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Amplifying Community Partner Voices in Rural Community Service-Learning Partnerships

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study delves into rural community service-learning (CSL) partnerships, shedding light on the complexities and dynamics of collaboration between colleges and rural communities. Through quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the research amplifies the voices of rural community partners, emphasizing the crucial role of trust, communication, and reciprocity. Challenges such as staff demands and organizational mismatches underscore the need for rural institutions to better prepare students and allocate resources to support their community partners effectively. The study advocates for transformative CSL approaches that prioritize community needs and nurture long-lasting collaborations. By providing insights into the impact of CSL on rural partners and organizations, this research offers valuable recommendations for improving future practices and fostering meaningful engagement in both rural and urban settings.

Keywords: Rural, community service-learning, community partnerships, collaboration

The foundation of a liberal arts education is to teach not only broad knowledge and practical skills but also personal and civic responsibility and integrative learning. Community service-learning (CSL) is a pedagogical tool that can be used to help meet this aspirational goal. It has been well established that experiential activities such as CSL can enhance academic, personal, social, and civic outcomes for students and provide opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in an ecological setting (Celio et al., 2011; Conway et al., 2009; Kuh, 2008). In addition, CSL can assist communities in addressing pressing needs (Slavkin, 2007). A growing number of colleges are institutionalizing CSL and civic engagement, and several initiatives have been developed to advocate for this type of work. This increasingly broad-based use of CSL has led to a push for a better assessment of its impact on various stakeholders. Smith and Paine (2015) described five different types of impact that may result from CSL work: economic, human, social, physical, and cultural capital. These five types of impact may result in either intended or unintended effects, which are both equally important to address when working with community partners (Smith & Paine, 2015). Research supports the positive outcomes of CSL for the community and for mitigating the common "town–gown divide'' (Edwards et al., 2001). The limited research in this area has revealed benefits to the local community, including filling program and service needs and improved relationships between the college and the community (Eyler et al., 2001). Community partner benefits of CSL include increased capacity/efficiency, increased networking, high-quality outcomes, and tangible work products (Srinivas et al., 2015). Conversely, some of the risks and challenges to community partners associated with CSL work include time constraints or pressures, poor communication with faculty and students, lack of supervision of student work, insufficient student engagement and follow-through, the challenge of training students for real-world/workplace practice, restrictions of the academic calen-

dar, lack of reciprocity, faculty attrition, and deficits in cultural competence (Srinivas et al., 2015; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). In some instances, the aforementioned benefits do not outweigh the risks to agencies who are often already facing many obstacles, such as infrastructure challenges, staff turnover, and shifts in priorities (Barreneche et al., 2018; Karasik, 2020; Rinaldo et al., 2015).

The current CSL research emphasizes student teaching and learning and impacts on campuses, rather than impact of CSL on the community (Celio et al., 2011). Some argue that institutions of higher education do not involve their host communities in developing projects and that there is a disconnect between the social demographics of the community members served and the students (Hidayat et al., 2009). Scholars have questioned who CSL is actually serving and have called for a shift, moving beyond a charity or deficit-based model of CSL that reinforces negative stereotypes (Weah et al., 2000) to a more critical or democratically engaged model that focuses on reciprocity, assets, inclusion, collaboration, shared power, and cocreation of knowledge (Hoyt, 2011; Mitchell, 2008). Due to the above concerns and gaps in research, the purpose of this study is to address the college–community relationship and the impact of CSL on partners who engage with a college in a rural setting. The majority of CSL examples and models in the literature are from urban or suburban research institutions (Holton, 2003). Therefore, our study recognizes a need to begin developing a CSL model for rural institutions of higher education in order to understand and ground this work in the context of a local, rural community (Harris, 2004) where collaboration and partnerships may be especially important.

College–Community Partnerships

There is a general consensus that research on community partnerships in the CSL field needs the greatest amount of attention (Berkey et al., 2018; Bortolin, 2011), especially in rural areas (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). CSL work would not be possible without meaningful, authentic, mutually beneficial partnerships that include community involvement (Barreneche et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2017). Cruz and Giles (2000) advocated considering the college–community partnership a unit of analysis, and only recent studies have focused on community partners' experiences and the college–community relationship, specifically in rural areas (Creighton, 2008). Historically, colleges have tended to treat community sites as learning or community labs, where the community is expected to be flexible to meet student learning needs, rather than colleges meeting the needs of often underserved community organizations (Stoecker et al., 2009). As a result of the potentially exploitative nature of CSL, some communities may deny institutions of higher education access to their site.

Effective partnerships are characterized by commitment, communication, closeness, equity, reciprocity, and integrity (Bringle et al., 2012; Hidayat et al., 2009; Tinkler et al., 2014; Tryon et al., 2009). Developing a deep relationship based on these qualities can help address the challenges and risks inherent in CSL work. College–community partnerships require trust, and if that trust is broken, the foundation of reciprocity is as well (Malm et al., 2012). This reciprocity and trust develops over time from mutual sharing of power, risks, and vulnerability. CSL work can be messy and complicated. The communication, cultural, and power dynamics at play in these relationships can become problematic if not addressed and navigated intentionally and directly (Mitchell, 2008; Stoecker et al., 2009). Addressing these partnerships may be even more important in a rural area where building collaboration is especially relevant (Paulson, 2018).

Rural Community Service-Learning

Scholars have suggested that "rural" is a complex concept and that rural areas and geographical locations consist of distinct cultures (Stamm, 2003). However, defining "rural" is difficult, as there is no agreed-upon definition in the literature and most definitions are based on population and economic factors (Smalley et al., 2012). "Rural" can mean different things to different people, and the existence of multiple definitions of "rural" reflects the reality that "rural" is a very multidimensional concept. This study uses the U.S. Census Bureau's (2010) definition: "Rural" is anything (population, housing, territory) not in an urban area. By this definition, the community in which this study was completed is rural. Additionally, the community in which this study was completed is eligible for rural grant funding via the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and qualifies for the Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) Designation. CSL in a rural area

differs greatly from urban and suburban CSL; it requires specific skills, experience, and relationships to navigate (Stoecker et al., 2016). Stoecker et al. (2016) used the term "rural service learning" to refer to CSL in rural areas (p. 3).

