

## Different Worlds and Common Ground: Community Partner Perspectives on Campus-Community Partnerships

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*This qualitative study includes focus group research involving 99 experienced community partners across eight California communities using community-based research techniques to capture community voices about their service-learning partnerships with different colleges and universities. Partners commented on their perspectives regarding motivations, benefits to the academic institution and to their own organization, impacts on student learning, and areas for improving partnerships. The analysis affirms the characteristics of effective partnerships of multiple well-established models of effective partnerships developed by higher education, but reveal that community partners have a specific sense of prioritization among partnership factors. In addition, partners revealed a surprising depth of understanding and commitment to student learning, the “common ground” of the service-learning experience. Community partners also voiced challenges and recommendations for their higher education partners to transform service-learning partnership relationships to bridge their “different worlds,” and enhance learning, reciprocity, and sustainability.*

I think a great partnership is when you stop saying MY students. They're OUR students. What are OUR needs? We share these things in common, so let's go for it.

—Community Partner

Yes, [the community-campus partnership] is about organizations, it's about students, but it is about common values that are much deeper. What we're learning to do, whether we're students or whether we're a non-profit, is doing something that is actually moving us as a community, a path of achieving process along the context of what we care about.

—Community Partner

What would we hear if we listened to community partners about their experiences in partnering with academic institutions? We know that engaging in relationships with members from local communities is central to the higher education agenda (Maurasse, 2001) and many scholars (e.g., Benson & Harkavy, 2000; Boyer, 1990; Bringle, 1999; Enos & Morton, 2003) advocate for community-campus partnerships to become a more intentional component of actualizing the service mission of higher education. In particular, community-campus partnerships have become recognized as linked to ser-

vice-learning initiatives for providing the service-learning experience for students and evaluating its impact (Bailis, 2002; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Gelmon et al., 1998; Jacoby, 2003; Jones, 2003). In the absence of community-campus partnerships, it is difficult to imagine how service-learning might even exist. The sustainability of community partnerships with higher education institutions requires attention to their motivations and perceptions of the benefits of the partners from their own perspective, however. While reciprocity of benefits for the community has long been an intended hallmark of service-learning practice (Ferrari & Chapman, 1999; Honnet & Poulsen, 1989; Keith, 1998; Sigmon, 1979; Waterman, 1997), service-learning practitioners often do not often know if, when, and how this is achieved.

To date, there are few published studies documenting the perspectives of community members in partnership with universities, and the field acknowledges that this area continues to be under-represented in the overall service-learning literature (Birdsall, 2005; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Bushouse, 2005; Edwards & Marullo, 2000; Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Giles & Cruz, 2000; Jones, 2003; Liederman et al., 2003; Sandy, 2005; Vernon & Ward, 1999; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). The growing number of academics

and practitioners who voice concern about the absence of the community perspective in the literature may be indicative of a growing openness to learn more about the perspectives of community members and a willingness to transform our practice in light of their input. However, Cruz and Giles (2000) indicate that there are complicated political and intellectual reasons why the perspectives of community partners continue to be under-represented in the field. The notion of “community” itself as a concept is contested (e.g., Stoecker, 2005; Tumiel-Berhalter, Waktins, & Crespo, 2005; Wellman, 2001), which has led to some paralysis in the research community at-large. However, the failure to grapple with understanding the community perspective may have potentially dire consequences because there is considerable room for misunderstanding between higher education and community partners, a divide that is evident in the language higher education practitioners often use.

A common metaphor used by service-learning practitioners to frame their thinking about the service-learning experience is “boundary crossing,” or “boundary work,” entering another world where different rules apply (Hayes & Cuban, 1997; Keith, 1998; McMillan, 2002; Skilton-Sylvester & Erwin, 2000; Taylor, 2002). Service-learning is often described as a metaphorical “bridge” between these two worlds or speech communities or, as Henry Giroux (1992) might describe it, akin to a “border pedagogy” where one must be familiar with the rules and norms of both so that we might become more effective border crossers. What do we know, versus what do we assume to know about these “other worlds” with whom we are entwined in the work of service-learning? Very little is written about the perspective of this “other world” that higher education wishes to engage. In an effort to facilitate better crossings for thinking and communicating together, Nora Bacon (2002) outlined the distinctions in theories of learning between higher education faculty and staff and community partner agency staff. Bringle, Games and Malloy (1999) also describe community-university partnerships as bringing together different worlds where academicians generally view knowledge as “residing in specialized experts, including disciplinary peers who are geographically dispersed and community residents [who] view knowledge as being pluralistic and well distributed among their neighbors” (pp. 9-10).

