

Community Partner Experiences in a Service-Learning Development Program

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Abstract

In response to continued calls for research centering community perspectives in service-learning and community engagement, this mixed-methods article examines the experiences of community fellows who were a part of a university service-learning development program. The purpose of the program was to train faculty and community partners in service-learning pedagogy and implementation practices. We analyzed self-reported data from 25 community partners over eight cohorts of the program. In the article, we find that community fellows grew their knowledge of service-learning terms and practices. At the same time, they identified logistic and equity challenges in service-learning implementation and partnerships. Amid these experiences, community fellows highlighted the formation of a shared community among all fellows as the strongest outcome of the program. The shared community afforded them space to build meaningful relationships, collectively plan, and problem-solve together as they practiced service-learning.

Keywords: service-learning, development programs, community partners



Universities often engage with local communities through community-based educational practices (Ehlenz, 2018). When leveraging antioppressive approaches, pedagogies such as extension education, internships, and service-learning can be used to develop lasting community-university partnerships that integrate learning and community development as complementary processes. However, these pedagogies have a long, imperfect history, having gone through many revisions after pointed critiques from faculty, students, and communities. Often, these critiques highlight the power imbalance between universities and communities (Bowen, 2014; Clifford, 2017; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019).

Historically seen as a learning approach, service-learning has prioritized student experiences and knowledge over community experiences (Raddon & Harrison, 2015; Stoecker, 2016). The results of these approaches have been mixed (Danley &

Christiansen, 2019). In some cases, these methods have resulted in worsened community-university relationships (DiPadova-Stocks, 2005). In response, researchers and practitioners continue to revise service-learning approaches, attempting to address and subvert lingering power imbalances between universities and communities (Mitchell & Latta, 2020).

Some of the latest revisions, stemming from critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008), work to prioritize community goals, knowledge, and needs. Where traditional service-learning might be seen primarily as a learning process, critical service-learning advocates argue it is (or should be) a process of social change, community development, or activism (Bowen, 2014; Vincent et al., 2021). Centering community goals rather than student learning marks a significant shift in the approach and intention of curricular community engagement. Critical service-learning (CSL) aims to directly affect social change efforts through

community-based courses by building authentic relationships and redistributing power to create more equitable outcomes (Mitchell, 2008). Community partners are cocreators of course content and activities. At the same time, they work to build strong relationships with faculty and students to collaborate on community-identified activities. This model is not intuitive and works against decades of unjust power dynamics. Even in this form of progress toward power redistribution, however, community partners are not given the resources to learn how to engage in these partnerships.

Background

Research on service-learning partnerships and practices has historically centered faculty and student experiences. There is a robust, decades-long field of literature that has tested, measured, theorized, examined, and otherwise analyzed student experiences and outcomes in myriad ways (e.g., Astin et al., 2000; Mason & Dunens, 2019). Although not as multifaceted as student-centered analyses, the faculty-centric research is no less ubiquitous. These studies are often faculty accounts and reflections, case studies, and analyses of faculty development in service-learning (e.g., Cooper, 2014; Lambright & Alden, 2012; Morrison & Wagner, 2016). Comparatively, community perspectives and voices are noticeably lacking in service-learning literature, as evidenced by the frequent calls for further inclusion (e.g., Blouin & Perry, 2009; George-Paschal et al., 2019). Researchers have responded with a slowly increasing field of study. Only within the past few years have we begun to see a more robust examination of community experiences of service-learning (e.g., Tinkler et al., 2014) offering an answer to the question: “Is service-learning an effective tool for communities in community-university partnerships?”

To date, answers have been mixed. Some community partners have highlighted the added value of student projects to their organizations (Cronley et al., 2015). Others have noted the individual growth in their experiences with service-learning (Chika-James et al., 2022). Another finding that has arisen is community partners’ intentional focus to ensure successful student learning experiences (Rinaldo et al., 2015)—a finding that may recenter student experience and merit calls for further critical analysis of the power dynamics at work.

Many of these same studies have also pointed out the challenges community partners experience in the context of service-learning. It takes extensive time and labor from community partners to make partnerships effective and sustainable (Barnes et al., 2009). Studies have recognized the varying range of success many student projects achieve in meeting goals (Matthews, 2019; Walker et al., 2021). Additionally, many partners have noted a lack of preparation, support, and resources for engaging in service-learning (Petri, 2015). Blouin and Perry (2009) explained that community partners do not always participate in designing the service-learning experience. Additionally, Davis et al. (2019) found that community partners can be unclear on the differences between service-learning and more transactional forms of engagement like internships. This confusion can lead to faculty and community partners having different definitions of core terms, different expectations of the experience, and ultimately a less effective partnership.

Given these findings, the literature suggests there is a lack of support and training for community partners in service-learning, which may result from lingering dynamics of traditional service-learning that devalue community partner labor and marginalize their perspectives. The purpose of this study was to examine a critical service-learning development program designed to address this need for more support and training for both faculty (Derreth et al., 2022) and community partners, in a more equitable approach. Hereafter, this article focuses on community partner experiences in the service-learning development program. We explore community partners’ key learnings and experiences from the program and the factors community partners find challenging and/or valuable in engaging community-university partnerships through service-learning.

