

## Voices from the Field: A Qualitative Exploration of Community Partners' Definitions of Service-Learning

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### Abstract

During the last two decades, the knowledge base regarding the benefits and burdens for all stakeholders in service-learning has expanded. However, service-learning research has neglected to address the foundation of the pedagogy, its definition, and stakeholders' perspectives on the meaning of service-learning. The current research addresses this deficiency through the use of focus group methodology to explore how community partners, specifically, define service-learning. By recognizing the community voice, we hope to empower all those engaged in service-learning pedagogy to communicate understandings, experiences, and expectations to develop beneficial service-learning partnerships.

### What is Service-Learning? A Community Partner Perspective

In response to critiques of service-learning scholarship as over-emphasizing the academic institutions within service-learning partnerships (Birdsall, 2005; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Jones, 2003; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000), a number of researchers have taken on the challenge to evaluate the pedagogy from the viewpoint of community members who work alongside academic institutions (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Bushouse, 2005; Miron & Moely, 2006; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008; Worrall, 2007). While there is still much to learn, we now have a better understanding of motivations, barriers, and areas for improvement in developing true service-learning partnerships. This research has confirmed that service-learning supports community partners' organizational capacity (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008; Worrall, 2007); community partners value their role as practical educators (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008; Worrall, 2007); community organizations benefit through staff and organizational development (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007); and community/university faculty communication is essential for success (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Cronley, Madden, & Davis, 2015; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008; Worrall, 2007). Moreover, we also know that student commitment is paramount when working with at-risk groups (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008), that service-learning partnerships may reduce stereotypes (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Hirschinger-Blank, Simons, & Kenyon, 2009; Madden, Davis, & Cronley, 2014; Worrall, 2007) and that these partnerships can increase critical consciousness around social justice (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

During the last two decades, the knowledge base regarding the benefits and burdens for all stakeholders in service-learning has expanded. The "bridge" that service-learning helps to build between academic institutions and community-

service organizations is best understood as a concept in reciprocity. However, service-learning research has largely neglected to address the foundation of the pedagogy, the meaning of service-learning as a method of experiential education. To date, very few studies have assessed community perceptions of what service-learning entails, although some evidence suggests that a great deal of "slippage" exists in various stakeholders' perspectives of the pedagogy (Birdsall, 2005). As such, some community partners' experiences with service-learning may differ substantively from the original conception of service-learning. The current research addresses this deficiency by exploring community partners' definition and understanding of service-learning.

### Service-learning as Part of University-Community Partnerships

Dewey (1973) proposed that learning is enhanced through personal experience, that intellectual development should include social development, and that there is value in providing actions that will benefit others. Recently there has been resurgence in the importance of university-community collaboration based on the desire for experiential learning opportunities for students which rely on the co-creation of knowledge among partners and confer benefits to the community. In doing so, scholars and policymakers are calling for reciprocity between universities and communities over the traditional top-down approach where knowledge flows from university "experts" to community practitioners (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2008).

Structural and ideological changes have pushed toward a university-community symbiosis (Ostranger & Chapin-Hogue, 2011). Structurally, economic realities have increased the need for universities to seek funding from various sources. Interdisciplinary and intercommunity projects are more attractive to local, state, and national sponsors. From an ideological perspective, criticisms of universities that have shielded themselves from the struggles

of host communities, while using the data generated from those communities for self-serving ends, have brought about a change in the way in which universities view their place within the larger community context (Fisher, Fabricant, & Simmons, 2004).

With these criticisms in mind, educational institutions have increasingly turned to university-community partnerships (d'Arlach, Sanchez, & Feuer, 2009). Service-learning has become one of the more popular forms of university-community engagement (Bortolin, 2011) because of its emphasis on shared benefits rather than a "community as laboratory" approach (Cushman, 2002). Although the field appears ready for service-learning pedagogy to help move education and university-community collaboration into a new era, it is imperative that participants speak a similar language with regards to expectations, motivations, and processes. As such, this must begin with a commonly understood definition of the pedagogy.

### **Defining Service-learning**

Universities and academics have labeled a variety of activities as service-learning over the past 40 years. Furco (1996) commented that almost any experiential learning endeavor could be classified as service-learning depending on each school's service program. Moreover, Cruz (as cited in Campus Compact, 2003) describes service as "a process of integrating intention with action in a context of movement toward a just relationship" (p. 8). However, providing a service as part of an educational experience differs substantively from service-learning. While the different forms of service are used interchangeably by many, each type of service has differentiating characteristics that set it apart from other types of experiential learning. Nearly 20 years ago, Furco (1996) first observed that it is important to distinguish among the different forms of service so that we can move towards a "universal definition" of the pedagogy.