Higher education and “community” certainly do not represent monocultures, of course. There are distinctions in motivations and perceived benefits among various higher education practitioners (Holland, 2002) and we might well anticipate that there are diverse views about the motivations and perceived benefits of those individuals from agen-

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cies partnering with institutions of higher education. The goal of this study is to better understand the diverse perspectives of long-term community partners collaborating with institutions of higher education, and to identify partner recommendations for ways to transform higher education practice to strengthen mature and well-established partnerships. This qualitative study, sponsored by California Campus Compact through a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service, Learn and Serve America Higher Education, documented the partnership perspectives of 99 experienced community partners working with eight diverse higher education institutions in California. These partners were primarily supervisors and staff members from nonprofit community-based organizations and public institutions such as libraries, hospitals, and K-12 institutions.

As recommended (Cruz & Giles, 2000), our unit of analysis was the community-campus partnership, perceived through the lens of community partner eyes. Our research considers community perspectives on effective partnership characteristics as well as their own voices regarding the benefit, challenges, and motivations they have regarding partnership with an academic institution. Regarding partnership characteristics, we place this study in the context of four diverse models (Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 1998; Holland & Ramaley, 1998; Liederman et al., 2003; Torres, 2000) of effective campus-community partnerships (Holland, 2005). Since those models were developed largely from a higher education perspective, the research question we addressed was how well the community partner perspective does or does not align with current models proposed by higher education. Regarding partner perspectives of the benefits, motivations, and challenges of their partnership with academic institutions, we place this study in the context of the work on partnerships such as Liederman et al. and Worrall (2005) but are breaking new ground regarding our method of documenting community voices from multiple institutions without the direct influence or involvement of higher education partners.

The need for this research was identified by practitioners in the field during a Fall 2004 retreat for service-learning professionals to learn from community partners how to improve their own practice. The research team worked to create a study design that would ensure the collection of purely community partner perspectives to significantly strengthen the academic literature on this topic of partnership relationships while assisting these experienced service-learning professionals in deepening their work. The study included community partners that would be considered to be in the advanced stages of partner-

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ship that, to have such longevity, would have considerable knowledge of partnership dynamics, barriers, and facilitating factors. These partnerships are referred to as the “final” (Torres, 2000), “nurturing” (Dorado & Giles, 2004) or in the “cooperative” and/or “systematic and transformative” (Socokett, 1998) stages of partnership. Because of this sample selection, the conclusions here may or may not have implications for nascent partnerships. Due to staff turnover at some organizations, some of the participants themselves may have been new, although the partnership between the organization they represent and the higher education institution would have been well-established.

### Literature Review

Many of the studies that have involved community partner perspectives on the outcomes and benefits of the partnerships have focused on various partners’ experiences with a single higher education institution (e.g., Birdsall, 2005; Bushouse, 2005; Clarke, 2003; Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Jorge, 2003; Miron & Moely, 2005; Schmidt & Robby, 2002; Vernon & Foster, 2002; Worrall, 2005). Some studies, such as Schmidt and Robby, and Skilton-Sylvester and Erwin (2000), describe the direct benefits to the “clients” the community partner entities serve, while others focus on the perception of benefits from the supervisors of service-learning students through evaluation data (e.g., Birdsall; Ferrari & Worrall). There are fewer studies that specifically look at the partnership itself as the unit of analysis. Dorado and Giles (2004) provide an excellent analysis of the stages and types of activities that tend to occur at three different levels of partnership that vary over time. Clarke created and piloted a 3-“T” evaluation model for community partners working with the same higher education institution designed to capture findings related to community impact as process. In a study sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges, Liederman et al. (2003) spoke with 19 community partner leaders from around the country in a two-day summit to identify elements of partnerships, common benefits, challenges, and recommendations for practice. Similarly, Worrall developed a case study comprised of the perspectives of 40 community partners working with DePaul University in Illinois where she examined benefits, challenges and motivations for partners’ involvement. Bushouse (2005) also identified benefits and barriers to campus-community partnerships among small nonprofits at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and Miron and Moely used the partnership as the unit of analysis to examine community perspectives on agency voice, benefits to their organization, and perceptions of the university.

### Structure and Methodology

Much of the value of this current study is its breadth in the context of diverse functioning partnerships. Service-learning coordinators at eight California campuses self-selected 99 advanced “nurturing stage” (Dorado & Giles, 2004) community partners to participate in 15 focus groups to discuss their perspectives on community-campus partnerships. To date, it is one of the largest multisite studies focused exclusively on community partners. The research team took extensive measures to ensure community partners’ confidentiality and anonymity. While the community partners included were nominated by their partnering service-learning directors, higher education representatives were not present during the study, nor did any higher education partner have access to the data before the findings were approved by community participants. This effort to control for interpretations by the higher education voice is in some contrast to previous studies with community partners (e.g., Liederman et al., 2003), in which higher education partners were present during the data collection process. To ensure broad relevance of the findings, the sites were selected based on the history and diversity of the partnerships and their institutional context; a mix of urban and rural, four-year and community college, public and private, faith-based and secular, Research I and liberal arts institutions were included from diverse geographical regions of California.