The Service-Learning Fellows Program

Local Context

The Service-Learning Fellows Program (SLFP) that is the subject of this study was conducted by Johns Hopkins University (JHU). An R1 university, JHU has a long, troubled history with Baltimore’s local communities (Pietila, 2018). In the recent past, JHU campus development relied on

a public-private partnership that implemented eminent domain to remove over 700 families from their homes (Gomez, 2019). Doing so radically changed the landscape and neighborhoods surrounding JHU, along with the community-university relationships. Additionally, JHU has just instituted a state-approved private police force, despite much community critique (Smith, 2021)—further exacerbating a strained relationship.

Considering these macroinstitutional movements, it has been an “uphill battle” in some ways for university faculty and staff to gain and sustain trust among communities and local organizations (Harms, 2021). The SLFP is designed to engage with this history as a means of contributing to its repair. The overall intention of the SLFP is to train faculty instructors and community partners, together, in critical service-learning pedagogy. CSL is designed as a justice-based approach for developing a community-university relationship that accomplishes a shared goal. Some development programs separate faculty and community because of their disparate needs and differing roles in service-learning. The SLFP brings these individuals together in hopes of engaging in the needed work of collaboration from the start of a project. As is evident from JHU’s history, trust should lead before any appropriate action can be taken. The SLFP is designed to develop trust and collaboration as a prerequisite to project design and implementation.

Program Design

The SLFP is led by the university’s Community Engagement and Service-Learning Center for the graduate health professional school (the Center). The Center’s team of faculty and staff have expertise in education research, public health education, community development and engagement, and leadership development. The leadership team also includes senior fellows (three faculty and two community leaders): past fellows who have each previously completed the SLFP and have been highly successful in implementing service-learning courses and projects.

Each year, the Center’s local community partners are encouraged to apply to become community fellows in the SLFP, a year-long service-learning development program. Three community partners are selected each year, alongside faculty instructors from each eligible school (Schools of Nursing and

Public Health) supported by the Center. On average, each yearly cohort has totaled nine people—three community partners, three public health faculty, and three nursing faculty. The SLFP is designed to support community partners and faculty instructors in learning CSL pedagogy together. The end goal is for fellows to facilitate service-learning courses and projects. The SLFP begins before fellows start designing projects, and then program leaders work with fellows through the design and implementation phases of their courses and projects.

The SLFP has four major elements to its structure (Table 1): an introductory seminar, a Center-supported community fellow project, mandatory cohort meetings, and All-Fellows Community of Practice meetings. The program begins with a 2.5-day summer seminar that serves as an intensive learning experience for all fellows. The seminar prioritizes social cohesion and trust building among the cohort, offering informal spaces for sharing meals and conversations. In addition, faculty and community fellows are trained, through several sessions, on CSL practices such as course facilitation, project development, and reflection activities. Finally, the seminar offers reflection, discussion, and planning times for faculty and community fellows to plan, share ideas, and ask questions of each other as they chart out their projects and courses for the coming year.

The seminar is followed by individual and group activities that support fellows. Faculty fellows work with designated advisors from the Center to develop their courses while community fellows work as a group with Center team members to develop action plans based on the community fellows’ needs and goals for their service-learning projects.

Community fellows also collaborate with Center staff to develop a shared project that benefits the Center’s greater network of partnering community-based organizations (CBOs). Past community fellows projects have included a community fellows-led training for CBOs to learn the basics and benefits of service-learning, an online community preceptor training module, and an updated *Opportunities Guidebook* for CBOs to understand a menu of engagement activities available through the Center.

Alongside individual and group advising, the SLFP organizes bimonthly mandatory

Table 1. SLFP Program Elements, Duration, and Objectives

Program element	Duration	Objectives
Kick-off Summer Seminar	2.5 days (June)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohort-building and deepening relationships • Foundational CSL training through instructional sessions • Course/project planning sessions • Practice critical reflection
Advising and community fellow project	8 months (Sep–April)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Codesign a project to further support the Center’s network of community partners • Practice academic–community partnership with the Center • Strengthen community–university relationships • Mentorship of community fellows in CSL activities
Mandatory cohort meetings	Bimonthly 1-hour sessions (Sep, Nov, Feb, April)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused instruction on facets of CSL (e.g., holistic assessment, reflection assignments, project management) • Discuss progress on course/project design and implementation • Work to address problems or questions related to courses/projects • Celebrate successes
All-Fellows Community Meetings	Bimonthly 1-hour sessions (Oct, Jan, March)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring together the full SLFP community (spanning nearly 10 years of fellows) • Discuss cutting-edge developments in CSL • Learn useful practices and skills from senior fellows • Integrate justice practices into CSL partnerships and designs

cohort meetings. These meetings gather the faculty and community fellows cohort to receive further training on specific issues related to service-learning. In these sessions, fellows discuss course and project assessments, reflection activities, and student engagement practices before taking time to reflect on how to integrate these practices into their own projects or courses.

