



9 Principles for Success in Service Learning—the Three Cs

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This project grew from the concerns of community agency staff that service learning wasn't delivering all it promised for its host communities. So we set out to better understand those concerns, but we wanted to do more than simply list them. We also wanted enough information to begin developing a service learning model that would better serve communities and their organizations. Doing so has led us through a two-step process. The first step appears in this chapter: deriving principles that guide effective service learning from the sixty-seven interviews with community organization staff. The next chapter builds on those principles, and a series of subsequent meetings with community organization staff, to suggest new frameworks for the practice of service learning.

We have talked about the issues of finding and recruiting students, coping with short-term service learning, managing service learners under often less-than-ideal circumstances, compensating for the lack of diversity among service learners, and developing and maintaining good relationships with the higher education side of the partnership. Here, we begin pulling together what we heard does seem to work and address the question of what constitutes a successful service learning experience from the community's perspective.

Our analysis leads us to propose the three Cs of service learning that serve the big “C”—community—of the service learning partnership, and likely will serve the students as well. The three Cs are:

- Commitment
- Communication
- Compatibility

Based on the organization representatives we spoke with, the success of a service learning project depends in large part upon the level of commitment made by both the academic and community partners to developing and carrying out a successful project; the effectiveness of communication between the professor, student, and organization prior to and during the project; and the compatibility—in terms of cultural understanding, knowledge, and professional skills—of the service learning program and the student with the community organization site. Not every success story we heard about shared all of these ingredients in equal measure, and their presence are not guarantors of success. However, according to these organization representatives, they seem to be the most fundamental principles governing service learning success. We have seen them come up again and again in our research, including in Chapter 8, written by the director of the Grassroots Leadership College.

Here we develop these three components as principles to guide service learning. And in contrast to the previous chapters, which focused mainly on what was not working, we now look at what community organization staff believe does work.

Commitment

Commitment may be the most fundamental of the three Cs, for without a commitment to the community, there will be neither the energy to maintain good communication nor the will to develop training and screening mechanisms to assure compatibility.

There are, of course, many service learning professionals who are committed to the idea of service learning. That commitment, however, has been mostly to the institution and the student, and not so much to the community and its organizations, at least based on what we have

learned in this project. We are talking here about developing a serious commitment to the community and its development, which is significantly different.

How might a full commitment to the community make service learning look different? First, there will be a commitment to developing longer-term service learning. As we detail in Chapter 4, short-term service learning creates problems for many agencies. More than a third of the organizations linked the success of service learning projects to faculty and students making a long-term commitment to the community and building a strong relationship between the student, professor, and organization. Many times, we heard some version of, “We would like people that can make a long-term commitment”:

If that was an ongoing service relationship, then people could be involved in direct service, perhaps [with a greater length of time]. . . . If service learning became even broader to be an ongoing requirement, over a year or two, that would open up some really interesting potential in terms of students’ ability to grow within a program, and strengthen connection within the community.

Most of these organizations thought that service learning commitments should be at least a year and some of the organizations wanted it to be at least two years. Most recognized that a semester is too short a time for the student to make a substantial impact. One indicator of a serious commitment would be faculty who are willing to work outside of the academic world’s artificial, fifteen-week semester calendar:

It would be interesting and really good for us to engage some of our service learners for a longer period of time, since some of them are only a semester. That’s really just enough time to get to understand the program a little bit.

One of the things I have always tried to do with service learning programs is to find projects where the project can be spread over a year and half, perhaps two years even, each time you get new energy into it. This is an important point; you have

to understand that one semester is a short period of time and by the time the students get up to speed and really get going, it is the end of the semester.

Beyond a programmatic commitment to service learning, community organization staff are also looking for students to make serious commitments to the agency and its host community. The variability in commitment from students makes service learning a highly unpredictable investment for community organizations. Even when an agency sets up the same project for several students, it can come out entirely differently for each, depending on the students' personal characteristics. Almost all of the community organizations said that the student's work ethic, including his or her personality, is significant in determining the success of the project. Service learners must have a clear interest of their own in the project and a passion for the issues being addressed by the organization. Community organization staff believe that, when the service learner is intrinsically motivated, he or she will have a stronger commitment to do quality work. Sometimes that motivation is quite specific, and sometimes it is more amorphous:

The most success has been when the student comes in and they know they want to get something specific out of it.

The interest of the person in the work that we do, and their just positive energy that they bring to the work.

Most community organization staff understand the challenges of being a college student. However, they still expect to see a different level of motivation from service learners because they are not only learning but also giving service to the community. Community organization staff really want service learners to make a commitment to the organization's work, and not just to meeting course requirements:

I think it's partly to do with motivation. If it's just a course requirement, they're probably not going to stick around, but if they've integrated it, there's a reason internally why they're doing it, and they might continue. It's pretty obvious right away who's doing it because they have to, and then we almost

wish that person could just find something else to do . . . because it's a lot of work to make those matches . . . schedules, etcetera, so it's frustrating when that person doesn't really want to be there. . . . And it hasn't happened a lot, but it does happen.

