

ARTICLES

WHOM DOES SERVICE LEARNING REALLY SERVE? COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS' PERSPECTIVES ON SERVICE LEARNING*

One of the major selling points of service-learning courses is their potential to mutually benefit communities, universities, and students. Although a great deal of research reports numerous pedagogical and personal benefits for students—from improved grades and increased civic engagement to increased understanding and appreciation of diversity—there is relatively little research on the impact of service learning on the community. To understand when and how service-learning courses benefit the community, we conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of local community-based organizations that have worked with service learners. We report on the primary benefits and costs associated with service-learning courses. We identify three types of obstacles to successful service-learning courses: issues related to student conduct, poor fit between course and organizational objectives, and lack of communication between instructors and organizations. We develop practical guidelines for addressing these obstacles and for ensuring that service learning fulfills teaching and learning goals and provides valuable service to community-based organizations.

DAVID D. BLOUIN

Indiana University-South Bend

EVELYN M. PERRY

Indiana University

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IN A RECENT American Sociological Association (ASA) report on learning in the *Social*

*Authors are listed in alphabetical order to signify equal authorship. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the North Central Sociological Association, Indianapolis, March 2006. We are grateful for comments and assistance from Emily Bowman, Mari Dagaz, Brent Harger, Jay Howard, Claire King, Bernice Pescosolido, Brian Powell, Rob Robinson, Nicholas Rowland, Nicole Schonemann, and the anonymous reviewers. The research was financed by an Indiana University Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Grant awarded to Bernice Pescosolido and the co-authors. Please direct correspondence to David Blouin, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Indiana University South Bend, Wiekamp Hall 2285, 1700 Mishawaka Avenue, South Bend, IN 46634; e-mail: dblouin@iusb.edu or Evelyn Perry, Department of Sociology, Indiana University, Ballantine Hall 744, 1020 E. Kirkwood Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47405; e-mail: eperry@indiana.edu.

Editor's note: The reviewers were, in alphabetical order, Catherine Mobley, Anne Nurse, and Shireen Rajaram.

ology major, a task force of leading scholars made 16 recommendations for undergraduate education (McKinney et al. 2004). Three of these recommendations advocated active teaching strategies that involve student engagement outside of the classroom.¹ The task force cited community-based learning experiences such as service-learning courses as a preferred option to meet these active learning goals.

Service-learning courses have become increasingly popular in college classrooms

¹Selected recommendations from Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major Updated, by McKinney et al. (2004), page iii: Recommendation 11: Departments should encourage diverse pedagogies, including active learning experiences, to increase student engagement. Recommendation 12: Departments should offer community and classroom based learning experiences that develop students' critical thinking skills and prepare them for lives of civic engagement. Recommendation 13: Departments should offer and encourage student involvement in out-of-class (co- and extra-curricular) learning opportunities.

across the country. Campus Compact, a national organization supporting collaborations between community organizations and universities, reports that 98 percent of their nearly 1,100 member colleges and universities offer service-learning courses (Campus Compact 2008). They also report that over the last five years member institutions have increased their service participation by 60 percent (Campus Compact 2008).

As service-learning courses become more prevalent, it is increasingly important to ensure that they are mutually beneficial to both universities and communities (Lewis 2004). One of the major selling points of service-learning courses has been an implicit assumption that they enhance student learning *and* provide service to the wider community. As Bushouse (2005) writes, service learning is often championed as a “win-win-win situation for the university, students, and community” (p. 32). Indeed, a great deal of research reports numerous pedagogical and personal benefits for students. These include improved grades and learning, increased civic engagement, enhanced job skills, and greater appreciation for diversity (see Mooney and Edwards 2001, for a review and sources).

While the benefits for students are well documented, little systematic research has investigated the impact on community-based organizations (hereafter called CBOs) (Cruz and Giles 2000). However, in order for service-learning courses to meet their intended goals—addressing community needs while giving students hands-on practical experience and encouraging civic responsibility—we must consider the evaluative counterpart: Does service learning offer real benefits to CBOs?

To begin to address this issue, we conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of CBOs about their experiences with service learning. In this paper, we present our findings on the benefits and costs of service learning for CBOs and highlight three common obstacles to successful service-learning courses. We conclude by de-

scribing practical guidelines for designing and implementing service-learning courses that maximize benefits for CBOs.