Center staff and senior fellows also organize All-Fellows Community of Practice meetings every other month. All fellows, from past and current cohorts, are invited to these meetings. Here, fellows discuss current projects. Fellows share challenges and successes for furthering the CSL mission of social change in their courses and projects. These meetings serve as a way of building a long-term network of faculty and community leaders committed to CSL. They also provide an open space where fellows can hone their service-learning facilitation skills through dialogue with each other.

Community fellows in the SLFP have consistent engagement with each other and with faculty fellows. They are also supported by Center staff who are experts in service-learning design and facilitation. The program is intended to provide the

training and networking relationships that community fellows need to be successful service-learning preceptors. By the end of the program, community fellows should be ready to partner with faculty and students on their CBO-identified needs.

Methods

A cross-sectional survey was distributed via Qualtrics at three distinct time points: preprogram (May), postseminar (June), and postprogram (April), to elicit experiences and feedback from fellows participating in the SLFP. Faculty fellows completed one version of the survey, tailored to course design (Derreth et al., 2022). Community fellows took another version, focused more on academic partnerships and project design, which is the focus for this analysis.

Community fellows were over 18 years of age and worked at various nonprofit organizations throughout Baltimore. There were 25 community fellow participants in the program between 2013 and 2021. The university Institutional Review Board deemed this study to be exempt (IRB00005944), as survey completion implied consent to participate.

Data Analysis

We used a mixed-methods analysis to interpret Likert scale and open-ended items in the survey. The first level of data analysis examined the Likert scale questions. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS for Windows (Version 27.0) and were summarized by descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. Quantitative survey items were categorized by two authors (RTD, CN) to facilitate clearer presentation of data. The items were categorized as addressing academic partnership, community benefit, or both. The “academic partnership” category focuses on community fellows’ perceptions of building a relationship between university affiliates (faculty) and the partnering CBO. The “community benefit” category addresses fellows’ perceptions of how service-learning impacts them and their communities. In some cases, survey items encompassed both concepts (Table 2). These codes, derived through a discourse analysis of the language construction of survey items, were informed by the research questions and foundational service-learning definitions (Derreth et al., 2022). These categorizations frame the sta-

tistical significance of longitudinal change (via paired *t*-tests) of individual items to show perception of growth for each item and category.

Categorized quantitative findings were then used to contextualize and synthesize open-ended survey responses (examples in Table 3). The template organizing style was used to organize qualitative data (Brooks et al., 2015) by generating a spreadsheet of textual material that was stored in NVivo software. Data were organized by case and by question.

Qualitative data were open coded independently by two authors (RTD, KEN), following the principles of qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Coded segments were sorted into respective themes and subthemes. Subtheme reduction involved analyzing the data for broad concepts related to the categories used to sort the quantitative survey items as noted above, while analyzing for potential countervailing data.

Through a method of abduction, or comparative inductive/deductive thematizing, authors analyzed data using the quantita-

Table 2. Likert Scale Survey Items by Thematic Category

Item #	Likert scale text	Thematic category (subcategory)
1	I have an understanding about the Center's role with service-learning courses.	Academic partnership
2	I can define service-learning in the context of the health professions.	Academic partnership
3	I can identify the important principles of community-campus partnerships.	Academic partnership
4	I can identify the ethical implications of service-learning partnerships.	Academic partnership
5	I understand how experiential learning contributes to student learning.	Academic partnership
6	I understand how to design a project based on community-identified needs.	Community benefit
7	I feel comfortable engaging students in reflection activities.	Academic partnership
8	I feel that I can effectively assess students' work in service learning.	Academic partnership
9	I have the ability to effectively evaluate a service-learning course.	Academic partnership
10	I feel comfortable preparing students to work in the community.	Academic partnership
11	I can identify how community-identified needs have been carried out in previous Center projects.	Community benefit
12	I have a sense of how to integrate community partnerships into my professional goals.	Community benefit
13	I believe that my work in the Fellows program will advance the mission of my organization.	Community benefit

Note. Items 6 and 9 were added to the survey in later years. Due to small sample sizes, they were excluded from quantitative analysis.

Table 3. Representative Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions text
Please identify a few goals you have for participating in the Service-Learning Fellows Program.
What excites you about the Fellows Program and service-learning?
What challenges do you anticipate around service-learning collaborations?
In your own words, how do you define service-learning?
In your own words, how do you define critical reflection?
What topics would you like more information about or for us to cover more in depth during subsequent meetings?
What are you excited about for future service-learning collaborations?
What would you like to focus on or expand during the upcoming check-in meetings?
Do you have any additional comments about the Seminar?
What were some of the challenges you experienced this year applying what you learned during the Fellows Program at your organization?
What surprises did you encounter related to service-learning collaborations?
What lessons learned do you intend to apply in your service-learning work next year?
Now that you have completed the Fellows Program, what are your <i>long-term</i> goals for upcoming service-learning collaborations or service-learning in general?
How do you envision continuing your work with the Faculty and Community Fellows Program?
What would you change about the Faculty and Community Fellows Program to improve it?
What would you like to focus on or expand on as a Community Fellow Alumni?
Do you have any additional comments about the Fellows Program?

tive coding framework, while also affording potentially new complementary or dialectical codes to surface (Osman et al., 2018). Results were established through team discussion and review of quantitative data to verify conclusions. Finally, analysis and results were reviewed by a SLFP senior community fellow (AWA), as a method of member checking and maintaining a community partner perspective throughout the study (Chase, 2017).

