

Achieving the Partnership Principle in Experiential Learning: The Nonprofit Perspective

Beth Gazley

Indiana University–Bloomington

Teresa A. Bennett

Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

Laura Littlepage

Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

ABSTRACT

University and college experiential education takes many forms: internships, practica and other field experience, volunteerism, community service, and community-based service learning, as well as community activities attached to college courses. Given the joint involvement of university and community institutions in experiential education and the diverse motivations for encouraging student community involvement, this academic practice can be viewed through three lenses: (a) as a form of student learning, (b) as a public policy instrument to promote student civic engagement, and (c) as a service delivery tool for community organizations. Much of the research about student service learning has emphasized the first of these perspectives, examining service learning's impact on a student's pedagogical experience and the campus ability to support service learning. This article focuses on the nature of the partnership between campuses and community organizations. We begin with a discussion of how prior literature describes this partnership and then use generalizable community data to explore what host organizations suggest are the most useful partnership characteristics.

Keywords: service learning, experiential learning, university and community partnership

University and college experiential education takes many forms: internships, practica and other field experience, volunteerism, community service, and

community-based service learning, as well as community activities attached to college courses. These high-impact practices are widespread throughout the undergraduate and graduate public affairs curriculum and are the focus of political, civic, and philanthropic attention because of the presumed public benefits of connecting an educational curriculum to community problem solving (Kuh, 2008).

Given the joint involvement of university and community institutions in experiential education and the diverse motivations for encouraging student community involvement, this academic practice can be viewed through three lenses: (a) as a form of student learning, (b) as a public policy instrument to promote student civic engagement, and (c) as a service delivery tool for community organizations (Littlepage, Gazley, & Bennett, 2012). Much of the research about student service learning has emphasized the first of these perspectives, examining service learning's impact on a student's pedagogical experience and the campus ability to support service learning (Bailis & Ganger, 2006; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Edwards, Mooney, & Heald, 2001; Imperial, Perry, & Katula, 2007; Jones, 2003).

This article reports in part on a larger research project focusing on the "supply" side, the community capacity to engage, mentor, and manage students. From the broader, community-oriented point of view, any promotion of experiential education raises questions about agency capacity to meet student demand for community-based experiences and how responsibilities should be shared between higher education institutions and community agencies to most effectively meet both academic and community objectives (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). In this article, we focus on the nature of the partnership between campuses and community organizations. We begin with a discussion of how prior literature describes this partnership and then use generalizable community data to explore what host organizations suggest are the most useful partnership characteristics. This examination of the community perspective on effective experiential education is uncommon but consistent with a central tenet of service learning: that the experience should benefit both students and the communities where they serve and learn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public colleges and universities serve the public good in many ways, including delivery of education and training courses and programs; preparation of future leaders who are civically engaged and/or equipped to lead their community; maintenance of public libraries, archives, and collections; provision of health care services; development of new technologies and tools; and the delivery and creation of arts programming and expression. University faculty, students, and staff also represent a source of volunteers, expertise, and information to their communities.

Reciprocity in University-Community Relationships

In return, universities expect much from their communities. Faculty members seek willing participants to host their research, classroom, and service initiatives.

Students want to apply their learning and practice professional skills, and make contacts that lead to jobs. And campus administrators anticipate that alliances forged with city and state leaders will result in desirable community support, legislative outcomes, and funding. In fact, many institutions set an explicit and voluntary goal of student community engagement in their educational mission (Carnegie, 2013; Wittman & Crews, 2012).

However, the reciprocal benefits in this exchange are sometimes assumed. A review of the literature finds occasional references to the “win-win” nature of the partnership, sometimes without attention to the way that campus-community relationships must be structured to achieve success (Jelier & Clarke, 1999; McIntyre, Webb, & Hite, 2005). Of particular current interest to advocates of experiential learning, therefore, is how to incorporate the community voice into the curricular design and objectives of a service-learning course or other form of student experiential learning (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