SERVICE LEARNING AND SOCIOLOGY

Although research on service learning applies to instructors of all disciplines, we believe it is particularly relevant for teaching and learning in sociology. First, as mentioned above, disciplinary leaders have explicitly advocated the use of active-learning pedagogies, such as service learning. Second, well-designed service-learning partnerships can achieve public sociology goals by extending or producing accessible and useful sociological knowledge. As Michael Burawoy (2005) noted in his 2004 ASA Presidential Address, “Service learning is the prototype: as they learn, students become ambassadors of sociology to the wider world just as they bring back to the classroom their engagement with diverse publics. As teachers we are all potential public sociologists” (p. 10). Service-learning partnerships thus have the potential to serve both pedagogical and public goals of the discipline. Third, many of the CBOs that partner with service-learning courses have missions that include the service of disadvantaged groups and the amelioration of social problems. Sociology as a discipline is well positioned to provide relevant knowledge and conceptual and theoretical tools for understanding both social problems and the experiences of marginalized populations. Finally, service learning is an excellent way to introduce students to sociological concepts, such as the sociological imagination, and to encourage students to apply these concepts to real life situations (Breese and Richmond 2002; Fritz 2002; Mobley 2007). As Fritz (2002) writes, “sociology and service learning seem to have been made for each other. Sociologists look for creative ways to introduce students, whatever their majors, to the world around them, and service learning provides that opportunity” (p. 67).

SERVICE LEARNING AND COMMUNITY IMPACTS

Existing research on community impacts focuses on the costs and benefits of service learning to CBOs and their clients.

Benefits of Service Learning for Community Based Organizations (CBOs)

Nearly all research on the community perspective reports some benefits for CBOs and generally indicates that benefits outweigh costs (Driscoll et al. 1996; Ferrari and Worrall 2000; Gelmon et al. 1998; Ward and Vernon 1999). Community agencies value the skills, commitment, fresh perspectives and energy of student service learners (Edwards, Mooney, and Heald 2001; Ferrari and Worrall 2000; Gelmon et al. 1998; Vernon and Foster 2002; Vernon and Ward 1999). Highly motivated and creative students inspire staff, offer new ideas to improve organizational operations, and provide additional human resources that help community agencies expand their services. Additionally, CBOs report benefiting from campus resources such as faculty expertise, potential board members (e.g., faculty, administrators), grant opportunities, and libraries and other facilities (Leiderman et al. 2003). Perhaps most importantly, existing studies describe important benefits for the clients of CBOs and the advancement of their missions (Leiderman et al. 2003, Schmidt and Robby 2002; Vernon and Foster 2002). As a case in point, Schmidt and Robby's (2002) evaluation of a youth tutoring program indicated that elementary students' math and spelling scores increased as a result of the tutoring provided by service-learning students. In a separate interview study, community representatives of youth services organizations reported that college service-learning students often connected well with their young clients, acting as important role models, and helping to improve the youth's grades and self-esteem (Vernon and Foster 2002).

Costs of Service Learning for CBOs

Existing research also indicates that CBOs experience predictable sources of dissatisfaction with service-learning courses and students. The most common are complaints of students' unreliability and lack of motivation and commitment (Gelmon et al. 1998; Vernon and Foster 2002; Vernon and Ward 1999). In one study, community representatives viewed the lack of commitment as particularly problematic because of the disappointment this caused their young clients, who depended on the university students (Vernon and Foster 2002). Additional challenges reported by CBOs include frustrations with short term commitments, scheduling hassles, unprepared volunteers, and the time needed for training (Vernon and Foster 2002; Vernon and Ward 1999).

RESEARCH GOALS

Service-learning courses, which combine community involvement with classroom instruction, originate from a long and rich tradition of experiential learning practices designed to encourage public scholarship and civic responsibility (Boyer 1990; Dewey 1938). From its inception, service learning was intended to address the needs of both students and the wider community (Sigmon 1979). Yet, in practice the focus has most often been on the interests of the university and students (Cruz and Giles 2000). Too little is known about how service learning impacts CBOs and the wider community. We argue, along with others, that it is paramount for service-learning courses and the research on this pedagogy "to reflect both the original goals of *service* and *learning*" (Vernon and Ward 1999:30).

While there has been increased scholarship on service learning in recent years, research on community impacts remains sparse and limited. The voice of CBOs is largely absent in the service-learning literature. Those studies that do incorporate the CBO perspective generally investigate only

specific types of service learning or an individual course or program. For example, Bushouse (2005) conducted phone interviews with 11 CBOs about their experiences with three sessions of a single graduate course. Similarly, Edwards, Mooney, and Heald (2001) collected 39 surveys of CBOs that had experiences with a single student volunteer program and Schmidt and Robby (2002) evaluated a single, although extensive, youth tutoring program. While these studies are insightful, the scope of service-learning courses at universities is much broader, encompassing activities as diverse as collaborative research projects, special program creation and implementation, grant-writing, and program evaluations, offered across multiple disciplines and courses. In a critique of service-learning research, Furco (2003) argues that the field has been limited by its inability to contend with this diversity. He therefore advocates conducting multi-site, multi-program studies that capture a range of service-learning impacts: "By gathering the same or similar information from various sites, researchers may be better able to observe and analyze impact patterns across a wide range of situations or programs" (p. 24).