In contrast to their urban counterparts, rural communities face unique challenges and offer unique strengths. A sense of community and tight-knit, close relationships that lack formality are common in rural areas and can be an asset to CSL work. These relationships have the potential to bridge the town–gown divide seen between colleges and the communities in which they are situated (Stoecker et al., 2016), and community–college relationships may be even more important in rural versus urban areas, because of the deep collaborations local colleges and rural organizations engage in (Curtain & Hargrove, 2010; Paulson & Casile, 2014; Paulson et al., 2015). However, people living in rural areas with dense social ties may be suspicious of `outsiders and distrust institutions of higher education, leading to relationships taking time to develop (Hidayat et al., 2009).

Challenges specific to CSL in a rural area include economic depression and lack of resources, lack of public transportation, and organizations' tendency to be fewer and spread out over larger areas (Stamm, 2003). Rural agencies and organizations are often understaffed and stretched thin, have less formal organizations and budgets, and tend to fill in with voluntarism where capacity is limited and organizations risk being overwhelmed beyond their capacity (Stoecker et al., 2016). For example, due to the aforementioned challenges, rural organizations may come to rely on students to produce professional-level work and products. Students conducting CSL in rural areas are sometimes given larger projects and more responsibility than students in urban areas, which can have a wider reaching impact with both positive and negative consequences (Harris, 2004). Given the present challenges to rural residents and the difficulties conducting CSL in rural areas, institutions of higher education can provide a good opportunity to serve in the role of capacity building and community development via collaboration, open communication, and reciprocity with the rural community. Finally, many positive and negative stereotypes are associated with rural areas and residents (Stoecker et al., 2016), and the negative connotations related to rurality can lead to ruralism, a pervasive form of discrimination (Bassett, 2005). Many college students come from nonrural backgrounds and may have preconceived notions about residents in rural areas that could interfere with their ability to work effectively with diverse communities.

The Present Study

The purpose of this mixed-methods research is to gain a better understanding of the community's perspective related to rural CSL and to identify what is working and what needs improvement in the college–community partnership to work toward creating lasting, symbiotic relationships in rural areas. Quantitative surveys provide a generalized starting point for understanding community partners' perspectives, whereas individual responses through in-depth interviews allow us to examine the complexity of these relationships in greater detail. Due to the nature of CSL work, individual experiences vary greatly, so it is important to hear each individual's lived experiences (Polin & Keene, 2010). Complementing quantitative data with the sensitivity of qualitative data could provide critical insights into the nature of college–community relationships and a deeper understanding that might be missed in survey data alone. The in-depth understanding and focus on the combination of this data could potentially give us a better understanding of rural community partners' experiences.

The main unit of analysis of this work is the campus–community relationship itself, specifically from the community partner perspective, an area that is relatively underrepresented in the literature (Blouin & Perry, 2009; James & Logan, 2016; Pillard Reynolds, 2014; Shalabi, 2013; Smith & Paine, 2015; Srinivas et al., 2015; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009; Worrall, 2007). This relationship, or social capital as described by Kendall and Knapp (2000), is a nontangible construct that focuses on partnerships and building bonds of trust between people (p. 110). Given the importance of community partners' perspectives, it is crucial to value and hear from various community members and to demonstrate the institution's commitment to reciprocity (Stoecker et al., 2009). The findings from this study may also provide a model for any institution in its mission to implement best practices in CSL.

Background

Research Setting

This study was conducted in a rural town located in the northeast region of the United States, where 87% of the residents identify as White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), compared to 69% of the student population at the college. The college is a small, private, highly selective liberal arts institution with an annual enrollment of approximately 1,600. The median income of the town in which the college is situated is $36,793, compared to the 2019 U.S. median household income of $68,703, with 24% of the residents living in poverty (U. S. Census Bureau, 2019). In general, the students at the college are more diverse and come from a higher socioeconomic status than the population in the town, reflecting the disconnect sometimes observed between the social demographics of the community members served and the students at the college (Hidayat et al., 2009), which could impact the development of partnerships.

History of Community Service-Learning at the College

In 2003, the Office of Community Service was renamed the Office of Community Service and Service-Learning to formalize the supportive role the office was undertaking with faculty interested in service-learning (SL). Since that time, it has evolved into the Office of Civic Engagement, with the function of support and coordination, but never oversight or requirement fulfillment, of SL courses. In addition, the college received the Carnegie Foundation's Classification for Community Engagement in 2006 and again in 2015. Beginning in the mid-2000s, the college began tagging courses with "SL" to designate CSL courses. In 2013, the Civic Engagement Committee was developed to take on the responsibility of educating the faculty about the process to apply this course designation. In 2016, the course-tagging symbol was changed to "E" to designate courses with a "community engagement" component. To qualify for this designation, courses were required to include the following four criteria: integrated learning, identified community issues and/or needs, reflection, and engaged course pedagogies. Faculty would complete an application form and submit it to the director of civic engagement, who would review and approve applications. In 2020, the college changed its online portal and, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the course designation was temporarily suspended. The college has no requirement that students participate in an "E" course or that faculty have specific training in forming partnerships or implementing CSL, other than meeting the aforementioned criteria for an "E" course. Some faculty do not complete the "E" application but still have an engagement component in their courses. Finally, no single repository or network exists to track these courses, making it difficult to get a complete picture of the community engagement efforts at the institution. Because of this lack of centralized coordination, the college engages with the community through a variety of both official and unofficial methodologies. CSL faculty development started with a book study in spring 2000. Since then, faculty CSL workshops have taken place most years with inconsistent attendance. Various endowments and minigrants have also been offered to faculty for course development, with the focus on education on CSL best practices and trusting the capabilities of the faculty to implement the work.

Methodology

Procedure

A mixed-methods approach, using surveys and interviews, was utilized in this study. After IRB approval, the primary researcher obtained contact information for community partners from the college's director of civic engagement. The difficulty in defining "community" is that there is no one definition for "community" and no agreement about who makes up the community. Establishing qualifications for "community partner" was a complex task, as partnerships are very fluid with changes in structure, personnel and faculty, and other environmental and situational variables. The college also did not have a comprehensive partnership tracking system in place. However, for the purposes of this study, community partners were identified as any person or organization with which students interact and carry out an academic CSL project (James & Logan, 2016). Thus, all identified community partners were connected to academic CSL, but their involvement varied tremendously. The list of contacts included 48 different organizations, and each contact was recruited via email invitations. Twenty-three participants out of the total 48 organizations contacted (a 48% response rate) completed the survey. The participants

were not compensated for their involvement in the study. Quantitative surveys provided a starting point for understanding community perspectives; however, to examine the complexity of these relationships and attempt to get an in-depth, nuanced understanding, individual confidential interviews were conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interview participants were recruited at the end of the survey via follow-up emails. The anonymous quantitative surveys included a researcher-developed Community Voices Survey and Satisfaction Survey and the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (TRES; Clayton et al., 2010).

