

## The Challenge of Short-Term Service-Learning

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*This paper presents the results of interviews with staff from 64 community organizations regarding their experiences with service-learners. One of the themes that emerged from the interviews focused on concerns related to short-term service-learning commitments that last a semester or less. We explore the challenges presented to community groups by short-term service: investment of staff time; staff capacity to train and supervise; incompatibility with direct client service; timing and project management; and academic calendar issues. Despite these obstacles, many community organization staff reported their desire to continue working with service-learners for altruistic and other reasons. The paper concludes with thoughts on how to deal with the challenges presented by short-term service-learning.*

One of the most popular forms of service-learning today is the service-learning component added onto a regular course. Such service-learning experiences are short-term, requiring only a semester or shorter commitment by the student and involving only a few hours a week during that time. The 2006 Campus Compact survey of service-learning (2007) found that the majority of students performing service, including co-curricular service, participated for 2.5 or fewer hours per week. Two “best practices” in service-learning highlighted at the University of California Berkeley consist of one eight-hour field trip in one case and a one-hour per week service engagement in another (Voorhees & Furco, 2005). Even in the field of pharmacy, where the development of a practice ethic is paramount, at least one service-learning placement expected only 16 hours of participation (Kearney, 2004). In business, one standard was a single 8-10 hour placement (Wittmer, 2004). Some analysts promote short-term service-learning for students with little to no consideration of its impacts on communities (Fitch, 2005; Reed, Christian Jernstedt, Hawley, Reber, & Dubois 2005).

How do community organizations react to students who arrive on their doorsteps expecting a ten-hour service-learning placement with lots of deep experiences and no future commitment? As we will see, small- and medium-size community organizations—those that have the most to gain from service-learning when it’s good quality and the fewest resources to waste on it when it’s not—often find short-term service-learning to be an unhelpful time sink. Not to have figured this out long ago, given the popularity of

the grafted-on service-learning project, is surprising. However, remarkably little is known about this issue. While analysts allow that problems exist with the application of service-learning, any mention of the challenges of time in short-term service-learning is rare in proportion to other topics.

Only a few analysts even recognize the existence of this time problem. Noley (1977), who was the Executive Director of the Commission on Voluntary Service and Action at the time she was writing, noted that “CBOs [community-based organizations] believe students spend too little time actually working to make meaningful differences in the lives of clients served at their site.” But these concerns basically went unheard and unaddressed. Birdsall (2005) mentioned that there are “time constraints” on service-learning, and Enos (2003) briefly noted that short-term service-learning places extra stress on both community and academic partners. Eby’s provocative 1998 essay was perhaps the first to elaborate on the problems with short-term service-learning, including the injection of poorly trained students into the community, the emotional impact on children of short-term service-learners who suddenly leave when the semester is over, and the disruption of the organization’s workflow. But the essay was based on experience rather than specific research findings. Wallace (2000) and Daynes and Longo (2004) also identified the “problem of time” created by the academic calendar that negates the continuity of work in community settings. Both also briefly addressed the question of how much time is required to effectively serve the community, with Daynes and Longo critiquing the short-term service-learning

model. Wallace relays a conversation between Myles Horton of the Highlander Folk School and Herman Blake of UC-Santa Cruz which points out the gulf between the ideal and the reality: "...he asked Horton...if students from Santa Cruz could come and do internships at Highlander. 'Yes', Horton replied, 'we will be glad to have them, provided that they stay with us for two years.'"

Most importantly, there is a lack of in-depth research on how, specifically, community organizations are impacted by short-term service-learning. Most of the information available on the length and depth of a service-learning experience focuses on students rather than community impacts (Ender, Martin, Cotter, Kowdewski, & DeFiore, 2000; Fitch, 2005; Krain & Nurse, 2004; Landsverk, 2004; Mooney & Edwards, 2001; Myers-Lipton, 1998; Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998; Reed, Christian, Jernstedt, Hawley, Reber, & DuBoise, 2005). Furthermore, much literature promotes the idea that *all* service-learning is good for *everyone* (Honnet & Poulson, 1989; Metz & Youniss, 2003). The famous Cruz & Giles (2000) article found numerous claims regarding the benefits of service-learning to the community, but no mention of the challenges of time or anything else.