Our own research seeks to address these limitations by collecting and analyzing perspectives from a diverse array of CBOs with diverse missions and whose experiences include many different service-learning courses across different disciplines. Our main goal is to continue to advance this important, but nascent line of inquiry, investigating CBOs' experiences with a variety of service-learning initiatives. While researching the general experience of community-based organizations, we solicited practical advice on measures instructors can take to better serve CBOs. In sum, the following questions guide our research:

1. What types of experiences (positive and negative) do CBOs have with service-learning courses and students?
2. How does service learning benefit CBOs? What are the costs for CBOs?
3. What common challenges do CBOs

encounter in working with service learners?

4. Ultimately, what can instructors do to more effectively serve CBOs?

RESEARCH METHOD

The data for this study consist of in-depth interviews with representatives of 20 different community-based organizations located in Monroe County, Indiana. All of the organizations had past and present experiences with service-learning courses and students from Indiana University, a large public university, located in Bloomington, a small city in South Central Indiana.

Sample Selection

The director of the Office of Service Learning at Indiana University assisted us in selecting the organizations for the study. First, we identified local organizations that were currently and historically the most involved with service-learning courses. Second, to create a diverse sample, we selected organizations that address a variety of issues and populations and avoided choosing multiple organizations that focus on the same general issues.

We contacted the Executive Director of each organization first via phone, and when necessary by email. All organizations contacted agreed to participate in the study. We selected interview respondents based on the Executive Director's assessment of who had the most experience and interaction with the service-learning students. We interviewed 13 executive directors, four volunteer coordinators and three program directors. We conducted all interviews from February to July of 2006. Interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to two hours and averaged about 50 minutes.

For this study, we broadly define service learning as a pedagogy that combines service and learning objectives. We asked respondents to talk to us about their experiences with students who are involved in their organization through service-learning classes. Many of our respondents were

quite knowledgeable about service-learning pedagogy. For those requiring clarification, we defined service learners as those who provide service to their organization to fulfill a requirement for a particular course. We eliminated internships and projects that clearly lacked a service component from the sample.

There is considerable variation in the definitions of service learning in scholarship and in practice. We decided to employ a broad definition for several reasons. First, CBOs do not necessarily know what goes on in the classroom, nor are they always privy to the service and learning goals of classes. Second, academic service-learning definitions are often normative in that they incorporate best practices (e.g., service learning requires opportunities for structured reflection (Nurse and Krain 2006) or “successful” outcomes (e.g., service learning aims to produce a more just society (Marullo 1996)). Since we were interested in how service learning is carried out in the community and how it affects local organizations, we thought it counterproductive to limit our interviews only to those courses that meet stringent academic guidelines and follow best practices. Our findings, therefore, point out potential problems with both poorly-executed and well-executed service-learning courses.²

The Sample

Our sample consists of representatives from 20 CBOs (See Table 1). These organizations serve a diverse array of client populations, including disabled children and adults, low-income families, victims/survivors of domestic violence, non-native

English speakers, school-age children and youth, the elderly, the infirm, domestic animals, and the general public. The organizations also vary greatly in size. The smallest organization has only two paid employees, and the largest, a hospital, over 2000. Organizations also vary in terms of the number of volunteers and service-learning students they employ. Organizations reported partnering with anywhere from 1 to 100 service-learning students at any given time. The broad range of service-learning activities the organizations are involved in includes mentoring, tutoring, food preparation, program development and assessment, event planning, marketing, and survey research, among others. Courses were affiliated with many different disciplines including sociology, law, marketing, computer science, and education, to name a few.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and entered into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software package which facilitates the creation and storage of notes, memos, and codes. We used both inductive and deductive analytic techniques. Interviews were coded based on findings from previous research and based on emergent themes. In the following review of findings we report on the most prevalent and consistent themes.

FINDINGS

CBOs' Experiences with Service Learning

In this section we discuss our findings in three key areas: the primary benefits and costs of service learning for CBOs and the common challenges CBOs encounter in

²Employing a broad definition also reflects current institutional practices at Indiana University. In educational materials for community partners, the Office of Service Learning (OSL) offers a similar definition of service-learning--“students will help provide a service for your organization as part of an academic course” (Indiana University OSL 2008)--that is separate from a discussion of the elements of successful service-learning classes. And, al-

though OSL staff offer expert guidance on service-learning course design, the university does not require instructors of courses with official service-learning designation to consult with or gain approval from the Office of Service Learning. Further, there are instructors of courses with service-learning components who do not apply for the official designation. It is very likely, therefore, that not all service learning courses fit strict definitions.

Table 1. Community Organizations Sample Characteristics

Nature of Community Organization	Number of Service Learners Each Semester
Academic services for children with disabilities	1-2
Family resource center	2
Hospital	2
Homeless shelter	2-3
Therapeutic horseback riding	2-10
Food pantry	3
Low income childcare	6
Support services for people with disabilities	7-10
Low income legal services	10
Transitional housing for victims of domestic violence	15-20
Animal care and control	18
Animal welfare advocacy	20-30
Boys and girls after school club	20-30
Youth tutoring and mentoring	20-35
Community recreation center	23
Low income pre-school	30
Family resource center	40-50
Homeless shelter	40-50
Parks and recreation	100

working with service learners.

