little experience with virtual instruction or the technology skills needed to adequately participate in virtual learning; limited or eliminated physical library access; no tutoring assistance; and unique challenges for populations requiring face-to-face class time to maintain visas (international students) or housing (veterans; Piotrowski & King, 2020). Other student concerns noted in another national study were wanting to be close to home, increased family care responsibilities, and changes in employment status (Polikoff et al., 2020). Race, class, and institution types were also varying factors in the number of classes taken, with Asian, Hispanic, and low-income households enrolling in fewer classes, leading to the possibility that racial or ethnic minority students will experience a higher rate of graduation delays (Polikoff et al., 2020). The impact of the pandemic has obviously substantially affected many facets of higher education and educational experiences.

In general, community partner perspectives on service-learning align with many higher education logistical concerns, such as scheduling, resources, communication, and remote site access (Karasik, 2020). These concerns have likely been exacerbated by COVID-19. Guidance from the National Council of Nonprofits (2020) indicates that organizations may be navigating flexible work schedules for staff, public transportation issues, reconfiguring work spaces, or staggering office coverage, among other challenges. Nonprofit organizations have also encountered barriers preventing them from offering services to clients, such as remote working, technology, physical health, safety, and mental health of staff.

Health and Safety. In higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the

already high rates of mental health issues. Son et al. (2020) found that 91% of surveyed students had an increased level of concern about their and their loved ones' health. Students reported increased stress and anxiety from multiple stressors, including lockdown and stay-at-home orders. They also found that most participants worried about the impact of COVID-19 on their academic progress due to the online transition, sudden changes in class requirements, and restrictions on research and projects. Prior research found that not having the ability to network can impact students' sense of belonging, leading to adverse social and psychological effects and poor academic outcomes (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). The pandemic has challenged institutions in managing students' needs and planning for better methods of meeting the future needs of students, as well as faculty and staff (Lederer et al., 2021).

Stress related to COVID-19 has had repercussions on university faculty and staff well-being. The Chronicle of Higher Education (2020) reported that faculty members are reporting higher burnout levels than in previous years due to the mental exhaustion brought on by emergency remote and hybrid classes, budget cuts, and the volatile job market. Faculty members are dealing with increasing workloads while their work-life balance and instances of human interaction are declining. Half of surveyed faculty members indicated that their enjoyment of teaching has decreased since the beginning of 2020 related to typical stressors of academia and newer challenges brought on by COVID-19 (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020; McMurtrie, 2020). Survey responses from faculty indicated that they hope the public health crisis and push for racial justice in 2020 will lead universities to implement new policies around evaluations, tenure/promotion, and productivity to make higher education more inclusive, fair, and sensitive to faculty mental health (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). Thus, the challenges of the recent pandemic have fostered both negative and positive outcomes for faculty and staff.

Health and safety of staff, clients, and students has also been a primary concern for community partners. Guidance from the CDC (Division of Viral Diseases, 2021) advised organizations to implement and update plans that are specific to the business, identify areas and tasks that are asso-

ciated with possible COVID-19 exposure, and implement control measures to reduce or eliminate risk of exposure. Potential strategies included engineering (e.g., facilities), administrative (e.g., communication, cleaning), and personal protective equipment (PPE). One recent study found that organizations protected employees using a variety of means, including remote work, cleaning/hygienic protocols, providing PPE, performing health assessments, and implementing social distancing and travel restrictions (Mahmud et al., 2021). The toll of COVID-19 on community partner employees has also affected well-being. Some employees encountered chronic stress and other mental health issues that may persist after the pandemic subsides (Kniffin et al., 2021). At the broadest level, health and safety concerns remain vital issues for community partners.

New literature has highlighted impacts of COVID-19 on different facets of higher education and community partners; however, there is little available information on how COVID-19 has impacted service-learning partnerships. We explored the following research questions: What did service-learning look like in the past? And now? How are community partners and universities adapting service-learning experiences due to COVID-19? How does service-learning address the needs of community partners? How does other community engagement by higher education address the needs of community partners? These questions were needed to help illustrate current and future service-learning partnership needs.

