

Assessments by Community Agencies: How “the Other Side” Sees Service-Learning

Joseph R. Ferrari and Laurie Worrall

DePaul University

Collecting information from community-based organizations (CBOs) about their perspectives about service-learning (SL) students is a valuable and important form of feedback to schools with such programs. In the present study, supervisors from 30 CBOs located in a large urban setting at the end of an academic term completed items about their perception of each SL student located at their site (total n = 109). Factor analyses (varimax rotation) of the CBO supervisor ratings of 9-rating items about students yield two reliable factors explaining over 74% of the common variance, namely: students demonstrated service skills (constructive relationship with others, respectful of clients, sensitivity to needs of clients, appropriate dress, positive attitude), and work skills (good attendance, punctuality, dependable, and strong work qualities). These results suggest that the CBO supervisors perceive SL students as providing useful service and work-related skills, and that the University partnership is beneficial to their agency.

The importance of experiential activities in the education of students has been discussed for nearly 70 years (Dewey, 1938), and has been expanded through experiential learning theories (e.g., Kinsley & McPherson, 1995; Kolb, 1984). Current advocates of experiential learning methodologies believe community service work and education may be *reciprocal*, enriching experiences for students and agency sites in what has emerged as *community-based service learning* (CbSL) initiatives (Boyer, 1995; Ferrari & Chapman, 1999; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Keith, 1998; Waterman, 1997). Students in CbSL classes learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully-organized community service experiences that meet actual social or civic needs. Further, the service provider (in this case, a student) may build a sense of connectedness to their larger society, gain skills to succeed in life, establish a connection to life-long learning, and increase the likelihood of life-long community service and civic altruism (Blyth, Saito, & Berkas, 1997; Eberly, 1988; Ferrari, DeFilippo, & Richmond, 2000; Morris, 1992; Rhoads, 1997). Students who complete CbSL classes have reduced problem behaviors, perform better in school, report enhanced social, identity, psychological, and intellectual development (Conrad & Hedlin, 1987; Ferrari & Chapman, 1999; Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1992; Rutter & Newmann, 1989; Moore & Allen, 1996; Raskoff & Sundeen, 1994; Waterman, 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1997), and claim broadened perceptions of service and future commitments to community service (Gibboney, 1996).

A reciprocal view of benefits between student,

school, and agency site emphasizes gains for all parties, as opposed to compensatory or at-risk views of one side or the other (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Ferrari & Chapman, 1999). In well-designed CbSL classes, the student, school, and community site are integrated into the educational process: *students* learn to create, plan, and prepare a course of action in real-life situations with a sense of care for others (e.g., Ferrari & Geller, 1994; Ferrari & Jason, 1996; Keith, 1994; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Schine, 1997); *schools* build stronger links with their local communities (e.g., Kinsley & McPherson, 1995; Sander, 1999; Weil, 1996); and, *agencies* have active citizens better prepared to tackle future problems as well as address current dilemmas (e.g., Eisen, 1994; Greene, 1998; Miller, 1997; Noley, 1977).

Little research exists that focuses on the agency's views of the student service provider or the college-partner institution. In rural communities, the collaboration between school and agencies, or *community-based organizations* (CBOs), takes on an extra level of significance, given the limited resources often available in such locations. Miller (1997) discussed the importance of “social capital” in rural settings; that is, the ability of a community to act collectively toward improving community well-being. Students who are given a substantive role in CbSL projects through direct involvement in the planning and solving of community dilemmas provide a major advantage to the social capital of rural communities. Community service providers, or “para-professionals,” may fulfill the needs that public agencies cannot address with their limited resources.