Cruz (as cited in Campus Compact, 2003) positions service-learning among the various service activities as "a form or subset of experiential education and community service" (p. 8). Considering the vocabulary that has been attached to present experiences, Cruz appears to have modified Dewey's original conception. Overly broad and vague definitions of service-learning have led to various interpretations of the pedagogy (Stallwood & Groh, 2011), such that there is substantial variation in how service-learning has been defined in research and in practice (Blouin & Perry, 2009).

In the first few pages of Campus Compact's introduction to service-learning, 12 variations on the definition of service-learning are offered (Campus Compact, 2003). Synthesizing the definitions, the primary purpose of service-learning appears to be an effort to enhance

education, increase civic responsibility, and respond to community needs. The definition that seems to be the most succinct in assimilating the pedagogy, tellingly, is the first definition offered:

The methodology of service-learning dictates that a clear link exists between the service course in a service-learning experience, students learn not only about social issues, but also how to apply the new knowledge to action that addresses real problems in their own communities. Service-learning students are assigned challenging community tasks, which consider the community's assessment of its own needs, strengths, and resources to be leveraged. Students receive academic credit for demonstrated knowledge in connecting their service experience with course content (Torres & Sinton, 2000, p. 7).

This definition goes beyond a cursory mention of the three objectives of service-learning and includes the community's needs and contributions in a meaningful way. Many, although not all definitions, recognize the community as a stakeholder in successful service-learning, but often fail to emphasize the real impact that the community makes on the partnership. Above all, the definition of service-learning must reflect a pedagogy that links community service and academic learning in a symbiotic relationship whereby each part strengthens the other (Ehrlich, as cited in Campus Compact, 2003).

Much of the increased research during the last two decades into the motivations, processes, and outcomes of university-community partnerships in service-learning has spoken specifically to university partners about ways to improve community relationships for positive service-learning outcomes. However, Bortolin (2011) notes that research on service-learning has been conducted using a voice that privileges universities as "active agents" and subjugates "community partners as passive recipients in community based engagement in higher education" (p. 56). If our goal is to strive toward a more equitable exchange of information and co-creation of knowledge, there must first be an assumption that all stakeholders -- students, faculty, universities, and community partners -- are equally valued and speaking a common language. Currently, however, the evidence to support either assumption is lacking, as little systematic attention has been undertaken to examine community partners' or educators' understanding of the pedagogy. In fact, the evidence points to the contrary when

considering how the pedagogy is defined and conceptualized by community partners. In research examining the impact of service-learning on the community, Birdsall (2005) noted that community partners lacked a clear definition of service-learning, confused service-learning and community service, and were unfamiliar with the term service-learning. Vernon and Foster (2002) reached a similar conclusion in their study on agency perspectives of service-learning. It is important to note, though, that in both the Birdsall (2005) and Vernon and Foster (2002) studies, findings regarding the lack of a clear definition and understanding of service-learning were secondary findings that emerged during the course of the broader study.

Moreover, Bortolin (2011), among others, challenges the academy to “undertake more research focused on community voice, community perspective, and community outcomes” (p. 56). By failing to comprehend the community’s understanding of service-learning, scholars continue to privilege the university, and this very bias may undermine the validity of the service-learning scholarship. The current research offers an important contribution to the service-learning literature and the pedagogy by addressing this deficit and responding to Bortolin’s (2011) challenge to embody the voices of the community. This study is an exploratory examination of how community partners define and implement service-learning. The goal is to bring us closer to a shared language across the university-community partnership. By recognizing the community voice, we hope to empower those engaged in service-learning pedagogy to communicate understandings,

experiences, and expectations so that we might develop mutually beneficial service-learning partnerships.

## Methods

### Design

Generation of responses within a group setting allows for exchange of ideas and experiences between participants (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Therefore, for this study, a qualitative focus group methodology was selected to allow for a wide range of views to be heard and to shift the role of expert from the facilitators to the participants. The purpose of the focus groups was to explore community partners’ definition, understanding, and perceptions of service-learning. The scope of the current paper includes analysis of community partners’ definitions and understanding of service-learning.