Method

Participants

This study investigated the perceptions of both university personnel and community partners regarding service-learning. All participants were over the age of 18 and included staff, administration, and faculty who were representatives of higher education and community partners. The 284 initial responses were reduced by 74 who did not complete the majority of the survey and by a further three respondents who did not indicate their partner type. As a result, a total of 207 participants were included in this study. All included responses stated participation in service-learning in the past. Higher education represented 30% ($n = 62$), and community partners represented 70% ($n = 145$). The difference be-

tween the community partner and higher education representation in the current sample was expected, given that universities typically partner with numerous organizations. Community partners represented a broad range of specializations, including advocacy (20.7%), arts/cultural (10.3%), education (21.4%), faith-based (9.7%), federal (0%), for-profit (1.4%), health care (13.8%), historic preservation (4.8%), information and referral (14.5%), local or state (17.2%), multipurpose (17.2%), not-for-profit (73.1%), nursing home/long-term care/multi level care (2.8%), public housing (1.4%), recreation (9.7%), senior housing/services (6.9%), transportation (2.8%), and other (20.7%). Responses could indicate more than one specialization. The size of the higher education student body also varied among the 58 participants answering the question: up to 5,000 students, 29.3% ($n = 17$), 5,001–15,000 students, 39.7% ($n = 23$), 15,001–30,000 students, 17.2% ($n = 10$), 30,001 or more students, 10.3% ($n = 6$), with two participants (3.4%) responding did not know or did not want to report.

Sampling procedures included self-selection into the study after the recruitment email inviting participation. Participants were not offered reimbursement for participating in the online questionnaire (approximately 10 minutes in length). The questionnaire was open from September 29, 2020 to February 9, 2021. The study was approved by the appropriate Institute Review Board and deemed exempt.

Distribution

Multiple sampling procedures were used to distribute the current survey, including emailing potential participants directly, posting the survey information on email lists or virtual groups pertaining to service-learning or community engagement, and using snowball sampling. The standardized recruitment email included a link to the informed consent and survey with a request to share the study with their organization's mailing list and with colleagues involved with community-university engagement.

A list of possible email participants was developed for direct distribution of the questionnaire. This list was started by collecting contact information from the researchers' American university. Specifically, we collected contact information for identified community partners that were published on the university webpage. When the part-

ners' websites included direct email contact information, they were sent the recruitment email. This procedure covered the surrounding counties near the rural, southeastern city with a population of approximately 32,000.

To explore other possible avenues of survey distribution, we initially reached out to our university community engagement office for possible email list options. After researching their suggestions for relevance to our study, we posted on the Community Service and Service-Learning Professionals in Higher Education Facebook page and emailed Campus Compact (<https://compact.org/who-we-are/>). Three mailing lists were identified: (1) USG Regents' Advisory Committee on Community Engagement and Service (RACCES), (2) National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) Higher Education Service-Learning Listserv (HE-SL), and (3) National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) Community-Based Organization (CBO-SL) Listserv.

The researchers also identified all listed schools receiving the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Classification for Community Engagement (<https://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/>). The classification, housed at the Howard R. Swearer Center at Brown University, represents institutions who engage in internal reflective processes to improve their community engagement. The list of 360 schools was then explored to identify their partners, if listed on their website. Any entity from this process that could have email addresses identified was recruited to participate. Many entities did not have email addresses available on their website, and if their email addresses were not listed, they were excluded. In addition, we performed snowball sampling by encouraging participants to forward the survey link to colleagues who engage in community-university collaborations.

We sent 4,820 email messages, with 590 being undeliverable (e.g., blocked, address not found, unable to receive mail, domain not found). We initially received 284 responses, yielding a 5.9% total response rate.

Instrument

The questionnaire instrument used in the current study was adapted with permission from the Karasik (2020) study, which investigated community partner perceptions of university-community collaborations. Since the Karasik questionnaire focused on

community partner perceptions, the current questionnaire was altered to be applicable to both university personnel and community partner respondents. In addition, specific questions were added to inquire about the impact of COVID-19 on community partners and service-learning experiences. In order to make the questionnaire instrument applicable to both higher education and community partners, we offered supplemental questions based on identifying as higher education or a community partner. For instance, only participants who indicated they were higher education were offered a question about the size of their institution's student body.

Participants were sent an email with a general introduction to the project, the informed consent document, and a link to the questionnaire. Participants interested in continuing with the questionnaire were asked to indicate their willingness to proceed by clicking "yes," which linked to the study. Participants who selected "no" on the consent form were directed to a page thanking them for their time and concluding their part in the study. Those who elected to continue were presented with the questionnaire.

The adapted online questionnaire included both fixed-choice and open response questions and had 21 questions (Appendix A). The questionnaire started with the informed consent process and a question asking for confirmation of willingness to participate. To maintain anonymity, IP address tracking was disabled for the questionnaire.

The first block of questions focused on the use of service-learning in the past. It started with a list of definitions providing a standardized vocabulary related to community-engaged learning and service-learning. Participants were asked if they had used service-learning in the past and to identify whether they represented higher education or a community organization. Higher education participants were asked a multiselect question about previous partner types. All participants were then asked to rate the helpfulness of service-learning (0 = *not at all helpful*; 4 = *extremely helpful*) for three aspects: student success, fostering relationships with the university and community, and agency outcomes.

The second block included questions related to the demographics of the organization. These questions included type of organization, size of student body if in higher educa-

tion, and the size of the organization.

