The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service-Learning

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of in-depth interviews with sixty-seven community organization representatives about their experience with service-learners. We found that partnerships have much room for improvement in several key areas: communication and relationship-building, managing and evaluation of students, and cultural competency, as well as the challenge of short-term service-learning.

Introduction

*S*ervice-learning has become an institutionalized practice in higher education. A lot of institutional hype accompanies service-learning, and a lot of research promotes its positive impact on student grades, attitudes, and sensitivities *(Lansverk 2004; Myers-Lipton 1998; Krain and Nurse 2004)*. There are also claims that service-learning positively impacts host communities *(Cruz and Giles 2000)* but much less research to back up those claims. In fact, from the community perspective, there has been growing dissatisfaction with service-learning since the late 1990s. In the worst cases, analysts saw poor communities exploited as free sources of student education *(Eby 1998)*. Others worried that the "charity" model of service-learning reinforced negative stereotypes and students' perceptions of poor communities as helpless *(Kahne and Westheimer 1996; Marullo and Edwards 2000; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2000)*. But this research doesn't assess the impact of those students on communities.

There are only a handful of studies that look at community impact and community perceptions of service-learning *(Cruz and Giles 2000)*, and these studies only minimally reflect community definitions of what that impact should be. The few studies available conclude that community organizations are relatively satisfied with the service that they receive *(Vernon and Ward 1999; Ferrari and Worrall 2000; Birdsall 2005)*. For the most part, however, the research on satisfaction has remained at a relatively superficial level, using Likert-scale questionnaires or focus groups, with the notable exception of Sandy and Holland *(2006)*.

Methodology

We wanted to hear from community organizations what they really thought about service-learning. We first convened a meeting of about twenty organizations to talk about the practice. Seven participants from that focus group agreed to form a core group to guide the qualitative research process. Our first decision was to focus on small to medium-size nongovernmental organizations, since they can gain the most from good service-learning and have few resources to spare for ineffective service-learning. Professor Randy Stoecker organized a special seminar to conduct the research.

The core group helped design the interview method and questions, which were then further refined by the seminar students. The students conducted and transcribed one-hour interviews with sixty-seven community organization staff; transcripts were returned to the interviewees for validity checks. The seminar then used a grounded theory process *(Glaser and Strauss 1967)* to identify themes and conduct the analysis. This produced seven themes: Goals and motivations of community organizations, finding and selecting service-learners, challenges of structuring short-term service-learning, managing service-learners and projects, diversity, relationship and communication with the higher education institutions, and indicators of success.

Next, students divided into teams; each team crafted a chapter of a report for the agencies. The seminar and core group participants decided to host a public planning event to present and discuss the research findings and develop an action plan. This led to the creation of a "community standards" brochure that gives a community organization perspective on effective service-learning.

The Findings

The research indicated that service-learning could be much more effective for community organizations, and it also showed what was working. A summary of the major findings follows, using many of the interviewees' own words, to enable the reader to hear their voices.

A. Goals and motivations of community organizations for service-learning

Agency staff work with college student service-learners for motives that are quite complex, involving consideration of both their own immediate organization needs and the long-term interests of society itself *(Shaffett 2002)*. Some of their motivations are

surprising. Similar to what Sandy and Holland *(2006)* found, many community organization staff hosted service-learners not because it produced expanded organizational capacity, but because they saw it as part of their mission to educate the public, including college students.

Other organization staff think of their investment in service-learners more narrowly as producing future staff members for the nonprofit sector. They feel they are training the "next generation of leaders."

> Just because a service learner comes in here today and doesn't set the world on fire, doesn't mean that . . . the education they gain here doesn't change them dramatically 10 years from now or 15 years from now. So in some sense we have to take a longer view of our role. Frankly, if we were going to look at what a service learner gives us, or gives to our clients, we would never do this. There's more to it than that. . . . Because someone's got to be doing this work twenty years from now. . . .

Altruistic and long-term interests notwithstanding, the prime motivator for our pool of organizations to host service-learners is their need for services that students can provide. Many organizations have college students work on Web sites, databases, surveys, or other carefully circumscribed projects that the agency does not have the capacity or the skills to do. This project-based service-learning model is becoming increasingly popular *(Chamberlain 2003; Draper 2004; Coyle, Jamieson, and Oakes 2005)*. Many organization staff also hope to host students who are interested in making a longer time commitment, and look for ways to create such commitment. Several organizations allocated less-routine tasks in accord with students' length of service, reserving more meaningful activities for those who devote more hours.