Participants

Of the 23 community organizations surveyed, 70% of the participants identified their organizational status as nonprofit and 83% (n = 19) have worked with the college for more than 3 years. Table 1 shows the participants' responses to the question regarding the type(s) of organization with which they identify.

Measures

Quantitative

Community Voices Survey and Satisfaction Survey

The Community Voices Survey and Satisfaction Survey questions were modeled by best practices in CSL assessment (i.e., Gelmon et al., 2018) and other resources in order to gain a better understanding of each partnership's level of satisfaction, costs, benefits, and quality and sustainability of the relationship (Hutchinson, 2011; Shinnamon et al., 1999; Srinivas et al., 2015). The Community Voices Survey consisted of 10 forced-answer questions and two open-ended questions: "What was the best aspect of this experience for you?" and "What aspects of this experience would you change?" Example multiple-choice questions included "What was your main motivation/reason for deciding to participate in CSL?" "How did your interactions with the college influence your capacity to fulfill the mission of your organization?" and "What are some of the challenges you encountered?" The Satisfaction Survey consisted of 14 items on

Table 1. Community Partner Profile

Survey participants*	
Organizational benchmark addressed	***n* (%)**
Education	17 (74)
Environmental	7 (30)
Housing	6 (26)
Public service	4 (17)
Safety	3 (13)
Mental health	3 (13)
Interview participants**	
Organizational benchmark addressed	***n* (%)**
Social services	6 (54)
Environmental	2 (18)
Education	2 (18)
Public service	1 (10)

Note. *N = 23; **N = 11.

a 5-point Likert scale.

Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale

The Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (TRES; Clayton et al., 2010) is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure key characteristics of a relationship and map responses on a continuum with three levels: exploitative, transactional, transformational (E-T-T). The participants' choices range from exploitative (reflecting negative outcomes) to transactional (reflecting mutual benefits) to transformational (reflecting the growth of both parties through the relationship; p. 8).

The goal of the TRES is to provide a concise, nuanced summary, from the point of view of community partners, allowing a snapshot of the actual and desired qualities of their relationships. Thus, the TRES was used in this study to examine the nature of the college–community partnerships in order to provide suggestions to improve the practice of future partnerships. The TRES can also be used diagnostically, formatively, and summatively along multiple points during a partnership, allowing for a better understanding of partnerships for this study and in future studies. In the current study, the TRES demonstrated excellent reliability (α = 0.91).

Along with the items on the TRES, a Venn diagram assessment tool was used in the individual interviews to measure *closeness*. Clayton et al. (2010) designed an assessment tool to study closeness in partnerships based on the frequency and diversity of interactions, along with reciprocal influences on decision making. This tool is grounded in a well-known CSL model that describes partnerships as a network of discrete relationships among students, organizations, faculty members, administrators, and residents (SOFAR; Bringle et al., 2009). Clayton et al. (2010) found that indicators of closeness between faculty and community were positively correlated with other positive impact measures reflecting the transformational nature of these relationships.

Qualitative

Interviews

Out of the 23 survey participants, 11 agreed to participate in an online, semistructured interview with the same set of questions asked of each participant. To encourage candid feedback and reduce researcher bias, a student research assistant who had no association with the partners (Waters & Brigden, 2013) conducted the interviews. The interview questions were open-ended and included questions related to the outcomes and impacts of the partnership with the college. In addition to the interview questions, each participant completed the Venn diagram assessment on closeness (Clayton et al., 2010).

Results

Quantitative Findings

Community Voices Survey and Satisfaction Survey

Descriptive data analyses were conducted on survey items. When asked about their motivation for participating in the CSL, the top three responses from community partners were positive experience with students/mentoring students (54%), connecting with the college (25%), and capacity building (16%). The top responses to "How did this experience impact you?" included "It helped me feel committed to the student(s) development" (60%), "Gave me a sense of community" (43%), "Allowed me to interact with others who are different from me" (35%), and "Gave me a sense of accomplishment" (35%). Finally, the question "What challenges do you face in this work?" yielded these responses: staff demands (70%), unprepared students (13%), mismatch in values (4%), and insufficient timing (4%).

The Satisfaction Survey (adapted from Gelmon et al., 2018) demonstrated excellent reliability (α = 0.96). The majority of community partners indicated that they were satisfied with the experience, assigning a score of 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale (see Table 2). However, it is important to note that three outliers in this data set were not satisfied with their experiences.

Finally, when examining the relationship between satisfaction and how long the community partners have worked with the college, the results indicate that the longer the participants worked with the college, the greater their overall satisfaction (see Table 3).

Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale

The TRES was completed to assess the actual

Table 2. Respondents Scoring 4 or 5 on a 5-Point Scale on the Satisfaction Survey

Item	*n* (%)
Communication (Student)	17 (74)
Communication (Faculty)	15 (65)
Interaction (Student)	18 (78)
Interaction (Faculty)	16 (70)
Quality of student work	18 (78)
Feedback and input into the planning of experiences	17 (74)
Scope and timing of activity	15 (65)
Level of trust with faculty	18 (78)
Level of trust with the student	18 (78)
This partnership was successful	18 (78)
I will pursue a partnership in the future	19 (83)
This partnership made a difference in the community	17 (74)
This partnership was mutually beneficial	19 (83)
This partnership is sustainable	14 (61)

Note. *N* = 23; scale 1–5 (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*).