Benefits for CBOs. According to our participants, the principal advantage to working with service learners is the assistance they provide in the form of labor and resources. This extra help translates into a range of benefits. Service learners often fill volunteer slots needed to keep programs running. One organization director notes, “We wouldn’t be able to have our programs without them. We simply would not be able to do what we do without them. That’s truly the bottom line.”

The extra help can increase the number of people organizations can serve and enhance the quality of services. For example, the director of an organization that serves children emphasizes the importance of increasing the adult-children ratio in the classroom:

In child care, the more bodies the better, in general, as long as they’ve got a clue about what they are doing. Because individual attention in classrooms is gold.

The assistance provided by service learners can free up staff time to attend to important,

less immediate, aspects of their work or create opportunities to pursue new projects.

When they’re [service learners] good, they’re like unpaid staff. . . . So it can be very beneficial in that way more man hours and things like that to get things done. . . . They can also do projects that I don’t have time for, which is a very big benefit especially when I was trying to do it all by myself.

In doing the work of paid staff, service learners also free up organizational resources to be used in any number of productive ways. This is particularly important for small non-profit organizations with small budgets or unsteady funding streams.

A lot of times we’re scrambling around to get some more money so we can run some more programs, but what service learners do is they eliminate the need to pay qualified people to do all of these things ‘cause service learners are very qualified people and they’re available because most of them don’t have families. We would have to pay a huge amount of money to get that kind of semi-professional work to run a program. So they just multiply grant money a hundredfold.

Many of our participants noted that even short-term partnerships can have long-term benefits. For example, some students continue their service to the organization beyond the course requirements as regular volunteers, interns or staff.

A lot of our service learners stay after they're done with service learning, which is really exciting, you know, because they obviously are getting something from it. And so the good ones that we get that aren't just doing it for a class, but they really enjoy the experience and do stay.

In some cases, students assist in recruitment by encouraging other students to volunteer. Service learners may also become organizational advocates who educate others about the mission of the organization, enhance public awareness about related social issues and generally increase publicity about the organization.

CBOs appreciate that service learners bring fresh, outsider perspectives and new ideas to the organization.

We love the way that young minds think. And you know we sit at our computer and . . . we just don't have the time or the energy to stop and be creative and think of new ideas. And by integrating service learners into what we're doing as a department, they bring that.

In some cases, service learning helps bridge the “town-gown” divide. Students learn about the community beyond the university’s walls, and community members discover that not all college students fit negative stereotypes (e.g., self-absorbed, disconnected from the community, apathetic).

I think it benefits the community because the community has an idea that the students all they want to do is party. They go downtown. They get drunk. I mean it's so stupid...but that's such a small percentage of the students who are here. And to have service learners walking around in this town and to have people talk about what they're doing and having them interact with families and kids shows a whole different side of the university to the community.

Finally, these partnerships can provide organizations access to university resources (e.g., technical expertise, connections to faculty with shared research/occupational interests) and open the door to other types of beneficial collaborations.

Costs for CBOs. As has been reported in previous research, service-learning partnerships may also have substantial costs for CBOs. In our interviews with community representatives, costs generally fell into two categories: risks to the organization and investments of resources that do not yield tangible returns for the organization.

CBOs working with vulnerable populations are particularly concerned with protecting those they serve from harm. A few participants shared examples of poorly-prepared service learners failing to treat clients with respect or breaching confidentiality agreements. Some organizations serve clients that require continuity and trust in relationships. When unreliable students fail to show up or follow through, they potentially do serious harm.

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May 20, 2009
I mean we honestly have kids here that wait by the door because they know it's 3:45 and so and so comes at 4:00 and they're freaking out 15 minutes beforehand "Oh my gosh he's not here yet, he's not here yet," and you're just praying, "Oh please walk through that door on time." And usually they do but there's a lot of them that do not and they do not realize the harm that they're inflicting on the kids.

Another participant voices a similar complaint:

Here our kids are crushed when people stop coming and . . . we're working with a population exclusively of kids who've witnessed and experienced family violence. Their sense of rejection is so heightened. So when volunteers say, "Well I'm done with my hours . . . I won't be back." That can be really hard for a kid.

Some CBOs have strict licensing requirements or confidentiality conditions tied to their funding. If service learners do not comply with agency policies, they put the organization at risk of losing much-needed resources. Participants also shared concerns

about another risk to CBOs: misrepresentation. Some service-learning projects include a public presentation in which students assume the role of organizational representatives. Inaccurate portrayals of programs, procedures, staff or clients can damage an agency's reputation or undercut their broader mission.