### Recruitment and Setting

Focus group participants were recruited with the assistance of the Center for Community Service Learning (CCSL) at a large semi-urban public university in the South. Researchers relied on the email distribution list for the CCSL’s biannual community partner breakfast as the sampling frame for the current study. At the beginning of the fall and spring semesters, the CCSL hosts a partner breakfast and invites the university’s faculty and community partners from across the metro area to attend. The goal of these breakfasts is to provide opportunities for faculty and community partners to facilitate service-learning partnerships.

Prior to the Center’s biannual community partner breakfast, the research team contacted community partners through the CCSL’s email distribution list (N = 49) inviting them to

Table 1.  
Sample Characteristics of Focus Groups (n =19)

Personal Characteristics <sup>a</sup>	
Female	78.9 (15)
Male	21.1 (4)
Race/Ethnicity	
African American	21.1 (4)
Caucasian	57.9 (11)
Hispanic	21.1 (4)
Mean Age (range 25-72)	45.5 (14.8)
Client Populations Served	
At Risk Children	38.9 (7)
Disabled Adults & Children	11.1 (2)
Low-Incomes Families & Individuals	44.4 (8)
At Risk Seniors	11.1 (2)
Other	11.1 (2)
Experience with Service-Learning	
Prior experience with Service-learning	
Never	21.1 (4)
One time	5.3 (1)
Two times	10.5 (2)
Three or more times	63.2 (12)
Mean Satisfaction Score with Service-learning Experience (Range: 1-5) <sup>b</sup>	4.39 (0.79)
Fields Collaborated with for Service-learning Projects <sup>c</sup>	
Business	14.3 (2)
Criminal Justice or Pre-Law	21.4 (3)
Education	35.7 (5)
Liberal Arts	40.0 (6)
Social Work	85.7 (12)
Other	42.9 (5)

participate in a focus group immediately following the breakfast. Research team members also recruited individuals to participate in the focus groups during the breakfast. In total, 19 individuals participated in the focus groups (N = 19, Response rate = 38.78%).

Three focus groups were conducted; two at the beginning of the fall semester (September 2012) and one at the beginning of the spring semester (March 2013). Each focus group was co-facilitated by two researchers who have had prior experience facilitating focus groups and who have implemented service-learning projects within their classes. Prior to initiating the study, human subjects approval was requested and received from the Institutional Research Board for the university at which the study was conducted.

### Participants

The inclusion criteria for the study required that the participants be over 18 years of age and employed with a local non-profit community agency. Table 1 presents participant demographics and experience with service-learning. Participants reported being involved in a broad range of service-learning activities including tutoring, mentoring, marketing and website development, and program development.

Note<sup>a</sup>: Some Ns vary because of some missing data.

Note<sup>b</sup>: Mean score only includes those who indicated that they have participated in service-learning.

Note<sup>c</sup>: Respondents could select more than one answer

### Data Collection

Data sources for this study included transcripts from digital audio recordings of the three focus groups and observational notes taken during each of the focus groups. Participants also completed a short questionnaire identifying basic demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity, etc.) and prior involvement with service-learning projects.

At the outset of each focus group, a facilitator explained that the purpose of the session was “to better understand service-learning from the perspectives of community partners.” In keeping with focus group methodology (Krueger & Casey, 2009), a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions were used to guide the discussions and encourage dialogue among participants. Participants were asked questions regarding how they conceptualize service-learning and how service-learning differs from other forms of service (e.g., volunteerism, internships, and field education). Researcher debriefing sessions were held immediately following each focus group to ensure that the meanings of the discussions were generally understood.

### Analysis

Descriptive statistics drawn from participant questionnaires are presented in Table 1. Data from the three focus group interview sessions were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. To identify emergent themes related to the research questions, responses were initially hand coded by all researchers independently using open and axial coding through an iterative, grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The grounded theory approach was appropriate due to the use of an inductive analytic process (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Having observed that minimal research exists on community partners’ definitional understanding of service-learning, we allowed themes to emerge from the data without employing a theoretical framework that may have influenced our interpretation of the partners’ voices.

The researchers subsequently compared their results to identify consistent themes. Several rigor criteria were also introduced to minimize bias including member checking, peer debriefing, maintaining an audit trail, and deviant case analysis (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln, 1995). The authors met frequently to discuss the coding process and emerging themes. Finally, as noted in the results section below, the authors sought out cases that contradicted the themes in order to revise and strengthen their validity for the entire sample.

