

## Asking the Community: A Case Study of Community Partner Perspectives

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*This qualitative study is based on in-depth interviews with 40 representatives from 12 community-based organizations (CBOs) working with the Steans Center for Community-based Service-Learning at DePaul University in Chicago. These CBOs see themselves as partners with the University in educating college students about the realities of racial and socioeconomic disparities in the United States through direct interactions with CBO programs and clients. Findings include: motivations for these CBOs to partner with DePaul tend to differ from the motivations to continue the partnership; the benefits to working with service-learners outweigh the challenges; and CBO's perceptions of DePaul University have been positively influenced by their relationships with the Steans Center.*

If structured, mutually beneficial campus-community partnerships are the ideal, how close do DePaul University's service-learning relationships come? This question guided the design for a qualitative research study to capture the perspectives of a selected group of community partners working with the Steans Center for Community-based Service-Learning at DePaul. The Center began collecting in-depth student feedback from service-learning courses during the first year of the program in 1998. Over time, student end-of-course surveys have given the Center an understanding about how students respond to service-learning courses. However, the information about community perspectives was more anecdotal. This study was driven by the desire to better understand the effect of DePaul University's large service-learning program on Chicago community partners.

The perspectives of faculty on service-learning teaching, scholarship, and student learning are well-documented (e.g., Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002; Astin, 1996; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Benson & Harkavy, 2000; Crews, 2002; Der-Karabetian, 1998; Eyer & Giles, 1999; Hammond, 1994; Jacoby, 1996; Lisman, 1998; Sigmon & Edwards, 1990; Zlotkowski, 1998). However, substantially less is known about the effects of service-learning programs and students on the organizations serving as community partners for these programs. Yet the community experience is critical in the service-learning enterprise.

Good partnerships are founded on trust, respect, mutual benefit, good communication, and governance structures that allow democratic decision-making, process improvement, and resource sharing (Benson

& Harkavy, 2001; CCPH, 1999; Campus Compact, 2000; Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2002; Schumaker, Reed, & Woods, 2000). More structured partnerships also include mutually agreed upon vision, mission, goals, and evaluation (Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2002; Points of Light, 2001; Royer, 2000), and a long-term commitment, particularly on the part of the higher education institution (HEI) (Maurasse, 2001; Mayfield & Lucas, 2000). Long-term, healthy, sustained partnerships are grounded in personal relationships. They develop from the relationships between people and are usually sustained by those same individuals (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Holland, 2003; Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2004; Schumaker, Reed, & Woods, 2000). In fact, service-learning partnerships can be seen as analogous to personal friendships or romantic relationships, in terms of the forms they take and their patterns of evolution. The closer and more committed the relationship, the stronger the notion that each partner is a member of a single community (Bringle & Hatcher).

Enos and Morton (2003) provide a rubric for considering partnership evolution from transactional (i.e., instrumental, task-oriented, project-based activities) to transformative (i.e., deeper and sustained commitment between partners in which there is an expectation of change). The partnership can evolve from one-time events and projects to the joint creation of work and knowledge, and often require years to establish (Dugery & Knowles, 2003; Maurasse, 2001). In their discussion of principles of good service-learning practice, Mintz and Hesser (1996) suggest the three lenses of collaboration, reciprocity, and diversity through which a

partnership's quality and integrity can be examined. Ideally, a partnership is grounded on all three.

Partnerships tend to follow a track of evolution defined by the engagement quality of both the HEI and community organization. Dorado and Giles (2003) defined three levels of engagement for these relationships: tentative (characterized by newly formed, short-term, and fairly superficial involvement), aligned (characterized by processes of negotiation that more closely align each partner's goals and expectations), or committed (characterized by frequent communication, a belief in the value of the partnership).

In examining service-learning partnerships in secondary education, Susan Abravanel (2003) found that while partnerships can meet education and community goals for mutual benefit, there are seven critical points of difference between educational institutions and community agencies—focus, purpose, project organization, scheduling, access to project sites, measurements of success, and assessment. Whereas community organizations tend to focus on products and specific outcomes, educational institutions are oriented around student learning. The community interest in products and specific outcomes is supported by Bushouse's (2005) study of 14 community organizations, in which she found that community nonprofit organizations preferred transactional relationships.