The little research available that even briefly addresses the problem of time from the community perspective suggests some of the problems with short-term service-learning. Bacon (2002) quotes a community organization partner who would prefer to "train the student... earlier and then get them practicing sooner and for more time...It would be nice if it could be done over longer than a semester (p. 42)." Vernon and Ward (1999), Bushouse (2005), and Sandy and Holland (2006) also encountered community organizations that criticized the short-term time commitment of service-learning and wanted more than a semester of service. One of the few studies on civic impacts of service-learning, in this case with high school students, found that short-term service-learning had less civic impact than long-term engagement (Billing, Root, & Jesse, 2005). Worrall (2007) also cited community organization staff concerns about student commitment and short duration of service expressed through evaluation surveys at her institution.

While these studies suggest that short-term service-learning is less than ideal for community organizations, we have little research focusing on community organization staff perceptions of short-term service-learning. This paper reports on research addressing that gap.

### The Project

This research was conducted in Madison, Wisconsin, using a project-based approach that engages community stakeholders in a process of

identifying issues, diagnosing those issues, developing prescriptions for them, implementing the prescription, and then evaluating the impact (Stoecker, 2005). The research reported in this paper focuses on the diagnostic step. After informal listening sessions to hear some of the concerns of community organizations about service-learning in the Madison area, we brought together a focus group of about 20 community organization staff. The focus group confirmed and outlined some of the organizations' concerns regarding service-learning. Seven participants from that focus group agreed to serve as a core group to guide the research process. The research was designed jointly by the core group members, students in a graduate seminar, a service-learning staff person, and two university researchers. We agreed among us to focus on the entire population of small- to medium-size community organizations (defined roughly as less than \$1 million annual budget and/or 12 or fewer full-time staff) who had hosted service-learning students, since such organizations have both the most to gain from the added capacity students might bring, and the most to lose from low quality service-learning. We used a broad definition of service-learning that included any student performing any service for a community organization for academic credit. That included some students that may more accurately be considered interns or practicum students, but doing so also allowed us to compare organization staff reactions to different types of student placements. Our definition also more accurately fit the community organizations' concept of service-learning—which included internships and practica—than the stricter definition used in most academic literature. Our definition of "short-term service-learning," again drawn from our interviewees, includes service-learning placements that last a semester or less, and typically involve a few hours a week of contact time.

Each of the three major higher education institutions in Madison—the University of Wisconsin, Edgewood College (a private faith-based institution), and Madison Area Technical College, have staffed service-learning offices, operate extensive service-learning programs, and participated with this project. We used lists obtained from all of the service-learning offices and from other regular sources of service-learning at the University of Wisconsin. We ultimately identified a population of 101 small- and medium-sized organizations that had participated in service-learning partnerships. In contrast to Worrall (2007), who only included organizations large enough to have more than one staff member who worked closely with service-learners, our organizations were nearly all too small for such staff capacity.

The students received two types of training prior to conducting the research. First, we used a fish-bowl-style training where everyone observed one student interviewing a community organization representative and wrote interview notes. Seminar participants then processed the interview collectively and compared their notes with each other. Then we met with the core group members and students conducted “practice” interviews with them, using digital voice recorders and also writing notes. The community organization staff members then provided the students with feedback on the interview process and we processed all the interviews as a large group.

We requested one-hour interviews with each organization, explaining that we would cover seven topics: community organization staff definitions of service-learning, ways of connecting with service-learners, reactions to different service-learning structures, managing service-learners, diversity issues in service-learning, communication and relationship issues in service-learning, and indicators of success. Some organizations declined an interview based on their belief that they had been erroneously identified as having worked with service-learners. Others refused because their volunteer coordinator or other staff who managed service-learning had either recently left or recently arrived. Most of those who refused cited time constraints. A small number initially agreed to be interviewed but then did not keep their appointments. The students ended up conducting 67 in-depth interviews with representatives of 64 organizations, using an open-ended interview guide based on the seven topics listed above. Students wrote partial transcripts and returned them to the interviewees for validity checks (Mays & Pope 2000; Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers 2002). Students then organized into two- to three-person teams and each team coded the interviews for a single topic. The team coding allowed us to qualitatively assess inter-rater reliability within the broad context of a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## Findings