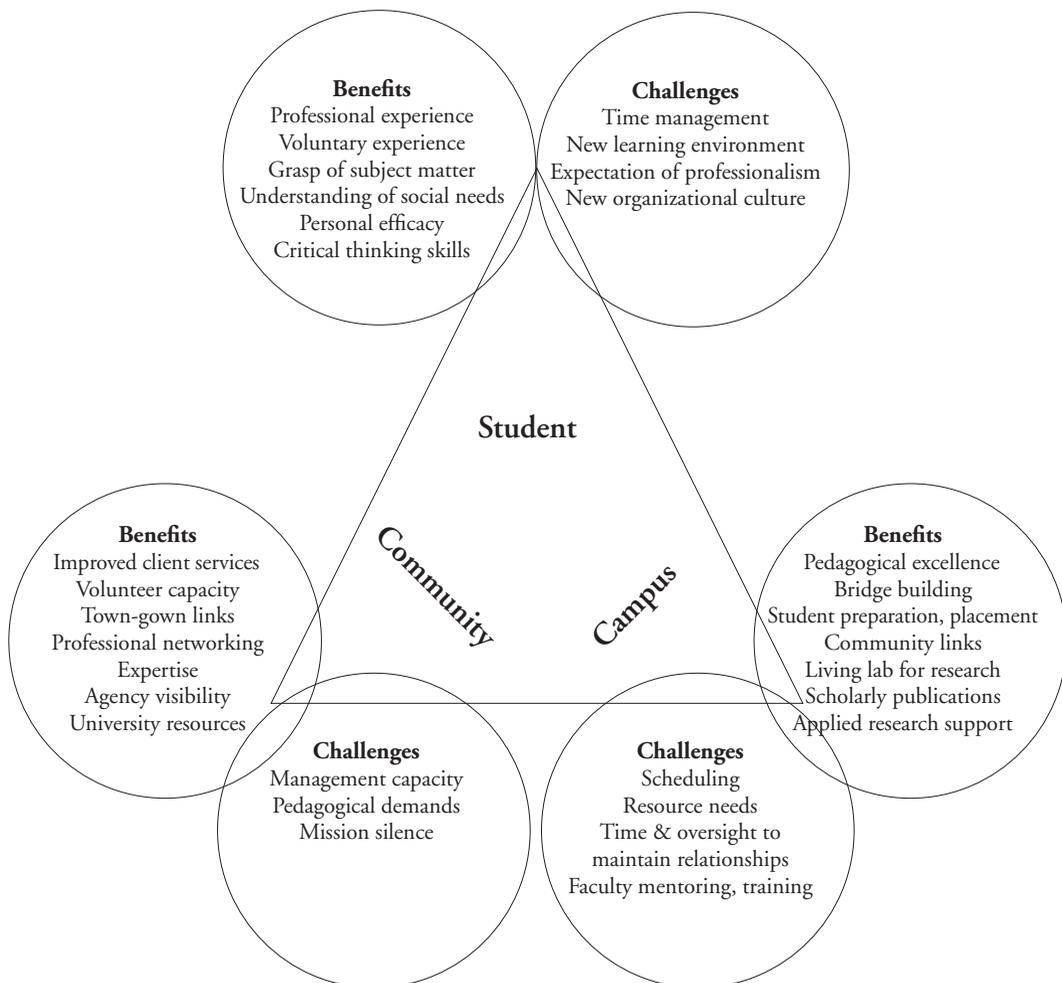
A planned, rather than casual, approach to student community engagement is a central tenet of effective partnerships, akin to what Freeland identifies as “intentional contributions” (2005, p. B20). The community serves as a “partner” in a two-way exchange of ideas, knowledge, and expertise rather than merely a recipient of student skills and labor (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Carpenter, 2011; Wittman & Crews, 2012). In an example germane to the public affairs field, each year the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) releases a list of 25 “Saviors of Our Cities” (Saviors of Our Cities, 2009). Using a word like *savior* undervalues the reciprocal nature of the partnership in which community leaders should also make contributions.

To transcend the merely transactional activities of the partnership and to create transformational relationships, partners must build trust in one another to the point where they can jointly design programs that accomplish all partners’ missions (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009; Enos & Morton, 2003). Without an emphasis on transformational goals, campus-community relationships can deteriorate to exploitation, and the outcomes may be unrewarding or even harmful to one or more partners. As some public affairs scholars have observed, those responsible for the design of community-based learning within public affairs programs must be especially attentive to achieving reciprocal relationships, because social equity is a central tenet of public affairs education (Waldner, Roberts, & Widener, 2011).

Our past research supports what we found in the literature. Community partners experience both benefits and challenges related to student experiential learning; and the challenges may include not only limited collaborative capacity but also concerns about the quality of agency involvement in project planning. In focus groups, some community agencies report ineffective faculty communication, poor preparation, or poor use of the host agency’s time (Gazley, Littlepage, & Meyers, 2007). Nonprofit representatives comment, for instance, that service learning does not always reflect an equal investment of faculty time and that

instructors do not always practice sufficient flexibility with project design. This principle of reciprocity is embodied in Figure 1, which describes student community-based learning as a pedagogy that involves contributions from three actors: campus, community, and faculty.

Figure 1.
The “Three-Legged Stool” of Student Community-Based Learning,
Highlighting the Potential Benefits and Challenges for Each Actor



Source. Adapted from Gazley et al. (2007).