B. Finding and selecting service-learners

Community agencies find service-learners through a variety of routes. The organizations are generally very glad to have faculty or students approach them. Some have staff capacity to take recruitment into their own hands, with varying degrees of success.

The majority of interviewees who discussed participating in volunteer fairs did not see them as efficient, since the time spent staffing a booth rarely produced many new service-learners. Volunteer fairs were especially problematic for small agencies who

really couldn't afford a minimal return. Some institutions charge a booth fee, which could mean a nonprofit might actually come out behind if no one signs up. Other organizations contact either a class whose topic is relevant to their work or a professor in a discipline compatible with their needs, and generally find this to be a more successful strategy. Agency staff also use service-learning centers and Web sites. These can be invaluable time-savers for busy nonprofit staff. However, some interviewees expressed interest in a central clearinghouse for all the various institutions of higher education in the area and thus being able to post their volunteer needs in one place, rather than posting the same information on a separate site for every area institution.

And while many organizations take any service-learner who requests a placement, others are more selective. Some agencies require that potential service-learners pass a background check or be in moral agreement with their mission. Others interview service-learners and turn away those who they feel will be more of a burden than a help to the organization.

Organization staff identified types of service-learners that they found most effective. While they saw younger students as "more hip" and able to relate to youth clients, they also expressed concerns about such students' professionalism. Similar to what others have found *(Bacon 2002)*, many organization staff interviewed for this study prefer to work with graduate students, or at least advanced undergraduates.

> . . . the grad students are actually working on providing direct services, twelve to fifteen hours a week . . . we do training for a couple months, that gives us four or five extra hours of staff time, of client time, for the next six months, so that's worth the investment. . . .

Part of the selection process is communicating organizational expectations to service-learners. About a quarter of our interviewees used a fairly formal process to communicate expectations, such as an orientation meeting, while a few others used informal methods such as a casual chat with the director or volunteer coordinator. But neither method seems to be a reliable way to ensure the organization is getting a committed service-learner.

> I do have some students that will . . . call at 4:00 and [the activities] start at 5:00, and will say, "Oh, I can't come, I have an exam tomorrow." . . . It's not a good reason because you've known about this exam, and now I have

to be the one who looks at this child and says, "I'm sorry, you can't [participate] tonight."

Many organizations would like to be more selective and strict, but worry that if they refuse any offer from an instructor, service-learning office, or individual student, they may never get a call from that institution again.

C. The challenge of short-term service-learning

A significant number of agency staff pointed out problems that arise when a service-learning component is grafted onto a regular course and involves only a short time commitment of twenty hours or less on the part of the student. Even service-learning projects lasting as long as a full semester are considered short-term and seen as problematic by many agency staff. In short-term service-learning, the amount of service provided by students may not produce enough benefits for either the student or the community to justify the effort; short-term service-learning also seems to generate less commitment on the part of the student. Especially when the service is mandatory, the organizations can feel the tension and resentment. Many organizations stated they were unable or unwilling to provide intensive training and supervision for students who do not make a long-term commitment to the organization.

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The lack of commitment exhibited by short-term service-learners sometimes can even lead them to exploit the goodwill of community organizations. The student commits to working longer than their course requirement in order to get the training, but then doesn't follow through on that promise after they've met their minimum hours.

> We were getting a fair number of people who said they would do the whole year, so they would do the 25-hour training, and do one or two shifts, and then we'd sign their little form saying they'd gotten their forty hours in, and then we'd never see them again. That got really frustrating. . . . Often the amount of time, either for the semester, or per week, it just isn't really meaningful for what we're doing.

Organizations that provide direct services where trust relationships with clients are important find short-term service-learning to be especially challenging, as students leave just when trust has been established. Programs for young people often are aimed at correcting problems associated with lack of good role models and other inconsistencies in their lives. If a student is unreliable and not invested in building a relationship with this type of client, their transient nature only exacerbates those problems.