Community organization representatives raised many provocative issues related to communication and relationship building, training and management of service-learners, and cultural competency. But perhaps the most consistent theme that emerged was the frequent reference to challenges associated with short-term service-learning. The emergence of this theme is all the more important because no interview question specifically asked organizations about their reactions to short-term service-learning. It was surprising that a third of the interviewees spontaneously brought up concerns about short-term service-learning without

any prompting in the interviews. In addition, there is a distinct absence of interviews lauding the practice of short-term service-learning. Our purpose was not to conduct the typical satisfaction study often used by service-learning offices at the end of a course, but to get an in-depth understanding of how community organization staff experienced service-learning. Thus, we make no claims about whether the groups were happy or not with service-learning overall, only that they voiced concerns about short-term service-learning without any solicitation.

In this study, 21 participants—about one-third—reported working only with service-learning students fitting the criterion of short-term service-learning—serving a semester or shorter for only a few hours per week—and the rest had worked with students for both short-term and year-long periods. The challenges of short-term service-learning grouped into a number of categories: time investment, capacity to supervise, direct-service difficulties, timing and project management, and calendar issues.

### *Investment of Time in Working with Short-Term Service-Learning Students*

A lot of short-term service-learning is done as a class requirement, creating a dual sense of frustration for the community organization. First, the experience is often too brief to greatly benefit either the organization’s mission or satisfy significant learning objectives. Second, the often mandatory nature of such short-term service-learning requires the organization to deal with the potential for student resistance or resentment and less-than-quality performance. Nine organization representatives said they were hesitant to invest time in service-learners who treated their service experience as a class requirement or obligation, and thus lacked altruistic dedication and commitment. Two of those representatives explain:

They [students] tell us right out that ‘it seemed better than writing a paper.’ We know automatically their hearts weren’t invested. More-invested students say things like they like working with children, or have experience working with children...

I think the biggest thing is that students are not willing to go above and beyond what their professor is requiring of them. ‘I am too busy; I have to do 30 hours; that is all I’m going to do. I can’t do six months’...

Even when the students are thrilled to be there, the simple fact is that these brief service-learning relationships lack continuity, and thus are sometimes a poor time investment for the agency. Many non-profit organizations are operating within tight or precarious budgets and can’t afford to spend a lot of

time and energy planning and implementing service-learning projects that do not give them a good return. Two other organization staff discuss the inefficiency of such a system:

[Service-learning] projects are a one-time deal; next semester the focus shifts, our priorities change. It would be nice to have some more ongoing relationships we can massage and nurture over time. I certainly think you would get stronger projects on both sides that way.

The whole thing [service-learning] takes time and investment in that person, and if we know they are going to go away in a semester then frankly it might not be worth our time if we are super-busy, which we often are.

Some organizations hold out hope, however, that the student's initial investment for a course requirement may turn into something more. And it does happen, of course, that students "catch fire" with the mission of an organization, or bond with clients, particularly when they are tutoring or mentoring youth, for example. That possibility is sometimes worth the risk of accepting a short-term service placement. But other times it is not worth the investment:

Part of what we try to do, or hope, is that people will be so into what they're doing that they'll do it on their own then afterwards...but when you get certain people who are only doing it for requirements, that can be a real pain, and even less than worthwhile.

The lack of commitment exhibited by some short-term service-learners sometimes can even lead them to exploit the goodwill and time investment of community organizations. They commit to working longer than their course requirement to get the placement, but then do not follow through on that promise after they have met their minimum hours. Eleven organizations expressed frustration at training students who do not follow through on the time commitment originally agreed upon.

We were getting a fair number of people who said they would do the whole year, so they would do the 25-hour training, and do one or two shifts, and then we'd sign their little form saying they'd got their 40 hours in, and then we'd never see them again. That got really frustrating...Often the amount of time, either for the semester, or per week, it just isn't really meaningful for what we're doing.