Recent studies have shed light on more specific community perspectives of service-learning partnerships. Community representatives have said that they initially value service-learning partnerships because they bring additional resources to the organizations and provide the opportunity to educate future professionals and community citizens (Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998a; Gelmon, Holland, & Shinnamon, 1998b; Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2003; Seifer & Vaughn, 2004). Sandy and Holland (2006) found that the opportunity to participate in the education of college students was a primary motivating factor in community partners' initial involvement in a service-learning partnership. Community partners want to be involved in such development matters as student recruitment and orientation, student reflection, faculty development, curriculum development, assessment, and process improvement (Gelmon et al., 1998a, Gelmon et al., 1998b; Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2002; Sandy & Holland). In addition, community organizations actively involved in university-community partnerships (UCP) report that these partnerships are most effective when they meet both short- and long-term goals, include frequent and candid communication between partners, explicitly value the community partner's expertise and contributions, and

build the community organization's capacity to function. UCPs also are most beneficial when there is sufficient support from the university and clear expectations for the partnership and its activities (Gelmon et al., 1998a; Gelmon et al., 1998b). Community organizations take risks in these partnerships, especially when they divert time away from core, funded activities. The risks are exacerbated if UCPs require a community organization to stake its reputation (with peers, clients, funders) on promises made by the higher education institution (HEI) and/or when the HEI's commitment to a project is short-term and unsustainable (Leiderman et al.). Bushouse's (2006) study found that the economic risk of allocating scarce staff resources to student supervision predisposed community organizations to prefer transactional relationships with defined time frames.

Communication is important for a variety of reasons, including understanding partners' perspectives, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and establishing personal connections between community partners and the HEI (Sandy & Holland, 2006). In fact, Miron and Moely (2006) found that community partners' perception of benefit and positive view of the HEI was linked to the extent of their involvement in program planning and implementation. Community partners value their roles in the educational process (Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Gelmon et al., 1998b; Sandy & Holland), as well as their increased access to needed resources for program delivery (Bushouse, 2005; Miron & Moely; Vernon & Ward, 1999). Perceived benefits to community organizations accrue to their clients and the organization itself (Sandy & Holland).

The challenges to working with service-learning programs include the time constraints of the academic calendar, students' lack of preparation, incompatibility of students' and organizations' schedules, and inadequate faculty involvement (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Vernon & Ward, 1999). Community evaluations of student performance in their organizations reported that student volunteers were reliable and valuable in providing the services of the organization, respectful to staff and clients, prompt, dressed and acted appropriately, and showed interest in the work of the organization. Organizations have also reported that the contributions made by student volunteers outweigh any costs associated with their training and supervision (Edwards, Mooney, & Heald, 2001; Ferrari & Worrall, 2000).

### The Case Study

Against the backdrop of this literature, I examined the perspectives of a subset of the community partners working with the Steans Center for Community-based Service-Learning (Steans

Center, or Center) at DePaul University in Chicago. The overarching goal of this project was to better understand how community-based organizations (CBOs) defined their relationships with the Steans Center. CBOs also were asked to discuss the benefits and challenges working with the Steans Center and why they thought DePaul supported it.

*Context*

The Steans Center is one important way DePaul University, the largest Catholic university in the U.S., manifests the service aspect of its mission in the curriculum. The Steans Center has grown DePaul’s academic service-learning program from 11 courses in 1998-99 to more than 150 courses in 2006-07. Currently, the Center places over 2600 students in approximately 150 community organizations each academic year. DePaul service-learners (DSLs) engage in traditional community service placements, project-based service, and community-based research, driven by the course focus and faculty member’s choice. An experiential learning requirement in DePaul’s Liberal Studies Program initially facilitated the growth in the number of community-based service-learning (CbSL) courses. However, as the Center’s resources grew, it developed capacity and experience to work with faculty across academic programs. Today CbSL courses exist throughout the undergraduate curriculum and in many graduate courses.

The structure of the Center has evolved into three primary focus areas—academic development, community development, and student development. Table 1 outlines the allocation of human resources to these areas, although the demarcations are somewhat artificial given the highly collaborative nature of the work. The executive director provides overall direction and oversight to the Center with an emphasis on integrating Center work into the institution’s structure and strategic plan. The associate director provides day-to-day oversight with an emphasis on integrating the Center’s work into larger community development efforts in Chicago. As reflected in Table

1, all of the service-learning coordinators focus on supporting the community partners.

*Method*

The original purpose of this study was to provide data for a doctoral dissertation. Organizations were selected if there were at least two individuals, with a preference of three or four, who could provide substantive interviews, so as to control for the possible bias of one satisfied or dissatisfied organization staff member. This requirement eliminated many organizations with which the Center had engaged. The two Internal Review Boards reviewing the research proposal required that interviews be completely anonymous. As a result, all of the quotes are masked to conceal the identity of the respondents and therefore their respective organizations.

The process for constructing this case study began with a review and analysis of end-of-term feedback surveys the Center received from its community partners between 2000 and 2004. These feedback surveys are intentionally short and designed to provide a straightforward mechanism for community partners to communicate their positive and negative experiences with DSLs and other Steans Center personnel and programs. Feedback consistently indicated that CBOs sufficiently value DSLs to continue their relationships with the Steans Center. Yet they also reported frustration with DePaul’s 10-week academic terms, students’ schedules, and students’ inconsistent commitment to service throughout the academic term. While these surveys yielded useful information about CBOs’ perceptions, the information was relatively superficial.