The third block was based on Karasik's (2020) questionnaire. It included multiselect questions asking participants to identify their job description and to identify the nature of their current and past community-university partnerships. Community partner participants were asked how many higher education partners they have and how many college students they work with currently and worked with before COVID-19 (one year prior). All participants were asked why they participate in community-based learning with college students (multiselect). The fourth block related to changes due to COVID-19. Higher education participants were asked how many partners they work with currently. All participants were asked what considerations have been made to facilitate service-learning due to COVID-19 (multiselect).

The last block focused on service-learning in the future. All participants were asked to identify how universities may assist with meeting community partner needs in ways other than service-learning (multiselect). At the conclusion of the questionnaire, participants were thanked for their time and then asked if they would like to forward the questionnaire to other professionals in an automatically generated response.

Analysis

The present study used quantitative data analysis techniques and was a posttest-only design. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, a nonparametric Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, and *t*-tests.

Results

Service-Learning in the Past and Now

The first research questions addressed in this study were "What did service-learning look like in the past? And now?" To address this topic, the researchers explored several sub areas that were relevant to service-learning in the past compared to the present. This comparison involved evaluating differences between past (pre-COVID-19) and current number of students participating in service-learning, based on community partner reports. The comparison also included higher education participants' current number of community partners and what category of partners they have worked with in the past for service-learning.

Community partner participant perspectives were addressed regarding how many colleges/universities they currently partner with for community-based learning. Community partner and higher education perspectives were also examined for the frequency of types of partnerships and reasons they participate in community-based learning with college students.

Comparing the Number of Student Participants

A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was conducted to evaluate differences in the number of students community organizations were working with on service-learning projects in the past (approximately one year prior; pre pandemic) and currently. Results indicated that community organizations reported working with significantly more students before the pandemic, $T = 61.5$, $z = -6.70$ (corrected for ties), $N - \text{Ties} = 63$, $p = .001$, two-tailed. Specifically, 60 organizations indicated that they worked with more students when compared to the present (Sum of Ranks = 1954.50), whereas only three organizations indicated working with more students in the present compared to one year ago (Sum of Ranks = 61.50). There were 50 organizations that reported no difference between past and current student involvement in service-learning. The effect size is considered large ($r = .63$).

Number of Community Partners

Higher education participants' current number of community partners ranged from 0 to over 51. The most frequently cited category was 51 and over ($n = 19$, 30.6%), followed by 1-10 ($n = 8$, 12.9%). Other responses included zero ($n = 1$, 1.6%), 11-20 ($n = 6$, 9.7%), 21-30 ($n = 6$, 9.7%), 31-40 ($n = 0$, 0%), and 41-50 ($n = 1$, 1.6%). There were 21 (33.9%) missing responses.

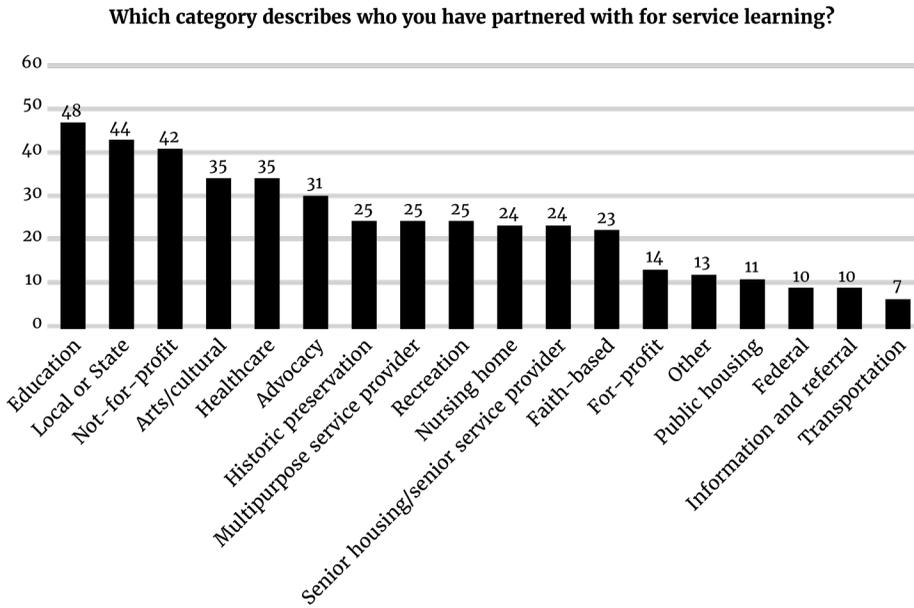
Community Partner Categories

Higher education participants reported past partners among all 18 categories. The number of community partners was led by the category education ($n = 48$, 77.4%), then local or state ($n = 44$, 71.0%), and not-for-profit ($n = 42$, 67.7%). Figure 1 illustrates all categories of community partner specializations.