### Results

Focus group participants’ experiences with service-learning varied. Some participants had very little experience with the pedagogy while others had worked for years with the host university and other area institutions on service-learning projects. Despite many respondents’ interest in, and prior experience with service-learning projects at the host university and other area institutions, definitions of service-learning differed widely among respondents. Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that, with the exception of one or two respondents per focus group, respondents generally had difficulty articulating a clear and concise definition of service-learning that is inclusive and reflective of all aspects of the pedagogy. Analysis of the focus group data indicated that those who were new to the pedagogy demonstrated the most trouble identifying and defining service-learning. One participant used experiences with the process of participating in service-learning by way of definition.

The students are given a list of organizations that they can work with depending on what their class is and what their assignment is, and then they choose which ones are of interest to them, and hopefully

they have done a little bit of research before they come to you. They ask you [to] be placed with your agency. And that is when you make a choice of what your hours of availability, what are your interests, what are you needing to do with your class? And then you go through with whatever your volunteer on-boarding process is.

In contrast, the more experienced community partners expressed a greater understanding of the purposes, objectives, and requirements of a service-learning model. One participant, who had engaged in service-learning for many years, described service-learning in a manner consistent with the Campus Compact (2003) definition,

Real service-learning has to be aligned with the objectives of [the] course I think. [Students and the community partner should] have a profitable and mutually beneficial experience. But it seems to me that if it is real service-learning then it has to be aligned with the outcomes and objectives of the course.

### **Definitions of Service-learning**

#### **Focus on service.**

When asked to define service-learning, only two participants focused specifically on the service aspect of the pedagogy. One participant defined service-learning as, "It's reaching out into the community and using whatever talents you have to help either an agency or to help somebody in your community." Another participant stated, "It's an opportunity to engage the community partners with students and let [students] know what's available within their own community and how they're able to serve."

#### **Focus on learning.**

Multiple participants (n=7) highlighted the responsibility of providing a learning experience and focused on the students' educational needs. These participants described service-learning primarily as an educational experience through phrases such as: alignment with curriculum, a profitable learning experience, and a "hands-on" element of academic experience. One participant emphasized that the service-learning experience could not just be a volunteer placement that lacks direction or focus; rather the work that the students are involved in should be tied to the learning objectives for the course. The participant explained, "It isn't just busy work; they need to be doing things that they are learning from in relation to their coursework." Likewise, a participant in another focus group also emphasized the importance of learning and application to the service-learning experience:

Where many of our volunteers are already coming with skills that they have to offer. They're not there to learn necessarily, but just to give back. Many of our volunteers aren't there to do anything highly skilled. It's more like they just want to give back. ... Whereas the [service-learning students] coming over, they're going to be learning and putting into practical application, hand's on, something that they're going to take forward into their careers.

Other participants encapsulated the practical side of service-learning. As one participant responded, "...to give the students real world experience in dealing with different economic groups and...diversity groups." Another respondent echoed this sentiment in her description of service-learning as getting, "...out of the ivory tower and into the trenches!"

#### **Distinguishing among Types of Service**

Overall, participants displayed uncertainty distinguishing between volunteerism, field placements, internships, and service-learning. For example, one participant stated, "We have interns, all kinds of interns that come over so I'm not exactly clear on the difference [in comparison to service learners]." Another participant offered this definition of service-learning:

I define it as the students coming to our organization for required hours and they go up there and complete their hours. Sometimes they may have a program they have to input or a study they have to learn from the kids.

Again, it was noted that community partners who had participated in more service-learning partnerships were better able to differentiate among types of service.

However, when participants were asked specifically, "How do you think participating in service-learning projects differs from student volunteers or interns?" the most common responses focused on learning: service-learning experiences should align with course outcomes and goals whereas field education placements and internships have a career focus. Some partners viewed service-learning favorably in comparison to volunteerism. As one participant explained, "service-learning students are more dedicated to the project or agency [in comparison to student volunteers]."

Participants also commented on increased expectations and resources required for service-

learning projects. Specifically, faculty expectations in service-learning projects seemed to increase community partner sense of responsibility when compared to strict volunteerism. Moreover, service-learning requires more work/planning/time on the part of the community partner due to the specificity and practicality of completing a project.

I think it takes a lot more planning involved, rather than someone saying I want to volunteer ... so that they're getting that learning component and [practical application]. More planning [is] involved and [it] might take more time, but I think that in the long-term, you're going to get more investment out of the students rather than someone who just wants to come and volunteer, you're actually going to have people more dedicated to the project.