In contrast, urban settings have different needs than rural communities (Keith, 1997). In urban environments, the large number of clients and their diversity of backgrounds and resources may pose multi-dimensional difficulties for university-agency collaborations (Groark & McCall, 1996; Weil, 1996). In a general statement about urban university-CBO collaborations, Noley (1977) stated that CBO officials feel that students come ill-prepared to perform service by not having appropriate skills or unrealistic expectations about their duties. Furthermore, CBO officials believe students spend too little time actually working to make meaningful differences in the lives of clients served at their site (usually, students spend one semester, and at best, one academic [9 month] year). Blyth (1997) reported that students believed that their efforts through SL courses assisted CBOs, making a difference in the lives of the clients they served. However, these researchers did not survey or interview the CBO officials about any improvements in their client's lives as a result of the efforts of student community service providers. Greene (1998) interviewed students and small-town CBO staff at two nursing home agencies and compared their qualitative perceptions of the process. Both students and site officials stated that they believed that the other group benefited from the experience. However, they perceived different benefits than the other party stated they gained, and students and site officials differed in their perceptions of each other's responsibilities. Vernon and Ward (1999) recently interviewed CBO staff from rural settings on qualitative items about the impact of students working at their site. The officials felt positive about the students and thought their presence helped the organization meet its goals. However, the CBO staff felt that the students brought challenges, given frequent schedule changes and variable commitments to the tasks.

Taken together, these studies suggest that more program evaluation is needed from the viewpoint of urban CBOs. In the present study, we sought to explore how CBO supervisors perceived the students who worked at their agency with quantitative and qualitative items. Agency supervisors completed rating scales and open-ended items about the performance of students working at their site. In short, we assessed how "the other side" of the collaboration (i.e., the CBO supervisor) perceived the student volunteers. Because the present study appears to be one of the few evaluations from this perspective, no *a priori* expectations about perceptions of the students' performance were made. Instead, we focused on gaining some insight into the views of CBO supervisors about the service-learners.

Method

Participants, University Representatives, and Agency Settings

A total of 135 upper-division college students (87 women, 48 men; age range = 19-21 years old; junior/senior status = 100%) enrolled at a medium-sized, midwestern, private, urban university participated in a range of community service work that fulfilled a requirement for a course. These students were enrolled in one of ten quarter-long (10 week) CbSL courses during the Spring, 1999 term (class size range = 14-60 students), that were taught by either a male ($n = 3$) or female ($n = 7$) instructor. The median number of CbSL students at each site was four (range = 1 to 14). In each case, students were required to perform either a set of activities or one major task associated with the content of their course. The activities or tasks were described by the CBO staff as important work to their agency.

All students and all instructors were aware that the CBO supervisor would complete a brief survey about each student's performance for the quarter long experience. However, since this was a research project only, students were assured that none of the information collected would be used in determining their final course grade. In fact, CBO supervisors did not complete their perception surveys until *after* final grades were submitted.

The initial contacts with the CBO staff were made by a permanent staff member of the University's CbSL office. All follow-up contact was provided by a University (student) representative (3 women, 2 men) who served as a liaison between the agency and the school throughout the quarter. Each University representative met two to three times per quarter with his/her CBO and had an average of five CBOs assigned for the quarter. In addition, the university had a full-time administrative director, a portion of time from one full-time faculty member, and three full-time staff persons available for contact with each agency.

A total of 30 CBOs were involved in this study. The CBO supervisor who completed the measures usually was a woman (21 women, 9 men). The types of CBOs varied in their purposes and mission but all were non-profit, private agencies receiving limited federal, state, and local financial assistance. Students performed a variety of activities, including preparing and distributing meals for homeless persons, tutoring adults in English or young children in reading, writing, or math skills, preparing immigrants for citizenship exams and INS interviews, assisting persons with AIDS, instructing job ready skills to welfare recipients, and providing daycare for children.

Measures

All CBO supervisors were informed at the start of the quarter that they would be asked to complete a brief survey at the end of the quarter on each SL student at their respective agency. These items were adapted from an unpublished survey of fifteen items created by Williams (1998) in assessing CbSL students from several colleges and universities in the Atlanta, Georgia area. Claudette Williams (personal communication, October, 1998) stated that the university found the survey easy to administer, agencies found the survey easy to complete, and students were not threatened by the nature of the questions. For the present study, this unpublished instrument was modified to reflect the urban students and agencies in the Chicago area, although the major topics and issues were largely the same.