We employed focus groups as our inquiry strategy because we wished to obtain data from a large sample across multiple communities and sought “meaning and sense-making” more than the precise numerical data that would be provided through a survey instrument. Because partnerships are by definition an inherently social activity, focus groups were best suited to obtain information, as we could make “explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1989). Accepted standards for focus group processes and hermeneutic fieldwork (Herda, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1989) informed our theoretical orientation and design, and practitioners in the field at a California Campus Compact retreat helped shape the initial areas of inquiry. Informed by the relevant literature, a five-member research team, comprised of three facilitators, one recorder, and the Principle Investigator, refined the questions for the protocol, which were presented in a semi-structured interview format with guided participation by the facilitators. Participants addressed questions concerning their motivations, benefits, challenges, and recommendations that were similar to some of the areas of inquiry

that Liederman et al. (2003) and Worrall (2005) studied. Because this study was more focused on the transformation of higher education practice from the community's perspective, it contrasts with a recent publication developed by the national Campus Compact office designed to serve as a practical guide for community agencies interested in partnering with higher education campuses (Scheibel, Bowley, & Jones, 2005).

Because a level of familiarity with the subject matter is necessary for research conversations to be productive (Gadamer, 1960/1975; Herda, 1999) and a particularly high level of trust was required to do this research, we involved seasoned scholars in service-learning who were familiar with service-learning concepts and focus group facilitation. The facilitators were neutral in the sense that they were not employed by the campuses and did not have a vested interest in the findings of each of the groups. Small stipends were awarded to community partners for their participation.

Data were collected by charting participant responses on easel paper, note-taking, and audio-taping and transcribing participant responses. We generated categories and themes to identify patterns, because our goal was to discern a set of characteristics across all partner responses. For each question on the protocol, the researchers developed a relational scheme that clustered participant responses according to themes. Notes from the audio-taped sessions were provided to participants to check for understanding. Data were coded and analyzed using Atlas-TI software, and hermeneutic "constant coding" approaches (Herda, 1999) were used to check themes. Initial research categories were developed based on the protocol questions and additional categories and themes were developed after an analysis of the data. The team worked with community partners to check for understanding and completeness using methods derived from community-based practices.

The ethic of reciprocity, a hallmark of service-learning practice, informed the research design. One of the distinctions of this study in comparison to other studies of community partners is its place-based, two-tiered approach. The importance of location is often overlooked in academic research (Grunewald, 2003; Oldenburg, 1989; Sandy, 2005), and including this variable in our design had important benefits. We convened focus groups in the locations in which they partnered and included participants who all had experiences working with the same higher education institution. By doing so, we expected that participants would be more likely to discuss the concrete details of their partnerships, as they all shared something directly in common with one another, and researchers would be able to tease out

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distinctions between different partners with the same higher education institution. There is evidence that the very act of convening the focus groups may have already begun to benefit the partnerships there. Participants shared ideas with one another and suggested solutions to directly benefit their particular partnerships at all focus groups. In keeping with key aspects of community-based research methodology (Stoecker, 2005), participants were involved with approving the thematic interpretations, finalizing the reports designed to inform and improve their particular partnership, and the "meta-analysis" that includes a cross-analysis of all the data generated from all of the focus groups. In keeping with accepted practices of hermeneutic and ethnographic qualitative research, direct quotations were shared with community partners to develop themes and categories for both the meta-analysis and campus reports, although space constraints do not permit much of them to be presented here.

Given the traditional wisdom regarding focus group research (e.g., Fontana & Frey, 2000; Morgan, 1998) and the fact that the participants in this study represent a "convenience" sample, to some extent, the findings are not generalizable in a statistical sense. However, we fully expect these findings to have broad applicability, particularly given the diversity and size of the sample and the controls inherent in our approach.

The following section will offer a discussion of the themes emerging from data analysis and place each theme within a discussion of prior literature and apparent import to the advancement of research on service-learning partnerships and their practices. Direct quotations from community partners from all focus groups are included to highlight themes.

### Emergent Themes

#### *Convergence with Characteristics of Effective Partnerships: Relationships are Foundational*

You can't assume the partnership will stay what it is. It needs to be fed. —Community Partner

A major contribution in advancing community-university partnerships has been the various ways the field has defined the core characteristics of effective partnerships. Important examples include: Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH), (1998); Campus Compact (Torres, 2000); the Wingspread Report (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989), Housing and Urban Development Department's list of characteristics (Holland & Ramaly, 1998), and the study by Liederman et al. (2003) that describes the characteristics valued by community partners. Holland (2005) notes that while many of these lists

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contain unique aspects related to the context in which they were developed, there is a high level of convergence in their recommendations that provides a vision of ideal partnerships. These lists include topics such as developing a mutually beneficial agenda, understanding the capacity and resources of all partners, participating in project planning, attending to the relationship, shared design and control of project directions, and continual assessment of partnership processes and outcomes.

The analysis of the characteristics described by the community partners in this study reveals that while they concur with these general principles, the language they use to describe them and how they prioritize them is often distinct. Aspects of valuing and nurturing the partnership relationship were uniformly stressed as the highest priority among all the groups.