The individual character of a service learner is another key factor of success from the community organization's point of view. Most interview participants emphasized the need for service learners who are genuinely interested, can be relied on, have effective communication and listening skills, and feel a sense of ownership for their service learning work:

[The students'] personalities were the type where they took a lot of initiative and just really dove into it. I could tell that they really felt strongly about what we're doing as an organization and their role with all of that. And that went a long way too, it being a beneficial experience for them and for us because they had that same drive about helping our clients.

Because once they feel that they have ownership of the project and what they're doing, they're going to take pride in that and want to continue on doing it. Because service learning is not just the whole process, but what happens after the process of them being involved in their communities.

Behind the organization staff's hopes for a higher-level commitment from students are their concerns that too many students can't make the most basic commitments. As we have seen, a number of organizations have concerns about the reliability of students even to show up at a service learning site. Despite the fact that the service learner has regular classes and activities outside of class, community organizations believe it is essential for service learners to maintain regular working hours:

I think a regular schedule is a really important thing. . . . Although I liked her as an individual, it felt like it was a lot of work to try and have something for her to do and because of the

irregular schedule it made it more difficult and, in that case, it was probably more of a burden than what we got from her.

In some cases, students also need to be flexible enough to change their schedules when public meetings or community events occur.

Finally, at the most basic level of relationship is the organization staff's hope that those on the academic side will minimally make a commitment to the practical activity of actually carrying out the project. This often includes making a commitment on paper through a memorandum of understanding (see Gonzalez, 2007). Eight of the organizations interviewed declared that formalizing the relationship with a contract was critical because it clarified the commitments for everyone involved in the project. According to the staff of one organization:

In our experience, we have formal agreement from the get-go as to what the expectations are, both from the student's perspective as well as the organization's and the faculty's.

Another agency has a contract covering the entire service learning process:

We have our own student contract where we ask students, "What are your goals, what are you committing to do, what are we committing to do, and how are we going to check in and evaluate that?"

We learn more about the specifics of such contracts in Chapter 10.

Communication

The second C, communication, is often an indicator of the level of commitment of the faculty and students in a service learning relationship. At least twenty-nine organizations in this study emphasized that faculty involvement, characterized by effective and timely communication, was fundamental to the success of service learning:

We [the organization] need to know what our needs are and we need to know what our limitations are for doing this active teaching and supervision. The students need to know what their

realistic time constraints are. And the professor needs to know what the assignment is. And we all need to communicate those things with each other. So if there is a link in that communication that is broken, it [the service learning experience] seems to all fall apart and not be a good experience for all involved. Things that have gone wrong in the past have been a breaking of a link in the communication chain.

It is evident from this statement that effective communication enables all the participants in the service learning project to be clear about their expectations. It also enables the organization to better manage the service learner, as another organization representative points out:

I would say that it's when we, as a community organization, are in direct contact with the professor . . . making sure that we were both on the same page, and understood what each other's expectations were so the same message was conveyed to the students by both.

Effective communication not only aids in clarifying expectations and managing the service learning project but also provides opportunities for the organization to learn about service learning. In the words of one organization staff member:

For myself, getting educated about what service learning is from the academic perspective . . . it really helped to clarify . . . the roles within the university and the community.

Ultimately, effective communication is about the student-organization-professor triad, one-to-one and all-to-one. So, along with all three meeting together, the organization and student need to talk on a regular basis:

Ideally, I like to meet with [the students] every few weeks and just kind of do an ongoing “touch-base”: “How’s it going? What are you getting, what aren’t you getting? Where are you? This is where I see you going.”

And the organization staff and professor need to interact. One key to effective communication is when the professor makes the effort to visit the site of the organization in the community:

Yeah [I felt like I had a strong relationship to the professor]. It was interesting how he came out first and really got to know me and what we were doing . . . and I think that was extremely valuable.

Two other staff members emphasize the importance of the faculty taking some initiative to learn about the community and the organization:

Leave the campus. I think it is important to faculty members to spend time with [the] community to see what happens, build relationships, and make a good fit. This probably needs to be done before the project starts to develop the partnership.

A couple of times I've gotten calls from professors saying, "How did things go?" The marketing group that did work on promoting our event, the professor actually came to the event and he talked to us. He really made an effort to be there and to ask questions . . . and the students were there as well. So I thought that was really neat.