Moving from Relationships to Partnerships in Student Community Engagement

Both community and university have reasons to promote student community engagement. Experiential and civic learning can foster greater student awareness of the community and of volunteerism (Bushouse, 2005; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tryon et al., 2008; Worrall, 2007). As the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* has explored previously, public affairs degree programs in particular have a multitude of reasons to support student community engagement as a pedagogical tool (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Dicke, Dowden, & Torres, 2004). Although the field still lacks a thorough census of student experiential education in public affairs, a 2007 survey of MPA directors found that most programs required an internship, experiential “capstone” course, and/or service learning (D’Agostino, 2008).

In public affairs and many other degree programs, universities have developed a number of ways to strengthen and expand connections to their communities, including creating liaison offices with responsibility for building bridges to communities and sponsoring community-based research, internships, service learning, and other community-based engagement activities. These forms of partnership management are considered to be effective practice (McNall, Reed, Brown, & Allen, 2009). Indiana University, for example, supplements community capacity by employing students to help coordinate volunteer activities in popular service-learning sites.

According to McNall et al.’s (2009) survey of prior literature, successful partnerships require shared decision making and adequate contextual preparation of students. The shared aspects of the work can occur regardless of the mode of student learning a faculty member employs. Campbell and Lambright (2011) found, for example, that the outcomes of a public affairs capstone course improved with the level of engagement by faculty and community members.

Without prior agreement on how decisions are to be made, disagreements can arise around the relative value of products and outcomes, and how to evaluate or grade an activity (and who does the evaluating). Without preparation, faculty may send students into communities without even a basic understanding of the host organization or its culture (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009; Wittman & Crews, 2012). For example, faculty from disciplines unrelated to public affairs may lack the detailed knowledge of that sector to be able to fully support students in understanding the sectoral context of their volunteer experience (such as the role of a nonprofit board of directors or the legal constraints of a public organization). They may also limit learning opportunities by failing to connect student activities to the organization’s mission. Inadequate faculty preparation poses problems for community volunteer managers who have responsibility for screening and placing personnel. A weak relationship then worsens if instructors become frustrated by organizations that seem unwilling to host students or respond to curricular objectives. But the frustration may be the result of the faculty member failing to consider the impact a project may have on an organization’s scarcest resource: time.

Shared action extends to shared assessment. Partnerships fall short when they limit their evaluation to student outcomes, yet traditionally this has been the emphasis of research on experiential education outcomes (Imperial et al., 2007). Data such as student hours spent in the community or numbers of internships, community-based class projects, and work-study placements do not reveal the quality of the partnerships, the connection between goals and outcomes, the community impact, or the level of reciprocity in the relationship. Unless a community organization's goals are captured in the evaluation process, what constitutes "success" in a partnership can be misconstrued. If partners do not freely express their interests, faculty and university staff may miss the opportunity to identify and troubleshoot concerns.

To build an effective reciprocal arrangement, each partner must understand the goals of the partnership, agree to responsibilities, and define the costs, outcomes, and expected impacts (Tyron et al., 2008; Worrall, 2007; Sandy & Holland, 2006). As a result, planning tools such as written or verbal agreements that spell out the nature of the partnership and the roles that each partner will assume have become increasingly commonplace. And presentations on the most effective curricular approaches to service learning in public affairs education have become frequent offerings at NASPAA meetings as well as related pedagogical conferences like the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC) Benchmark conference on nonprofit management education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA, AND METHODS

The research questions explored in this article address the nature of the partnership between campus and community. Specifically, we sought to understand (a) the community's receptivity and capacity to involve student learners, (b) what they considered to be the most important characteristics of a campus-community partnership, and (c) how frequently they reported experiencing those characteristics in past partnerships. We rely on both qualitative and quantitative data from a multiyear study on community goals and outcomes, the management of student learners, and agency capacity to engage more students. In the first stages of the study, we collected qualitative data by conducting focus groups with the executive directors or volunteer coordinators of 24 nonprofit and public agencies. We also have developed three case studies based on interviews and review of source documents (Gazley et al., 2007).

We then employed a representative survey of 290 community agencies in two contrasting counties, an approach designed to improve the generalizability of the findings. Prior service-learning studies tend to focus on particular service sectors or small groups, or solely on student and university outcomes, and most employ case studies or convenience samples (see Imperial et al., 2007, for a meta-review of the prior research). Convenience samples in the field of experiential learning over-

whelmingly rely on current participants. These samples produce biased responses because they derive their findings from the partners that have learned to make the relationship work. Although these studies are valuable in capturing the views of current partners, they do not capture the full range of community attitudes toward student learners or compare practices among the varied roles students that take within agencies (i.e., as general volunteers, interns, or service learners).