If they're turning in a final project that they're presenting to the class, we'd just like to make sure that they're not disclosing identifying information. A number of times we've had students who have written articles in the IDS [Indiana Daily Student (newspaper)]... There've been some really, really wonderful ones and we appreciate the exposure. There have also been some that are just filled with misstatements or mistruths about the things that are going on.

Partnering with service-learning courses can interfere with the ability of CBOs to carry out their missions. Although respondents cited relatively few instances of severe damage, it is important to recognize that CBOs must manage risks when working with service learners.

All of our respondents described a second set of costs: the draining of organizational resources. They shared frustration with service-learning partnerships that require investments of their time, energy or other resources that do not pay off. As one community partner reported:

It doesn't necessarily save you a lot of work. I mean it's good for them because they'll get the experience, but it may actually be more taxing for you.

Staff devote considerable time to orientations, trainings, preparation of job tasks, and service-learner supervision and support. Organization staff are also asked to deliver presentations to classes or provide regular input on service-learning projects. Time investments are not viewed as problematic if there is sufficient payoff for the organization; however, when not mutually beneficial, service learning is a drain on community agencies' limited resources.

If there's no exchange, no benefit to the non-profit other than getting just overrun by students, it's more of a hindrance than anything else.

When do the costs of service learning outweigh the benefits? Our respondents indicated a number of common problems that lead to "costly" experiences. Though there are a wide range of problems that occur at various stages of service learning, they all lead to one or both of the two types of costs detailed above: risks to the organization and resource drain. We grouped these challenges into three general areas: student conduct and commitment, course-organization fit, and communication.

Challenges: Student conduct and commitment. Although respondents emphasized that most service learners turn out to be assets to their organizations, they also identified common concerns about working with these students. A significant challenge in working with service learners is a lack of professionalism. CBO representatives expressed frustration with service learners who do not have a strong work ethic. Almost all described experiences with students who were unwilling to work hard, unable to take initiative or seemed unconcerned with producing quality results. Several organizations shared concerns about unprofessional communication; they described students who would aggressively pursue contact, demand accommodation on short notice, or attempt to contact clients directly without the organization's consent.

I've also had students that had certain things that I thought were very rude or insulting by the way that they've done something or phrased something or demanded something of me in order for them to get their project done.

Several of the CBOs that work with people who have very different life experiences than typical Indiana University students found that some service learners were not prepared to confront issues related to poverty, race, mental illness, substance abuse, or homelessness. This lack of awareness or

insensitivity to clients' experiences created challenges for some of our respondents. Organizations are willing to help students learn about these issues, but they propose that additional preparation in the classroom could prevent the offensive and sometimes hurtful behavior they have witnessed.

It's always a nice thing to be able to go to the class and explain to them before they choose [our organization] what we do here and what the kids are like. . . . I don't sugarcoat things when I go in there. I let them know that it's going to be difficult sometimes. And that's really helpful I think for the students and for us because then they know what they're getting into a little bit more.

Almost all of the respondents struggle with unreliable students who do not show up for shifts, miss appointments, or fail to follow through on tasks or projects. In some instances, this is merely an inconvenience. This becomes a more serious issue, however, when clients are disappointed or important work is not completed.

I would say the biggest annoyance is the service learners that are inconsistent. They need it for a class but then they don't show up or they're flaky and we're counting on them. And I don't do something myself or I have it all laid out and they don't show up and I'm scrambling to do it. . . . So that's probably my biggest complaint is if they're irresponsible and don't follow through. . . . Last semester it happened all the time.

Another participant observes:

We see people who come to volunteer who maybe lack the commitment that our volunteers who come out of that really un-tethered sense of volunteer duty. We've had some frustration with people who are not as committed, they don't show up regularly for their shifts, they're late all the time, and I think that's it. This is not a meaningful issue for them.

Like many representatives of CBOs we interviewed, this respondent questions service learners' level of commitment and motivation. Because service is driven by require-

ments and is not necessarily tied to personal goals, students sometimes seem less invested in the organization or its broader mission than volunteers. Several respondents linked shallow commitment to reliability and accountability issues.

Challenges: Course-CBO fit. Organizations vary considerably in size, mission, goals, services provided, and types of service recipients. It is not surprising, then, that they also vary considerably in their needs. When service-learning goals do not complement agency needs, organizations' investments of time and energy are less likely to pay off. For our respondents, these "poor fit" partnerships are another significant challenge in service learning. We identified two general types of service-learning needs: *program-oriented* and *project-oriented*. CBOs with program-oriented needs tend to have established programs that need positions filled. They prefer to incorporate service learners into their everyday routines (e.g., after-school tutoring, meal preparation, and client intakes) and are thus able to accommodate those students needing to complete a set number of service hours. CBOs with project-oriented needs tend to have specific, one-time projects that need to be completed rather than ongoing, defined needs. They might need assistance with event-planning, grant-writing, advertising, or administering special projects. Not all organizations in our study fell neatly into these categories; some had both types of needs.³

³A previous study by Bushouse (2005) found that CBOs prefer "transactional" over "transformational" service-learning partnerships because they have lower economic costs and higher benefits. These distinctions are based on a continuum of university-community partnerships developed by Enos and Morton (2003). Transactional partnerships involve a fairly superficial level of interaction, such as one-time events and short term projects or appointments. Transformational partnerships are longer term, involve greater interdependence, and eventually "invite the possibility that their joint work is likely to transform them both" (Enos and Morton 2003:30: As quoted in Bushouse 2005).