One organization representative thinks that face-to-face time including all three parties is important, no matter where it occurs:

So places where the professor, myself, and the student have sat down and worked things out have worked out the best. As far as structurally, the more formal the better. . . . It almost always works best when it's face-to-face. We all tend to think of phone and e-mail as helpful tools, but it's my experience that they're very limited helpful tools. And they're best for conveying meeting times and often just some factual information . . . but if we're talking about what somebody found out or what's been accomplished, that's got to be face-to-face.

What is the substance of such communication? Thirteen organizations emphasized how important it is for everyone involved to have clear expectations for any service learning project:

Having a clear expectation of what the service learning goals are, across the board—that’s myself, the student, the professor . . . is critical to the success of the service learning project.

One organization staff member believes this is important because:

If we don’t strongly know what we’re going to do, the student is going to flounder a little bit . . . so when we have clear-cut goals [we have better success].

Here, again, some form of written agreement can help make everyone’s expectations clear.

Compatibility

The third C of successful service learning, compatibility, is somewhat of an art. It can also be compared to those memory games for kids, where you turn cards over and try to remember where you saw the one matching what you’ve just turned over. Or, think of it as the pieces in a giant jigsaw puzzle.

Fourteen organizations recognized the importance of a good fit between the goals of the organization and students. They expressed this idea of fit in a variety of ways:

When a person comes . . . we tell them about all the different programs and we try and make it a good match for them as well as a good match for us.

If what they’re offering is something that we could benefit from.

I think that what makes it successful is that we each come out of it feeling like we’ve gotten something, that it’s a win-win situation for the student as well as the organization.

[Having a service learner] is both valuable to the organization, in terms of additional things accomplished that we would perhaps have not been able to do, while at the same time being a learning experience to the student so that they get enough out of it to come out of it feeling like they have learned something.

It is not always easy to create that mutual benefit, as one staff person states:

We try to be flexible. We try to identify projects that are going to be helpful to us but also meaningful to them, so sometimes we have to be quite flexible in what we do in order to meet those needs.

This concept of mutuality of fit emphasizes that service learning cannot be just about the student, even when there is pressure to serve students first. In cases where the student has an interest in fitting the service learning work into his or her own professional or personal development, it is all the more important that the organization, the student, and the professor be clear about their expectations and motivations for participating in the service learning project. Many service learning experiences are useful as resume builders and provide insight into possible career choices, but to insist on things being set up a certain way only for the student's gain is exploitative of the community agency and its constituency.

Another way that agency staff think about the fit between the organization and the service learner involves personality characteristics:

The other thing is they have a certain amount of competitiveness. Meaning, they take on challenges. If one method is not working to teach a math problem, they try another route. Maybe it is not competitiveness, but persistence. I believe they have an innate ability to work with people or they don't. I don't believe it is something you can develop. Maybe you can develop it, but you certainly cannot create it [from nothing]. These people are usually people who have always been involved in helping people.

As discussed in Chapter 3, a number of agencies interview students to determine whether they will be a good fit. Others try to provide students with as much information about the organization as they can, so the student has the opportunity to determine how good a fit the project would be with his or her expectations. But the issue of fit is not just about whether the student fits the organization. It is also about whether the

entire service learning program fits the needs of the community and its organizations. Nine organizations made the statement that a service learning project is successful if the project fits into their programs:

If somebody calls and says, “We’d like to come out and volunteer,” . . . and they say, “We have to paint,” . . . and we’ve just painted everything . . . , they could put another coat on, but it really wasn’t necessary.

Of course, the issue of compatibility is not just about the compatibility of the service learning program with the agency’s mission, or of the service learner as an individual with the culture and work of the community organization. It is also about the conditions under which programs are designed and service learners are trained, affecting how well either will fit with community organizations. Currently, the institution’s schedule and the professor’s priorities determine the level of training that service learners are provided with, as well as how and when they receive it. The training can be particularly important:

[What would help is] some sort of “boot camp” about how to “be” in an office . . . recognizing that this is a more informal space than a lot of others, certainly compared to corporate internships, but still, people have full days of work and need to get them done.

The question of compatibility, then, takes us deep into the history and institutional motivations of service learning and of higher education institutional culture itself. The literature has already established that there is a lack of compatibility between academy and community in terms of schedules, deadlines, and priorities (Strand et al., 2003). It has not traced the effects of these incompatibilities to their ultimate conclusion. There are consequences when there is not compatibility, such as:

- A community organization loses nearly its entire student volunteer base, who are supporting the organization’s after-school program, because the local schools run until mid-June, but the university gets out in mid-May.

- A meeting doesn't happen because the service learner who was supposed to send out the reminder notices had a paper deadline that took priority.
- A child is left wondering what's wrong because the college student who was mentoring him or her just stopped showing up one day.

Taking the issue of compatibility seriously can unravel the current structure of higher education. Service learning that serves communities requires, first, that the service learning program operate on the community calendar. That means service learners and their sponsoring faculty being available over the holidays for those organizations working with constituencies who are particularly vulnerable then, for example, or beyond spring graduation for those working with school programs that extend beyond that time. The attitude that partial service is better than nothing perpetuates the problematic perception that the community is there to serve the institution's needs.

