Service Learning from the Perspective of Community Partner Organizations

Joel A. McReynolds

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Jo Arney, Department of Political Science/Public Administration

ABSTRACT

Engaging university students in service learning with community organizations has both benefits and challenges. How the community organizations receiving student volunteers perceive the partnership is critical to understand if the relationship is to be successful. Past studies have explored student and institutional perceptions of service learning partnerships, but few have asked the community organizations for their perspective. This study involved analysis of 14 service learning partnerships formed by the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse with local community organizations. The organizations' perceptions of student volunteers and the university administration were collected through semi-structured interviews, which revealed five central themes. Using these five themes the study analyzes the relationship of the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse with its community partners, and provides recommendations for future improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Service learning is often heralded as an excellent programming initiative within education, because it takes what students are learning and puts theory into practice. Essentially a service learning project is a volunteering opportunity that students are required to complete for a grade that connects back to the classroom. For successful service learning to transpire the university must have a relationship with a community partnering organization.

In order for service learning to occur there must be partnerships between the institution of higher learning and community organizations. These partnerships automatically create a relationship between the instructor, community partner, and students (Dorado and Giles 2008). It makes sense that for service learning to work there needs to be local organizations that can partner with the university to provide service opportunities. This link is so necessary that some scholars argue service learning cannot exist without partners. Bailis goes as far as to say that, "...service learning and partnerships are two sides of the same coin" (2000, p.5).

While there have been several studies published on the relationship between partnering organizations and institutions of higher learning (Bortolin 2011; Dorado and Giles 2008; Sandy 2007), most of these studies focus primarily on the university faculty and administration. There has been little research done on the perceptions of the community organizations themselves, with the exception of Sandy's 2007 work. Additionally, many of the major studies in this area have taken place in the Northeast or Southwest of the United States, with the Midwest largely untouched (Dorado and Giles 2004; Dorado, Giles, and Welch 2008; Sandy 2007).

Thus the focus of this study is on the perceptions of the partnering community organizations toward the participating students and the university. Using grounded-theory methodology, interviews with 14 local organizations were recorded and data collected on the general feelings these organizations have in regards to their relationship with the university. Through analysis five key themes were found that will help the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse (UW-L) better understand their community-partner relationships.

The paper begins with a general review of relevant literature that will examine the definition of service learning, discuss the use of service learning in curriculum, and place the study in context related to previous studies on university-community partnerships. The methodology of the study will then be discussed, followed by the results and discussion of the key findings. The paper concludes with recommendations for moving forward, and implications for future research.

Service Learning

There are many definitions of service learning, and depending on the specific study they may vary significantly. For the purpose of this paper the definition provided by Bringle and Hatcher will be used. In their famous work on

service learning curriculum they define service learning as a:

> "course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility," (Bringle and Hatcher 1995, p.112).

Although this will be the definition used throughout the paper, it should be acknowledged that it is unlikely every activity that claims to be service learning at the university falls under this framework. Still, it will be assumed and taken on good faith, since the educational benefits of the studied service learning activities is outside the scope of this study.

While there generally has not been substantial research done on the effects of service learning, there has been enough to defend its presence in education. Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray found that literature published from 1993-2000 reported that students were satisfied with their participation in service learning, there was a feeling that service learning was useful to communities, and university-community relationships were enhanced by the partnerships (2001).

In a 2000 study, Cruz and Giles summarized the key findings of the research on service learning available at the time. Their main claims are that service learning contributes to community development, strengthens ties between campus educators and the local community, and offers benefits to community partners (p.30).

In support, Shea and Weiss (2013) explain that service learning "...confronts students with real-world problems and is deemed an effective approach for helping to bridge the gaps between theory and practice while exposing students to public service experiences," citing Bryer (2011), Bushouse et al. (2011), Imperial, Perry and Katula (2008), and Koliba (2007) as examples (p.730).

In summary, there has been much research on the positive effects of service learning, including their potential to bring, "academics and practitioners into closer relationships," (Ostrander 2004, p.74). However, there has admittedly been a lack of substantial research on the effects of service learning on the community (Giles and Eyler 1998; Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray 2001).

Relationships & Partnerships

As stated earlier, partnerships are essential for service learning to exist. Jacoby (2003) writes that, "...service-learning must be grounded in a network, or web, of authentic, democratic, reciprocal partnerships," (p.6). Fogel and Cook echo this sentiment in writing that, "much of the success of university-community partnerships depends on the relationships that are developed and nurtured…" (2006, p.597). Further research extends this emphasis, exclaiming that university-community partnerships are crucially dependent on interpersonal relations (Parker and Selsky 2004; Dorado et al. 2008).