The review of the survey data raised the following questions: What effect do DSLs really have on the CBOs they serve? How do CBOs perceive their roles in the service-learning partnership? Why do CBOs initially become involved with the Steans Center? Why do they stay involved? To gain a deeper understanding of CBOs’ perceptions of service-learning partnerships, the Center, and the University as a whole, I conducted a series of indi-

Table 1  
*Steans Center Organizational Structure*

		Executive Director		Associate Director	
External Grants	Academic Development	Community Development		Business	
Program Manager	Assistant Director	Assistant Director	<u>Student Development</u>	Manager	
Assistant Manager	Program Coordinator	Program Coordinator	Coordinator	<i>Intern</i>	
	<i>2 Program Assistants</i>	<i>Graduate Assistant</i>	<i>26 Service-Learning Coordinators</i>	<i>Technology Assistant</i>	
	<i>Graduate Assistant</i>				

*Note:* Italics indicate part-time employees

vidual interviews with key decision-makers at 12 organizations. I surmised that one-on-one interviews would allow me to best understand the quality of the relationship between the CBO and the Steans Center, elicit descriptive data that would allow for adequate time for follow-up explanations, and illuminate the details of their relationships with the Center and DePaul students (Babbie, 1992; Creswell, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miller & Crabtree, 1992; Murphy & Dingwall, 2003). At the same time, I recognized that my role as director of the Center was likely to influence the candor and objectivity of the responses as well as my interpretation of the responses (Marshall & Rossman). To counteract a positive bias in respondents' answers, I assured them of complete anonymity and that I sought candid responses to improve the Center's relationships and programs. It may have helped that in most cases I was not the primary point person in interviewees' relationships with the Center. While I cannot guarantee unbiased interviewee answers, the interviews yielded sufficient critique of DSLs, DePaul's academic calendar, faculty absence from the community experience, and overly complicated systems of communication, to give confidence respondents answered candidly.

I employed a purposive selection strategy to identify organizations. From a database of more than 150 community partners, I selected 12 based upon the following criteria: likelihood of at least two to four substantive interviewees, length of relationship, and number of service-learners hosted. I looked for long- and short-term relationships, organizations hosting a range of DSLs, and organizations receiving a variety of resources from the Center. Several organizations received products resulting from student course projects; others worked with DSLs as direct service deliverers (e.g., tutors and other academic support roles). The organizations selected spanned the selection criteria range.

CBO selection was difficult. Although I sought to capture a wide range of organizational missions and program activities, largely due to the criterion of interviewing more rather than fewer people at any single organization, it happens that most DSLs are involved with these organizations through community education programs. In addition, the constraints of DePaul's 10-week academic terms have inclined CBOs to steer DSLs toward programs benefiting from, or at least not harmed by, short-term volunteer commitments. Thus the majority of the interviews were conducted with directors and staff of community education programs.

At each CBO, I interviewed the key people who decide whether or not to accept service-learners into their organization and design and oversee the

students' work. Between August and December 2004, I conducted 40 interviews with a range of organizational personnel, including executive directors, program directors, volunteer coordinators, and community organizers. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. I analyzed the transcription content and coded each according to recurring patterns and themes, a process involving multiple transcript reviews.

My overarching research question was: **What are the factors that motivate community organizations to work with DePaul's service-learning program?** I developed several clarifying secondary questions: a) Are the factors that motivate CBOs to agree to participate in a service-learning program the same as those that motivate them to continue their participation? b) How do CBOs articulate the value of service-learners to their organizations? c) What do CBOs believe they gain? d) What challenges do service-learners pose? e) How is DePaul perceived by CBOs working with the Steans Center? I used structural questions to launch what I hoped would be in-depth conversations. (See Appendix A for Interview Protocol.)

### *Findings*

If two or more people from any organization responded with similar language and/or conveyed similar perceptions about working with the Steans Center, I counted it as a theme from that organization. This allowed me to report findings based on organization, rather than individual, themes.

Four broad themes emerged in the interviews: (1) CBOs see themselves engaged in and committed to student education with DePaul University through the Steans Center; (2) the benefits to working with DSLs outweigh the challenges; (3) the quality of the relationship is paramount; and (4) the Steans Center has positively affected CBOs' perception of the University. Instead of organizing the findings around the questions that framed the study, the data drives the organization of the findings.

A coding scheme provided nuance to each of the four themes (see Table 2). Comments that contained language about diversity and learning about others were coded as cross-cultural learning and designated with a C in the educational partner column of Table 2. Comments about race, immigrants, and practical application of learning were coded with R, I, and P respectively in the educational partner column. Comments related to providing students with a better understanding of poor people and poverty were coded as socioeconomic (S) in this theme column.