Number of University Partnerships

Community partner participants reported partnering with a range of colleges/universities for community-based learning.

Figure 1. Frequency of Partner Categories in Higher Education



Participants most frequently indicated working with two colleges/universities ($n = 36$; 17.1%), followed by working with one ($n = 33$; 15.7%). Other responses included zero ($n = 11$, 5.2%), three ($n = 20$; 9.5%), four ($n = 13$, 6.2%), five ($n = 11$, 5.2%), six and seven tied ($n = 1$, .5%), eight and nine tied ($n = 0$, 0%). There were 10 (4.8%) that reported working with 10 or more colleges/universities. There were nine (6.2%) missing responses.

Community–University Partnership Types

The partnership types that higher education and community organizations participated in also varied among the different types of organizations. Higher education most frequently reported partnering for service-learning ($n = 51$, 82.3%). Community organizations participated most frequently to have volunteers ($n = 102$, 70.3%); see Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency Distributions of Responses by Affiliation

Survey response	Higher education		Community organization	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Community–university-based partnerships agency currently (or has previously) participated in?				
Community-based research	44	71.0	44	30.3
Field experiences	42	67.7	64	44.1
Fundraising	21	33.9	29	20.0
Guest speaking to classes	40	64.5	72	49.7
In-service/staff workshops	35	56.5	26	17.9
Internships	44	71.0	87	60.0
Service-learning	51	82.3	87	60.0
Site visits	27	43.5	44	30.3
Special events	37	59.7	50	34.5
Volunteers	43	69.4	102	70.3
Not currently participating	1	1.6	8	5.5
Other	0	0.0	6	4.1

Note. Participants were able to select multiple answers.

Reasons for Community-Based Learning Participation

The reasons for higher education and community organizations to participate in community-based learning with students overlapped, with some variations (Table 2). The top three responses for higher education were that community-based learning helps fulfill the mission of the agency/organization ($n = 35$, 56.5%), provides the opportunity to share experience/knowledge ($n = 34$, 54.8%), and fills unmet needs at the agency/organization ($n = 30$, 48.4%). For community organizations, the three most frequent responses included the opportunity to share knowledge ($n = 99$, 68.3%), filling unmet needs at the agency ($n = 80$, 55.2%), and developing relationship(s) with universities for future projects ($n = 78$, 53.8%). Other reasons for participating in service-learning included the following: Higher education response: “[Community engagement] is a graduation requirement and provides students with opportunities to apply what is being learned in courses to real life experiences”. Community organization responses: Education; fund-raising opportunities; giving back; mentor future leaders; and to empower students to become agents of change themselves.

Facilitating Service-Learning Due to COVID-19

The second research question concerned how community-based organizations and higher education were facilitating service-learning experiences due to COVID-19. Many areas of service-learning have been impacted by COVID-19, according to the participants. Seventeen specific considerations related to the impact, with an additional “other” option. The top three frequent considerations being made to facilitate service-learning due to the impact of COVID-19 for higher education were increased virtual communication ($n = 29$, 46.8%), requiring masks to be properly worn by everyone ($n = 25$, 40.3%), and updated guidelines/policies ($n = 23$, 37.1%). Community organizations’ most frequently cited considerations were requiring masks to be properly worn by everyone ($n = 81$, 55.9%) and increased virtual communication ($n = 75$, 51.7%). Adding more cleaning protocols and updated guidelines/policies were tied as the third most important considerations ($n = 66$, 45.5%; Table 3).

Service-Learning Assisting Community Organizations

The third research question involved how service-learning assists community organizations. A series of independent-samples

Table 2. Frequency of Participation Rationale

Survey response	Higher education		Community organization	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Rationale for participation in community-based learning with college students				
Attract future employees	8	12.9	48	33.1
Develop relationship(s) for future projects	24	38.7	78	53.8
Fill unmet needs at the agency	30	48.4	80	55.2
Fulfills mission of agency	35	56.5	69	47.6
Opportunity to share knowledge	34	54.8	99	68.3
Intergenerational interaction opportunities (clientele)	9	14.5	31	21.4
Intergenerational interaction opportunities (students)	24	38.7	62	42.8
Not currently participating	2	3.2	7	4.8
Other	3	4.8	8	5.5