The survey went to a random sample of all nonprofit and religious organizations in two counties in the state of Indiana. Marion County is a major metropolitan area, the site of the state capital, and home to a large and diverse community of over 17,000 nonprofit organizations. Monroe County houses a smaller city and a mid-sized college community with a tradition of campus-community engagement. The two counties together comprise 28% of all college students in the state (students in these counties might attend any one of 11 community colleges, universities, seminaries, or four-year colleges). Sampling two counties increases the generalizability of our analysis since they differ from one another in size, student and citizen population, number and types of educational institutions, and number and types of nonprofit organizations.¹ Further details on data collection are included in the endnote.

The survey questionnaire asked respondents to describe college student involvement in their agencies, focusing on three mutually exclusive categories: (a) interns and practicum or pre-service students who work largely independently (e.g., in management, nursing, social work, education); (b) course-based student service learners, meaning students who are assigned by their instructor to volunteer for a community organization to meet educational objectives for a specific credit-bearing course; and (3) general volunteers, or students who volunteer on their own and alongside other community members. Of the total 290 nonprofit managers in the study, 100 reported engaging students through service learning, and the majority (60% or more) experienced all three of the common service-learning models: direct service, agency projects, and projects related to the student's coursework. In our analysis, we alternate between a focus on the full cohort of 290 respondents and the 100 nonprofit managers who reported experience with service learners. The choice to focus on the service-learning experience helps to apply an appropriate theoretical framework and also achieve greater reliability in interpreting survey responses.

FINDINGS

The findings here are organized to report first on nonprofit managers' receptivity and capacity to involve student learners, then the degree programs on which they rely, their reflections on the most essential characteristics of an effective campus-community partnership, and their assessment of how frequently they have experienced those characteristics in the past.

Table 1.
Diversity of Student Academic Disciplines for Host Agencies in This Study

	Percentage of Host Agencies That Have Interacted With Academic Discipline (n = 246)
Public Affairs and Policy (including public and nonprofit management)	26.4%
Don't Know	26.0%
Liberal Arts (including languages, humanities, natural sciences)	24.0%
Other	23.6%
Business, Marketing, Tourism, and related fields	22.4%
Medical and Health Professions	18.3%
Education	17.5%
Journalism and Communication	17.1%
Science, Technology, Computer Science, and/or Engineering	11.8%
Fine and Performing Arts	11.8%
Physical Recreation and Education	8.9%
Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Services	2.0%

Public Affairs Is Most Frequent Source of Students

Respondents were asked about the degree interests of the students whom they had engaged as service learners, interns, or volunteers. The survey form allowed respondents to select from all academic departments whence students had originated, at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Table 1 reflects that 26.4% of organizations had involved students from Public Affairs and Policy departments, the most frequent program named. A further 24% of organizations had involved Liberal Arts students, and 22.4% had involved students from Business, Marketing, or Tourism programs. Smaller numbers of students came from Medical and Health Professions (18%), Education (17.5%), or Journalism and Communication (17.1%). Even fewer were represented from Science, Performing Arts, Agriculture, and Physical Education. When asked about the types of students involved in their organizations, 79% of respondents had experience with students as general volunteers; 64% had experience with students in internships, pre-service projects, or in a practicum; and 40% had worked with service learners (i.e., students assigned through a course; results not displayed). We note that other communities might find a different mix of degree programs involved in student experiential education based on the nature of their higher education institutions.

Table 2.

Respondent Attitudes About Student Volunteers, Service Learners, and Interns (n = 287)

“To what extent do you agree that...”	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know/ NA	Total
Our staff is eager to work with students.	1.0%	0.7%	9.1%	31.4%	56.4%	1.4%	100.0%
Student work is as good as the work that other (non-student) volunteers provide.	0.7%	3.5%	9.1%	41.5%	40.4%	4.9%	100.0%
Short-term volunteers are not worth the effort.	31.0%	44.9%	17.1%	3.5%	1.4%	2.1%	100.0%
Our agency's mission supports student civic engagement.	2.4%	4.5%	14.6%	29.3%	40.4%	8.7%	100.0%
When it comes to involving student volunteers, the college schedule can pose problems for my agency.	9.1%	33.4%	29.3%	23.0%	1.7%	3.5%	100.0%
Teaching students about my field is part of my job.	5.9%	12.5%	24.7%	34.1%	17.4%	5.2%	100.0%

Receptivity to Student Involvement

Respondents indicated their agreement with six questions addressing the organization's level of preparation, or capacity, for student involvement generally (see Table 2). At this stage in the research, respondents were not asked to differentiate between the student's role as service learner, intern, or volunteer. We found a widespread receptivity to students in that 88% reported that their staff was eager to work with students to some or to a great extent, and 82% reported that student work was as good as other volunteer work. When asked about the organization's preparedness for student involvement, 70% reported that their agency's mission supported student civic engagement, and 52% reported that they considered teaching students about their field to be part of their job. In analyses published elsewhere, time constraints and staffing limitations were the most common reasons for a respondent to report a limited capacity to involve students—more common, in fact, than agency size by itself (Littlepage et al., 2012). This positive perspective on student engagement is consistent with some prior research (e.g., Edwards et al., 2001).