Within the theme, "Benefits and Challenges,"

Table 2  
Organizations by Selection Criteria and Response Themes

Community Organization Focus/ Program Focus	Number of Staff Interviewed	Length of Relationship with Steans in Years	Total Number of Service-Learners over these Years	Total Number of Paid Student Employees over these Years	Theme 1: Educational Partners	Theme 2: Benefits & Challenges	Theme 3: Quality Of Relationship	Theme 4: Perception of DePaul University
#1: ESL/Citizenship/Employment	4	2	23	2	C	V, Ex/T	Rc, Re, SA	CE
#2: ESL/Citizenship/Youth Program	5	6	103	8	C, R	V, Ex, RM	Rc, Re, P	CE
#3: ESL/Citizenship	3	1	49	3	C, P	V, Ex	Rc, Re, P, SA	CE, Lv
#4: ESL/Citizenship/Intercambio/ Adult Education	3	6	125	11	C, S, P	V, Ex/T	Rc, P, SA	CE, Lv
#5: ESL/Citizenship/Intercambio	3	6	59	6	C, I	V, R/T, I	Rc, P	O, Sv
#6: ESL/Citizenship/Children/ Intercambio/	4	4	105	7	C, S, I	V, Ex, RM/I	Rc, Re, P, SA	CE, Lv
#7: Adult Literacy/Children/ Projects/Homeless Services	5	3	165	8	C, R, S	V, RM/T	Rc, P, SA	CE, O, Lv
#8: ESL/Citizenship/Adult Education	3	5	33	8	C, R, S	V, RM/T, I	Rc, P	Sv
#9: Adult Education/Projects Homeless Services	2	2	56	3	C, S	V, Ex	Rc, P, SA	CE, Lv
#10: Projects/Research Organizing and Advocacy	2	2	88	2	C, I, P	Ex/T	Rc, P, SA	CE, O
#11: Pre-School/Daycare/ Children	4	6	151	6	C, S	V, RM/I	Rc, P, SA	Sv
#12: Adolescents/Children/After School	2	3	67	3	C, R, S, P	V, RM/I	Rc, P, SA	CE, O

Note: Key to Codes by Column  
 Educational Partners: Rc - Reciprocal; C - Cross-cultural; R - Race; S - Socio-economic; I - Immigrants; P - Practicum  
 Benefits & Challenges: V - Volunteers; Ex - Expands resources; RM - Role Model; T - Lack of time; I - Inconsistency  
 Quality of Relationship: Rc - Reciprocal; Re - Relationship; SA - Highly satisfied; P - Personal relationship  
 Perception of DePaul: CE - Community engaged; Lv - Lives its mission; Sv - Committed to service; O - open



benefit comment categories included access to volunteers (V), extending or expanding organization resources (Ex), and DSLs serving as role models (RM). Challenge comment categories included inadequate student time commitment (T) and students' inconsistency (I) in regularly serving the organization and skill-level across student cohorts. Within the theme, "quality of the relationship," comment categories included reciprocity (Rc), importance of the relationship (Re), a personal (P) relationship with a specific faculty and/or staff, and a high degree of satisfaction (SA). Within the fourth and final theme, "perception of DePaul University," comments about DePaul connected to, concerned with, or integrated into the community were coded as community engaged (CE), living out its mission were coded (Lv), service-minded were coded (Sv), and open were coded as (O).

#### Educational Partners

"We recognize that we're providing a form of education" (AI, August 9, 2004).

*Race, Culture, and Class.* The most significant finding was CBO's perception that they provide practical opportunities for DSLs to cross cultural boundaries and better understand socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic disparities in American society. At least two respondents from each of the 12 organizations made a specific reference to at least one aspect of this theme. Respondents spoke of the opportunities their organizations provide for DSLs to learn about people different than themselves through direct interaction with the CBOs' clients and staff. Ten of the 12 organizations referred to three *specific* cross-cultural learning areas: socioeconomic inequalities, bridging a racial divide, and/or understanding the immigrant experience. Of these 10, six articulated this as a primary motivation for working with DSLs. Three of these six referred to socioeconomic and race. Two of these three employ a predominantly African-American staff, the third employs a highly diverse staff, and all three serve a predominantly African-American population. The other three organizations commented about providing opportunities for DePaul students to confront misconceptions about immigrants. These agencies offer comprehensive services to predominantly Latino immigrant populations and are staffed by immigrants from Latin American countries. Two of the 12 organizations referred to *general* cross-cultural learning. Interestingly, these two organizations employ a predominantly Caucasian professional staff.