Almost all respondents mentioned struggling to accommodate poor fit partnerships that rarely produce mutually-beneficial results. Sometimes service learners approach organizations with specific project objectives that may or may not correspond with organizational form or needs.

You've got people coming with different agendas and different goals that don't really match up with what your mission is But the biggest disadvantage is getting the point across that you don't have all needs at all times, that you have evolving needs that one semester you might be focused more on one area of your non-profit and there's no room for that in the current program.

Poor fit sometimes has less to do with the type of need and more to do with the duration of service. Many of the service-learning classes at Indiana University require a minimum number of service hours. This creates problems for CBOs when, after completing their mandatory hours in the first several weeks of the semester, students end their relationships with the organizations. CBOs seem to have adjusted to working with the academic calendar and most emphasize that they prefer semester-long commitments. This clearly relates to concerns about making sure that organizational investments in service learners pay off. Respondents also wanted to ensure that students were with the organization long enough to fulfill the learning objectives of the course and get a broader sense of the community partner's mission and operation.

Are they here enough to really be able to grasp what's going on? Are they here enough that I'm not gonna have to spend too much time showing them things over and over again? Is it going to be worth it? . . . Are they

Like Bushouse, we find that certain organizations, with specific programs already in place tend to prefer "transactional" relationships with service learners. However, unlike Bushouse, we also identify "project-oriented" CBOs that are better equipped to deal with and tend to prefer more "transformative" service-learning partnerships.

here enough that they feel a part of it or do they feel like they just come and do their thing and it's like going to another class or something like that?

Some partners believed that longer-term commitments produced service learners who were better able to support the organization. Several respondents mentioned the importance of semester-long service for developing service learners' comfort with the work, the clients, and the organizational culture.

Well first of all service learners are only here for . . . you know a certain period of time—fifteen hours or whatever is the requirement for the class. And so that makes it difficult to develop the relationship, you know, the ability to work on your own. They're just finally feeling comfortable with it when they leave. They become more reliable and effective as a volunteer if they stay longer than their time.

Concerns about time commitment are also linked to the desire to educate students about the nature of community engagement, emphasizing that it is a relationship rather than a single act or finite experience.

Challenges: Communication. During our interviews, we repeatedly heard versions of the following stories:

Usually what happens is we have people who are volunteering with our programs, we don't even know they're part of a class, and then they bring us a sheet and they say "Can you sign off and say I've done my twenty hours?"

And:

That's why I'd like to see it in writing ahead of time because students will come in and they'll misunderstand maybe the goal, they'll skew it maybe, or they just won't even think to tell you...They have to think about the fact that we get contacts from people totally out of context. We have no idea what class they're in or what's going on. I almost never know the course number and only about a third of the time do I know the professor's name.

These descriptions are indicators of a serious potential obstacle to successful ser-

vice-learning courses; CBO representatives we spoke with often have little to no communication with instructors. Many of the challenges service learning poses to CBOs are tied to the instructor's inaccurate assumptions or lack of information about an organization's culture, basic operation, or needs.

If service-learning course instructors do not have a clear sense of what their students will encounter at a particular organization, fail to clearly communicate service-learning terms and goals to students and/or CBOs, or rely on students as the sole conduit of information between the instructor and the CBO, they are unable to adequately prepare the students for service. CBO representatives brought up a number of issues related to student preparedness. In most cases where readiness is an issue, organizations encounter students with inaccurate or nebulous expectations. Several organizations with youth-directed programs recalled students who assumed their service entailed playing with children and were disappointed or even perturbed when they learned the organization was assigning them to other, less "fun" tasks. Some service learners are unable to articulate what they want to do with the organization or lack a clear sense of the goals of service learning (i.e., why they are there). Many of our respondents shared related frustrations:

Why is there a service-learning component in this class? In other words, what do they want their students to get from it? So that when the students come here, I'm clear, they're clear, and maybe we can accomplish something. You know I've had students come—like the students who come and say "I don't care. I'll do anything." . . . What is the point of them being here?

Clear and consistent communication is not only important for sharing crucial information about the organization. If they understand the general goals of the course and the specific objectives of the service-learning component, CBOs are better equipped to support students' academic and civic development.