Table 3. Overall Satisfaction and Years Working With the College

	Overall Satisfaction		
	Less than 1 year (*n* = 1)	1 to 3 years (*n* = 3)	3 years or more (*n* = 19)
Mean	2.36	3.62	4.10
Minimum	2.36	2.43	1.36
Maximum	2.36	4.21	5.00

Note. *N* = 23

and desired quality of relationships, with higher numbers indicating relationships closer to transformational. A paired-sample *t*-test was conducted to evaluate the difference between community partners' actual and desired scores on various key elements of the TRES (see Table 4). The results indicated statistically significant differences in the following key areas: (1) outcomes/benefits of the CSL partnership, (2) collaborative decision making, (3) contribution of resources, (4) the role of the partnership in work and identity formation, (5) what matters in the relationships/partnership, and (6) overall level of satisfaction in regard to growth and change. Specifically, partners indicated a desire to move toward a more transformational partnership/relationship in each of these areas compared to the actual partnership/relationship.

Open-Ended Survey Questions

In a thematic analysis of the responses related to the best aspects of CSL, three themes were identified: (1) meeting and collaborating with faculty/student and mentoring students (*n* = 16), (2) deliverables (new projects), and (3) expanding capacity (*n* = 6). Responses to what the community partners would change about the CSL included (1) the need to prepare/screen students (*n* = 6), (2) nothing (*n* = 5), (3) change calendar/timeline and restrictions with student and/or partner schedule (*n* = 5), and (4) the need to work on shared goals/expectations (*n* = 4).

Table 4. The Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale

Key attributes	Actual		Desired		*t*(22)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Outcomes (scale 1–9)	6.34	2.32	7.82	1.72	2.875	.009*	0.27
Goals (scale 1–4)	3.26	.810	3.39	.782	1.000	.328	0.04
Decision making (scale 1–6)	4.91	1.34	5.30	1.10	2.398	.025*	0.21
Resources (scale 1–3)	2.56	.589	2.86	.344	3.102	.005*	0.30
Conflict (scale 1–4)	3.73	.751	3.91	.417	1.699	.103	0.11
Identity formation (scale 1–8)	4.73	1.71	5.73	2.00	2.615	.016*	0.24
Power (scale 1–3)	2.69	.558	2.86	.344	1.699	.103	0.11
What matters (scale 1–6)	4.47	1.47	5.26	1.32	3.458	.002*	0.35
Satisfaction/change (scale 1–9)	6.82	1.77	7.73	1.78	3.254	.004*	0.32

Note. $N = 23$.
*$p < .05$

Qualitative Findings

Community Partner Interview Results

Following the guidelines presented by Braun and Clarke (2012), a thematic analysis was completed on the interview data. The researchers recorded and transcribed each semistructured interview. Then each researcher read and reread the interviews and began to individually identify various codes in the transcripts. The researchers met several times to compare their findings, and categories were developed across participants based on extensive discussions. In order to improve the trustworthiness and authenticity of the qualitative data (Patton, 2014), several verification strategies were used in data collection and analysis, including triangulation, peer reviewing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member check-ins, and external audit trails. Through this iterative process four themes were developed: (1) personal/individual motivations for partnerships, (2) challenges to successful partnerships, (3) keys to successful partnerships, and (4) the role of the college. The following section will provide an overview and examples of each theme and subthemes.

Personal/Individual Motivations for Partnerships. When asked for the reasons they got involved in their partnership. the majority of community partner responses identified personal benefits or individual motivations. Similarities across the findings included mentoring, "co-educator," career development, providing students with broader skills such as civic and leadership skills, and "expand[ing] student's belief systems." Other motivations involved the desire to have students "grow roots here." In fact, three of the 11 participants disclosed that they were college alumni.

The majority of the participants talked about positive relationships with students as a personal motivation or benefit. One participant noted, "[Some] students would have dropped out if it were not for their relationship with [our organization] and the support they got." Another powerful quote related to mentoring students contained the following:

> The most important thing is that there are amazing benefits to both community partners and the students. That it is a two-way street—there are benefits to the partner which also has a positive benefit in our region. But also, we change the lives of students in ways that are really profound. I just got an email yesterday from someone who worked with me as an intern 12 years ago and her life has never been the same. We impact each other for the better. I appreciate [the college] for giving us that opportunity.

Challenges to Successful Partnerships. Specific challenges identified in the thematic analysis were the episodic nature of the work, limits in agency capacity, difficulties working with students and faculty, and unclear expectations and inconsistent communication.

The difficulties surrounding the episodic nature of the work and limits in agency capacity, also supported by the survey data, were expressed by the interview participants. As one participant explained,

> The one-semester experience is just so brief that by the time the student starts to really get an understanding and is invested, it's over. With the amount of time that is structured to put into it, they get some experience. . . . There could be so much more learning and impact with a model that was longer than one semester.

All but one participant discussed how this work can be labor intensive, where many nonprofits are often "stretched thin" and understaffed. Of the 11 participants, 10 worked for nonprofit organizations. A related example included the increased workload that occurred as a result of taking on students or from students not following through on obligations. In one unfortunate example that a participant described, "Staff went out and had to do additional fieldwork to resolve issues that arose." And in another, "I don't have a lot of nice things to say about the partnership with the college at this point. I probably wouldn't work with [the program] because it wasn't beneficial for me." Clearly, the relationships reflected in these comments are not transformational or transactional and might even be considered exploitative.

Working with students was consistently noted as an additional challenge. Several participants commented on the need for better screening and preparation of students. Specific examples included "students were inconsistent," "arrived late," "did not follow through," and "demonstrated poor and inconsistent communication skills." Three participants also noted the challenge of transportation to sites that were not within walking distance from the campus.

In line with the survey data, a majority of participants noted that working with faculty was sometimes difficult. Specific problems mentioned included a lack of accessibility to faculty and communication with faculty. A powerful quote from a participant explained,

> Honestly, I recommend that the college clearly define expectations for their students and their faculty better on how they are engaging with the local community and agencies. I found the expectation of the partnership was not clear at the forefront of the project, even though we had met and discussed what the expectations were, which ultimately ended up causing issues closer to the end of the project.

All 11 partners indicated that the expectations were sometimes unclear. However, interestingly, seven out of 11 partners indicated that their expectations were met, two indicated that they were not met, and two said their expectations were sometimes met.

