

## **Student and Community Partner Expectations for Effective Community-Engaged Learning Partnerships**

Holly Stack-Cutler and Sara Dorow

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Student insight and community partner feedback can contribute to understanding and thus improve community-engaged learning practices. Student and community partner voices, however, are not often heard during community-engaged learning development. To ascertain student and community partner expectations for community-engaged learning, thematic analysis was performed on data from two sources: a workshop where five student panelists involved in community-engaged learning discussed their expectations of community-engaged learning, and a survey of community partners ( $n = 45$ ) to examine perspectives on working with students and university partners during community-engaged learning placements.

### **Student Findings**

From their community placements, students expected opportunities to acquire management skills, to exercise leadership skills, and to be given responsibility. They further expected to be exposed to a variety of perspectives on how others view their expertise, and to have an involved community supervisor who would give an orientation of the organization, provide ongoing supervision, and highlight the significance of the work students would perform in their community-engaged learning placement. Students considered their placement to be a safe environment where they could challenge themselves, test learned skills in a professional setting, and connect faces and stories to theories learned in the classroom. To successfully negotiate community and university expectations, students recommended taking ownership of placement experiences and being responsible for one's own work; having ongoing conversations to ensure that one's own and community partners' expectations are being met; learning theory in the classroom and engaging in practicum preparation; using problem-solving skills to navigate unexpected situations; and exploring future opportunities to hone skills.

## Community Partner Findings

Community partners appreciated having flexible timeframes and being able to negotiate length of community-engaged learning placements with university partners based on their organization's needs. Traits that they attributed to effective community-engaged learning placements and partnerships were grouped into three areas: placement characteristics, student characteristics, and university partner characteristics. Effective community-engaged learning placements had specific outcomes, were mutually beneficial for organization and university partners, did not require financial support from the organization, and had good community mentors available for students. Effective community-engaged learning students were knowledgeable about and responsible for meeting placement expectations; came to the placement with adequate background, skills, and pre-training; were enthusiastic, motivated, and ready to learn; and had an interest in the organization and their placement tasks. Effective university partners conducted ongoing student supervision during placements, supported students to help them get the most out of their experiences, and shared students' progress with community partners through reports.

## Conclusion

To foster effective community-engaged learning partnerships, universities need structures for students to (1) share past community-engaged learning experiences with other students and prepare for community-engaged learning placements; (2) have mutually beneficial conversations with community partners; (3) negotiate with university partners; and (4) receive mentoring and support from university and community partners. Further, universities need to establish structures that enable ongoing conversations between community partners and university partners. University and community partners need to provide feedback, share what they have learned about making student engagement work, and negotiate community-engaged learning placement timelines.

## About the Authors

**Holly Stack-Cutler** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. Her research interests include community-based research with vulnerable populations, community-engaged learning, and resilience and social capital of adults with reading difficulties. Stack-Cutler earned her M.A. and M.Ed. at Brock University.

**Sara Dorow** is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta. Her research and teaching are guided by interests in the political economy of im/migration; neoliberal globalization; practices and imaginaries of community; processes of racialization; and constructions of kinship, gender, and childhood. Three areas of scholarship define her current work: globalization and community, transnational adoption, and scholarship of engagement/community service-learning. Dorow earned her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Minnesota.

# STUDENT AND COMMUNITY PARTNER EXPECTATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

Holly Stack-Cutler, PhD Candidate, & Sara Dorow, PhD, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada



## INTRODUCTION

Encouraging student insight and community partner feedback into their community-engaged learning (CEL) experiences can lead to understanding promising learning practices. However, students' and community partners' views are not often heard during CEL development.

## RESEARCH DATA & METHODS

We conducted a thematic analysis on two types of data:

- 5 students from Business, Law, Biological Sciences, Arts, and Human Ecology) with experience in co-op, practicum, and service-learning placements discussed CEL expectations and experiences negotiating community and university CEL expectations
- Community Partner on CEL Partnerships - written responses to open-ended survey question
- 4 from the same group of community development, recreation, social services, and environmental health workers discussed characteristics of effective student placements from the perspective of their organizations

## FINDINGS

### I. Student Perspectives on CEL - Placement Expectations

#### A Site Environment to Learn Skills and Challenge Themselves

- Students expected to acquire management skills, exercise leadership skills, and be given responsibility
- Students expected their placement to be a safe environment where they could take risks, challenge themselves, and try new things.