If you're just going to do an event, and another event and a project, a project, a project, it doesn't feel like you're connecting the dots. You're not growing anything. It has to be sustainable, and I think you only get sustainability when you're building relationships and there's a certain humanity to the whole thing.

—Community Partner

These partners emphasized that the relationship itself is foundational to service-learning and that all collaborative activities or projects stem from this. This supports the claim by Dorado and Giles (2004), and Benson and Harkavy (2000), that community partners value the relationship with the university beyond a specific service-learning project. This finding also provides support for the claim posited by Skilton-Sylvester and Erwin (2000) that people can begin to cross the borders that commonly divide university and community members “through the development of caring relationships and reflection on those relationships” (p. 73). It is in some contrast to the study conducted by Bushouse (2005), who found that small nonprofit organizations were more likely to prefer arrangements with minimal required staff time, with presumably less emphasis on relationship-building.

Other highly valued characteristics described by these community partners, ranked in order of frequency, include: 1) *Communication among partners*, particularly clearly defined roles and responsibilities, ongoing, accessible lines of communication, flexibility, and the ability to say ‘no;’ 2) *Understanding partner perspectives*. While the lists generated by higher education researchers often stress mutual benefits, community partners were more likely to describe the need for understanding each partner’s work cultures, responsiveness to partner needs, and caring about

mutual goals. Some partners stressed that higher education partners need to focus more intently on community needs; 3) *Personal connections*. Overall, partners did not often stress the need for formal structure or resources, although this may be partially explained by the fact that these experienced higher education partners already have this infrastructure in place. K-12 institutions tended to underscore the importance of written agreements and structure more frequently than community-based organization partners; 4) *Co-planning, training, and orientation*. Community partners described collaborative planning with faculty and staff, and agreed-upon systems for training and orientations for service-learners as one of the most critical areas to improve campus-community partnerships; 5) *Accountability and leadership*. These partners emphasized the need for adequate follow-through and accountability on the part of all partners, and shared, equitable leadership. Continuity of personnel is important.

*Common Ground: Our Partners in Education*

One of the most compelling findings of this study is the community partner’s profound dedication to educating college students — even when this is not an expectation, part of their job description, or if the experience provides few or no short- and long-term benefits for their organization.

I should add that I’m a frustrated teacher! I see [service-learning] as an opportunity to influence the next generation. I see it not just as we’re getting those wonderful volunteers, but we have an opportunity to train and influence and sensitize people to deal with the issues the clients of our agency face. It can influence their family relationships, it’s going to influence their career choices, and it is maybe going to help them deal differently with people they meet on the street.

—Community Partner

We are co-educators. That is not our organization’s bottom line, but that’s what we do.

—Community Partner

Campus-community partnerships are commonly thought to be based on differences in self-interest and require negotiation to ensure these different needs are met (e.g., Bushouse, 2005; Scheibel, Bowley, & Jones, 2005). Enos and Morton (2003) suggest a continuum of “self-to-shared-interest,” where partnerships function first as a “transactional” partnership with distinct objectives and then move toward developing shared goals to a “transformational” relationship. A recent study by Worrall (2005) affirms this perception of community partners, indicating that they first become involved with service-learning to gain access to additional resources and then stay

involved over time because they enjoy their role as community educators. In contrast, the community partners included in this study spoke of their shared goals regarding student learning at the inception of the partnership. They repeatedly stressed that educating college students was a more compelling reason for becoming involved in community-campus partnerships than more tangible “transactional” short-term benefits to their agency or organization.

While educating students was an initial motivation for these community partners, their commitment to educating students may have grown over time as they became more experienced. They demonstrated a remarkable awareness and level of student learning outcomes for career development, civic engagement, academic course content, diversity and multi-cultural skills, and personal development.

[Students] come from the university hoping to help us build a house, but with service-learning in context, that same student would understand why there is a lack of affordable housing, what is the impact of a lack of housing on the community, on a low-income family, on a neighborhood. Part of the challenge is broadening the scope of what the specific work a student might be doing at an agency and helping them understand that in context. That is really a tough thing to do, and it seems like it is often our responsibility as community partners to help make those links.  
—Community Partner

While community partners are devoted to educating students, and often perceive this as a way to “give back,” community partners face significant challenges inherent in the work itself. These include grappling with issues related to the academic calendar and logistics, workplace preparedness of students, understanding the learning goals and their roles in the experience, and dealing with recruitment, supervision, placement, and evaluation.

Their understanding of the benefits of service-learning for students and higher education institutions as a whole largely mirrors the benefits documented by higher education, and include: exploring career options, building competency in diversity and multicultural communication skills, obtaining deeper knowledge of a particular issue or profession and the non-profit world in general, developing practical job skills and job leads, cultivating skills of engaged citizenship and lifelong serving, enhancing self-esteem and self-exploration, and developing a greater sense of connectedness in their college life. Many focus group participants noted that the service-learning activities at their agencies aid in the retention of students in higher education by providing a sense of connectedness for students. They indicated that it

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seemed to be particularly important for students of color and first generation college students, corroborating other studies in the literature (e.g., Gallini & Moely, 2003). Community partners also believe higher education institutions are motivated to collaborate with them to improve the image of the campus and to obtain access to research sites and contacts.