#### *Incompatibility of Short-Term Service-Learning with Direct Service*

There was agreement among 14 organizations that short-term service is often a particularly bad fit or

inappropriate for direct service, especially when working with youth. Oftentimes, programs for young people are aimed at correcting problems associated with lack of good role models and other inconsistencies in their lives. The short-term service-learners' transient nature, and their potential to be unreliable and lack commitment, only exacerbates those problems. Here, three interviewees whose organizations work with low-income and homeless children express concerns about the emotional distress sometimes accompanying short-term service-learning:

We do not want to have students come in, meet with them [the children] for a few weeks, then start to get connected and have them drop off the face of the planet. That is not healthy for these kids. They really need to have strong role models in their lives. We ask students to give at least a six-month commitment. But some people would say okay, and then not show up again after they did the commitment they needed to for class...

For us, a lot of our kids come for three months and then they are gone, so sometimes [short-term service-learning] fits. With a lot of homeless kids [however], counting on certain people is really important. If they know that so-and-so is coming back next week; that means a lot to the kids. They have a lot of people that wander into their life for a day and then are gone and they have to start over...

Some [service-learners] continue on past the semester...but that's usually our only hesitation with the [university students] is that timeframe, especially if [the children] get real attached to one of our volunteers; the one-semester-based timeframe is hard on the kids.

Sometimes, as mentioned above, this is because the students are motivated only to meet the minimum hours stipulated by their professor. But even the students who make a sincere commitment can find their lives changing from semester to semester in ways they didn't expect:

For the most part when their semester is up, they don't continue. A lot want to but because of their schedule changes, transportation issues, or whatever reason, it's pretty rare that we see them again, but we do have exceptions. Sometimes kids will say "where's so-and-so" after a few months of depending on them for homework help or they knew they had someone to play checkers with...generally it's too short.

## *Capacity to Supervise and Train Short-Term Service-Learners*

The biggest part of the service-learning time investment for organization staff is in training and supervision. Since many cash-strapped small- and medium-sized nonprofit organizations need to rely at least somewhat on skilled volunteers, their meager staff often must spend significant time in managing them. With short-term service-learners it is not efficient to spend 20 hours training someone but then only receive 15 hours of service. Twelve organizations commented that short-term service-learning made it difficult, and often costly, to invest staff time in supervising and training the service-learner, two of which are quoted here.

... [The intern] is here twenty hours a week. I have a service-learner here for just a few hours a week; it doesn't make up for the administrative costs...

Our number-one reason [for not having service-learners] is time...there are time constraints on both mine and the person who would be in charge of supervising [a service-learner]... I wouldn't even say it is because they are a volunteer as opposed to a paid staff, it is just the time of having to supervise somebody else in addition to taking on all of your own responsibilities.

In many cases it is simply not time efficient for the organization staff to provide the same formal training and oversight to short-term service-learners that it gives to people who make a longer commitment. Two staff members explain:

We really don't have many opportunities for people to come in for ten hours. Especially if they're going to be working with children, by the time we are done training them our staff could have done the same thing, but better.

We are always looking for interns, but projects that we tend to have—some of them have a steep learning curve, so that by the time we get someone up to speed, it's really not worth it for one semester.

A number of the organization representatives with whom we spoke, as shown in this section, explicitly compared service short-term learners to long-term service-learners and interns. They strongly prefer the intern model because it provides both longer-term service and a greater probability of hosting a committed and skilled student.

### *Issues with Timing and Project Management*

The challenges with managing service-learning placements include having ample time to prepare for

working with students, delegating work to them, and finding time for reflecting with students and evaluating their projects. Nearly one-third of the organizations noted the difficulty of designing a meaningful service-learning project to fit a semester-long or shorter period. Some staff expressed doubt in their ability to provide educational support for short-term service-learners, noting that their own stressful jobs prevented the depth of planning and thought they would have liked to put into service-learning projects. A fairly common complaint among the agency staff is that it is unrealistic to expect students to prepare, carry out, and reflect on a project all within a one-semester time frame:

I think it has been challenging the few times we have tried to use [short-term service-learning] to figure out the timing of it. Students have a really narrow window at the beginning of the semester where they have to figure out what they are doing and then it is kind of a narrow couple-of-month window to do it and then they are gone. And it has been hard for us to kind of be prepared enough and have any kind of plan ahead of time on how we might use somebody that shows up on our doorstep saying they want a project.