*"I think that the biggest expectations were that I would have some responsibility and some opportunity to learn new things. I would like to be able to take on some responsibility and to be able to learn from situations that you will be required for your qualifications that you bring to it and that you'll be given ample opportunities to really get your feet wet."*

#### Opportunity to Put Classroom Learning into Practice

- Students expected their placement to be a place where they could test learned skills, and abilities in a professional setting.
- Experiences in the real world meant students could attach faces and stories to theories learned in the classroom to more fully develop their understanding of a topic.

#### Exposure to Multiple Perspectives

- Students expected to get a variety of perspectives on how others view their expertise and areas of interest.
- Students recommended being open to new experiences and learning from mentors and the people one will meet in a community placement.

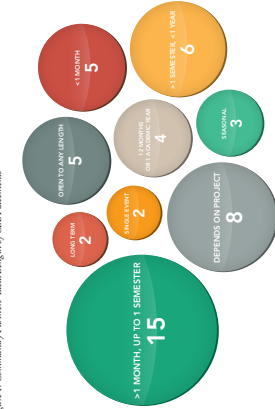
#### An Involved Community Supervisor

- Students expected their placement supervisor to provide an orientation of the organization and the tasks expected of them, provide on-going supervision, and highlight the significance of their work/duties.
- "For my supervisor I expected maybe to have a little bit of direction, a little bit of structure, maybe an orientation to the organization that would be really helpful, and maybe to explain the meaning behind the work that we would be doing with our clients. To know the purpose of my work better than just being relegated to a task and being left by myself."*

## II. Community Partner Perspectives on CEL Partnerships

Community partners appreciated being able to negotiate the length of CEL placements based on their organization's needs (see Figure 1). Key characteristics of CEL partnerships were grouped into three areas: placements, student, and university partner (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Community Partners' Ideal Length of CEL Placements



## DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Students expect their CEL placements to provide them with opportunities to "marry" theory and practice (Hall & Hollander, 2006; Ralph et al., 2008), develop test new skills, and build relationships with community partners and university staff (Sawly & Holland, 2006).

- Through CEL partnerships community partners expect to mentor motivated students, have ongoing communication with students, and be able to provide them mutually beneficial outcomes with both students and university partners (Coore & Payne, 2002).
- Universities need to have structures for students to (a) share past CEL experiences with other students and negotiate for CEL placements, (b) have mutually beneficial conversations with community partners (c) prepare for university partners and (d) receive mentoring and support from university and university partners.
- Universities need to have structures for community partners to (a) have ongoing conversations with university partners and provide feedback, (b) share what they have learned about making student engagement work and (c) negotiate CEL placement time lines.

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## STUDENT SUGGESTIONS FOR NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY AND UNIVERSITY EXPECTATIONS

### Actively Prepare and Communicate

- actively ask questions to clarify community partner expectations
- communicate with community partners before starting placement—do not wait
- own and understand your own expectations and be able to negotiate placement
- talk to other students in class and mentoring professor before starting placement
- take ownership of placement experiences and be responsible for own work

### Critically Engage with Community Experiences

- learn theory in the classroom and engage in practice preparation
- reflect on theory and practice that theory learned in books does not always dictate placement realities
- use problem-solving skills to navigate unexpected situations and challenges

### Explore Future Opportunities

- ask questions to clarify community partner expectations, continue to share
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  - skills which the community partner receives services from a trained individual
- "I am a big talker and communicate so I was able to just say 'what do you want me to do?' and 'what are you expecting?' so we had a lot of conversations, one and my supervisor about what she was hoping to get and what I was hoping to get. And we did have some negotiating along the way because things didn't always go as planned."*
- "You're like, 'oh, you're doing this, you're doing that, you're doing this, you're doing that, you're necessarily work on the same time line... real world time line that starts September or April.'"*

For more information contact Holly Stack-Cutler at [hstack@ualberta.ca](mailto:hstack@ualberta.ca)  
Poster can be found at NCEEL Resources at <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/nceel/blog/>



## CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE CEL PARTNERSHIPS:

### Effective CEL Placements...

- are focused and have specific outcomes
- are mutually beneficial for organization and university partner
- do not require financial support from organizations
- are mutually beneficial for all involved
- "We had a great time, they're interested in us, we had a great partner from the board and a specific focus with the student and in consultation with the agency regarding the student project."

### Effective CEL Students...

- are knowledgeable about and responsible for meeting support them in their placement
- are enthusiastic, motivated, and ready to learn
- will be doing
- "In an effective placement, the student would be able to use their education and skill to the greatest benefit to the organization and the student, gain valuable experience related to their field of study."

### Effective University Partners...

- conduct ongoing supervision of students during placement
- support students to help them get the most out of their CEL experience
- communicate through reports
- "Students that are supported by a pair secondary coordinator and other students in addition to our staff, works best for us."

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