Nine 5-point rating scales (1 = very dissatisfied; 5 = exceeded expectations; NA = not applicable) were completed by the CBO supervisors to evaluate the SL student's quarter long performance, including: (1) *attendance*, adhered to schedules and gave no unexcused absences; (2) *punctuality*, was on-time for service and gave no unexcused reasons for tardiness; (3) *appearance*, dressed appropriately for the organization and the assigned work; (4) *attitude*, arrived willing to work and displayed interest in the organization; (5) *respectful*, acted in an appropriate way, showing respect for the organization and clients; (6) *working relationships*, was approachable and easy to work with on tasks; (7) *dependability*, required an appropriate level of supervision and accomplished the work in a dependable manner; (8) *work quality*, showed commitment to quality and thoroughness of their work; and, (9) *importance of work*, showed understanding of the importance of the work to the organization. Also, CBO supervisors were asked to explain their ratings on each item and then to record any comments about the student's overall participation at the site.

Procedure

Instructors and students enrolled in each CbSL class also were informed about the use of the CBO's survey, but were assured that the agency feedback in no way would influence their grades for the course. As part of each class, students spent between six to eight weeks at their agency site, working between 3 and 4 hours per week, 20-25 hours over the course of the quarter. A representative of the university's CbSL office kept close contact with the CBO supervisor to trouble-shoot any difficulty and to facilitate the collaboration. At approximately the eighth week, the CbSL representative visited each agency and distributed to the CBO supervisor one survey per stu-

dent. The CbSL representative stated that completed surveys were to be returned within two weeks. Pilot testing indicated it took about 10-12 minutes on average for CBO supervisors to complete all student performance evaluations.

Results

The University CbSL Office representative collected 109 completed student performance evaluations (return rate = 80.7%) from the 30 CBO agency supervisors. From these data, we conducted a series of quantitative and qualitative analyses. Initially, a factor analysis on the 9-items assessing student performance ratings was conducted, followed by an ANOVA of CBO supervisor sex by CbSL student sex on the summary factor scores. Also, a content analysis of the comments reported by CBO supervisors on each student's overall performance was conducted, and a summary of any additional written statements was examined.

Factor Analysis and Gender Comparisons of CBO Supervisor Ratings of Student Performance Evaluations

Most CBO supervisors (95.9%) did not write comments about their ratings of the CbSL students. However, among the few cases where comments were written, most statements (69.4%) were categorized (by a female research assistant, blind to the purpose of the study) as positive about the student's performance (i.e., good job with clients, always on time, people here liked him). The nine 5-point performance evaluation rating scales completed by CBO supervisors on each of the CbSL students were entered into a maximum likelihood factor analysis (varimax rotation). A two factor solution, with eigen values > 1.00, emerged that explained 74.2% of the common variance. Table 1 presents the factor loadings (> .55) and mean score for each scale item. As noted from the table, the first factor contained five items, reflecting what may be called a student's *service skills*. Items loading on this factor were the **CbSL student's working relationship with clients, appropriate respect of clients, sensitivity to the client's needs, presenting an appropriate image to the client, and a constructive attitude about working with a client.** The second factor contained four items and may be labeled *work skills*. Items loading on this factor included attendance at the site, punctuality, dependability for tasks, and demonstrating good quality work.

Summary factor scores for each CbSL student then were calculated, yielding a group mean score of 23.51 ($SD = 2.29$) for service skills and 18.01 ($SD = 2.64$) for work skills. Both summary factor scores

TABLE 1

Mean Score and Rotated Factor Structure (Maximum Likelihood Analysis: Varimax Rotation) on CBO Supervisor Ratings of CbSL Student Performance Evaluations.