Limited Communication Between Faculty and Community Partners

Respondents then were asked to indicate what made service-learning partnerships with campuses effective for their agencies (Table 3). Nonprofit managers responding to this question cited the following items as *essential*: Clear and ongoing communication (39%), a faculty and student understanding of the agency’s mission (32%), a match of student skills to agency needs (30%), training and orientation of student volunteers (29%), an agency understanding of the goals of service learning (27%), and the ability of the agency to choose the students they worked with (26%). When “very important” and “essential” responses were combined, 84% indicated that faculty and students should know the agency’s mission as a solid foundation to effective partnerships. The second-highest success predictor was a match of student skills to agency needs; more than three fourths (78%) of nonprofit respondents indicated this was a very important or essential element.

Table 3.
Respondents’ Reports on the Importance of Various Factors for the Partnership (n = 245)

“How important is this factor to the success of the partnership?”	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Essential	Don’t Know/ NA
Clear and ongoing communication between agency, students, and faculty	2.0%	13.1%	37.6%	39.2%	8.2%
Faculty and students understand agency’s mission	1.2%	7.8%	51.8%	32.2%	6.9%
Agencies understand the goals of service learning	3.3%	13.9%	46.1%	26.5%	10.2%
A volunteer coordinator or manager is available to coordinate student work	6.1%	21.2%	40.0%	24.9%	7.8%
Training and orientation of student volunteers	1.2%	16.3%	47.8%	29.0%	5.7%
Assessment of partnership process and success	3.3%	28.2%	42.0%	13.5%	13.1%
Formal agreement or memo of understanding between agency and faculty/student	13.1%	29.8%	31.4%	15.1%	10.6%
Match of student skills to agency needs	1.6%	13.9%	48.6%	29.8%	6.1%
Opportunity for student reflection	4.5%	31.4%	42.0%	12.7%	9.4%
Ability to choose the students we work with	6.9%	25.3%	34.7%	25.7%	7.3%
Ability to work with graduate students	19.6%	32.2%	22.9%	11.0%	14.3%

When we measured the extent to which these goals were achieved, we found mixed results. The model of shared leadership we are looking for in this study requires that all partners understand the principles of service learning. As Table 4 reveals, a large majority of our nonprofit respondents (88%) reported that they understood service learning (59% agreed; 29% strongly agreed). Over half (59%) strongly agreed or agreed that supervising service learners required the same effort as supervising volunteers; 55% reported that they felt informed about the goals of a college course before it began; and 54% reported that faculty members they had partnered with were knowledgeable about their organization.

Table 4.
Level of Agency Preparation for Service Learners

“Please indicate your level of agreement with the following questions.”	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don’t Know/NA
I feel informed about the goals of a college course before students from that course begin their work with my agency.	1.0%	14.0%	17.0%	43.0%	12.0%	13.0%
I discuss with the supervising faculty my agency’s needs before students begin their volunteer work.	1.0%	18.0%	24.0%	37.0%	7.0%	13.0%
I understand what service learning is.	0.0%	0.0%	8.0%	59.0%	29.0%	4.0%
I communicate with supervising faculty during the service-learning project.	3.0%	15.0%	25.0%	36.0%	10.0%	11.0%
Faculty supervising service-learning projects are knowledgeable about my organization.	1.0%	7.0%	23.0%	46.0%	8.0%	15.0%
My board of directors understands what service learning is.	1.0%	7.0%	19.0%	34.0%	6.0%	33.0%
Managing service learners requires the same effort as managing other kinds of volunteers.	1.0%	21.0%	9.0%	38.0%	21.0%	10.0%

Note. For improved reliability of responses, this question was asked only of respondents reporting experience specifically with service learners ($n = 100$).

Table 5.
Community Agency Participation in Student Learning

“On the occasions when you have served as the chief contact person for a student service-learning assignment, how often are you asked by faculty or students to...”	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always	Don't Know/ NA
Evaluate the students you worked with (verbally or in writing).	8.0%	33.0%	23.0%	24.0%	12.0%
Attend a class presentation of the results of the project.	47.0%	24.0%	14.0%	1.0%	14.0%
Attend that class as a guest speaker or visitor.	42.0%	36.0%	8.0%	2.0%	12.0%

Note. For improved reliability of responses, this question was asked only of respondents reporting experience specifically with service learners ($n = 100$).