Ultimately, service learning that truly fits the community would be based on a yearlong model of higher education. One unique institution, Trent University in Canada, as we note in Chapter 4, has a strong service learning program that emphasizes students engaging in community-designed projects and also offers a full academic year of courses. While still breaking for holidays and summer, the Trent courses run from fall through spring, allowing students to spend much more time on projects than during the more common semester or trimester course.

Second, service learning that serves communities needs to be designed around community issues. This means that service learning courses may need to be designed and scheduled not a year before they are offered, but only one to a few months before, as the severity of community conditions and issues shift without warning. Some are experimenting with the "flash seminar" model of service learning (Stoecker, 2008; Cutforth and Stocking, 2005). Indeed, the community-based research project that led to this book was based on a flash seminar created only two months before the start of classes. That means dramatically changing the course-scheduling process to accommodate large numbers of last-minute courses for both faculty and students.

Third, service learning that serves communities needs to provide a very different kind of education for students. Communication skills, professional skills, specialized practice skills, and others should not be just two-hour training add-ons, but a part of the curriculum for service learners who are going to do more good than harm. This can be particularly challenging for research-intensive and liberal arts institutions that offer few skills-based courses. Such an educational milieu may also require a new breed of student who seeks service learning not for a line on their resume, but more to provide real service. Those students also must be open enough to learn from people who often have different racial and class backgrounds, and consequently less formal education than they do. Service learning, therefore, may become an activity that students will have to apply for, rather than just another requirement for them to meet. Of course, we must provide a curriculum that develops students who can successfully apply for such opportunities.

And, of course, these changes reverberate into the way we prepare and evaluate faculty. Our graduate programs must prepare future faculty in how to develop and maintain community relationships, how to run a meeting, how to link research to action, and a variety of other skills that are considered irrelevant or are assumed to be easy. It may even require developing a new breed of faculty, and a new paradigm of tenure and promotion guidelines and workload rules. Far beyond those institutions that simply recognize community service as part of the portfolio, we may need to develop guidelines that recognize a faculty member who teaches no traditional courses, publishes no traditional journal articles, and provides no traditional professional service, but instead is engaged with bringing large numbers of students into the field to do effective work with large numbers of community organizations.

Conclusion

This project shows the results of our current institution-centric version of service learning: too many organizations left dissatisfied with the outcomes of service learning and too many communities underserved. There were a number of organizations who would not talk to us for this project. We heard indirectly that at least some of them had such negative experiences with service learning that not only did they not want to talk about it, but they wouldn't even consider any further trials with the

practice. This is the service learning dialectic. If we continue the current model that serves students at the expense of communities, we risk alienating more and more community organizations until the practice of service learning itself is threatened. This is an area where an alarm should be raised to preserve the sustainability of this practice—it's important to ensure that the community organizations don't feel taken advantage of, lest they decide eventually that hosting service learners is not worth the hassle.

It is imperative that those of us privileged enough to attend college, or to be entrusted with serving its students, also feel obligated to serve the community, not as vanguard leaders or charity providers but as true partners. We're all interrelated and interdependent, not self-contained in academic or community vacuums. The oft-quoted statement coined by an Australian Aboriginal activist group and often attributed to Aboriginal elder Lila Watson (Northland Poster Collective, 2006), "If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together," applies to service learning perhaps better than to any other partnership we can create.

The community organizations that we interviewed engaged with us in developing a set of community standards for service learning, which they hope will be taken up by faculty and administrators and used to help prepare and implement better service learning projects. We have been circulating their draft of this "Standards for Service Learning" brochure at several conferences, teaching and learning symposia, and throughout much of the community. It has so far been very well received by all parties. You can read our elaboration of that brochure in Chapter 10. In the meantime, agencies in Madison, Wisconsin, continue to host service learners because they really need the help. Many also value the opportunity to be informal teachers in a real-life setting that can transform students to become better-engaged citizens, or to even begin lifelong relationships with particular nonprofits or causes.

Some of you may think that community organizations, and we as their supporters, are setting the bar too high. These are, after all, students. We should not expect them to exhibit the skills of trained employees. There is a tacit understanding among most nonprofits that when dealing with unpaid help, be it service learners or well-meaning

volunteers, things do not always work smoothly, and that's just the nature of the nonprofit beast. However, if higher educational institutions can even begin to incorporate some of these suggestions and internalize organizations' preferences in their course planning, relationship building, and preparation of service learners, it will go a long way toward better practice of service learning. The result will be a true "win-win" situation that benefits not only the learning objectives of the student and teaching goals of their professor, but does more good than harm to the community they purport to serve.