Comments most frequently addressed the issue of dispelling misconceptions about the population that the organization serves, and emerged from an

expressed belief that too many people in the U.S. harbor misconceptions and stereotypes about communities of color and poor people who live in urban environments. These CBOs perceive themselves playing an important educational role for DePaul students, particularly for white middle class students, about urban social realities. One youth program coordinator said,

I thought that it would be an interchange and that students could also get a real view of what goes on in public housing or in poverty-stricken areas.... I learned something from the DePaul students—that they were living on a lot of misleading information about black communities. (RS, September 2, 2004)

There appeared to be an expectation among this group of CBOs that DSLs will use their newfound learning about poor urban and immigrant communities to correct misperceptions held in the larger society. As a director of a community English as a Second Language program stated,

I think that they are going to be transmitters of what they learned here.... In a way, they are going to be a voice to other people who are not in touch, who have not experienced, who have not interacted with immigrants. I think they are going to be a positive influence on other groups for breaking down preconceived notions of other immigrant groups. In the long-term it will be very beneficial. (FE, August 16, 2004)

The executive director of another organization went further when he said his goal was to give DSLs "a better understanding of what it is to be a Latino or a poor person in these communities, so when they are helping to develop public policy or making public policy, they can have a true understanding of what impact their decisions will have" (RE, August 17, 2004).

Some of the motivation to work with DSLs stems from the promise of educating the next generation of decision-makers about the people often adversely affected by public policy decisions. This is a long-term view of their educational process. These CBOs appeared to understand that there may be a significant lapse of time before the experiences they provide impact DSLs and the communities they serve.

Responses in this area also conveyed a strong belief that higher education should educate students about issues of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities. As one community education director put it, "We are living in a big city where we can find a lot of kinds of people, a lot of races. The universities need to teach how to be more sensitive, how to be more respectful with these kinds of people" (AV, September 2, 2004). This respon-

dent added that current social divisions in Chicago could be reversed if powerful institutions, such as universities, taught their students more about societal inequalities. All responses in this area conveyed a belief that organizations provide DSLs with important complements to traditional higher education courses and should be part of preparation for participation in American society. These responses are similar to other research that has characterized the community perception as providing opportunities to cross boundaries (Sandy & Holland, 2006). Clearly these CBOs have strong ideas about higher learning.

*Extending Education.* Four organizations specifically identified their educational roles as providing practical settings for students to apply knowledge. Comments in this area referred to the importance of providing students with opportunities to test academic and career choices. As one program director stated, “You want to offer your students not only the ability to learn their discipline, but to realize if that’s the right fit for them...I think that’s the biggest benefit we provide to the university” (AN, September 8, 2004).

While these CBOs often indicated that they were motivated to begin a relationship with the Steans Center because they would have access to volunteers, they stay involved because they came to see themselves as educational partners. At some point in the development of the partnership, the larger motivation is the opportunity to educate the next generation of professionals, citizens, board members, policy makers, and donors. This appears to be as important to organization mission as program and service delivery.

Other studies have found a similar result. For example, prior research found that CBOs involved in university-community health partnerships perceive themselves as educators (Gelmon et al., 1998a; 1998b; Seifer & Vaughn, 2004). Sandy and Holland (2006) and Basinger and Bartholomew (2006) also found that community partners are motivated to join UCPs by their prospective roles in educating college students. Clearly, CBOs perceive that they provide educational opportunities that can broaden DSLs learning beyond the classroom, a significant complement to the traditional classroom experience that should be more characteristic of a university education.

### Benefits and Challenges

*Benefits.* “Okay, so we benefit from the labor, there’s no doubt about that. But we also benefit from what they invite us to learn in the process of being in our mix. Plus the other thing is they construct new ideas. . . . You’ve got a student who’s

got a whole different take on something that never crossed your mind” (DY, September 8, 2004).

All the CBOs initially became involved with the Steans Center because they perceived an opportunity to access a new resource. The community organizations involving the greatest number of DSLs are volunteer-driven. Ten of the 12 organizations stated that their programs would not survive without volunteers. Every organization in this study mentioned the Steans Center as providing access to a reliable pool of volunteers; seven explicitly stated that working with the Center extends their resources; six referred to DSLs as providing role models to their clients.

When asked to compare DSLs with the average community volunteer, 11 of the 12 organizations expressed the perception that service-learners are more reliable which makes the organizations more invested in orientation and training. As one respondent said, “They are certainly as good as [volunteers from the community]. . . they are very dependable. We know we’ll have them for 10 weeks. We also have recourse. A community volunteer comes once and then doesn’t show up again for six weeks. . . but we have no recourse” (KN, August 11, 2003). Another respondent stated, “People going for their B.A. already possess certain skills...I don’t have to train them...It’s so much easier to work with them” (AP, August 9, 2004). These CBOs believe that course enrollment ensures consistent participation of a group of more educated, trained volunteers in their organizations for at least 10 weeks.