SCALE ITEM	M	FACTOR 1 "service skills"	FACTOR 2 "work skills"
Work relationship	4.72 (0.49)	.8367	
Respectful	4.75 (0.48)	.8303	
Site sensitivity	4.69 (0.53)	.7517	
Appearance	4.67 (0.55)	.6964	
Attitude	4.67 (0.62)		.6533
Attendance	4.37 (0.87)		.9336
Punctuality	4.37 (0.85)		.7009
Dependable	4.64 (0.71)		.6551
Work quality	4.63 (0.67)		.5742
EIGEN VALUE		5.53	1.15
PERCENTAGE OF VARIANCE		61.50	12.70

Note. n = 109 students. Ratings scales: 1 = low; 5 = high. Values in parentheses represent standard deviations.

showed good reliability for research purposes (coefficient alpha rs: service skills = 0.91; work skills = 0.87). A 2 (CBO supervisor gender: male vs female) by 2 (CbSL student gender: male vs female) ANOVA also was performed on the two summary factor scores. There was no significant interaction or main effects for gender of supervisor or student on either of the summary-composite scores.

Content Analyses of CBO Supervisors' Overall Written Comments About CbSL Students

Next, a content analysis on any written comments made by CBO supervisors about the student's overall performance was conducted. Seven different themes emerged from reading each written comment, and the frequency of each theme was coded dichotomously by the female research assistant as present ("yes") or absent ("no"). These themes were: the student was helpful to the agency; the student was sensitive to the needs of clients; the student was friendly toward clients and staff; the student demonstrated empathy toward clients; the student's relationship with clients was appropriate and positive; the student was interested in providing service to clients; and, the student was dedicated to his/her work.

CBO supervisors *unanimously* reported that they found the students helpful, sensitive, friendly, compassionate, and acting appropriately. In addition, most CBO supervisors claimed the students were interested (94.4%) and dedicated (90.9%) in the work. Chi square analyses on frequency of these themes for male or female CbSL students indicated no significant gender difference. In addition, several CBO supervisors commented that the CbSL students worked independently of supervision, were able to handle difficult situations, and showed an ability to resolve conflicts and solve situational problems that arose.

Discussion

The present study examined the use of a brief survey that requires little time for CBO supervisors to complete. Results suggested that it is possible to obtain reliable information about students working in community service projects from CBO supervisors. We believe that given the opportunity, most CBO supervisors will provide their perceptions on the community service and work habits of students. In short, we believe that the present study provides a useful instrument as a component of assessing CbSL programs.

Of course, there are several limitations in the present project. For example, the rating scales were used along 5-point alternatives, possibly limiting the variability in responses by CBO supervisors. Related to this limitation, the ratings by CBO supervisors on each of the nine 5-point scales were relatively high (see Table 1: M score per item was ≥ 4.4 out of 5 points). It is possible that some reactivity effects and/or response biases existed in how the CBO supervisors completed the items. While supervisors may have been pleased with the performance of each student, they may not have wanted to jeopardize the working relationship with the University, and therefore assigned extremely high ratings of students to help ensure a continued partnership. Future research needs to examine increased response variability and response biases as sources of confounds in CBO supervisor data. In addition, although the forms used in the present study were modifications of instruments created by Williams (1998), they were edited by members of the University CbSL Office and the present authors. The CBO supervisors, as well as faculty who taught CbSL courses, were not involved in the creation of the measures. It is not known if the items included in this new instru-

ment measured the criteria most useful for faculty and CBO agencies in assessing student participation in community service.

Nevertheless, the present study does suggest that there is a continued need to obtain information from CBO supervisors on their perceptions of the university students involved in community service. Future research is needed to refine the items and procedures of the present scales, to assess potential biases and confounds in reported data, and to obtain a wide range of faculty and agency perspectives on how to strengthen the partnership arrangement. Long-term, follow-up data also is needed to ascertain the impact of community service learning on both the university and the community agency. There is also need for data on rural as well as urban settings. In any case, we believe that soliciting CBO agency input about the development of service and work skills in students is essential to understanding and strengthening community-based service-learning experiences.

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Authors

JOSEPH R. FERRARI is an Associate Professor of Psychology at DePaul University in Chicago, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community*, and co-author of *Educating Students to Make-a-Difference: Community-Based Service Learning* (1998: Haworth Press). In the areas of applied social-community psychology, his publications focus on caregiver stress and satisfaction, addiction recovery in communal-living situations, health and chronic fatigue, psychological sense of community, and student community volunteerism.

LAURIE WORRALL is the founding Director of the Office of Community-based Service Learning at DePaul University.