However, as Table 4 indicates, fewer than half of respondents communicated with supervising faculty during the project (46%) or discussed agency needs with faculty before students began their work (44%). One third did not know whether their board of directors understood what service learning was, and one quarter thought their board did not understand (although an additional two fifths believed their board did understand) service learning. This finding has implications for the ability of a community organization to make student engagement a strategic goal, given the role that board members play in strategic leadership. In addition, Table 5 indicates that 47% of respondents reported they had never been asked to attend a class presentation of the results of the project, and 42% had never been asked to attend the class as a guest speaker or visitor. When asked about the agencies' role in evaluation, 41% had never or only occasionally been involved in assessing the students they worked with.

These findings suggest that a large proportion of faculty do not communicate with or fully involve community partners in project planning, implementation, or evaluation as recommended by the literature. Responses were mixed when respondents were asked to identify specific actions that would improve service-learning experiences for their organizations. As Table 6 reflects, nonprofit representatives with service-learning experience generally recommended more faculty involvement such as joint curriculum planning, face-to-face pre-semester meetings, and agency orientations for instructors and all community partners. But we also find a lack of agreement regarding the level of priority to place on each activity. One third (32%) of respondents indicated a low need for more faculty involvement, but 62% ranked faculty involvement as a high-priority need (37% gave it the highest priority among a list of options). In addition, just over one quarter

of respondents (28%) ranked the need for better project design as a low priority, but nearly half (47%) indicated better project design as a high priority (20% ranked it most important). Further, just over 28% indicated a low need for more campus coordination of volunteers while 42% ranked it as important or most important. Finally, when asked if organizational involvement in evaluation would improve the service-learning experience, 18% considered this item of low importance while over one third (36%) ranked it as a high priority.

One way of interpreting such results is to argue that they reflect the underlying principle we espouse in this article: that instructors cannot assume host agencies share a single perspective on project planning. Rather, the diversity of perspectives we find here most likely reflects the sector’s own diversity in terms of its capacity, missions, and preparedness to engage students. The results argue for an engaged and participatory planning process, to ensure each host agency has the opportunity to articulate to faculty the goals and needs most important to them.

Table 6.
Community Agency Suggestions on Improving Service Learning

“What actions might improve your organization’s service-learning experience?*	1 Most Important	2	3	4	5 Least Important
More faculty involvement, such as joint curriculum planning, face-to-face pre-semester meetings, and orientations for professors and all community partners (<i>n</i> = 82)	36.6%	25.6%	6.1%	29.3%	2.4%
Better design of projects, such as larger scale community projects and long-term projects (<i>n</i> = 71)	19.7%	26.8%	25.4%	26.8%	1.4%
Availability of campus staff/students to coordinate student volunteers (<i>n</i> = 53)	18.9%	22.6%	30.2%	28.3%	0.0%
More opportunity for evaluation and feedback of student service learners and experience (<i>n</i> = 62)	16.1%	19.4%	46.8%	17.7%	0.0%

* “Please rank all of the options below, place a 1 by the action you consider most important, a 2 by the next highest, and so on. Feel free to skip options you do not feel are necessary.”

Note. For improved reliability of responses, this question was asked only of respondents reporting experience specifically with service learners (*n* = 100)

As Table 7 reflects, when asked what role each partner should play in planning, supervising, and evaluating student volunteers, interns, and service learners, respondents revealed a preference for a shared model of responsibility. More than half of all respondents (52% to 67%) felt that supervising students, setting project objectives, and evaluating outcomes should be a shared responsibility. Few reported that they didn't know how to respond, and most had firm opinions on the best partnership model. One third assigned principal responsibility to themselves (the host agency) for student supervision and setting project objectives. Few students or instructors were expected to set objectives by themselves. The results suggest that community agencies view student engagement ideally as a collaborative activity.

Table 7.
Community Agency Attitudes on Partnership Roles

“Ideally, when including student interns and volunteers in your organization, who do you think should have the principal responsibility for...”	Supervising	Setting Project Objectives	Evaluating Service-Learning Projects
Host agency	33.9%	33.2%	15.2%
The professor	4.2%	8.0%	10.4%
Students	0.3%	1.0%	1.0%
Shared responsibility	52.6%	52.6%	67.1%
Other	3.5%	2.4%	1.4%
Don't Know/NA	5.5%	2.8%	4.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note. This question was asked of all respondents ($n = 289$).

Testing a Respondent's Own Experience on Attitudes Toward Service-Learning Design

Because much of our analysis is based on community attitudes toward student experiential learning, we also examined whether a respondent's own high school or college experience as intern, service learner, or community volunteer influenced receptivity to students or the nature of the recommendations respondents made. Testing for prior personal experience not only addresses a potential source of response bias, it also helps faculty who are engaged in service learning understand how their partners' personal experiences might shape their approaches to collaboration. Among our respondents, the majority had been involved in experiential

learning as a high school or college student (57%), but a fairly large proportion had not been involved in prior experiential learning (40%).