### *Spectrum of Distinct Benefits to Partners*

As a previous qualitative study with community partners affirmed (Bacon, 2002), relationships are a major vehicle through which learning and knowledge generation take place for community partners, and through which they accrue tangible benefits. While all partners demonstrated a deep dedication to educating college students, their description of other motivations and benefits for being involved in service-learning varied, and appeared to be on a continuum of those who spoke more about “brass tacks” benefits provided by individual college students, to those who described a need to contribute to the common good overall. The benefits community partners describe in this study can be categorized as 1) direct impact; 2) enrichment; and 3) social justice. The following outlines the most commonly described benefits:

#### 1. Direct Impact

##### (1a) Impact on client outcomes.

By engaging in relationships with nonprofit clients, college students have a positive impact on client outcomes, such as youth, English learners, the elderly, homeless, and disabled. As described in many other studies (e.g., Birdsall, 2005; Jorge, 2003; Schmidt & Robby, 2002; Vernon & Foster, 2002), college students are highly valued as age-appropriate role models for youth and given credit for raising educational outcomes and ambition among youth. Service-learners engage with people in various other settings as well, and provide companionship for the elderly and for other nonprofit clients such as the homeless.

The college is right in our back yard for a lot of these high schools, it is great to have the college students come because then these kids will think about going to college. It shows that college is possible.  
—Community Partner

##### (1b) Sustaining and enhancing organizational capacity.

Service-learners are a critical part of the workforce of some partner organizations and help sustain and extend the capacity of K-12 and nonprofit organizations, often enabling them to take on new projects that would have remained “on the back burner.” They also enhance the workforce in various ways by

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becoming future staff, donors, and volunteers.

Our program would probably not survive if we do not have service-learners. It's economics. We couldn't possibly hire the number of people we need to do our programs. —Community Partner

## 2. Enrichment

### (2a) Staff and organizational development.

Another major benefit of partnering is staff and organizational development. When partnering with higher education institutions and supervising service-learners, partners reflect more on organizational practices, and gain from the intellectual assets of the academic institution by learning new information from students and obtaining greater access to academic research. Partners are often able to further their organization's goals by garnering greater access to the prestige associated with the academic institution, and it is often affirming, energizing, and enjoyable for staff to be involved. Some have even returned to college themselves.

[Students] make us better professionals and they ask us the kind of questions that we have forgotten about. I am part of a consortium with faculty and students and social service agencies. Not only are the students looking at me but they are looking at me in comparison to the other agencies that they are interested in. In all levels it forces us to be more professional. We have to look at our ethical values because they ask those kind of questions. —Community Partner

### (2b) Increasing community capacity.

Social capital among community partner agencies is often strengthened when universities foster linkages among community partners with whom they are affiliated. This finding corroborates Gelmon et al.'s (2001) work and the study by Vernon and Foster (2002) that found that "service-learning and volunteer programs are conduits for building social capital in a community." The partners expressed strong benefits from being convened by the academic institution as a source for enhancing community networks and relationships.

The university has brought us together as partners. That's a real important outcome of this university partnership and it has grown. It has brought different partners together from different towns, from the same town. —Community Partner

## 3. Social Justice

### (3a) Motivated by the common good.

Some community partners described their motivation for being involved with community-campus partnerships as related to a common struggle for

social justice and equity, a way to strengthen common values, build their community, and impact the greater good.

Being a participant in social change. This should be the ultimate goal. —Community Partner

This may sound corny, especially these days, but the idea of service, the idea of doing something for the common good that benefits lots of people is my motivation [for being involved with service-learning]. And maybe you're not going to get paid a whole lot of money for it, and maybe you're not going to crawl up the career ladder doing it, but it is the right thing to do for society and the community. —Community Partner

### (3b) Transformational learning

At several focus groups, community partners spoke of the ways in which community-campus partnerships can transform knowledge by bridging the gap between theory and practice, providing opportunities for reflection and furthering new theory that can change both our knowledge and practice. This may speak to the development of new knowledge generation that connects the different ways of knowing in community-campus partnerships that Bacon (2002) describes.

And it gets at, 'This is the pedagogy thing. But this is the real thing.' The college kind of lives in the world of theory, and we live in the world of reality, and we hardly get to think about the theory because we're rushing from work. This is a place to try on this theory or this practice and let's see if it works. —Community Partner

If I was a professor...I'd really want to work with a school, not just send students, but actually get myself in there, do data, measure, try on different things. And on the other side, as [K-12] educators, we do the same thing. We just sit in our classrooms and teach what we know.