Table 3. Frequency of Considerations Due to COVID-19

Survey response	Higher education		Community organization	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Considerations made to facilitate service-learning due to COVID-19?				
Adding more cleaning protocols	18	29.0	66	45.5
Adding signage about policies	15	24.2	51	35.2
Changes in the furniture layout for social distancing	14	22.6	46	31.7
Changes in job requirements for student work	19	30.6	30	20.7
Increased virtual communication	29	46.8	75	51.7
Limited interior visits	17	27.4	59	40.7
Requiring masks to be properly worn by everyone	25	40.3	81	55.9
Optional use of masks	0	0.0	8	5.5
Reduced number of users in a space	19	30.6	62	42.8
Utilizing outdoor areas	22	35.5	41	28.3
Using more touch free features	8	12.9	14	9.7
Updated guidelines/policies	23	37.1	66	45.5
Transportation limited	9	14.5	11	7.6
Transportation not offered	10	16.1	15	10.3
Using social media/web to communicate safety procedures	18	29.0	36	24.8
Indirect projects only ^a	21	33.9	41	28.3
Indirect projects preferred	15	24.2	13	9.0
Other	4	6.5	13	9.0

Note. Participants were able to select multiple answers.

^a Indirect projects are described as projects that limit physical contact with the site.

t-tests were performed to evaluate the helpfulness of service-learning for student success, fostering relationships between the university and community, agency outcomes, and total helpfulness (the average of the three aforementioned areas) for community organizations and higher education. There were significant differences between

community organization and higher education perceptions of helpfulness across student success, fostering relationships, and total helpfulness. Community organization and higher education differences in helpfulness ratings of agency outcomes were not significant ($p = .06$). For student success, fostering relationships, and total ratings,

service-learning was rated as more helpful across each area by higher education participants than by community organization participants. The effect sizes for each area (using Cohen’s *d*) ranged from small to medium. The effect size for helpfulness ratings of student success and agency outcomes was small (.36 and .31, respectively), while the effect size for fostering relationships and total helpfulness was medium (.74 and .65, respectively).

When putting the mean scores into context of the qualifiers (referenced in Table 4), both community organizations and higher education participants rated service-learning as being at least very helpful (3) on average, with one exception. The mean agency outcomes (from the community organization perspective) fell between moderately (2) and very (3) helpful qualifiers.

Community Engagement in Higher Education Addressing Community Partner Needs

The final research question regarded how other community engagement on the part of the university addresses the current needs of community partners (Table 5). Participants were asked how they see the university assisting with meeting community partner needs outside service-learning. Frequency of participant responses was examined separately for higher education and community partners. The top three responses for higher education included community-based research (*n* = 34, 54.8%), volunteering (*n* = 30, 48.4%), and consulta-

tions with faculty experts (*n* = 27, 43.5%). The top responses for community organizations were volunteering (*n* = 79, 54.5%) and community-based research (*n* = 60, 41.4%); consultations with faculty experts and fundraising were tied as the third most frequent responses (*n* = 45, 31.0%). Other responses centered around needing to be resourceful, faculty community participation, targeted integration into the curriculum, interns, space sharing, research/resource sharing, and reciprocity.

Discussion

Perspectives of both community partners and higher education regarding service-learning have been explored in this study. We examined these partnerships through several research questions. In regard to our first research question, we examined the characteristics of service-learning partnerships in the past and now. One of the most important conclusions is that community partners reported the involvement of fewer students in service-learning projects since the pandemic. Only a minority of organizations stated that they worked with more students, and some found no change. This finding aligns with the University of San Diego’s Nonprofit Institute survey of nonprofit leaders, which also found a decrease in volunteers while the need was sometimes increasing (Deitrick et al., 2020). Past research has consistently found that student labor was a key benefit of service-learning for community partners (Cronley et al., 2015), so decreases in human capital would

Table 4. Perceptions of the Helpfulness of Service-Learning

Area	Community organization		Higher education		df	t
	M	SD	M	SD		
Student success	3.23	0.79	3.51	0.77	199	2.33*
Fostering relationships	3.13	0.90	3.69	0.57	164	5.23***
Agency outcomes	2.83	0.90	3.09	0.79	188	1.88
Total	3.08	0.68	3.47	0.48	145	4.43***

Note. Unequal variances not assumed for fostering relationships and total areas; 0 = not at all helpful, 1 = slightly helpful, 2 = moderately helpful, 3 = very helpful, 4 = extremely helpful.