Keys to Successful Partnerships. The overall keys to successful partnership identified in the interview data entail developing clear goals/expectations and communication before the start of the projects, maintaining flexibility in hours, ensuring a fit between the goals and values of all partners, and specific student and faculty qualities. In relation to clearer expectations, one partner suggested:

> I think [in] our experience would be to do a better job connecting in the beginning. . . . I would pay much more attention to this. If we did it again. The other would probably have had a pretty clear discussion on accessibility of the faculty member when the project started, that might have avoided some frustration in communicating back and forth and making sure we both understood where the project was going.

Another subtheme related to successful partnerships and expectations was the need for open communication. One specific suggestion stated, "I think we would probably give students written expectations and discuss preferred methods of communication and understand the students' time and schedule and availability prior to engaging them for a project."

The third subtheme related to successful partnerships encompassed positive student qualities. The student qualities related to

success were numerous: "engaged," "enthusiastic," "interested in the members," "committed," "reliable," "showed up and followed the rules," "were a good fit for the agency," "independent, driven to success," and "provided new and diverse ideas/perspectives." One participant provided a clear example of positive qualities: "I think the factor [to success] is that we had students who were willing to engage themselves, and commit time and effort to make their time valuable towards the agency." Another example related to building capacity, skills, and fresh perspectives:

> Students are bringing their ideas and their gifts, so we've had everything from, [*sic*] yoga and relaxation classes to creative writing clubs and . . . just a lot of different things like that happen and those often are legacy projects that carry on at least for a while, or come and go, which is wonderful. The students bring, you know, new faces and new opportunities for individuals to interact with and share and just have an interchange. Then, of course, we have some big projects that can get accomplished too. That probably wouldn't happen if it were not for the outside support because, with a lot of the day-to-day, you know, obligations and the work that we have to do.

The final subtheme consisted of faculty qualities related to success. Participants gave favorable descriptions of faculty who were accessible, provided student supervision, maintained open communication, and provided specific skills. As one participant reflected,

> I think that, in especially more recent years, I think we've gotten way better on both ends of communication roles and responsibilities of the college to professors and us as far as, you know, how this works. It may not have gone so well early on that we did not always feel we had support from the professors that we needed, given the time we needed to put into it, but that has been much, much improved and gone much better for the most part.

The Role of the College. The community partners discussed the positive and negative aspects of building relationships with the college, and what they would change about the college. Some of the positive aspects of these relationships involved the college helping with "building linkages" and "knitting the community together." A specific comment indicated, "I know community partners are not all non-profits, it is good for us to network with each other and some of that is facilitated through our relationship and partnership with [the] College bringing us together." Colleges can serve as bridges between various organizations, connecting different groups together to help create a linked community.

One drawback that hinders establishing and maintaining a relationship with the college is a lack of support and trust in the college. Only one participant expressed this specific sentiment, but the researchers wanted to give voice to those who expressed a negative experience. As mentioned earlier, two of the 11 interviewed participants were not satisfied with the CSL experience and did not have their expectations/goals met, and there were three outliers in the satisfaction survey. One participant explained,

> I don't have a lot of nice things to say about the partnership with the college at this point. I probably wouldn't [do it] again . . . because it wasn't beneficial for me. . . . I'm just so worried about the fact that I can actually trust that they would send me a student who I could work with. So I don't know. I'm very leery about possibly ever having a [student] again because I just went through all those years of challenges and stress.

Relationships with community organizations can remain viable only through ongoing evaluations by the college and partners to ensure that mutual benefits continue. If a partner starts to lose trust in the college, as in the example above, open communication is essential to address the issues at an early stage.

Several participants discussed their hopes moving forward in CSL work with the college. Those hopes entailed longer term "deeper relationships," for the college to better recognize the work that the partners put into CSL, better preparation of faculty and students for CSL work, and partnerships outside [city]. Some partners prefer that

students continue with their organization over the course of a few years, rather than a short semester-long project, to develop deeper connections; however, in some instances this may not be possible. One participant gave this example:

> I would say that [the students] who are with us for 4 years tackle different types of problems and I think that we get more out of that . . . we develop a real relationship with students who are with us for a long time. There's a lot more that they get out of [the experience]—they become a part of our organization—and they may not come in with a specific, you know, defined project, but they learn more about what we do and are able to in some ways, they help us grow from the inside out.

Another desired change was related to better recognition and support of community partners by the college. Suggestions related to this theme included "more recognition of partners," "more showcasing of work," and "increasing media exposure of the CSL work." One participant offered a telling example: "I think it's really important that [the college] also understands how much work it is on the part of the community partners to make this happen. How could we get more creative with supporting that, recognizing that in some way?" Understanding and addressing the amount of effort and commitment that is required of partners may be necessary to help them feel valued throughout the course of the relationship.

The next desired change was "preparing faculty and students for this type of work" and the need to "set a standard for everyone." If a college hopes to create lasting community partnerships, expectations must be established for anyone that plans to work with a partner, and the college should monitor the conduct of these individuals. According to one participant,

> Maybe setting the standard with professors for healthy communication with the partners to make sure that we don't just have certain professors that are outstanding but that anyone that's involved with this has a certain expectation for, you know, respecting the time it takes on the other end. Also, if the professors are willing to maybe come to the community site and also understand what it's about.

Standard training for all faculty and students working with community partners may be helpful to ensure that there are consistent experiences within varying relationships. Educating all faculty and students on the nature of the organization they are working with may be a stepping stone in preparing them for this work.

The final suggested change was to expand CSL work beyond the city in which the college is located. For example, "My group is a countywide organization and it would be nice to have more of a county focus by the college. It tends to be [city] centered. If I could change something, that would be it." The expansion of partnerships may be beneficial for some organizations, but also ties into the concern regarding transportation to sites that are not within walking distance of the campus. Addressing some of the above wishes may create better relationships; however, colleges should also express clear boundaries of feasibility, and ensure partners understand what may and may not be possible.

Interview Venn Diagram Level of Closeness

A paired-samples t-test was completed on the Venn diagram level of closeness from the individual interview responses (Mashek et al., 2007) and revealed a statistically significant difference between actual closeness and desired closeness, $t(10) = 3.96$, $p = .003$, with a moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.61$). The mean score of actual level of closeness and desired level of closeness was 3.54 ($SD = 1.12$) to 5.09 ($SD = 1.04$), respectively.