Other perceived benefits to working with DSLs included access to role models for community clients, access to resources that enable a CBO to expand the reach of its programs, and a calculated economic benefit. DSLs are perceived as “valuable for the role modeling they present to both kids and parents that another life is possible” (KW, September 7, 2004). They also introduce the possibility of accessing higher education when parents “see [DePaul] as a place to send their children” (AI, August 9, 2004). Eleven of the 12 organizations reported that DSLs help to extend organizational resources, six of which stated that DSLs extend the organization’s budget by precluding the need to hire more tutors and program assistants. Each CBO perceived DSLs as providing a substantial number of the volunteer hours they report to funders and other constituents. One executive director said, “We put a value to hours that a service-learner would be offering ... say \$10 an hour per student... we leverage that to a funder” (RE, August 17, 2004).

Other research findings have been mixed in this

area. Some community partners find service-learners inadequately prepared for the workplace (Sandy & Holland, 2006). Another study found students reliable but unprepared, skilled but inconsistent, and needing supervision (Vernon & Ward, 1999).

While Center partners' initial motivations to accept DSLs may have been to extend organizational resources, the reason for continuing involvement appears to evolve over time. A range of motives were articulated, including fulfilling organization missions, gaining a symbiotic partner, and the opportunity to hear fresh perspectives about the organizations' work.

*Challenges.* "There are . . . 30% that are just fantastic. They exceed our expectations. . . There's like 50% that are fine and do their job, and then there's 20% that are difficult. . . it's almost like more work to have them" (BW, August 19, 2004).

Campus-community partnerships are not without challenges. Interviewees indicated a degree of frustration with DePaul's 10-week academic terms, DSLs' limited time commitments and varying degrees of interest in community work, and a perception, expressed by four organizations, that many faculty members appear to lack knowledge about or interest in the organizations at which their students serve. Every organization reported some level of frustration with the limited time that DSLs can contribute to their organizations and a sense that a certain percentage of students were uninterested in the organizations' missions or unprepared to engage with the community work. The issues relating to time pertain to students' inability to commit significant blocks of time in any one visit, as well as the limitation dictated by DePaul's short academic quarters. In addition, there is the challenge of cycling new groups of students in and out of an organization. As one executive director put it,

The challenge ... is creating a continuum. How do we get the benefit of them learning from the [prior] class so that they're not all reinventing the wheel and they're [not] all providing me with a report on the same history of [the neighborhood] that I already know or that's already been documented? (AI, August 9, 2004)

While CBOs recognize that DSLs are college students with multiple and competing priorities, the frustrations remain. However, interviewees indicated that their organizations perceive the benefits of working with DSLs outweighing the challenges because they have adapted programs to better utilize DSLs. Every organization described some process of adaptation in which, over time, they learned how to best integrate DSLs into their daily work. All the CBOs indicated that some level of program adaptation is

necessary to leverage DSLs as a resource for program delivery and enhancement.

A few CBOs expressed a strong desire for more interaction with faculty, a finding recently articulated in Sandy and Holland's (2006) study. Several interviewees wondered whether this lack of faculty involvement had adverse consequences for student reflection and/or integrating community and classroom learning. It may be that lack of direct faculty involvement was a minor theme in the present study because the Steans Center plays such a strong intermediary role between community partners and service-learning faculty.

#### Quality of the Relationship

"It's all about relationships" (AI, August 9, 2004).

The theme of relationships was woven throughout the interview and are paramount to CBOs. They fulfill their missions and benefit their communities, in part, by developing relationships between people that connect their organizations to larger networks of resources. The CBOs interviewed tend to define their relationships with DePaul according to the behaviors they associate with the Center. Strength of relationships with the Steans Center appears to be related to the Center's level of responsiveness, consistency, accessibility, and communication. "When I had that problem, you guys responded immediately and totally to my satisfaction. . . . [I]t was just a difficult situation. Your response was more than what I expected" (DJ, September 7, 2004). Respondents also indicated that these relationships are evolving and founded on trust the Center earned over time. "The relationships become personal and I think that makes all the difference in the world" (LG, September 16, 2004).

*Reciprocity is personal.* "I think it's fair to say that there's kind of a mutually reciprocal and respectful relationship here that means a lot to us" (KA, September 29, 2004).

Every organization referred to a reciprocal relationship with the Center. Within the context of reciprocity, 11 organizations referred to a specific faculty or staff member with whom they had developed a personal relationship.

*Communication.* Issues of communication were at the heart of the reflections on these CBOs' relationships with DePaul and key to the Center's reputation for responsiveness. The interviews with long-term CBO partners conveyed a sense of having grown together in an understanding of how to negotiate the communication. "I think early on it was the challenge of not really understanding what it [service-learning] was. There was a lot of miscommunication internally here. . . . Once we got [the right] people involved I think things run more



smoothly. The challenges with the university were communication” (RE, August 17, 2004).