Results

Quantitative Results

Each of the eight analyzed Likert scale items measuring perceptions of academic partnerships reveals increased mean scores between pre- and final surveys (Table 4). Items 1 through 4 show a large effect size

(Cohen's *d*) for the difference in means, indicating improved perceptions of learned material. Each of these items focuses on participants' perceived understanding of and ability to identify core functions and definitions of service-learning as they are used in academic partnerships. Paired *t*-tests comparing mean scores for pre- and final survey responses reveal statistically significant increases for these four items. There was also a positive increase in mean scores for community-benefit-focused items, though only one item (11) shows a large effect size. The paired *t*-test for items 11 and 12 were the only statistically significant findings. These data indicate there is room for improvement in measuring community fellows' perceptions of the community benefit of service-learning. Full statistical results are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. Statistical Comparisons for Likert Scale Survey Items

Academic partnership focus					
Survey item	Presurvey mean	Final survey mean	Pre/Final difference in means (SD)	t-value (df) ^a	Cohen's <i>d</i> ^b
1	4.18	4.82	0.65 (0.61)	4.40 (16)**	1.07
2	3.29	4.59	1.29 (1.05)	5.09 (16)**	1.24
3	3.82	4.65	0.82 (0.81)	4.20 (16)**	1.02
4	3.71	4.59	0.88 (0.86)	4.24 (16)**	1.03
5	4.29	4.59	0.29 (0.59)	2.06 (16)	0.50
7	3.94	4.29	0.35 (0.99)	1.46 (16)	0.35
8	3.67	4.00	0.33 (1.23)	0.94 (11)	0.27
10	4.12	4.41	0.29 (0.92)	1.32 (16)	0.32
Community benefit focus					
Survey item	Presurvey mean	Final survey mean	Pre/Final difference in means (SD)	t-value (df) ^a	Cohen's <i>d</i> ^b
11	3.47	4.41	0.94 (0.89)	4.32 (16)**	1.05
12	4.18	4.65	0.47 (0.87)	2.22 (16)*	0.54
13	4.71	4.47	-0.24 (0.75)	-1.29 (16)	-0.31

^aTwo-tailed *t*-test. ^b**Bold text** indicates large effect size at > 0.8.

p* ≤ .05. *p* ≤ .01.

It is important to contextualize results in the aggregate for each of the two thematized categories to show changes in overall perceptions of community fellows related to academic partnerships and community benefits of service-learning. Figure 1 shows the proportion of responses corresponding to each point on a five-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* for all survey items coded as “academic partnership.”

These aggregate percentages of the eight survey items relate to community fellows' overall perceptions on whether they can identify the value of and enact mechanisms for academic partnerships in service-learning. Over time, community fellows increased their percentage of “strongly agree” responses to over 54% by the program's end, up from just 17% before the program, an increase to more than triple the earlier percentage.

Similarly, Figure 2 displays the propor-

tions of responses to items thematically categorized under “community benefit” to show whether participants can identify how service-learning might benefit them, their communities, and their organizations. By the end of the program, nearly 60% of responses were “strongly agree” regarding the general community benefit of service-learning. There was a smaller overall change from preprogram to final responses to these items compared to responses to items coded as “academic partnership”; the proportion changed by less than 100%. Additionally, Figure 2 reveals an already relatively high percentage of “agree” and “strongly agree” responses in the preprogram survey (79%), possibly contributing to the lack of large effect sizes shown in Table 4.

Qualitative Results

The categories for the quantitative data and subsequent results offered an organizing frame for analyzing open-ended survey responses. In other words, authors used