—Community Partner

## 4. Balance on the Benefits Spectrum

All focus groups included lengthy discussions on the many direct benefits to agency clients (1 above) and the enrichment opportunities for their organizations and for themselves personally (2 above). Both are powerful themes on motivations and benefits for community partners in the study. While issues related to social justice (3 above) were voiced by a smaller number of people overall—about half of the focus groups involved discussed social justice in detail—it is interesting to note that those community partners motivated by the hope for social justice describe this phenomenon in ways that faculty and students speak of social justice. The emphasis on social justice may largely be an individual preference, and their motiva-

tions are likely as varied as the motivations voiced by higher education practitioners, some of whom emphasize the role service-learning as pedagogy while others stress civic engagement goals or social justice (Holland, 2002). As Dorado and Giles (2004) posit, however, relationships in campus-community partnerships are influenced by institutional as well as individual factors. The “ease” of the partnership experience seemed to make a difference in whether or not individual community partners emphasized benefits that were more short-term or altruistic. Those partners who described themselves as actively struggling with the logistics of the partnership seemed to take the most “transactional” approach in ensuring their institution received direct short-term gains to make the partnership worthwhile. Partners that seemed to experience fewer of these obstacles often spoke more about desire to further the common good. A comparison of how these direct impact, enrichment, and social justice benefits voiced by community partners might correspond with the mapping of the relationships between learning and serving in Robert Sigmon’s “Linking Service with Learning” (1994) could help shed more light on this in the future.

#### *More Faculty Involvement in the Partnership*

There is a profound missed opportunity when faculty are absent from the community-campus collaboration and their students’ service-learning experiences.

Communication with professors seems to fall apart. We would appreciate a heads-up from them about what they’re going to do and what their goals are.  
—Community Partner

Maybe the faculty should have to do fifteen hours.  
—Community Partner

Community partners indicated that their greatest challenge in partnering with campuses is to find ways to interact directly with faculty through ongoing, reciprocal relationships, become collaborators in designing the service-learning curriculum, and engage with faculty more deeply in the work of their agencies. As Gelmon et al. (1998) advise, community partners and faculty need to become more cognizant of community strengths and needs, to work together to come to agreement on a clear message for students, and to create more appropriate service-learning experiences that are linked to the classroom. There was an overwhelming clamor among these community partners that faculty should be more directly involved with their sites and work to better understand the culture, conditions, and practices of their community co-educators.

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The impact of their weak connection with faculty is disturbing. All eight focus group sites indicated that it was fairly commonplace for faculty to create assignments that were illegal or inappropriate for their workplaces, and that curriculum or schedule changes often occur without their consent or prior knowledge, causing significant disruption for agency staff. Partners also report that they are rarely informed about assessment and evaluation outcomes for student learning. Recruitment processes, on-campus orientations for new and experienced partners, orientations for service-learners, evaluation, recognition, and celebrations were all discussed as important areas for improvement. These community partners also provided many examples of partnership experiences that worked well with faculty, including joint planning days prior to the start of the semester, on-going collaboration with a faculty member throughout the lifespan of a project, clearly defined responsibilities, and shared expectations and roles for students.

As Miron and Moely (2005) report, there are still significant benefits to community-based agencies and positive interactions with higher education partners in the absence of co-planning and authentic collaboration, but these partners indicate that the “status quo” with faculty relationships is often unacceptable. While faculty involvement, co-planning, evaluation, and celebration are all usually included as important characteristics of effective partnerships (e.g., Honnet & Poulsen, 1989; Torres, 2000), practicing these principles more diligently, and with a greater emphasis on co-teaching, may go a long way to demonstrating respect to community partners.

#### *Higher Education Institutions as Citizen and Community Partner*

All of the community partners at the participating campuses stressed that they would welcome more opportunities to network with their campus partner and partnering agencies. Experienced partners often desire more coordinated involvement in larger-scale community development initiatives, and some recommended that the campus take on a leadership role in bringing community members together.

I would like to get out of the internship approach, to look at what has to happen for the broader purpose...I’ve been pushing for [the university] to take a larger-scale community-based look at some of these things, so students can interact over a longer time-span, allow a lot of students to [participate] and also have a more inter-disciplinary approach throughout the project.  
—Community Partner

Perhaps because of the importance education institutions play in the development of social capital in

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rural areas (Miller, 1997), it was predominantly community partners based in more rural areas who voiced interest in this. In urban areas, in contrast, the relationships community partners have with any one campus did not appear to be as critical for them because they routinely partner with so many higher education institutions. In fact, community agencies may help bridge connections among universities:

We had a partnership with two universities. So these two universities and two sets of students never partnered and at the end of our program students were saying we should have one or two classes on social welfare for our child development department and vice versa. I know there is a linkage now with the professors and that had never happened before. —Community Partner

A few community partners — in both rural and urban settings — **voiced concern that higher education campuses and service-learning offices focus too much on individual courses and programs and not enough on the obligation of the higher education institution to participate as a partner in community matters.** In support of their request, it might be interesting to learn if higher education partners grow more committed to community development as they spend more time engaging in service-learning work. This study's research team may not have had adequate representation among those who might work with academic institutions on longer-term community development projects in ways advocated by Harkavy (1999) and Bringle (1999) to address this adequately.