There appears to be a process that most respondents moved through as they gained more experience in working with DSLs. This process was often characterized by initial uncertain expectations on the CBOs’ parts. The journey from uncertainty to clarity is one that CBOs apparently need to take before they understand how to use DSLs effectively in their programs. Two comments illustrate this journey particularly well. The director of a citizenship education program, who was a relatively new partner, admitted that she was unclear about how to negotiate with the Center when she said, “It seems really vague to me sometimes. . . . I don’t really know what the potential is” (BK, August 17, 2004). A more seasoned partner articulated uncertainty in the beginning, followed by a realization that she could shape her program’s relationship with the Center on her own terms.

When I first came . . . we were basically taking . . . whoever wanted to come. . . . I had this idea that we needed to do whatever it took to make the DePaul students happy. . . . I didn’t realize what I could ask from DePaul, that I could build my own relationship. . . . [Over time] I realized that everybody’s priority was that we were getting what we needed from this experience. (ST, August 31, 2004)

Taken together, these interviews indicated that the process of improving communication, responsiveness, and consistency has developed trust between CBOs and the Steans Center. CBOs believe DePaul, through the Steans Center, is genuinely interested in serving Chicago communities through their organizations. Responses in four organizations indicated an initial skepticism of DePaul’s proposed service-learning program that appeared to be grounded in the historically negative interaction between universities and communities in Chicago; all four indicated that over time the Steans Center’s actions have helped them overcome this initial skepticism of DePaul.

#### Perception of DePaul University

The Steans Center has shown us many clear ways that they really mean it. They walk the talk. They invite us to the evaluation. That was a first. It probably takes more of [the Center’s] resources and time to be really intentional in finding what we want....I figured DePaul maybe has a better mission....and really carries out the mission of service. (DA, August 20, 2004)

As a result of their positive relationships with the Steans Center, the CBOs in this study indicated

positive perceptions of DePaul as a whole. CBOs characterized DePaul as open, living out its mission, and community-connected. These CBOs perceive the institution as concerned with its role in the social fabric of the city and with a mission motivating it to give back to its community. While these CBOs were most familiar with the Center and DePaul service-learners, many were able to define the Center within the context of the institution and draw conclusions about the kind of HEI that would support such a large and broadly applied service-learning program. As a result, DePaul is seen as an institution that is “embedded in a society” (SM, September 28, 2004) and “a community player ... connected to the community” (AN, September 8, 2004). DePaul is “continuing their tradition of giving back to the community” (TC, September 23, 2004). Although DePaul has been credited with the gentrification of its North side community and displacement of working class people of color in the 1970s and 1980s, one respondent commended “them for realizing that they have to do more than just benefit from the actual neighborhoods that they’ve built from. . . . Now I see that DePaul is giving back to the city that made it so successful” (AI, August 9, 2004).

DePaul’s engagement with the city, manifested through its commitment to the Steans Center, undergirded these respondents’ characterization of DePaul as a different kind of university. Responses indicated that through the Center’s actions, the University is perceived as troubleshooting problems and actively maintaining relationships. The Center specifically was cited by interviewees as an entity that helps to perpetuate the image of the university as one that listens and is concerned with mutual benefit. “That is what is unique and special about the Steans Center, they are . . . very intentional in learning what we need” (DA, August 20, 2004).

The University’s mission was often credited with the creation and ongoing support of the Center. While I had expected that CBOs would convey an understanding of the Steans Center as an entity charged with developing experiential learning opportunities for DePaul students, I was somewhat surprised that CBOs recognized a deeper institutional motivation for creating and supporting the Center. While the University articulates the role of the Center as the primary bridge between its Vincentian mission and curriculum, I hadn’t expected external constituents to voice a similar understanding. Nonetheless, subtle doubts remain. “DePaul is doing it differently, hopefully the Steans Center does not change the way it does things. . . . They are really intentionally making room for CBOs even at the planning stage, which is quite remarkable. I hope that

doesn't change" (DA, August 20, 2004).

## Conclusion

We're understaffed, over burdened, under-resourced; we'll take all the hands we can get. And that's the really practical answer. Beyond that ... we respect the mission of the Steans Center and I think we espouse really similar values because the work that we do is also very much community driven. (KA, September 29, 2004)

The above quote captures the complexity of the Steans Center's relationship with each of the organizations in this case study. These organizations entered into a relationship with DePaul University through the Center for practical reasons—these CBOs exist in an environment of dwindling resources and increased need, and the Center provides access to human capital that supports programs. However, due to consistent communication, development of personal relationships, and perception of similarity in missions, there also is a perception that they have become partners in the Center's work.