Discussion

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine the impact of rural CSL on community partners who are involved in CSL, an area of study often ignored in the literature (Bortolin, 2011; James & Logan, 2016; Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008), especially in a rural area in the United States (Harris, 2004; Pillard Reynolds, 2014; Stoecker et al., 2009). The goal was to provide an opportunity to amplify the voice of rural community partners, to develop a better understanding of the community partner's satisfaction, and to provide recommendations to improve practice. The results of this study both con-

firm and add to the existing literature on both positive and negative experiences and outcomes of CSL for community partners and organizations in rural areas and provide a framework for conducting CSL, focusing on the unique considerations of working in a rural community.

Rural Community Partner Satisfaction

Consistent with previous research, the majority of the participants indicated overall satisfaction with the CSL experience. However, to improve practice it is important to note and address the areas of least satisfaction: faculty communication and sustainability of the partnership. At the heart of this conversation is the fundamentally relational nature of CSL work. Relationships among CSL participants may be even more important in rural areas.

A common thread throughout this research, and in the CSL literature, is that a successful and sustainable campus–community partnership is based on trust, clear and open communication, and reciprocity, no matter the location. Therefore, it is imperative that faculty spend time nurturing relationships (at the beginning, middle, and end of the CSL process), understanding community strengths and needs, and working toward shared goals. As expressed in this research, and noted in previous CSL research, faculty often appear only as bookends of the semester, demonstrating a lack of respect for the time and commitment of community partners (Creighton, 2008; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). This lack of consistent communication from faculty can be especially problematic in rural areas because people in these areas often have dense social ties with one another and value deep collaboration (Stoecker et al., 2016). In rural areas, there also may be initial feelings of doubt and lack of trust in institutions of higher education (Hidayat et al., 2009). For this reason, rural CSL partnerships may need extra attention to ensure that trust can be built, meaning faculty should prioritize open communication and carefully assess their availability before entering and committing to these relationships.

Although the majority of the participants were satisfied, it is important to note that three of the 23 survey participants were outliers in the data set who indicated overall dissatisfaction with the rural CSL experience. When the majority of people are satisfied, the minority are often ignored (Stoecker et al., 2009). Hence, it is important to amplify the unsatisfied voices, learn from them, and work toward resolutions to maintain the sustainability of all relationships with community partners. Dissatisfaction has the potential to reinforce feelings of skepticism that can spread quickly throughout a small community, creating negative perceptions of the college.

The item regarding sustainability of the partnership received the lowest score on the Satisfaction Survey. The findings from this study, as indicated by the TRES and the Venn diagram level of closeness, are consistent with previous research (Shalabi, 2013), demonstrating that rural communities also want to move to a more mutually beneficial and transformative relationship. One way to make these relationships more transformative is to provide a basis of reciprocity (Davis et al., 2017) in which stakeholders work toward collective decision making on projects and goals from the beginning of the project, and through mutual, shared distribution of resources and power (Creighton, 2008; Mitchell, 2008). It is important to note that transactional relationships and outcomes may be appropriate and satisfying in some CSL situations, whereas movement toward mutual transformation may be desirable in others. In other words, transformational relationships might not be optimal or even possible in some partnerships (Barreneche et al., 2018). Most of the participants in this study indicated that students were providing a service and expanding organizational capacity, suggesting that the partnerships were, at a minimum, transactional and reciprocal. This range of possibilities highlights the importance of assessing community partner satisfaction with the relationship.

Recommendations

The importance of relationships in CSL work stands as an overarching theme in this study. Its significance may be even greater for rural organizations, which often have multiple needs that CSL students can fulfill. Relationships also take on added significance in rural areas where deep ties are more common and more highly valued, and a mistrust of outsiders may exist. In fact, relationships with rural community organizations can endure only through ongoing evaluation by the college and partners, to ensure maintenance of mutual benefits. If a partner starts losing trust in the college, open communication is crucial to address

any issues or concerns. Developing CSL boards could be useful to hear the concerns expressed by partners to relay information back to faculty, and to support both parties in creating trust and more effective partnerships. The participant's suggestion of facilitating networking might be beneficial to allow varying opinions, especially negative opinions of the college, to be openly shared and addressed. Such networking would also offer a good opportunity for the college to discuss how they could mend ruptured partnerships and create support systems across varying community organizations. The use of satisfaction surveys may provide an opportunity to continuously assess the partnerships over time, to ensure a sustained symbiotic relationship, and to allow an opportunity for reflection and discussion. Finally, it might behoove institutions of higher education to pay attention to the key relationship areas outlined by the TRES and work toward thicker relationships. By measuring partner satisfaction and relationships and using this information to engage in a dialectical feedback process, rather than a linear cause-and-effect process, institutions can strive for a greater positive impact on their local communities that is also more desired by these communities (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

As we have addressed, collaborators in rural areas yearn for these closer relationships and truly want them to be collaborative in all areas of engagement. They want to help create, grow, and expand these relationships, as indicated by their dedication to mentorship and coeducation roles. In contrast, urban community partners have the opportunity to work with multiple institutions with a large pool of students and might not deem these relationships as important or require the social capital, which CSL in rural communities can help foster, that a rural partner might (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). As revealed in this study, partners in rural areas value not just the positive aspects of an organization, but also the personal growth they experience while teaching students. Institutions could be mindful of partners' value for mentoring students and let community partners lead the relationships more, to let institutions explore how these partnerships could promote growth for themselves and the students.

Benefits of Rural Community Service-Learning to Community Partners

Consistent with previous research (Creighton, 2008; James & Logan, 2016; Miron & Moely, 2006; Pillard Reynolds, 2014; Srinivas et al., 2015), research participants indicated multiple benefits to CSL partnerships, such as mentoring students, deliverables, increased capacity, media exposure, increased program effectiveness, leveraging of resources/skills/expertise, future hires, and fresh ideas and perspectives. In fact, 83% of survey participants indicated that the CSL was mutually beneficial. This finding is promising, as Cruz and Giles (2000) noted a lack of research to support the claimed benefits of CSL on community organizations.