*Diverse Views of Infrastructure*

Experienced community partners may require different types of support from service-learning offices than new partners. Findings by Vernon and Foster (2002) reinforce the best practices literature (Campus Compact, 1999) by indicating that community partners, particularly those in the early stages of partnership, express much more satisfaction in their campus partnerships when there is a service-learning office to facilitate student placement and provide an accessible contact point. There is also convergence on this point in the four models of higher education literature (Holland, 2005; Campus Compact, 2000; Holland & Ramaly, 1998; Liederman et al., 2003; Torres, 2000). While the experienced community partners involved with this study expressed very high satisfaction with the staff of service-learning offices, described by one group as the “face and heart” of the institution, there is some evidence that service-learning offices, in an attempt to “make things easier” for faculty and community partners, often function as unknowing gatekeepers or barriers for these partners who seek to

make authentic connections with faculty.

Is it just the service-learning coordinator that cares about this program? —Community Partner

I've never developed a relationship with a professor. I work with the service-learning coordinator primarily, and some students.

—Community Partner

[The service-learning office] keeps the list [of participating faculty]. They have a lot of concern that administrators come and get a hold of the list and recruit students before they assign them.

—Community Partner

Community partners recognize that faculty are essential to their ongoing collaboration with the higher education institution and would appreciate more assistance in making those connections from the service-learning offices. These partners expressed a tremendous depth of awareness of academic culture and campus politics; some sites were worried that the service-learning offices do not have support of the higher education institution overall, and are viewed as inconsistent with campus culture and norms.

*Access and Fairness*

Focus group participants spent considerable time strategizing together on how to gain greater entrée to their higher education institution partner. In larger institutions, the service-learning office may represent only one of several possible connections for community partners. They are well aware that there are often special benefits associated with developing relationships with particular faculty members, departments, or programs that might even provide additional financial resources for them. This process can be mystifying even for experienced partners.

To what extent are all the agencies aware of all these different opportunities? Is the university reaching out to community organizations, and not just with a piece of the puzzle but the bigger picture? I learned about things [from other focus group participants] I have never heard of before today.

—Community Partner

There should be a more formal process for soliciting involvement. Right now, it is hit or miss based on a relationship that you are fortunate to have.

—Community Partner

The processes for making these connections are not necessarily funneled through service-learning offices and may not even be “public,” as the agreements are often arranged through personal relationships between faculty and individual agencies. While recognizing that all partnerships are based on relationships, these partners expressed a great deal of

concern about fairness and many suggested there be ways to standardize access for all partners. Many hope for more access to campus classrooms, but also expressed concern about how recruitment processes for students are usually handled in these situations, often pitting them in a popularity contest with other organizations where the most enthusiastic guest speaker “wins.” One partner commented, “I feel like I’m kind of in a roadshow to get students. It is not ideal.” Some partners suggested more partner fairs and mixers, curriculum planning sessions, Web sites, videos, and other forms of communication infrastructure. One said, “We need a communication system that we could tap into.”

#### *Appreciating Differences across Partner Types*

To strengthen campus community partnerships, many agencies and institutions stressed the need for better communication infrastructure that was sensitive to their particular workplace culture and organizational infrastructure. They point out that communication is not a “one size fits all approach.” K-12 institutions, for example, may require processes and procedures that are distinct from social service nonprofits because they usually have different hours of operation and often more hierarchical and complex chains of command.

It is pretty hit or miss with the [higher education student leader coordinators]. They’re students, sometimes they don’t get up until 4:00 in the afternoon, and well, that means we’re probably not going to get to talk that day. —K-12 Partner

More research may be needed to identify the special needs of K-12-higher education partnerships because these are often mandated rather than voluntary.

Maybe being in a university town — it’s the elephant in the room. When you get involved at the [K-12] administrative level, part of our time is getting involved with the university. But it is not written into your job description. It’s another unfunded mandate. —Community Partner

#### *The Great Divide: The Mythology of Hours*

Overall, community partners expressed a high level of frustration with mandatory hour requirements and did not feel that this was a particularly useful indication of student achievement or impact on the community partner site. Many felt that the designated hour requirement sends the wrong message to students and were sometimes distressed by the amount of paperwork this requirement generates. One partner said,

I’m very concerned about the students that just want to get their hours done. That’s not service-

#### *Different Worlds and Common Ground*

learning...Some are just doing community service, and that’s defeating the purpose.

—Community Partner

An unintended outcome of the emphasis on hours seems to be a misunderstanding of the term, ‘service-learning.’ One partner commented, “The only difference [between service-learners and volunteers] is in the tracking of the hours; the service-learning students are much more interested in it if you are tracking their hours.” Birdsall (2005) reported a similar finding.