Figure 1. Proportions of Responses on “Academic Partnerships” at Each Time Point

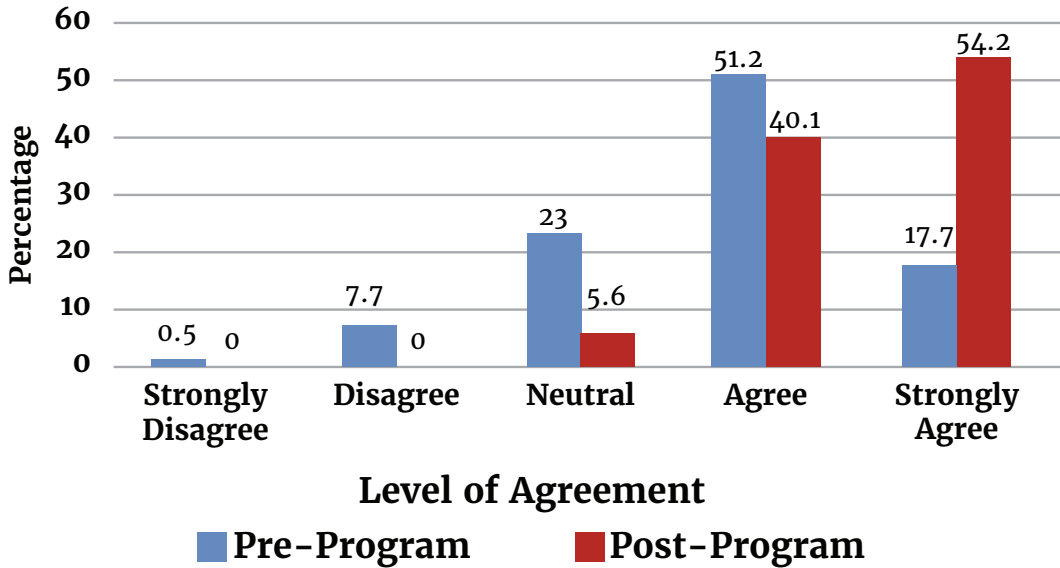
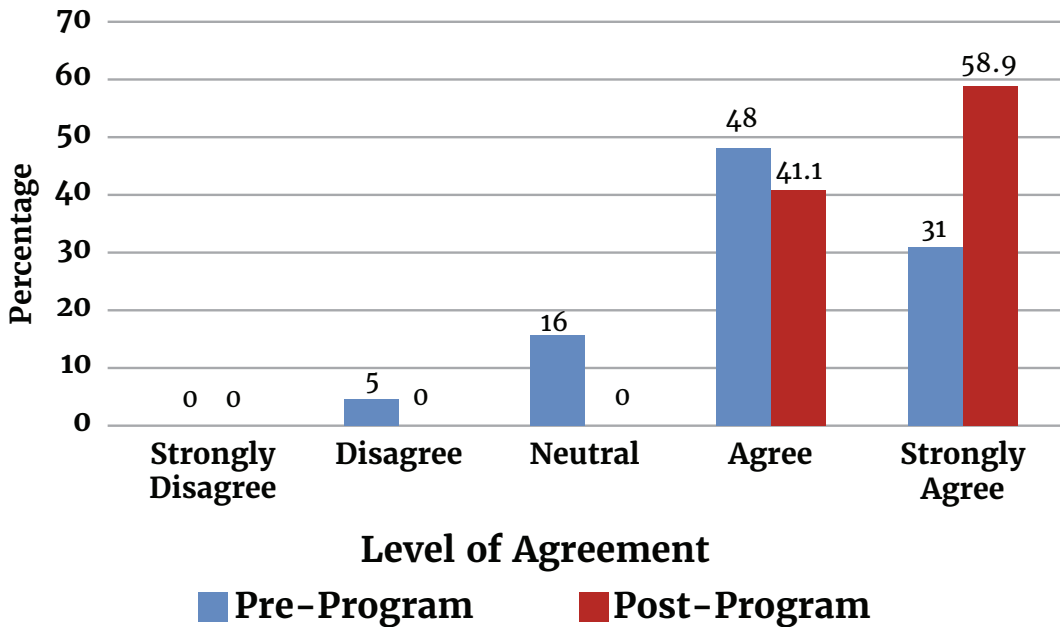


Figure 2. Proportions of Responses on “Community Benefit” at Each Time Point



the categories of academic partnership and community benefit as broad directives for analyzing open-ended data, before integrating a deductive analysis in alignment with abductive coding.

The community fellows' open-ended responses prove particularly useful for revealing deeper elements of participant learnings and the challenges of service-learning partnerships. Additionally, some qualitative findings complicate the simplified quantitative categories in important ways for the field to consider.

Four main themes were deduced from the qualitative analysis:

1. *Community fellows' development.* There was integration of service-learning concepts and skills into community partners' language and practice, suggesting that fellows learned service-learning content from the SLFP.
2. *Program critiques: Partners at the margins.* Our analysis reveals the need for further development of program equity and ways to address power dynamics.
3. *Partner concerns: Practical limitations and responsibilities.* Partners offered comments on limitations related to service-learning.
4. *Finding a "community" as a community partner.* Community partners shared a profound connection with their cohort as they progressed through the program.

Theme 1: Community Fellows' Development

Using Service-Learning Terms and Concepts. Qualitative data supported that community fellows' knowledge of service-learning concepts improved throughout the SLFP, evidenced by changing language usage over time. For example, partners largely began the program defining service-learning in ways that restated "learn" and "service," using general terms and descriptions for their definitions.

Fellows' definitions of service-learning revolved around identifying students' need to "learn" about communities—such as, "Service-learning involves students learning about a community and developing skills from the classroom that could be applied in the community." Additionally, respondents relied on service projects to explain service-learning: "Service learning is a reciprocal process of engagement,

learning and community service activities." Importantly, community partners had a clear understanding of service-learning elements, such as reciprocity; balancing practice and theory; and shared engagement between students, faculty, and community partners. Yet, as existing literature purports, the purpose and methods of integrating these elements can be complicated (Mitchell, 2008). These nuances, particularly related to a *critical* service-learning approach, were infrequently acknowledged in preprogram definitions.