A positive finding of the TRES is that there was no difference in actual and desired scores in the following areas: goals, conflict management, and power. This finding might indicate that the partners felt that when conflicts arose, the partners would deal with the issue openly. One could argue, as suggested by this study, that this result may be an outcome of an open and trusting relationship that has been built over time. For example, 82% of the survey participants have worked with the college for 3 or more years and had the highest levels of satisfaction, whereas the few partners who had worked a shorter duration with the college had lower levels of overall satisfaction. One could also speculate that the community partners who are newer to this work might see it as an added burden or have not established deeper relationships to address unmet needs or manage conflicts when they arise. In regard to mutually shared goals and shared power, the results seem to indicate that the survey participants' actual and desired status were compatible, indicating that they felt that both community partners and the college respect each other's goals and that these relationships are based on reciprocity, shared resources, and joint ownership for projects.

Recommendations

Another benefit noted by participants is public recognition of community partners by the college. Some comments related to this theme include the desire for the college to provide "more recognition of partners," "more showcasing of work," and "increasing media exposure of the CSL work." Understanding and addressing the amount

of effort and commitment that is required of partners may be necessary to help them know that they are valued throughout the course of the relationship. The college should consistently recognize the work of all community partnerships and the benefits of these relationships.

Finally, another way to enhance the benefits of CSL to individual community partners could be to prioritize individual community partners' different motivations for engaging in this work (Bell & Carlson, 2009). For example, many partners see this type of work as a way to expose students to civic service philosophies (Ferrari & Worrall, 2000) and possible future careers (Gelmon et al., 2018). The importance of the variety of community partner motivations is supported by the significant difference found in the Identity Formation Subscale of the TRES and by the majority of participants in both phases indicating that a benefit of CSL is to be a mentor and "coeducator" with students. Therefore, faculty and institutions of higher education can prioritize the importance of this identity or role.

Challenges of Rural Community Service-Learning for Community Partners

In both phases of the study, participants expressed the risks, obstacles, and burdens of rural CSL and provided suggestions for the college to mitigate some of these costs. The top responses for the challenges in this work included staff/organizational demands, unprepared students and faculty, organization and student mismatch, and insufficient time available for projects. The findings related to staff demands and increased workloads have been supported in previous research (Creighton, 2008; Srinivas et al., 2015) and may be even more salient in rural areas where partners are already stretched thin and do not have adequate resources to mitigate these extra costs. Since people in rural areas often wear multiple hats, sustaining and finding time for these partnerships may be harder than for their urban counterparts. In urban areas, most organizations have more people and resources available to distribute work and establish partnerships; rural areas struggle in this aspect. Considering there are typically fewer people in resource-stretched organizations, such organizations' communication shortcomings may be more noticeable, whether that is with the college, faculty, students, or the partners themselves. All but one participant discussed how this work can be labor intensive, stating directly that many nonprofits are often "stretched thin" and understaffed. Importantly, in this research, 70% of the survey participants and 90% of the interview participants reported working for a nonprofit organization.

As mentioned previously, sustainability of the partnership had the lowest score in the satisfaction survey. If a relationship does not provide a benefit, causes excessive workloads, or is exploitative, can it be sustainable in the long term? There is a need for institutions of higher education to deepen their commitments to community partners, ensuring that the partnerships are mutually beneficial, while honoring the workload of community organizations. Notably, 83% of the survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that they would continue to pursue partnerships with the college, despite the aforementioned costs and drawbacks, implying that the benefits of this work might outweigh the costs. On the other hand, this finding could highlight that rural partners feel a sense of desperation and need help so badly that they are resigned to being taken advantage of in some ways. However, institutions of higher education should attempt to mitigate the risks and costs of CSL, as they often have greater resources and power, especially in rural areas where funding for community organizations is often limited. Participants suggested the following as ways to address these risks: improved preparation or screening for students, more faculty training and mentorship, and open and clear communication.

Recommendations

Faculty and institutions of higher education have an ethical responsibility to screen and orient students to this work and help students understand the rural context (Barreneche et al., 2018; Harris, 2004), perhaps addressing issues of ruralism. Rural CSL work presents unique challenges and barriers, and faculty can play a crucial role in mitigating these challenges and barriers by making connections, educating students, and monitoring their work (Harris, 2004). One interesting comment by an interview participant included insight about connections that formed during their CSL experience: "The relationship is with the individual faculty, not with the college." Successful development of CSL courses and relationships with community partners is contingent upon faculty nurturing relationships and managing students and on

institutions supporting faculty in their work.

One suggestion is to facilitate rural learning programs in institutions of higher education to ensure that students understand the area they are working in and the specific organization in which they will be placed during a CSL experience. Allowing students the opportunity to learn about common issues in rural communities could also provide them with tools that they could apply more generally to other rural communities and agencies. Faculty can also help students understand the demands rural community partners may experience and that, because of these demands, students may need to take the initiative and work independently on projects. Due to the aforementioned role of faculty in CSL, it is especially imperative that when colleges advocate for institutionalized engagement work, they support faculty in their implementation, development, assessment, and recognition of CSL, mandating clear goals and communication with all stakeholders before the start of a project (Harris, 2004). If institutions fail to work directly with their partners when developing CSL projects, a mismatch in goals and expectations can arise, creating projects that may not apply to the partner organization, resulting in overall dissatisfaction and ineffectiveness. Thus, institutions should attempt to have open conversations with their partners and involve the community in developing projects from the very beginning of the CSL engagement process.

Since the majority of participants noted that working with faculty was sometimes difficult, specifically noting lack of accessibility to faculty and communication with faculty, we conclude that preparation is key to healthy and sustainable community partnerships. Educating all faculty and students on the nature of the organization they are working with may be a stepping stone in preparing them for this work. Institutions should provide standardized criteria regarding CSL best practices and clear guidelines that can help educate and support faculty in implementing high-quality CSL into their curriculum and cultivating relationships with rural community partners. Providing faculty development and peer/community mentorship and ensuring core competencies (Creighton, 2008), providing incentives (money, course releases), support (with logistics, student TAs), and recognition, especially through tenure and promotion policies, could encourage the implementation of high-quality CSL and strong relationships with community partners. Institutions could also develop CSL course designations with specific standards for implementing CSL to track and monitor CSL projects.

Related to student–organizational mismatch, if a college hopes to create lasting community partnerships, certain expectations must be set for anyone who plans to work with a partner, and the college should monitor the conduct of these individuals. Interestingly, all 11 partners interviewed indicated that the expectations for their partnerships were sometimes unclear. However, seven out of 11 interviewees indicated that their expectations were met, two indicated that they were not met, and two said their expectations were sometimes met. Faculty can create a manifesto that makes expectations and goals explicit before the start of a program. Lastly, faculty need to have frank conversations with community partners about what students can and cannot offer in the context of their education and developmental level (Creighton, 2008; Green et al., 2017).