This study largely confirms the findings of others and perhaps adds nuance to existing literature. As with Sandy and Holland's study (2006), this study highlights CBOs' depth of understanding and commitment to students' educational process. It also confirms Sandy and Holland's finding that the theme of crossing boundaries is a significant motivator in CBOs' participation in service-learning partnerships. It adds the nuance of confronting race, class, and ethnicity as an important educational motivator for some CBOs. Unlike Sandy and Holland, however, the responses in this study indicate that these CBOs entered into their relationships with the Steans Center because they perceived access to a new resource. It was only over time that they developed the perception of themselves as educational partners.

This study also describes a set of relationships at a particular point in time. Enos and Morton's (2003) transactional-to-transformative framework and Dorado and Giles' (2004) tentative-to-committed framework were helpful in understanding the Center's relationships. CBOs' describe their relationships with the Center as both transactional and transformative, but not exclusively either. It is clear the reality of DePaul's academic calendar grounds these relationships in the transactional. It also may be that the most effective use of this particular resource resides in the realm of transaction, as Bushouse (2005) suggests. It may be unrealistic to expect transformation to emerge from relationships grounded in 10-week course-based student placements. At the same time, many respondents used language that suggests these CBOs see the possibility of trans-

forming society by engaging in a reciprocal educational partnership with the Steans Center.

CBOs' language reflected relationships that reside somewhere between aligned and committed on Dorado and Giles' (2004) scale. While CBOs used language of alignment—how they continually work to align Steans Center's resources with their needs—they also used language of commitment. Their responses indicate frequent communication with the Steans Center and that they value the relationship. At the same time, the language of transaction is ever-present.

It was interesting to find the language of reciprocity emerge from CBOs' comments. They seem to be grounded in the belief that the success of the partnerships is as important to the Steans Center as it is to them. Using the lenses of collaboration, reciprocity, and diversity that Mintz and Hesser (1996) suggest, these CBOs define their relationship with the Center as reciprocal and supporting diversity, as defined by educational experiences that cross significant societal boundaries. It would be interesting to explore how each of these CBOs defines reciprocity. It would be an overstatement, however, to define these relationships as collaborative. None of the CBOs indicated that there is a genuine sharing of power and resources, nor a defined set of mutually agreed upon goals and objectives. Cooperative, perhaps, better defines the relationships.

There are some limitations to this study. A small subset of organizations were targeted—fewer than 10% of the total number of organizations with which the Center works—so it is difficult to say how representative these perspectives are of all the Center's community relationships. In addition, there is a distinct possibility that responses were positively biased given the author's role in the organization. While only a few interviews yielded mostly superficial responses, there were enough to validate the value of conducting multiple interviews at each organization. A study designed to capture the perspectives of partners across a wider variety of organizations that had been involved in a wider range of activities may yield a greater diversity of responses. Nonetheless, this study highlights the possibility of leveraging community experience and expertise to help teach students about issues of socioeconomic disparities and racism. It also highlights the positive effect service-learning programs can have on community perceptions of an institution.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

### CBO Motivations

- 1) Please describe the nature of your relationship to DePaul. In what ways are DePaul students, faculty and staff involved with your organization? For how long?
- 2) What motivated you or your organization to accept service learners into your organization? What motivates you to continue the relationship?
- 3) What do you hope to gain from the relationship? What challenges does your relationship with DePaul pose to your organization? What tasks or jobs do DePaul service learners perform for your organization?

### Benefits and Challenges

- 4) How would you describe the value of service learners to your organizations? What contributions do they make? What challenges do they pose?
- 5) What are the consequences to continued participation with DePaul's service-learning program? What can you do more of? What can you do less of?
- 6) Overall, do you think that service learners have a positive, negative or neutral impact on your organization? Why?
- 7) In what ways does your organization rely on volunteers to deliver your programs?
- 8) Do you think that the service that service learners render your organization is better than, the same as, or worse than your average volunteers? How or why?

### Relationship/Partnership

- 9) What is the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with your relationship with the Steans Center/DePaul? Why?
- 10) Would you define the relationship between Steans Center/DePaul as a reciprocal one? How/Why?
  - a. What do you think DePaul gets out of the relationship?
- 11) What resources does your organization allocate to the relationship with the Steans Center/DePaul? Financial/human/other?
- 12) Do you consider the Steans Center/DePaul as a resource to your organization? How/why?
  - a. Do you consider DePaul in your planning processes?
- 13) Do you anticipate continuing your relationship with the Steans Center/DePaul? Why or why not?
- 14) What suggestions do you have for strengthening the relationship between DePaul and your organization?
- 15) Is there anything else that you would like to add that I may have missed in my questions?