This finding of a varied personal experience with experiential education allowed us to go on to test this association on our respondents' attitudes toward student learners. Although we found a few low to moderate bivariate correlations, the statistical significance of a respondent's prior experience disappeared in all but two cases after controlling for other, more instrumental factors such as the agency's experience with student learners (results not shown). In the two exceptions, respondents with prior personal experience were more likely to agree that "Teaching students about my field is part of my job" and also to place value on the "Opportunity for student reflection." Though not conclusive, the results suggest that managers retain and carry forward key principles of service learning from their own experiences. Future research should continue to explore the link between experience with, and receptivity toward, experiential learning.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

The nonprofit managers interviewed in our 2007 focus groups and case studies identified numerous recommendations that agencies can employ for the effective involvement of student service learners. Most agency-identified recommendations centered on volunteer management policies and programs. In fact, most of the suggestions involve the focused application of widely accepted volunteer management practices such as screening, training, supervision, and recognition of volunteers (Hager & Brudney, 2004). For example, when questioned about selection criteria for students, interviewees noted the value of identifying and publicizing in advance the needs that students can meet and the skills required to address them. Managers also suggested that agencies should be able to turn down students who cannot meet current program priorities. They highlighted the need for agencies, students, and faculty to discuss in advance their expectations of what student projects will accomplish. At a minimum, faculty should share course objectives and syllabi with agency representatives. Many managers also observed the need for more formalized planning tools, including memoranda of understanding between agencies and faculty or contracts between students and agencies to define the deliverables.

Above all, agencies emphasized the need for an equal commitment from all three partners to making the project work. They stressed the need to develop management tools that ensure regular communication between agencies, faculty, and students. A common theme in the interviews was the need for greater communication among all partners as service-learning projects are planned and implemented. Communication breakdowns were cited frequently by managers when discussing service-learning projects that had not worked well. Interviewees described numerous instances where regular communication would have ameliorated common problems, including low student motivation and questions about work priorities.

Our agency interviews reinforced one particular lesson from Hager and Brudney (2004): the value of designating a staff person as coordinator of student service learners. Colleges and universities that can create funded volunteer coordinator positions for students perform an important service for agencies by helping to meet their volunteer management capacity needs. Other changes will require faculty and campus involvement. Agency managers called on faculty and campus administrators to formalize the student placement process and involve agencies more fully in initial planning, rather than “throwing” students at community agencies. As an interviewee observed, “Course-based service-learner students are the most difficult to match because there’s often something they need to do [and it’s] not necessarily what we need.”

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This study addresses community-based experiential learning from a perspective less commonly explored in the literature—that of the “host” agency offering students the learning experience. For these reasons, the community partner input gained through this study is useful because it adds to the body of knowledge about university and community perspectives on experiential learning. We note, however, that constraints on survey length made it difficult to distinguish the specifics of a respondent’s experience or type of student involvement so that our conclusions about the relative advantages or disadvantages of any one type of experiential learning are less nuanced than they might be. We also note that we are addressing just one part of what we consider a three-part relationship between campus, community, and student. Here we focus on community partners as the subjects whose voices have been most lacking from prior research. But future research should compare expectations and experiences between all participants in a service-learning partnership. Also left for future research is the question of whether a faculty member’s disciplinary training in public affairs offers advantages when the service-learning activity takes place in the public or nonprofit sectors. Our study found that public affairs programs are well represented in these communities when it comes to student community engagement, but most of the students in our sample came from other disciplines, and our data do not allow us to compare disciplinary perspectives.

As for key findings, this study reinforced past research in observing that most nonprofit staff members are receptive to engaging students in community-based learning. The new findings we contribute to service-learning scholarship focus specifically on how partnerships can be improved. Our results signal weak campus-community connections and possibly a weaker than optimal approach to communication and troubleshooting. We find a strong interest among community agencies in jointly setting service-learning goals and assessing student outcomes. We derive these practical recommendations from the study:

- Faculty and community partners must plan experiential learning projects together.
- Experiential learning projects and programs should be mutually beneficial.
- Both parties should understand and incorporate each other's mission, goals, and capacity into experiential learning programs.
- Frequent, specific, and meaningful communication is critical to partnerships.
- Faculty and community partners must acknowledge and respect each other's expertise in program management, student decisions and supervision, and project evaluation.

Therefore, faculty members involved in community engagement must do more to understand the mission, expectations, and capacity of the organizations they partner with and actively work to build reciprocal and meaningful partnerships. Our findings support a long-standing argument among service-learning advocates that reciprocity in student community engagement means more than an exchange of student labor for learning. To be successful, all parties (students, faculty, and community partners) must benefit from experiential learning programs. Reciprocity begins with shared program planning, and is reinforced in ongoing communication, when the community partner is consulted as students are selected, as supervision decisions are made, and as student work is evaluated.