Short-term service-learning also makes it difficult to fully develop projects and carefully reflect on them. Nearly one-third of the organizations noted the difficulty of designing a meaningful service-learning project to fit a semester-long or shorter period. Some staff noted that their own stressful jobs prevented the depth of planning they would have liked to put into projects, and that it's unrealistic to expect students to prepare, carry out, and reflect on a project all within a one-semester time frame. The academic year issues that make all service-learning difficult create even more problems for short-term service-learning by reducing available hours and consistency.

> You lose 'em [undergraduate service-learners] for a week over Thanksgiving, and then you lose 'em over Christmas, and then . . . they don't come back until the end of January, and then you've got spring break and they've got finals . . . and you know, none of those things are part of our calendar.

There are, of course, good outcomes and organizations that are satisfied—but in order for short-term service-learning projects to succeed, it is imperative that there be clear, realistic shared goals, strong relationships with faculty, carefully focused and simple projects requiring little training, and committed students.

D. Managing service-learners

We found substantial variation in how community organizations set up structures and processes to manage service-learners. Much of that variation revolved around whether students worked as individuals or in groups, whether they performed their duties on- or off-site, and whether or not they were paid for their service.

Most agency staff prefer to manage individual service-learners rather than groups due to the uneven contributions of group members, space issues, and the tendency for groups to work from remote

locations and therefore have less contact with the organization. The exception may be when there is a big event that needs a lot of volunteers. In general, group projects were often based off-site, while individuals were more likely to conduct their service-learning at the agency's headquarters or outposts. This was particularly true for interns or service-learners working in direct service capacities. Some organization staff believed that they could better manage and form relationships with service-learners when they were on-site. Others cited intellectual benefits and a familiarity that is crucial to understanding the organization's needs and mission.

> To their defense, they're not with us forty hours a week, where they'd kind of get it a little more . . . there's a thirty-minute or hour meeting every week [or] two weeks, so there's only so much communication time . . . they're on campus doing their thing, and we're out here, doing our thing, and the two aren't connecting.

Some organizations felt that workers who got paid as interns or work studies did a better job than those who were volunteers (and receiving course credit). They speculated that students didn't take the job as seriously if they weren't compensated. But some others thought volunteers, who were only receiving the intrinsic benefit of their service, placed them in higher esteem than if they'd been paid.

The community organizations varied in what kind of training they required in the service-learning process. Over two-thirds provide some kind of direct training to service-learners. Agencies dealing with sensitive issues, like rape crisis centers and domestic abuse shelters, emphasized training and often required as many hours for training alone as the professor required for the total amount of service.

Evaluating the service-learner also varies tremendously from agency to agency. Some agencies like to do informal check-ins with the student. Others are happy to fill out a midpoint written form or online survey. Others would prefer a phone call with the professor and want to weigh in on the final grade. When organization staff go to the time and trouble of completing an evaluation, and then hear no feedback on it, they doubt that students are being evaluated at all on their performance. One staff member related an experience that did not instill confidence in how seriously the faculty contact was treating the service-learning project:

> . . . and I just happened to see her [the faculty member] at a different event and she said, "Oh, did the students do a good job?" Well, that surprised me because I would think that she would have known if the students had done a good job or not. . . . And I remember her being very surprised when I said, "No, because they didn't finish." So I did think that was funny that she hadn't looked at what they had done to see what they'd completed.

E. Diversity and service-learning

Of the forty participants who discussed the characteristics of their service-learners, two-thirds directly indicated that an overwhelming majority are white and/or women. Compared to clients of many agencies, service-learners often come from a privileged race and class background, which provides a challenge to the nonprofits hosting them and the community members they work with. A few interview participants mentioned instances where a student's lack of comfort with diversity revealed a potential danger in service-learning.

> It was an instance where we did direct service with [college students] so we had [people] coming in who were struggling with coming-out issues and who were dealing with violence in their dorms, and the LGBT center was the one place that they could feel safe and not have to deal with any homophobia. Then we had the service-learning student come in and talk about how the reason she was there was because she was uncomfortable with these issues because of her faith, and it really made a lot of people uncomfortable. It was just a bad fit.

Sometimes when students and agency clientele work together, community members have something to share that expands the students' worldview and may also be a new experience for the client. Organization staff pointed out, however, that such relationships can be "exploitative" or feel "voyeuristic" to the organization's clientele.