The SLFP set out to clearly define the CSL approach used at Johns Hopkins. By program end, fellows were using program-specific language to explain their definition of service-learning, which involved concepts and terms related to identifying power dynamics and centering community voice. Final survey responses echoed commonly shared language of "mutually beneficial partnerships" and "ensuring that [service-learning] is not merely *transactional*, but *transformational*" (emphasis added to highlight program language). This terminology reflects fellows' learning and suggests achievement of a programwide objective of establishing a shared vision and definition of critical service-learning as it is practiced at the university.

Critical Reflection in Action. Several participants emphasized the value of critical reflection with students, organizational colleagues, and other community members—particularly toward the end of the program. Notably, it was not until the postprogram responses to questions asking about priorities, definitions, and future practice that community partners highlighted the necessity of critical reflection to successful service-learning practice. One participant shared the importance of including community partners in reflection exercises as part of service-learning courses:

[I want to] create a space for the learning element of service learning to really be present in my workspace. This goes in tandem with critical reflection and now that I know what elements are necessary for this process to occur and that we as CBOs play a role in facilitating this process, I can work to institute this at my organization.

This community fellow blends the learning

and service components of the pedagogy, suggesting a complex understanding not just of the value of critical reflection, but of its utility in the context of community-engaged partnerships. This statement also highlights the practical education the fellow gained, when she stated her confidence to “institute this at my organization.”

In the postseminar and postprogram responses, we saw community partners valuing critical reflection and planning to enact it in their future work both as partners and community leaders: “I plan to do more reflection activities with my service learning and with all of my volunteers.” Partners viewed critical reflection as fundamental to meaningful engagement with students, staff, and other community members. As one community partner succinctly stated, “The core of service learning is to plan together . . . execute together . . . reflect together.”

Theme 2: Program Critiques: Partners at the Margins

The SLFP showed success in training community partners in the conceptual and practical foundations of service-learning; however, fellows’ responses also underscored areas for improvement. Foreshadowing deeper reflections on their positionality explored in the discussion section of this article, community partners felt the program, at times, centered faculty needs and roles above their own. “The fellows program is mostly dedicated to didactics in JHU education. It was difficult to apply the concepts to outside education environments.” Due to the course-based nature of service-learning, most seminars focused on leading courses, designing curriculum, and assessment. Another participant noted: “The primary focus of most meetings was often on course creation and faculty support. While this was interesting, . . . meetings felt like an obligation and not something I was getting much out of.” Community partners play an important role in these course elements; however, their comments highlighted the need for more dedicated focus on their role(s) and responsibilities in the academic-based elements of service-learning.

There was also evidence of unchallenged power dynamics that center academic roles and experiences over those of the community partners, which were pushed to the margins.

My main critique is that some meetings felt much more focused on the faculty as opposed to the community fellows. For example, multiple sessions included concrete examples of reflection activities used in the classroom, but we rarely had the same kind of focus on reflection that can be done at the CBO.

Here a community fellow identified that the most concrete examples stemmed from a faculty-first perspective, offering resources on critical reflection that were not as relevant to community-based organizational leaders who are rarely in classroom settings.

Theme 3: Partner Concerns: Practical Limitations and Responsibilities

Many participants were very clear about the practical limitations of CSL, proposing important considerations for sustainability of the pedagogy. Community fellows were concerned about being able to (1) clearly explain the value of service-learning partnerships to others in their organization and (2) provide necessary training for their colleagues on the elements of service-learning. Further, many highlighted their severely limited time capacity and anxieties about being equipped to lead students in a meaningful service-learning experience, given these types of organizational constraints.

The responses revealed how complicated the development and implementation of a successful service-learning project can be for community partners. For example, some fellows in executive roles noted the need to train others in their organization who would have ongoing contact with communities and students. “My biggest challenge will likely be communicating goals/plans for service learning to staff at our various sites in a way that is clear, meaningful, and easy for them to implement.” This statement indicates that fellows need to be trained in service-learning pedagogy well enough to train others who are already spread thin. One community fellow noted, “It can be difficult to ‘make the case’ for service-learning opportunities/projects with already stretched staff members.”

The program, it seems, was able to do some of this training. However, even fellows who felt equipped with the skillset noted that this element of being a community partner only added further time constraints—an ongoing limitation many participants high-

lighted. “As a community fellow, time is precious, and at times, having to do another doodle, read some articles or attend another meeting is something that while I view as worthwhile, I am just having difficulty squeezing in.” Another fellow similarly noted, “I have many things competing for my time and attention. I suspect there will be times when I want to devote more time than I have.” Perhaps blending these two practical issues, that same fellow continued by expressing concern about clearly communicating the critical nature of service-learning as a transformative relationship, not a charity model. “[I don’t know how to] ‘sell’ the idea that service-learning is more than an internship to my work peers—or at least not having it ‘slip’ to that.” This idea highlights the difficulty in communicating the difference between critical partnerships, which challenge power dynamics, and more conventional internships.

Finally, community fellows expressed practical anxieties over how to facilitate and engage students in a meaningful experience: “There is this collective concern that emerged in a couple conversations of ‘are we CBOs creating meaningful service-learning opportunities?’” Another community fellow wrote, “I feel strongly that my work could be improved by being more intentional about what type of volunteer work students complete [with us]. I am hoping to learn about best practices.” These responses highlight a potential limitation of the program in preparing community fellows to be effective facilitators. However, it also reflects the deep care they have as educators of service-learning students (Compare et al., 2022). They frequently revealed their strong commitment to the learning process and care for students as valued members of the collective project.