The interviewee above also mentioned that it is often difficult to manage delegation of work even among organization staff, let alone among service-learners that are “short-term and unexpected.” On the whole it seems that service-learning projects are more successful when there is a clear, realistic goal between the higher education institution, the student, and the site supervisor—or as one organization put it, a “shared possible goal.” Along the same lines, another organization staff member noted that both parties' satisfaction is contingent upon “mutually agreed-upon objectives.” The lack of time in short-term service-learning to clarify the goal and how it is to be carried out also hampers the ability of all parties to adjust the project as it proceeds:

The big thing with [this particular class] was, I guess, it was a big misunderstanding on our part, or their part, or probably both ...What they were doing for us was creating some marketing materials and enhancing our website and stuff, and they saw it as a semester-long project, so the product that they were giving us, they looked at as their final. Whereas it should have been done two months earlier because there is a lot of going back-and-forth with ‘I don't like this or that,’...in the real world it doesn't work that way. You don't turn in a final project and say, “here you go, goodbye.”

Once the semester is over...poof..., they are gone. Sometimes the works are unfinished,

sometimes they are not very good, and they left us a mess. I am very hesitant to go back to [this particular class].

Community organization staff care about the student's learning as well, and short-term service-learning makes it difficult to develop a project that will serve both the student's educational needs and the organization's service needs. They worry that, in some cases, no one really benefits.

The limited-term aspect is what makes it [service-learning] not work for the childcare program; we would like people that can make a long-term commitment. For direct service I do ten hours of training and a background check, and by the time that process is done, usually about half those hours have already been used. Even 30 hours...they come in and do five or six shifts...I don't know that it's beneficial for the students either, it's such a limited contact with the program, and it's hard to know where there's growth and learning.

#### *Community and Campus Calendar Incompatibility*

There is certainly recognition out there that campus and community calendars don't correspond very well. This is actually a problem with all service-learners, including even those who commit to an entire year. What we have not recognized is that the incompatibility of the two settings can create serious problems in a short-term service-learning context. Five organizations discussed having issues with their service-learning students due to the conflicting campus-community schedules.

You lose 'em [undergraduate service-learners] for a week over Thanksgiving, and then you lose 'em over Christmas, and then...they don't come back until the end of January, and then you've got spring break, and they've got finals...and you know, none of those things are part of our calendar...versus most of our grad students understand that you can only be gone for a week, because if they've got a client, you can't blow them off for two or three weeks, because if they didn't need to meet with you, they wouldn't BE here...but also, we can't afford to put things on hold for six to seven weeks out of the year, because the work still goes on...

Midterms, finals, school breaks, and lack of continuity in the academic workload also present challenges for consistency in short-term service-learning projects.

A semester is pretty short, and the problem with the semester is there's a bunch of holes...service-learning doesn't mean the rest of their

classes stop, so they have a lot of demands on their time. And sometimes those demands get way higher, like midterms, finals, spring break... So all those things make it tough to get in and get a unit of work done.

The breaks in the academic calendar can create real burdens for organizations. Agencies have to find ways to fill in during those times when students are not technically in session and don't feel any obligation to work at their service-learning site.

It has typically been certain times when you don't have enough volunteers.... There is also the seasonal issue of people going on winter break. That has been a big issue for us, as much as we rely on service-learners. Winter break is a huge issue, spring break is a smaller one, and summer can require a whole new round of recruiting people to volunteer.

As the quote above suggests, the nature of short-term service-learning exacerbates this problem. If a class does not consistently send approximately the same number of service-learners each semester, there will be gaping holes in the volunteer pool of the organization. Of course agency volunteer coordinators are always recruiting to fill gaps created by people moving on, but if you're talking about half of a class being assigned to one agency, that can make or break a program.

...One year we had I think eight or nine people who were all from the same class who came out...well, that had a really significant impact on [the agency] in terms of needing volunteers...literally half my volunteers on Wednesday...and Thursday nights had come from this project... The next year, I don't think anybody mentioned it, so none of the students knew about us and so we went from having nine volunteers [from the class] one semester to zero the next...and that's a big fluctuation.