However, it was also clear that community partners look to course instructors to provide structure regarding the type of experience they are involved in and in shaping their mutual expectations for the service-learning experience.

An experience will be extremely beneficial regardless, but will it be satisfactory for the expectations of the teacher? That's what we do not know. ...So I asked [instructor], What do you expect to get out of this? So [instructor] told me, for my students, I just want them to venture out into the community and find out what resources are in the community to give them perspective and vision. [Another instructor] wanted for the students to get that awareness that they can be a part of the solution. ...So, that's the kinds of things if we know ahead of time, we can know does the teacher expect something very general? Then this is a volunteer opportunity for you. Does the teacher want something more in depth and aligned to his objectives? Then this is a different kind.

### Discussion

The current study sought to improve our understanding of how community partners define and operationalize service-learning. To date, surprisingly few studies have examined, directly or indirectly, community partners' perspectives of how service-learning is defined, such that we are aware of only two other

published studies (i.e., Birdsall, 2005; Vernon & Foster, 2002) that addressed this issue. The importance of speaking a common language cannot be overstated when attempting to build university-community partnerships that are sustainable and mutually beneficial to instructors and community partners.

The primary finding of this study suggests that community partners' understanding and conceptualization of service-learning are not universally consistent with what is disseminated throughout the academic literature and service-learning organizations. Furthermore, many community partners seem to lack a firm understanding of the difference between service-learning and the various other forms of experiential learning. While many community partners in this study mentioned the learning aspect of service-learning, respondents appeared to have the most difficulty articulating the difference between volunteerism and service-learning. This confusion is particularly troubling given that one of the most critical components of service-learning is the integration of the service experience with course learning objectives. These findings concur with prior studies (i.e., Birdsall, 2005; Vernon & Foster, 2002). Confusion and lack of clarity regarding how service-learning is defined minimizes the likelihood of creating effective, sustainable partnerships that are necessary for substantive contributions to the community.

Bringle and Clayton (2012) note that the variation of language used to discuss service-learning "reveals a problematic lack of precision around, and consensus on, fundamental concepts, approaches, and goals" (p. 102). While it is understandable that terms take different meanings or subtleties across contexts, often overlooked is the confusion that can occur within communities that host college campuses. Arrazatte, Lima, and Lundy (2013) claim that the terms used to describe community-campus work, such as service, engagement, and outreach, often divide the two groups and lead to greater confusion. Further, universities may refer to this work as "service-learning" but community partners may use terms such as "volunteer" or "service-hours" (p. 43).

However, this is not only a community-centered concern, as faculty members also have difficulty defining and operationalizing service-learning. In a national survey that compared the use of service-learning among social work and criminal justice faculty, Madden, Davis, and Cronley (2014) found that when offered a choice between defining service-learning as "simply a term for experiential learning" or a "rigorous pedagogy," respondents were more likely to choose the more general definition, "simply a term for experiential learning." This may be an indication that many faculty members also fail to view service-learning as a critical pedagogy by which instructors and community partners can

connect the theory of the classroom with the needs of the community. Therefore, it also cannot be assumed that university faculty possess a sufficient understanding of the pedagogy to educate community partners about the goals and objectives of service-learning or the ways in which it differs from other experiential learning models. This has led Stoecker (2016) to surmise that practitioners have tried to overcome our (academic) weaknesses or “rebrand bad practice” (p. 19).

Indeed, faculty members may learn more from community partners about the pedagogy if they approach the partnership as learners themselves. While many of the respondents in this study did struggle to articulate a definition that is consistent with the literature, community partners, who had been engaged in service-learning for a longer period of time and in multiple partnerships, were quite knowledgeable about the pedagogy and described almost “textbook” definitions of service-learning. Thus, experience may be critical to understanding the mechanics and theory behind service-learning, as well as the ability to understand the intent of the pedagogy and how it differs from other forms of experiential education. It may also be the case that those individuals who are most interested in service-learning are also those who are most likely to self educate about the pedagogy, as well as possess an intrinsic investment in doing it “right,” on either side of the university-community partnership.