**p* < .05.

****p* < .001.

Table 5. University Assistance With Partner Needs

Survey response	Higher education		Community organization	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
How do you see the University assisting with meeting community partner needs outside of service-learning?				
Community-based research	34	54.8	60	41.4
Consultations with faculty experts	27	43.5	45	31.0
Fundraising	14	22.6	45	31.0
In-services/workshop for staff	23	37.1	42	29.0
Volunteering	30	48.4	79	54.5
Other	4	6.5	9	6.2

Note. Participants were able to select multiple answers.

be detrimental. Higher education and community partners appear to have overlapping but differing reasons for participating in community-based learning. Community partners most frequently partnered to procure volunteers, as reflected in the above findings, whereas higher education participated in partnerships to specifically support service-learning. Past research has found that community partners benefited in service-learning engagement by gaining volunteer recruitment opportunities (Bell & Carlson, 2009; Blouin & Perry, 2009). We found both similarities and differences in the partner types' reasoning for their service-learning partnerships. They both desired to fulfill unmet needs and share knowledge. These findings are similar to Cronley et al.'s (2015) findings that community partners found value in service-learning: Participation expanded their organizational capacity, and organization members enjoyed mentoring students. Community organizations also develop relationships with universities in anticipation of future projects, which reflects the desire to continue relationships longer in duration than a single event. Other important findings included that universities most frequently reported having over 51 community partners, with a variety of partner types. Most community partners were categorized as educational, local or state, and nonprofit organizations. Community partners, on the other hand, most frequently reported working with only one or two universities. This finding is similar to that of Karasik's (2020) study, where 79% of respondents reported working with two or more university part-

ners. The asymmetry of universities' having many community partners while community partners collaborate with few higher education institutions currently remains and is something to be considered within partnerships.

Community partners and higher education participants endorsed similar strategies when asked how they have adapted service-learning for COVID-19, while indicating that they weigh those considerations differently. Health and safety concerns like requiring masks, increasing virtual communication, and updating guidelines and policies were the most common adaptations shared for higher education and community partners. These actions are consistent with national health and safety guidelines followed by many organizations (Mahmud et al., 2021). Challenges to communication, logistics, and health/safety were felt by both organization types in other studies as well (Grilo et al., 2021; Lin & Shek, 2021; Piotrowski & King, 2020; Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020).

Higher education participants and community organizations rated service-learning very helpful for student success and fostering relationships. Fostering relationships had the largest statistical difference between partner types. One study did find that "community partners contribute to fostering and sustaining service-learning partnerships" (Goldberg & Atkins, 2020, para. 1); however, in this study higher education perceived service-learning as more beneficial in building relationships. Research supports both direct and indirect effects of

service-learning mediating student success (Simonet, 2008). Higher education, overall, found service-learning to be more helpful, especially as it relates to student success and fostering relationships.

Community organizations and those in higher education both identified volunteering, community-based research, and faculty expert consultations as approaches universities could take to assist community organizations outside service-learning. Benefits to the community had been identified in prior research, including accessing expertise from the university (Rinaldo et al., 2015) and finding volunteers (Jordaan & Mennega, 2022).

Implications

This study examined the differences between community partners and higher education at this unique time. The pandemic has led to a reduction in the engagement between higher education and community partners

in service-learning activities. Resuming service-learning experiences will require a coordinated approach. Community partners and higher education should engage in collaborative strategies (see Table 6) to reestablish or increase community-based learning experiences in light of their respective specific challenges post pandemic.

Implications for Higher Education

A power differential may exist when a community partner relies on one or two universities. Prior research (Cronley et al., 2015; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009) has noted that power differentials can act as barriers to service-learning. Power differentials may also be a factor in perceived helpfulness differences between partner types. Overall, the perceived helpfulness of service-learning was high regardless of partner type; however, higher education may perceive service-learning as more helpful because of the academic bias in service-learning partnerships (see Tinkler et al., 2014). Fostering

Table 6. Strategies for Higher Education, Community-Based Organizations, and Improving Partnerships

Category	Implication description
Higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share missional intent of course and project with related goals and objectives. • Facilitate space for mutual knowledge sharing to increase buy-in and relationship quality. • Choose service-learning approaches that minimize impact of constraints and reduce burden on students and sites. • Opportunities should be flexible, with virtual learning and work from home environments for greater accessibility.
Community-based organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in co-creating service-learning by sharing mission, vision, and goals at the outset of the project. • Assume an active role in the planning process and advocate for goals and needs. • Discuss limitations of resources and staffing issues that may impact the service-learning experience. • Sharing of time, resources, and knowledge can provide legacy implications for the community.
Improving partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to work to invest in maintaining established relationships, including communicating about changes in needs, wants, and/or goals. • Actively plan to mitigate unequal costs/benefits to service-learning. • Communicate regarding roles, responsibilities, accessibility, flexibility, and the ability to say no. • Follow and plan for changing health guidelines, including how to communicate during times of natural disaster or pandemic. • Build in flexibility to minimize impact of future issues.

relationships showed the most difference among partner types. One important implication for higher education (and community organizations) is that motivations differ for engaging in service-learning. To make these relationships mutually beneficial, fulfilling the mission for higher education (as their most frequent rationale for engaging in service-learning) is important to consider. Sharing with the community partners the missional intent of the course and project along with related goals and objectives is key to ensuring expectations are met. Faculty should also incorporate space to share their knowledge with community partners and allow community partners to share their knowledge in a meaningful manner (these were also frequent rationales for both partner types participating in service-learning). Such knowledge sharing may further propel participation and foster relationship building. For example, a site could be encouraged to provide a presentation highlighting a related topic. Taking a relational approach to service-learning by recognizing power dynamics, openly communicating, and sharing ownership of the process and outcomes can help guide more equitable partnerships and has been highlighted in literature on ethical service-learning (see Doran et al., 2021).