This story reinforces the point that students who can commit to an entire year can cut the organization's volunteer recruitment and orientation burden in half.

#### *How Agencies Make the Best of Short-Term Service-Learning*

Even though nearly all of the 21 organizations that had worked only with short-term service-learners had less than positive feelings about it, eight organizations discussed why they continued working with these service-learners regardless of the drawbacks. A surprising number of organizations saw mentoring students as almost an extension of their mission, similar to Worrall's (2007) findings. Community organi-

zation staff value playing a part in the education of service-learners, even if the returns of short-term service-learning may be questionable, as these two organization representatives discuss:

I believe [service-learning] helps [students] put a face to the disease, in working with clients. I believe, part of our mission of course is education and prevention, and by virtue of being around all this and going through the trainings and the orientation, they learn more about [the organization's cause].

We do weigh it, you know, is it really going to be more of our time? You have to analyze each project, each opportunity, to see if it really is going to beat a cost-benefit ratio kind of thing, but in general, like I said, I have a personal bias to working with students...

In at least some cases, the definition of short-term service-learning is the organization serving the student rather than the other way around.

Other organizations, also consistent with Worrall (2007), value the perspective that students can bring. In the daily grind of just getting the work done on a shoestring budget, having fresh energy and new ideas can be energizing for the staff.

It helps our staff with being able to do a better job. They have a little bit more support and they have somebody to work with. I think it's a good experience for the staff that provides the supervision as well as the other staff, to have new people, new faces; just fresh perspectives on things that the students bring. It helps to motivate sometimes, I think.

One of the most promising reasons for having short-term service-learners is to do specific projects, a service-learning model called *project-based service-learning* (Bradford, 2005; Draper, 2004; Stoecker, Stern & Hathaway, 2007; Wayne State College, n.d.). Many organizations have special projects that they lack capacity to do. Having students with specific skills do those projects can fill those capacity gaps.

...With [a semester-long service-learning class], we were looking at some products that were more technical..., and those are things that if you had to pay for them would cost you an arm and a leg. And also the learning curve for us, this is something that we have no idea what to do or how to do it. We look to the students for some guidance, you know, you learn it, tell us; rather than us learning it, because of that kind of time commitment.

One agency delineated special projects for students that fit into a single semester. This allowed them to

avoid the scheduling challenges presented by the agency's regular mode of direct-client crisis service:

...I see service-learning working best with sort of 'pre-packaged' projects that have very defined parameters—that are meaningful, so it's a worthwhile experience—but not so time-sensitive.

Shorter-term projects can also support community outreach. This particular organization worked with two students on a media campaign, including an analysis of media process, which happens annually at this agency during the month of April "...so we really kick into gear in January, and then May is sort of the evaluation time...so it works well in a semester." But even within this project, the challenge of short-term service-learning was evident. Aside from the simple logistics and the amount of time required, it is hard to gauge, in one semester, the students' motivations and personal time pressures, and therefore difficult to predict the quality of the product.

One of the service-learners [who] worked on Media and Outreach and analyzing our awareness campaign...was just phenomenal. Put in way more time than required. The other one was a really good-hearted person that just didn't have the time to meet the commitment that the program asked, which wasn't even to go above and beyond, so we had a really mixed experience just in that little microcosm. They came from the same class, one was a sophomore pre-med that was way overwhelmed, the other was a senior with hardly any classes left to take, and just really wanted to do this.

Low-resourced community organizations may also be able to maximize the positive effects of short-term service-learning by implementing a student intermediary model. This model uses one student as a kind of quasi-volunteer coordinator, who can manage a group of service-learners for a single organization, relieving the organizations staff of much of the supervision burden (Stoecker, Stern, & Hathaway, 2007). Such a model has been developed for community-based research (CBR) at Mars Hill College. At Mars Hill, students often play minor roles in CBR projects for two years before they are given the responsibility of managing a project themselves (Strand, Cutforth, Marullo, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003).