Theme 4: Finding a “Community” as a Community Partner

Perhaps the most impactful finding, in relation to outcomes of the SLFP, was the value of the cocreated community. Community fellows consistently made comments that developing collaborations and relationships with their cohort was the most valuable element.

The best part of the program was the opportunity to get to know other community partners and faculty in a very comfortable environment while also gaining an

“insider’s” understanding of how service-learning courses are developed and what their needs and goals are.

Community fellows also found value in building relationships beyond the program and toward the benefit of their organizational and community work. “I really enjoyed engaging with other professionals and faculty to consider our organizational needs from a fresh and more research-based perspective.” Through the program, community fellows found a space to connect with each other and share perspectives, successes, and challenges that supported the way they design their community work. The program fostered a place of authentic sharing:

I thought that we were able to develop relationships naturally without it being forced. I’m very excited about continuing to grow the conversations that we have around meaningful collaboration. I think that we were really open and honest with one another, and I hope that that leads to many productive projects and opportunities.

More than networking (Compare & Albanesi, 2022), fellows built relationships and cocreated a space of support and innovation—developing a more complex and sustaining community of practice (Wenger, 2000). One fellow’s comment highlights this cocreation:

I love to learn about individuals in general, but this opportunity is unique in the sense that we get to learn so much from each other as we continue through the program. There are conversations that we’ve already had around service-learning with JHU staff and faculty that change the way I view service-learning in the classroom.

Although service-learning practice and training still work imperfectly against ingrained inequalities, the cocreation of community among fellows may offer a way forward for innovating more equitable, community-centered models of service-learning. As community fellows identified here, the formed community gave them new insights, ideas, and practices to engage with their partnerships *and* their communities.

Discussion

Our discussion mirrors the above qualitative themes as we work to make sense of the usefulness of these results for advancing academic–community partnerships. We establish four arguments based on the study results. First, the SLFP has positive outcomes related to the community fellows’ development using service-learning concepts and practices. The program is successful in teaching core concepts, and it could be used as a model for community partner education. Second, there are practical limitations and equity concerns for the SLFP that must be addressed. We suggest some initial remedies for these limitations and concerns. Third, we highlight the implicit pressures community fellows reference related to community voice and justice that feed into their concerns and anxieties. We name this their “in-between” positionality. We further call on academic centers and faculty to better support community partners who experience these pressures. Fourth, we present future directions that can build on SLFP successes and address limitations and concerns. These future directions rely on designing more communal development programs so that community partners can depend on and contribute to a network of people engaging in similar work.

Program Impacts and Community Fellow Development

Results suggest that the SLFP was effective in establishing shared terms and practices of CSL. This outcome is particularly noteworthy considering that community partners and faculty can often have different service-learning definitions in the absence of collective discussions or trainings (Davis et al., 2019). Results also showed success in engaging community fellows in critical processes like critical reflection.

Overall, quantitative and qualitative findings suggest the program was successful in educating, engaging, and developing a group of community fellows, alongside their faculty peers (Derreth et al., 2022), in the foundations of academic service-learning partnerships. This outcome could mean that service-learning development programs are an essential component for developing strong partner relationships and establishing the skills and knowledge necessary to carry out service-learning projects effectively. Further, having a space to explore shared sense of purpose, definition, and

practice can be a way of building authentic relationships that support individuals through service-learning design and implementation (Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell & Latta, 2020). It can also give community partners language and agency in projects to vocalize their position and their communities’ goals throughout the service-learning process. Such contributions are especially important when considering how to mitigate negative impacts or damaging relationships in service-learning.

Program Limitations and Community Fellow Concerns

Study results contribute to ongoing discussions regarding the effectiveness of service-learning for communities’ benefit (Mitchell & Latta, 2020). It is clear from our quantitative and qualitative findings that community partners are thinking deeply about this topic. Quantitative results were mixed, especially on the development program’s contributions to the wider communities CBOs serve. This community perspective was bolstered by our qualitative findings around program limitations and inequities.

University service-learning practitioners need to consider the limitations that the fellows presented to better empower service-learning partnerships to benefit communities. The limitation on community partners’ time is well-known (Barnes et al., 2009), but it remains a top concern. Streamlining service-learning engagement through a development program may help limit time-consuming problems during implementation—a question we encourage future researchers to explore.

A less discussed limitation is the fellows’ concerns about communicating the value of service-learning to their colleagues. First, this concern shows that community partners are thinking about how to institutionalize service-learning through engaging multiple individuals within an organization. This inclination may indicate that (1) partners recognize the value of service-learning and want to extend its reach, and (2) partners expect service-learning to be engaged at an *institutional* level. Even with this positive orientation, service-learning professionals should think practically about how to work with CBO leaders to share the workload among multiple organizational members. Development programs might better account for these concerns by engaging community partners in a train-the-

trainer model, thereby supporting them to facilitate foundational service-learning trainings. Alternatively, development programs may consider site-specific training days to alleviate the community fellows' training burden at their organizations.