Faculty should be mindful of distinct advantages to different service-learning approaches and choose those that minimize constraints and reduce burdens on students and sites. It may be advantageous to design service-learning opportunities to be flexible by including virtual learning and work-from-home environments. Implementing indirect service-learning or e-service-learning components may provide specific advantages. For instance, indirect projects may help preserve faculty time, avoid site interaction problems, and allow additional control over student learning experiences (Heckert, 2010). Indirect and e-service-learning projects also offer advantages to students, as they may circumvent transportation, time, and cost barriers (Germain, 2019; Heckert, 2010). Planning flexibility into project design by including virtual learning options may also allow for continuation of service-learning activities in the future if campuses close (e.g., for natural disasters or pandemics; Hodges et al., 2020). The community partner can similarly benefit from being prepared for future virtual learning situations to continue service-learning in the future.

Implications for Community-Based Organizations

Research indicates that community partners use service-learning as a vehicle to establish relationships with universities and gain resources. Community partners are encouraged to cocreate service-learning, when possible, to share their mission, vision, and goals from the beginning of the project. When feasible, formalized workshops where both parties participate to develop the service-learning experience together can strengthen partnerships and learning outcomes for students (Gassman et al., 2019). Though it is primarily higher education's role to ensure the reciprocity of service-learning engagements, community partners may further enhance the relationship by playing an active role in the planning process and advocating for their goals and needs. Sharing knowledge, as community partners' most frequent reason for participating in service-learning, can be considered part of the legacy of the partnership work. Considerations for the future include talking with higher education partners about limitations of resources and staffing issues. Open conversations about logistical challenges may lead to creative solutions and further relationship building.

Karasik (2020) identified challenges for community partners related to service-learning that may provide additional insight. These included student-related challenges (time and commitment), problems aligning the university with partner needs or resources, communication concerns, cost-benefit mismatch, and reciprocity concerns that may contribute to the priority mismatch. Future considerations are still needed to address how to approach building these partnerships to be "equitable, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial," as Karasik proposed pre pandemic (2020, p. 113), a task that may be even more important and challenging now.

Partnership Implications

Since communication was reported as a top shared adaptation, partners should find ways of assessing needs and invest in maintaining relationships. Achieving clear communication is especially important since higher education-community partnerships may include long-term changes (e.g., virtual in lieu of face-to-face meetings). It may also be appropriate for higher education representatives to recognize that

their partnerships are not equally benefiting their community organization partners and to actively plan for ways to mitigate this discrepancy when planning future projects. Effective community relationships in service-learning should work to communicate shared defined roles, responsibilities, accessibility, flexibility, and the opportunity to say “no” (Sandy & Holland, 2006). Doran et al. (2021) found that community partners see the need “to have more ownership over decision-making processes as well as the importance of strong relationships grounded in open communication and consent to guide both the process and outcomes of successful service-learning partnerships” (p. 156). Specific COVID-19 partnership considerations will change as the pandemic develops, so it will be important for both partners to prepare students to follow changing health guidelines. To build in flexibility for future global or local issues, all faculty, staff, and students will need to be able to communicate effectively and have access to virtual communication. Overall, the perceived helpfulness of service-learning makes the work of communication and partnership building important for both partner types.

Limitations

This study offers several insights into community organizations and higher education views and use of community-based learning, specifically in the context of COVID-19. However, several limitations impacted the internal and external validity of the study. One primary limitation affecting internal validity is that the current study was a post-test design and included no baseline information regarding service-learning prior to COVID-19. Though we addressed specific research questions involving comparisons of participation in service-learning pre- and post-COVID-19 during the first year of the pandemic, this limitation restricts the conclusions that can be made. This study had the potential limitation of priming higher education participants when asked to identify who they had partnered with prior to questions rating helpfulness. Reflecting on these past partnerships immediately preceding the helpfulness question may have impacted their responses.

Our methodology also presented some limitations regarding the generalizability of the findings. We distributed the survey to community organizations and higher education institutions involved in service-learning by

several methods, including directly emailing representatives and snowball sampling. However, our sample may not be representative of community organizations and higher education institutions that are engaged in community-based learning. The title of the project could have skewed participation toward those with an interest in service-learning. Snowball sampling could have inflated the survey response rate. Further, a primary method for recruiting participants was gathering email addresses from higher education websites; therefore, much of our participant selection was influenced by content of higher education web pages. Inclusion in the study could thus have been affected by omission of community partners from the webpage, outdated web pages, or absence of information about community partners on the website. It is also likely that the pandemic itself impacted the availability of some potential study participants.