We also find that agencies rank "soft skills" such as communication and collaboration between partners more highly than material resources such as staffing and training. This finding is remarkable given the emphasis past scholarship has placed on the material aspects of volunteer management capacity (VMC). While we do find that VMC matters, a supportive faculty attitude toward service learning may matter more, and perhaps should be considered as an element of VMC. Essentially, therefore, we are finding that in the context of student service learning, a partnership's capacity is built not only on staffing and training but also on a faculty member's willingness to practice what is being preached to students: to exit the campus doors and enter the community as a full-fledged partner willing to work with the agencies hosting their students to achieve the transformational benefits of student community engagement.

Many institutions will find that this goal can be achieved only through a broader approach to faculty development, with appropriate incentives and support to help faculty members understand the most effective approach to service learning. If they can surmount these barriers, which are both perceptual and resource driven, a higher level of faculty engagement will build knowledge of their communities and sustain commitment from host agency staff and governing boards, resulting in greater support for student engagement in the future.

FOOTNOTE

- 1 Data collection involved screening and sampling stages. A professional survey research firm attempted to telephone 2,874 organizations (100% of the organizations in Monroe County and a sample drawn via a random number generator in Marion County, for an overall sample representing 26% of all documented nonprofit and religious entities in the two counties). The sampling included both charitable and non-charitable tax-exempt categories, to capture a broader range of student involvement. The list was extracted from a database created to provide comprehensive baseline information about a state's nonprofit sector and is the preferred approach since it incorporates the largest number of nonprofit organizations that might engage students (for details, see Grønbjerg & Clerkin, 2005). We observe, however, that such an approach leaves out public (governmental) agencies and business entities where students might also be involved in volunteer or pedagogical activities.

Of the identified nonprofits, 1,071 did not have an operational phone number, 784 did not return calls, and 1,019 responded. This low return rate signifies that some organizations were nonoperational. We do not anticipate that a sampling bias exists at this level, given that organizations involving students have the same probability of being operational as those that do not.

Of the 1,019 respondents, 672 (66%) reported that they involved college students in some capacity. Those who reported involving students were asked to complete an e-mail or paper survey, which 43% accomplished ($n = 290$). Fifty-nine percent of these are senior staff, 14% volunteer coordinators, and the remainder held another staff role. We calculated our confidence intervals for this sample at two levels. The sample of 672 nonprofits that involve students can be assumed to represent the full population of 1,804 active nonprofits in these two counties with a 2% margin of error (95% confidence level). The survey sample of 290 can be assumed to represent all organizations that engage students at a 5% margin of error.

The distribution of our sampled population of 290 nonprofit organizations by National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) classification is similar to that of the state as a whole, except that our sample produced more religious organizations and fewer human service and public benefit organizations. To the extent that this distribution influences our results, we effectively undercount involved students because our analysis also reveals that religious organizations were less likely to involve students than human service and public benefit organizations (Gazley et al., 2012). Generalizability is also limited to the extent that nonprofit organizations or students from our selected counties reflect characteristics not found in other geographical areas. We note, for example, that volunteering rates are slightly higher in this state compared to national averages, and some of the campuses involved are national leaders in student civic engagement practices. Finally, we sampled only nonprofits with working phone numbers, and we fully surveyed only those that reported recent student engagement.

Comparisons of the two county samples via t-tests were mostly non-significant and inconclusive, so we have chosen to display all data in aggregate.

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Beth Gazley is associate professor in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University–Bloomington, and an affiliate faculty member in the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. Her research addresses questions related to nonprofit and governmental management capacity, including collaborative capacity, the role of nonprofits in local government emergency planning, and effective service learning and volunteer management models. She uses service learning in her undergraduate nonprofit management course and is a recipient of two statewide service-learning awards.

Teresa A. Bennett is the founding director of the IUPUI Solution Center, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) office of outreach and community engagement. The Solution Center, a unit of the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research, is responsible for increasing awareness of IUPUI's engagement mission and for matching the interests of the community to the talent of faculty, researchers, and students on the campus. Ms. Bennett holds a Master of Public Affairs from Indiana University and a Bachelor of Arts in Communication from Purdue University.

Laura Littlepage is a faculty member at the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis and associate faculty at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy as well as a senior researcher at the Indiana University Public Policy Institute. Her research addresses questions related to the effectiveness of nonprofits. She teaches a service-learning class—“Do the Homeless Count?”—that students participate in as data collectors. She has been the principal author of numerous publications and several journal articles.