You know I really like to meet the instructor before I start getting phone calls from students wanting to do projects. If I know what the instructor wants their students to get out of the experience and I know what the course is about I can provide a better learning experience for the students and be more prepared. You know this whole thing is about reciprocity. . . . I feel a certain obligation to be a professional mentor for students.

Some partners expressed the desire to have a more formal role in evaluating students. This would, they propose, increase service learners' sense of obligation or willingness to accept responsibility. Since much of the service-learning process takes place beyond the classroom, partners are able to give instructors a more holistic picture of students' efforts and accomplishments.

In some cases, CBOs find it useful to continue communication with instructors beyond the completion of the service-learning experience. They can provide instructors with potentially valuable evaluations of the course and suggestions for future projects. A few CBO representatives also expressed a desire for feedback from the instructor. They wanted to know if the goals of service learning are achieved, and if not, how they could better facilitate student learning.⁴

I never hear from instructors whether they've felt the activities met their course objectives... It just would be nice to know whether they thought what happened was beneficial or if they thought that would be something they would want to do again in the future or if they thought that if so and so such and such was tweaked you know it might be more useful.

Service learning is a joint venture. Successful partnerships require much more than good intentions; they require true collaboration. In descriptions of what constitutes a solid foundation for service-learning rela-

⁴It is important to note that a few respondents acknowledged that, although they embrace the idea of co-teaching, the reality of doing their job with limited resources makes it difficult to invest the required time and energy.

tionships, respondents returned time and time again to the importance of communication with course instructors.

I think just understanding overall what we want, what we expect is very important so that they can relay that to their class and kids don't just show up at the organization completely blind. . . . If the professor knew what we were about, once again it just kinda makes that relationship much better and then maybe they're going to beef it up a little bit as a student if they know that their professor is vested in the organization.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAXIMIZING SERVICE IN SERVICE LEARNING

While our study findings—and therefore our recommendations—focus on logistics, the challenges CBOs commonly encounter might reflect incompatibilities between institutional research and teaching models and service-learning practices that support positive outcomes for CBOs. Research universities, like Indiana University, are rooted in the traditional models of researcher as professional expert (Reardon 1998; Whyte, Greenwood and Lazes 1989) and teacher as knowledge expert (Howard 1998). These models center power and control in the hands of the academic/instructor. In contrast, service-learning pedagogies increasingly incorporate features of participatory research and teaching approaches, including collaborative design, shared decision making, reciprocity, and non-academic expertise (Reardon 1998; Stoecker 1999; Whyte, Greenwood and Lazes 1989). Such approaches emphasize shared power and shared control. These conflicting conceptions of appropriate power relations are perhaps underlying many of the challenges we discuss above. Our respondents' experiences indicate that service-learning course instructors that treat CBOs as *partners* rather than subjects or recipients tend to produce better community outcomes. This echoes recent research that identifies relationship parity as central to successful uni-

versity-community partnerships (Leiderman et al. 2003). We therefore offer recommendations for instructors that lay a foundation for greater parity and true reciprocity. We focus on practical recommendations, based on respondents' suggestions, to address the challenges discussed above.

1. Partner with CBOs to Develop the Service Component of Courses⁵

Recent research consistently highlights the importance of collaborative planning (e.g., Leiderman et al. 2003; Rajaram 2007). Our findings indicate that this essential guideline bears repeating. Instructors should partner with CBOs to develop the service component of courses.⁶ Visiting the community organization and establishing open communication well before the course begins is essential. Early contact should involve instructors' attempts to get a sense of the organization and incorporate its needs and capacities into course design. According to our respondents, instructors' inadequate knowledge of their organization leads to unhelpful and even costly service-learning partnerships. The service component should be mutually beneficial, maximizing student learning and community service. Pay special attention to issues of "fit" discussed in the challenges section above. Our findings suggest that CBOs often have a strong preference for either "program-oriented" or "project-oriented" service (see also footnote #3). Most CBOs in our study also prefer regular, semester-long commitments. Finally, ask about past experiences with ser-

⁵Our recommendations contribute to and at times echo those made by researchers who incorporate the community perspective. For example, see also Rajaram (2007), for steps for developing service learning projects and Leiderman et al. (2003), for suggestions for developing mutually beneficial partnerships.

⁶If your institution has an office dedicated to organizing and implementing university-community partnerships, we recommend contacting it in the early stages of course design. These offices are excellent resources for integrating a service component into a course and identifying potential community partners.

vice learners (good *and* bad) and explore the potential risks of the project to the organization.