Overall, regardless of the accuracy of the description of service-learning, community partners had positive views of service-learning and embraced their contribution to the partnership. Community partners’ perspectives supported the idea of service-learning as a bridge between academic and applied knowledge — a way to break through the boundaries and stereotypes that often disconnect the community from the academy. Blouin and Perry (2009) referred to this boundary work as the “town/gown divide” (p. 126). One participant in the current study underscored this sentiment when urging students and faculty members alike to use service-learning as an opportunity to “[get] out of the ivory tower and into the trenches!”

Related to this recognition of their role in service-learning, the community partners in these focus groups understand that they play a significant function in providing a learning opportunity for students. Previous research from students’ perspectives makes clear the importance of the community partners’ influence on acquisition of skills, knowledge, and perspective resulting from the experience (Frazer, Raasch, Pertzborn, & Bradley, 2007). Many participants expressed a genuine commitment to ensuring that the learning goals and objectives of courses are supported by the agency and are met by students. Despite this

commitment, participants appeared to grapple with the practicalities of how to ensure that learning takes place, perhaps indicating that community partners may be more knowledgeable about the pedagogy in practice than in theory. Academic institutions, instructors, and students benefit from this willingness to contribute, but simultaneously, university partners should be aware of their obligations to support and benefit community partners.

### **Limitations**

While the study has several strengths, namely that it is one of the first focused studies on how community partners define and understand service-learning; incorporated multiple focus groups for greater representation; and applied qualitative rigor criteria to reduce bias and increase validity of results; limitations should be noted. First, the sample size remained relatively small (N = 19). However, efforts were made by the researchers to maximize representation of community partners by holding three different focus groups at two different points in the year (i.e., two groups in the fall and one in the spring). Second, the findings of this study may reflect some selection bias in that all community partners self-selected to participate. Individuals who did not self-select may have differed in some way from our participants. Third, it should also be acknowledged that the lack of definitional understanding of service-learning could be a failing on the part of the host university and instructors who have engaged in partnerships with community agencies to explain and educate community partners about the pedagogy adequately (see below). Finally, given that the researchers have utilized service-learning in the classroom, a potential bias exists regarding our notions about the meaning of the pedagogy. Despite these limitations, the current study represents a significant effort towards understanding how community partners operationalize and understand service-learning.

### **Recommendations**

In spite of the gains that have been made to understand the impact of service-learning for students, institutions of higher learning, and the community, the findings of this study underscore the need for strengthening communication across university-community collaborations. The findings also highlight the need to differentiate service-learning more clearly from other forms of experiential learning and service. Given the wide variation in respondents’ definitions of service-learning, course instructors should not assume potential community partners share a mutual understanding of service-learning and what the pedagogy entails. Abravanel (2003) recommends that instructors assess the level of experience that the community partners have with service-

learning and work to build on that experience to help clarify and explain the “essential elements” of the pedagogy. Furthermore, Blouin and Perry (2009) suggest that course instructors and community partners complete a memorandum of understanding, which can assist with clarifying the purpose and intent of service-learning, as well as to help lay the necessary foundation for a productive and mutually beneficial partnership. The memorandum should stipulate the roles and responsibilities of the various parties (i.e., instructor, community partner, and student); the learning objectives for the course; and logistical details surrounding the proposed partnership, such as the time commitment involved, a timeline for the project, the deliverables that will be provided, and expectations for communication between parties.

This assumes that all members of the partnership are knowledgeable enough about the pedagogy to explain the essential elements. Additional research might be instructive in helping to uncover faculty members’ perceptions regarding service-learning and how they understand differences between the pedagogy and other forms of experiential learning. Furthermore, comparison with community partners regarding this issue might help us to better understand where the breakdown occurs. Future researchers may also want to purposively sample more diverse institutional settings (e.g., private schools, faith-based schools, and online programs) to develop a better understanding of how service-learning is conceptualized across settings.

Findings from the current research reveal that more experienced community partners were better able to define and discuss service-learning in a manner that is consistent with the theoretical concepts that have been outlined by service-learning organizations and prior literature. Future research might inquire how community partners learn about service-learning (i.e., Did they attend trainings? Were they mentored by university faculty? Did they have a strong partnership with a university center for service-learning? Did they seek out a service-learning partnership or were they approached by a university partner?).

Finally, our study advances the study of how community partners’ perceptions can be used to help foster and support evolving university-community partnerships. Foremost, however, is that we ensure that all stakeholders can articulate a clear, concise, and inclusive definition of service-learning. A foundation of mutual understanding about the pedagogy is paramount to promoting the goal of reciprocal exchange based on the co-creation of knowledge.



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