### Can We Move Beyond Short-Term Service-Learning?

While service-learning proponents may think that short-term service-learning is good for students, it is an open question whether it is good for communities. For those who are convinced that it is

not, the challenge is to find ways to develop long-term opportunities. One option is to integrate service-learning assignments into “year-long” courses, where groundwork and training are laid in the fall, and direct service continues throughout the entire year. Another option in cases where students cannot make the commitment to a year-long class is for faculty to form relationships with community agencies and send approximately the same number of students each semester, for a set period, so that the agency can depend on at least a certain number of “warm bodies.”

The desire for long-term service-learners was underlined by nearly one-third of the organization representatives interviewed. In addition to the benefits of a longer time commitment, long-term service-learners are frequently either upper-level undergraduate or graduate students in an internship or field placement, technical college student interns, work-study students, or committed multi-semester undergraduate service-learners. An interviewee stated that, in contrast to a negative experience she had with an undergraduate service-learning class that was “too unstructured,” a relationship had developed with another department that was working well:

...I know exactly what's supposed to happen there. I know what they're supposed to learn while they're here. I know what I can expect from them. It helps that they're here for a full year, so there's a long period of time to develop and get things done...it's worth our investment because, you know, we get somebody every October who's brand new, doesn't really know what they're doing, but is here for a long enough time, for enough hours, and enough intensity that they figure it out, and so then we get several months worth of really productive, good work from them, and at the same time they're getting really deep, valuable learning from us.

Implementing such a model requires some changes from higher education institutions. One example comes from the Trent Centre for Community-Based Education and the U-Links Centre for Community-Based Research—partner organizations that work with Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada. Trent University's curriculum is structured around year-long courses, and service-learning is incorporated into many of those courses as part of the University's institutional structure. The design builds on the European “science shop” model, which extends service-learning and community-based research models and makes them more community-focused and project-based. Both community-based research and

service-learning is organized through a process where community organizations write proposals for projects and the Centre then locates students in existing courses to carry them out (Hall, 2006).

It may not be practical for all service-learning commitments to be a minimum of a full year, given the current structure of higher education in the United States. But if higher education faculty, students, and administrators at least recognize the shortcomings, they can work to mitigate them with better planning and support services. A number of our interviewees discussed how they would really appreciate a heightened level of support from a university or college staff member, someone at a service-learning office, or perhaps a temporary grant-funded position or student scholar that would have the responsibility to support service-learning.

For all of the service-learning projects we could offer for people to do, there is all of this behind-the-scenes planning that needs to happen in order to get people in a room to do something, so it would be nice if we had somebody who would be able to coordinate that stuff because I just don't have time....

To the extent that higher education institutions are either unwilling or unable to adapt themselves to better support community organization needs, the organizations themselves will have to take responsibility for getting the most out of short-term service-learning. While we believe that the burden to make service-learning work should rest with higher education institutions, we recognize the commitment of community organizations to serving students even when it hinders the organization's productivity. We also note that the organizations Worrall (2007) studied were able to adapt themselves to the problems of short-term service-learning. The strategies that work for Worrall's higher-resourced organizations, however, are likely not possible for small-medium-size agencies that have at most one staff person who can manage service-learners. Our tendency is to encourage such organizations to “just say no” to short-term service-learning. And while some in fact do just say “no,” our interviews also revealed that many organizations fear that rejecting any offer of help may eliminate them from receiving any future offers.

## Conclusion

While it is true that only a minority of our community organizations, approximately a third, expressed concerns about short-term service-learning, we reiterate that they did so without prompting from the interviewers. Service-learning is a higher education intervention like any experimental

research. Ironically, however, there is no institutional review board or informed consent process required for service-learning activities. If an experimental research project produced reports of adverse effects for a third of the treatment group, it would be thoroughly scrutinized. It is important to heed the concerns expressed by community organization staff.

Community organizations, by themselves, do not feel like they are in a position to press higher education institutions to structure service-learning so that it better fits community needs. Consequently, we engaged the community organization staff from this project 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 (Tryon & Stoecker, 2007). They continue to host service-learners in the meantime, 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. 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 is just the nature of the nonprofit sector. However, if higher education institutions can 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 service-learning practice. The result will be a true 'win-win' situation that benefits not only the learning objectives of the student and teaching goals of their instructor, but does more good than harm to the communities they purport to serve.

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