2. Share Course Objectives and Define CBOs Role in Course

Instructors should share the goals, objectives, and teaching methods of their courses with the CBO. Plans to include course requirements that might affect CBOs or involve them directly or indirectly, such as public presentations or newspaper articles about the CBO or student experiences at the CBO, should be approved by the CBO beforehand.⁷ Additionally, discuss ways the CBO may want to be involved in the classroom. We were surprised at how deeply invested most of our respondents are in ensuring the learning goals of the courses are met. Many CBOs view themselves (and want to be viewed) as co-instructors. They have ideas for in-class discussion and service reflection. Some CBO representatives might appreciate the opportunity to visit classrooms to familiarize students with their organization and the population they serve and discuss the connection between their mission and broader social issues. To increase student accountability, instructors should invite CBO involvement in assessment by, for example, asking CBO staff to fill out structured student or team evaluations (Hollis 2002). These should be designed to assess student *learning* (Weigert 1998) and both students and community partners should be made aware of evaluation criteria at the beginning of the course.

3. Clarify Expectations and Goals in Writing

Written communication that clearly explains student requirements and how service learning is connected to the goals of the course lays a solid foundation for the partnership. We recommend completing a memorandum of understanding (MOU), signed by both

⁷In the event that service-learning course activities involve the collection of research, IRB approval may be required. Please see your institution's IRB for specific requirements and procedures.

the instructor and community organization. The MOU should include a copy of the syllabus and communicate the roles and responsibilities of the CBO, the students, and the instructor, goals of the course, and details of the commitment (e.g., time commitment, timeline, deliverables, and expectations for communication). Lack of student reliability and professionalism is a primary challenge for CBOs. The MOU, therefore, should detail a protocol for addressing problems, clearly indicating whom to contact if problems with service learners arise (for example see: <http://www.indiana.edu/~cops1/download/MemoOfUnderstanding.pdf>).

It is equally essential that instructors clearly and effectively communicate educational goals as well as service goals and responsibilities to students. Course readings and in-class discussion of these important issues should be reinforced with *written* guidelines that include at minimum: service goals and their relevance to course objectives, specific expectations for professional conduct (e.g., standards for communication with staff and clients, confidentiality, public CBO representation, and timely work completion), and evaluation criteria. Instructors may write these guidelines or work with students to incorporate them into individual or group service project plans. Ideally these guidelines will support student-CBO communication and bolster student accountability and professionalism.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have addressed an under-studied aspect of an increasingly prevalent pedagogy. Service-learning courses have become popular, in part, because they are assumed to both enhance student learning and to provide a service to the wider community. The benefits to students are well documented, but the value to the community is less clear. Based on interviews with CBOs we find that although service-learning partnerships are generally a net positive, there are common challenges and predict-

able impediments to creating mutually-beneficial relationships. We identify three major obstacles to successful service-learning courses: poor student conduct, poor fit between course and organizational objectives, and lack of communication between instructors and organizations. There may be no way to guarantee the perfect partnership; however, our research suggests that instructors have significant influence over the impact of their courses. Communication and preparation are paramount. Instructors who know, understand, and communicate with community partners, who clearly communicate goals and responsibilities to students, and who integrate course goals with student service activities and community partners' organizational missions, can all but ensure that that service-learning courses will be beneficial for all involved.

Instead of limiting our focus to those courses that are well-designed and well-executed, we attempted to capture much of the diversity of service-learning courses and university-community partnerships. Although we believe this is a strength of the project, such breadth also produces limitations. In practice, service learning takes many forms, is employed in a broad range of disciplines, and involves partnerships with many different types of CBOs (e.g., for profit corporations, public social service agencies, and non-profit organizations). Although we note important patterns in CBOs' experiences with service learning, we are unable to generalize about the impact of specific types of service-learning courses. We therefore encourage ongoing conversation between research on specific service-learning courses and teaching practices (e.g., Lewis 2004; Mobley 2007; Mooney and Edwards 2001, Nurse and Krain 2006, Rajaram 2007) and multi-site, multi-program studies that investigate a range of service-learning impacts. Most importantly, we recommend a continuing emphasis on the "community perspective" in service-learning research. Although our paper is focused on community impacts,

efforts to enhance community benefits will likely also benefit students. Scholarship on the learning outcomes of service learning emphasizes the importance of facilitating connections between the academic material and the service experience (e.g., Alexander et al. 2000; Howard 1993). Rather than investigate either student or community perspectives, future research on service-learning pedagogy should evaluate the relationships between service and learning outcomes.

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David D. Blouin is an assistant professor of sociology at Indiana University South Bend. He teaches

courses in introductory sociology, statistics, and culture. His current research interests are in the areas of culture, inequality, human-animal relations, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. His recently completed dissertation, which is a multi-method study of the role of animals in American families, examines the cultural, demographic, and biographical bases of relationships between people and their pets.

Evelyn M. Perry is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at Indiana University. She teaches courses in community and urban sociology and qualitative research methods. Her research interests are in the areas of culture, urban sociology, inequality and the scholarship of teaching and learning. She is currently conducting a multi-method study of the neighborhood-level relationship between residential racial integration and substantive social integration.

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