> . . . it feels like people want a piece of our family. Students want to be in there and meet a real live . . . (homeless) person and get this knowledge. It feels almost like a commodity rather than if we say, well, the most helpful

thing you could do is XYZ, but that doesn't give them this exposure.

A number of staff members from organizations where diversity plays a significant role reported valuing the service-learners who themselves had a diverse background, as they could be role models and could better understand the community experience.

As alternatives to finding diverse service-learners, agency staff may look for service-learners who have some type of background or experience that shows their ability to work with diversity; attempt to provide diversity training with the students; or hope students arrive with some cultural competency training from the institution.

F. Relationship and communication with the higher education institutions

Having an established relationship and open, regular communication with the higher education institution helps nonprofits gain clarity about the expectations for the service-learning placement and keeps the process running smoothly. Trust in the relationship is important for success, and can make a big impression. In one case, a professor was highly praised for the commitment he demonstrated to the service-learning project, volunteering himself as a tutor alongside the students. Placing a high value on communication seems like common sense. But the staff we interviewed consistently cited problems with institutions in this area. Nonprofit staff also described their own difficulties with maintaining good communication, which may result partly because they have less to gain from the current service-learning model.

Students often end up being message bearers, passing along business cards to professors or conveying information on their class requirements to organizations, especially at the beginning of the service-learning relationship when students are being recruited and projects are being set up. Two-thirds of the nonprofits communicate with faculty or institution staff during the evaluation phase, and fewer also check in during the service-learning experience itself for ongoing management or problem-solving. Some of this communication is face-to-face, but most is through phone calls, e-mail, letters, contracts, evaluation forms, and databases.

What happens when the communication breaks down? Some sources of dissatisfaction or confusion are due to unclarified expectations of roles and responsibilities of the institution or the organization.

> To be perfectly honest with you, I was never really sure what we were supposed to provide. I know I asked that question of the coordinator . . . but when she and I met to review the evaluation of this intern, that was a question I would often raise, "I don't know what I am supposed to be doing."

Interviewees described a desire for more accessible information from the institution. They wanted the academic system demystified, as they were spending an inordinate amount of time just trying to find contacts. Many think that well-advertised and well-staffed service-learning centers are valuable communication tools to help compensate for their time constraints. They also want more face-to-face time with faculty on their own turf, and appreciate opportunities to present in classes.

G. Indicators of success

What creates a "successful" service-learning experience from the community's perspective? Based on the organizations we spoke with, the success of a service-learning project depends on three things: the level of commitment made by the academic and community partners, the effectiveness of communication, and the compatibility of the service-learning program and the student to the community organization's goals.

Commitment includes faculty devoting time to developing projects, providing support throughout projects, and building relationships outside projects. In particular, agency staff want to develop longer-term service-learning opportunities, provide consistency to the organization, and impart deeper learning experiences for the service-learner. Organizations desire similar commitment from students. Community organization staff believe that service-learners who are intrinsically motivated will have a stronger commitment to do quality work.

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We cannot overstress the importance of good communication between faculty, community organization staff, and students. Memorandums of understanding or service-learning contracts are

helpful in clarifying expectations, but they do not substitute for ongoing communication through projects. Interviewees also really want the instructors to visit their agencies.

Compatibility focuses on the fit of values and work habits between student and organization and the fit of calendar and goals between organizations and institutions. A number of agencies interview students to determine fit. Others provide students with background information about the organization so the student has the opportunity to determine if the project fits their expectations. Beyond students and the organization, it is also important that the entire service-learning program fit the community. Nine organizations stated that a service-learning project is successful if it fits into their programs. Otherwise they may feel it's a waste of time.

> If somebody calls and says, "we'd like to come out and volunteer," . . . and they say, "we have to paint," . . . and we've just painted everything . . . , they could put another coat on, but it really wasn't necessary.

When service-learning is done with proper input from the agencies that are being served, it can be a most useful tool for filling urgent needs in society while still fulfilling learning objectives, maybe in an even deeper way. Our hope is that our research may contribute to the dialogue between campus and community so that improvements can be made to mitigate some of the challenges straining the capacities of the nonprofit organizations that are gracious enough to allow service-learners into their daily work.

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