Future Directions for Research

The current findings of this national study point to several future research directions. It would be helpful for researchers to determine the nature of the reduction of service-learning opportunities for students. This more detailed knowledge could further help the field determine what types of barriers higher education and community partners might encounter. For instance, given that some organizations were able to maintain or increase their community-based learning experiences, it would be helpful for researchers to determine those strategies or characteristics that facilitate service-learning experiences for students.

These findings may align with global experiences. However, gaps in the service-learning literature exist in community-based learning for both partner type perspectives from countries outside the United States and United Kingdom (Koekkoek et al., 2021). The global implications of COVID-19 have required similar lockdowns and social distancing; thus there is a justification for further developing these findings to see similarities or differences among countries. The National Council of Nonprofits (2020) offers resources to provide the latest information for nonprofits, to help prepare and respond to the varied impacts of COVID-19 across the United States and around the world.

Apart from effective strategies, it would also be beneficial to follow up with a qualitative inquiry about higher education and com-

munity partners who are engaged currently in this work to determine what lessons have been learned about service-learning and other community-based learning during the pandemic. With higher education and community partners continuing to encounter and navigate specific challenges, it would be beneficial to see how perceptions and experiences have shifted as we approach new phases in the pandemic.

Conclusion

This study is timely in that the societal impact of COVID-19 is emerging and dynamic. We have seized the opportunity to document higher education and commu-

nity partner experiences and perceptions regarding service-learning and other community engagement at this significant time in history. Service-learning is in a unique position to offer a purposeful means of strengthening higher education-community ties in the wake of COVID-19. Community partners need student volunteers and also desire to give back through the relationship. Both community organizations and higher education can further their respective missions while reassessing communication and resource sharing. We hope that this study helps guide and inspire those who are developing service-learning partnerships.



About the Authors

Ryan J. Couillou is a licensed psychologist and an assistant professor of psychology at Georgia Southern University. His primary research focuses broadly on community and university engagement. He is cofounder of The REFLECT Program—a collaborative consultation, outreach, and action research program geared toward enhancing mental health and wellness in communities. He received his PhD in counseling psychology from the University of Georgia.

Beth McGee is an assistant professor at Georgia Southern University in the School of Human Ecology in the Interior Design Program. Her focus areas in teaching, scholarship, and service are through service-learning and biophilic design (nature-inspired). She received her PhD in design construction and planning, interior design concentration at the University of Florida.

Tabitha Lamberth is a political science PhD student at the University of Georgia. Her research interests focus on political psychology, primarily in political behavior and cognition. She received her MS in experimental psychology from Georgia Southern University.

Skylar Ball was a research assistant and has a bachelor of science in psychology with a minor in child and family development from Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA, United States. She is currently in her third year pursuing her doctor of psychology in clinical psychology from Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA, United States.

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Appendix A. Instrument With Questions per Participant Group

Survey questions	Higher education	Community organization
Block 1. Past use of service-learning		
Definitions provided for service-learning, community-based research, community service, field experiences, internships, and volunteering	x	x
Has your institution used service-learning in the past?	x	x
Which best categorizes your organization? Higher education or Community Partner	x	x
Which category describes who you have partnered with in the past for service learning?	x	n/a
How helpful do you view service-learning? 0 = not at all helpful, 4 = extremely helpful		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student success • Fostering relationships • Agency outcomes 	x	x
Block 2. Demographics		
Which category BEST describes your agency or organization?	x	x
What is the size of your student body	x	n/a
Size of organization	x	x
Block 3. Based on Karasik (2020) questionnaire		
Which BEST describes your current job description?	x	x
Based upon the earlier definitions, which of the following types of Community-University based partnerships does your agency currently (or has previously) participated in?	x	x
How many different colleges/universities does your organization currently partner with for community-based learning?	n/a	x
Approximately how many college students do you currently work with on service-learning projects?	n/a	x
In the past, at this time of the year and before COVID-19, approximately how many college students would you be working with on service-learning projects?	n/a	x
Which of the following represent reasons YOUR agency participates in community-based learning with college students?	x	x

Continued on next page

Appendix A. Continued

Survey questions	Higher education	Community organization
Block 4. Questions about change due to COVID-19		
How many community partners does your agency currently have?	x	n/a
What considerations have you made to facilitate service-learning due to the impact of COVID-19?	x	x
Block 5. Questions about service-learning in the future		
How do you see the University assisting with meeting community partner needs outside of service-learning?	x	x