Another area of concern found in both the survey and interview data was the scope and timing of the CSL projects. This problem is a common concern for community partners, as institutions of higher education work on an academic calendar, which organizations and nonprofits do not. This schedule mismatch is problematic because organizations still need assistance during midterms, finals, summer and winter breaks, and at the end of semesters. Institutions of higher education and faculty might need to find creative ways to extend projects beyond the academic calendar and move beyond short-term CSL. Examples can include focusing on project-based service-learning (Tryon et al., 2008) or allowing different groups of students to work on the projects each semester. An added suggestion includes collaboration among the partner, faculty, and student to create a timeline and communication plan, which would ensure a clear understanding of what is expected throughout the partnership, and generating possibilities for work during institutional breaks, such as remote work or a summer position. Some final suggestions for improvement provided by the participants in this study and supported by the literature included the need to maintain flexibility in hours and ensure there is a good fit between the goals and values of all stakeholders (Creighton, 2008; Stoecker &

Tryon, 2009).

Implications for Rural Institutions of Higher Education

To maintain and foster college–community partnerships, institutions of higher education can move away from traditional models of CSL that focus on student learning to a more critical service-learning approach that advocates for a social change orientation, working to redistribute power, developing authentic relationships between college and community, and encouraging community partners to be coeducators who can assist institutions in making important decisions related to the community (Howard, 2014; Long & Campbell, 2012; Mitchell, 2008; Stoecker et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2018).

Institutions of higher education can serve in the role of capacity building and community and economic development within a rural community via CSL. Many institutions of higher education are seen as anchors in their communities, playing a key role in enhancing the physical, social, cultural, and economic well-being of the community and engaging the community in addressing local and pressing concerns. These concerns can be addressed by providing communities with access to educational materials (e.g., providing access to the campus library and digital databases), research (e.g., completing needs assessments), and entrepreneurial capacity building (Mitchell, 2008; Perry & Menendez, 2010).

Colleges and communities have a long history of segregation. As mentioned by participants in this study, colleges need to be aware of the impact of budget concerns on organizations and that time is a limited resource for many rural community partners. Some institutions have more funding, power, and influence over others, and the potentially problematic power dynamics between a college and a community organization can result in a partner being less willing to share their discontent with the college out of fear of "being taken off the list" of potential community partners (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009, p. 34). This hesitancy might be even more relevant in rural areas because federal grant money tends to be funneled to urban areas with larger populations and a greater likelihood of finding students for CSL work. As the participants in this study remarked, partners that work at the agencies are already stretched thin and are often working in multiple roles. Therefore, the college can act as an anchor institution to leverage assets in a more equitable way, moving toward a transformative approach and commitment to long-term community capacity building (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009) and just being better neighbors.

Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusion

One limitation of this research is the degree to which the findings can be generalized to other colleges and communities. The themes developed in this study are not intended to be all-encompassing and comprehensive. They are local to the geographic location of this study, and the goal was to broaden the understanding of rural CSL in the community in which the study was conducted to improve future work. Furthermore, this research included a convenience sample that may have resulted in bias. Specifically, this sample included only organizations that have worked with the college, with the majority having worked with the college for over 3 years. Therefore, it would behoove future research to attempt to recruit participants who did not respond to the survey or interview request or who choose not to work with the college. Additionally, future research could target participants who are new or have worked with the college for shorter periods of time. The survey instruments utilized self-report measures, and the participants may have over- or underestimated their responses to conceal vulnerabilities or enhance social desirability. However, anonymity in the surveys was maintained and hopefully did not have a negative influence on the outcomes.

To further expand on the current findings, future research could assess current or new CSL partnerships, following them throughout a project or course to address specific issues in the moment. Another suggestion would be to interview rural community partners who had a negative experience with CSL or had a negative experience initially that later became a positive experience with a healthy, reciprocal relationship to provide an understanding of how that relationship transformed. In addition, specific outcomes and assessment measures could be evaluated using the SOFAR framework (Bringle et al., 2009) or the impact areas (Smith & Paine, 2015). For example, it may be useful to talk to actual community members or clients that are impacted by CSL work. The TRES can also be used to look at relationships over time through longitudinal research and

to take a more nuanced look at why some rural college–community relationships are successful and why some are not. Finally, conducting a comparison between rural and urban community partners' needs, experiences, similarities, and differences could provide valuable information to all institutions of higher education.

In conclusion, although several findings from our study could be generalized and useful for any CSL program regardless of geographical location (the importance of trust, open communication, time and resources constraints), we provide a few takeaways for rural institutions of higher education to consider. First, to ensure partner satisfaction and partnership longevity, institutions in rural areas should prioritize building trusting and potentially transformative relationships with community partners and assessing these partnerships through frequent check-ins with all stakeholders in each partnership (students, faculty, staff, organizations, and residents). This is not a novel idea in CSL work, but based on our findings we argue that trusting and collaborative relationships may be even more important in rural areas, which are characterized by dense social ties so that deeper relationships are important and valued. Open and frequent communication with faculty, in order to build trust, can also provide a safe outlet for partners to express direct concerns without fear of retaliation by the institution, as rural organizations may rely more on social and economic assistance from institutions than their urban counterparts. Second, reciprocity is a key ingredient to any effective and mutually beneficial partnership. The results indicate that some rural partners yearn for more transformative relationships and truly want them to be collaborative in all areas of engagement. Specifically, the partners discussed motivations and dedication to mentoring students and working as coeducators. In contrast, urban community partners often work with a large range of institutions and groups of students; they might not have the opportunity to form close mentorships; they may have the capacity to easily manage a preestablished project from a class or institution. Finally, our research reveals that numerous rural partnerships are primarily focused on addressing the scarcity of organizational personnel at their CSL sites. In such cases, students play a crucial role in assisting partners to undertake projects that might not have been initiated otherwise. It is important to note that rural areas are frequently underserved and lack sufficient funding in comparison to urban areas. Consequently, we assert that rural institutions of higher education possess the potential to utilize and share their assets, resources, and social and economic influence to effectively support rural CSL partners in ways that bring mutual benefits and drive transformative change.

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