In addition, we must also take seriously the inequities that community partners identified when they expressed concern about their roles, perspectives, and expertise being pushed to the margins throughout the program. At the crux of the comments appeared to be a fundamental paradox of service-learning: Community partners are expected to lead social change projects in communities, while also remaining within the confines of an academic model of education. If this dynamic remains unchanged, development programs are destined to reify this prioritization. The SLFP exemplified this challenge through the extensive focus on course-design training over project development. University-based service-learning practitioners should work with community-based partners to reprioritize the relationship between classroom-based work and community projects. This change in orientation may warrant a redefinition of service-learning as a pedagogical method outside university framing. What might it look like, for example, to have a framing where the university is considered the partner to community social change projects? A framing like this would reprioritize the purpose of service-learning as a pedagogy of collective social change, rather than coopting social change language in an academic program for university benefit and student learning.

Community Fellows and the “In-between”

Fellows' critical reflections on their own positionality may provide insight into why they reported such mixed responses on whether academic-community partnerships benefit communities. Partners had strong words of support for service-learning but also challenged the program leaders to think more critically about the role of community partners in the service-learning space.

One way that service-learning research and training tends to flatten the community partner role (instead of exploring it more deeply) is by assuming a monolithic definition of “community partner” as representative of “community.” This simplistic framing is not indicative of how

community fellows represent themselves. Fellows mused about lessons learned that were helpful in communicating to their colleagues and community members. Others highlighted the need to ensure community voices were present in the service-learning project, revealing a self-defined positionality separate from “the community.” Indeed, the simplistic framing of community partner as community can ignore the nuance of the relationships between community partners and the communities they represent or engage with. Further, a simplified definition of community puts partners in the difficult position of speaking on behalf of a whole community. To do so seems an impossible task, a challenge that may speak to why fellows were torn over service-learning's impact on community benefit—or at least whether they had standing to claim such benefits for “the community.”

Still, community fellows voiced wanting to integrate service-learning pedagogy and include other community leaders and partners, but they were unsure how to hold space for that goal. Community partners took on an in-between role, where they were responsible for both representing a generalized “community” perspective in academic spaces and being a university “affiliate” who vouched for university service-learning to communities and CBO colleagues. University-affiliated practitioners should both support community partner efforts here and alleviate the expectation that all partners are the embodied definition of “community.”

Indeed, fellows' comments have helped us more closely consider *who* we were partnering with—“community fellows” in service-learning—and what relationship they see between themselves and “the community.” These findings open space for the question: Who gets to be a community partner in service-learning, and how do they relate to their broader communities? This is a particularly important line of questioning if the field of service-learning expects to impact social change within local communities.

Cocreating a Way Forward: Recommendations for Development Programs

Findings from this study may suggest a way to critically engage in greater reflections on the complicated, unsupported, in-between role in which community partners often find themselves. The strengths of the

cohort community in the SLFP may be an effective way to envision service-learning, community roles, and even who gets to be involved in service-learning practice. Community fellows were clearly excited to develop and engage in the cohort community and appeared adept at recognizing how to leverage said community to advance their organizations' and communities' missions. Above all, they were grateful to learn from others in diverse roles, all of whom had an interest in using service-learning methods to address community progress and social change.

Service-learning development programs should work on building collaborative spaces that allow community fellows to learn from others such that it advances their community work. A community fellow's role as organizational leader is one that engages in community partnerships often. Making space for service-learning cohort members to inform each other on how best to implement service-learning proved especially valuable and may be improved if these types of programs delve deeper into the complex role of what it means to be a community partner. In doing so, we might engage in a practice that one fellow described as

Creating a service-learning opportunity that is part of a wider vision—shared goals between the university and community partner—not just combining two separate sets of goals (each maintaining their own territory). Creating service-learning that transforms the usual goals of each into something new.

In other words, we might make space for fostering solidarity for change among students, community, and faculty practitioners through their engagement in a transformational partnership.

Conclusion

This study examined the perspectives of community fellows who engaged in a service-learning development program. Our goal was to understand what community fellows learned, and what they found challenging and valuable from the experience. One practical recommendation out of these findings is the implementation of a communal service-learning development program to establish shared language, definitions, and purpose between university and community partners. This kind of institutional support can address existing problems of miscommunication and lack of training identified by community partners. This type of program should also provide space to explore and refine the community partner role and experiences of those who take it up in ways that are more equitable and less university centric. Development programs can act as spaces of facilitation and connection in addition to spaces of knowledge development.

The formation of a sustaining community of practice among faculty and community fellows proved to be a highly valued method of working through the responsibilities and roles of a community partner. Above all, the development program made space for all participants to ask questions, reflect, and solve problems together, outside the demanding pace of their work, all while learning skills and knowledge necessary to be facilitators themselves. Engaging in questions on purpose, justice, and positionality prior to enacting service-learning projects might lead to more effective partnerships and deeper discussions on the complexity of engaging with diverse communities in social change. Development programs that are equitably organized can be launchpads for community partners to learn and share how to best use and apply service-learning within their respective contexts.



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