Community partners were unanimous in expressing their desire to provide service-learning experiences of adequate duration that would be meaningful to service-learning students and for their nonprofit clients. Partners working with campuses that required less than 20 hours reported the most distress with the hours requirement and the most concern about the adequacy of the service-learning experience, in terms of the quality of the education experience for students, and the short- and long-term benefits for their organization. One said, “How valuable is it to the student to spend 10 hours someplace? What have they really learned?” Their concern corroborates the literature conducted with service-learning students and supervisors on the importance of time as a learning factor (e.g., Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Mabry, 1998; Patterson, 1987). As expected, many other community partners with longer time commitments from service-learners sought to increase the time allotment as well. The time required for training, orientation, and background checks is sometimes longer than the duration of the service-learning commitment. A short-term commitment on the part of service-learners could even be harmful when working with sensitive populations such as refugee children.

#### *Implications for Higher Education Practice*

The community partners’ emphasis on the importance of relationships points to further recommendations for transformations in higher education practice:

1. *Value relationships.* As service-learning coordinators are well aware, the need to cultivate positive relationships in campus-community partnerships is complex because of the sheer number and diversity of partners involved, and because partners and situations change over time. Community partners expect their higher education institution partner to connect with them personally. On the “macro-level,” new practices may need to be instituted to ensure more equitable access to campuses, while on the “micro-level,” partners must continue to engage in ongoing relationship-building. Rather than feeling inconvenienced by requests for participation, community

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partners ask for more campus visits, more face-to-face meetings, and greater inclusion in orientations and planning sessions. These partners stress that building effective community-campus relationships involves communicating roles and responsibilities clearly, working to better understand different workplace cultures, demonstrating sensitivity about how to best communicate with one another, and expressing appreciation for one another.

2. *Hold conversations regularly about partnership process and outcomes.* The research team recommends that higher education institutions consider sponsoring or participating in conversations among all partners to reflect on their formal partnership arrangements, informal communication links, critique current practice, and collectively identify ways to strengthen partnerships, document impacts, celebrate achievements, and build networks.

3. *Involve faculty more directly.* This is the most critical area for improvement. Experienced partners need a way to connect with faculty to plan the curriculum, negotiate student placement, and assess and evaluate the service-learning experience. At a minimum, partners desire to see the syllabus and the specific learning goals and expectations for students so they can contribute to an effective learning arrangement. Partners want faculty to visit their sites and perhaps even volunteer to truly understand the partner's organization and assets. While they did not usually make specific requirements for recognition, their strong self-identity as co-teacher warrants attention from the academic institution.

4. *Consider ways the academic institution can help build social capital.* Because an important asset of community-campus partnerships involves developing connections among community agencies and the campuses, higher education institutions and service-learning offices may wish to find ways to participate in the long-term development of their community and to develop longer-term service-learning activities that involve the campus as a whole.

5. *Develop new, more facilitative roles for service-learning offices.* While the gate-keeping and coordinating function may be essential for beginning partners, expanding activities related to convening faculty, community, and students together for curriculum planning, evaluating, networking, and celebration is a more critical role for service-learning offices to play for advanced partnerships. Service-learning offices can also expand their role as an information hub for activities and opportunities sponsored by the academic institution and even serving as a community bulletin board for local events.

6. *Address the hours divide.* While tracking hours has been a favored way for higher education to document accountability and impact, community part-

ners often see this as an impediment. Appropriate duration of the experience and an emphasis on learning may be a more appropriate measure for achievement than hourly requirements.

## Conclusion

"[Service-learning] pushes forward this question about what education is for."

— Community Partner

Longstanding community-campus partnerships are more than simply the "byproduct of self-interested action" (Maier, 2002, p. 23). Rather, they involve our inherent solidarities aligned with educating college students and an openness and sensitivity to the distinct benefits and challenges involved for all partners. While certainly not a roadmap for border-crossing, this study can deepen higher education practice by highlighting community partners' insights on the work to which we are all committed. Effective campus-community partnerships requires attention to and an exploration of both distinct needs and interests of higher education and community partners — the different "worlds" in which we live — as well as a recognition and appreciation for the inherent commonalities and motivations that bind us together. *The day-to-day work of educating students, and in some instances, our aspirations for a more just world, provides common ground for our mutual engagement.* The path by which we traverse this ground together is cultivated through our ongoing relationships with one another, and nurtured through open, respectful, and appropriate communication. To further this work, it is important to reflect together to improve our practice locally, and enable us to ask deeper questions together.

Topics on which we might begin to hold conversations include how to engage more deeply with faculty; recognizing partners as co-educators of students, with all the planning and preparation that entails; committing the academic institution to ongoing action as an institutional citizen in larger-scale community development projects; and finding ways to develop appropriate institutional infrastructure that supports and facilitates these shifts in emphasis and practice. In the "end," higher education and community partners may find that they have each become more committed to the mission, values, and goals of the other. We hope that others will be encouraged by this study to engage in future research conversations to deepen our work as service-learning educators and as participants in campus-community partnerships.

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