Despite the importance of relationships when it comes to universities partnering with community organizations, it should come as no surprise that the relationships are often less than ideal. There are several reasons for difficult relationships between the two parties, but a few are highlighted in past research.

Morton (1995) writes that partnerships are often based on charity instead of justice. When service learning is viewed as the university helping or providing resources (i.e. students) to a community organization, instead of mutual resources being shared, it can lead to tension in the relationship. A condescending attitude on the part of the university is also a noticeable symptom. This same attitude is observed by Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2000) who found that many faculty members view their relationship with the community as elitist and unidimensional.

Another reason university-community relationships can be challenging is described by Bringle et al. (1999):

> "Academicians view knowledge as residing in specialized experts, including disciplinary
> peers who are geographically dispersed; community residents view knowledge as being
> pluralistic and well distributed among their neighbors. Faculty are stereotyped (possibly
> with good reason) as being isolated, contemplative, theoretical, cautious...community leaders are
> action oriented, focused on results, expansive in looking for local resources, and responsible for
> making daily decisions about their communities," (pp.9-10).

University faculty and community organizations often have different priorities and methods for solving

problems. These differences can make it challenging when trying to work together. A professor may be thinking about a semester project or grades, while a community organizer is focused on the daily operations of their service. Similarly, a nonprofit administrator may be focused on a five-year plan, while a university faculty member's priority may be that week's assignment. These differences require a level of understanding and cooperation if a partnership is to experience development and growth.

Although the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse does not have a formal volunteer requirement to graduate, many classes in the general education program include a level of service learning. The general education program's stated purpose is to, "cultivate knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for independent learning and thinking" (Undergraduate Catalog 2011-2013). Requiring students to partake in community service strongly supports this goal, therefore service learning is frequently employed during general education courses.

The importance of service learning is further stressed by the school's two volunteer fairs, one held during the Fall semester and another in the Spring. There is also an on-campus office called the Leadership and Involvement Center, which provides resources and connections for both students and community organizations. Through the various classes and student organizations it is estimated that there are currently dozens of university-community partnerships between the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse and the surrounding La Crosse area.

METHODS

As shown in the relevant literature, the relationship between the university and the community organizations is critical for service learning initiatives to be successful. As was also previously discussed, there has been limited research done from the perspective of the partnering organizations. Therefore, the research question of the study is as follows:

> *Research Question:* What are the perceptions of partnering community organizations toward the service learning students, programs, and administration of the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse?

To answer this question IRB approval was received to conduct interviews with 14 community organizations that partner with the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse for service learning purposes. Research on these partnerships included an initial brief email correspondence, during which the purpose and method of the study was explained, the statement of consent provided, and a reply requested if the organization's contact was interested in the study.

If interest was expressed by the organization, an interview was scheduled at the locale of the interviewee's choosing. The interviews were semi-structured and allowed the conversation to organically occur, however a set of eight questions were always included to ensure comparability. The eight questions are listed below in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview Questions

---

1. What are the characteristics of an effective university-community organization partnership?

2. How would you describe your current relationship with UW-L?

3. What are some positives and negatives of this partnership?

4. What has been your general experience with the college students that volunteer as part of a requirement for class?

5. How does your experience with the service learning students differ from other types of volunteers?

6. Is there any communication between yourself and the faculty assigning the service learning requirements?

7. In what ways do students benefit from community partnerships? In what ways does your organization?

8. Looking towards the future, is there anything that could be changed to better your relationship with UW-L?

The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants, after which they were immediately transcribed and securely stored.

The community organizations were selected from a campus resource entitled the Community Agency Guide. The Community Agency Guide is an online tool that provides UW-L students with a list of community organizations that have expressed interest in service learning and/or have requested student volunteers. The list of organizations in the Community Agency Guide was cross-checked with the list of organizations that attended the University's previous Volunteer Fair and Involvement Fest, two events held on campus that are avenues for organizations to recruit student volunteers.

If an organization was featured in the Community Agency Guide as well as present at either the Volunteer Fair or Involvement Fest, then it was assumed that the relationship between the University and the organization could be considered a partnership. The 28 organizations that met this criteria were then contacted using the information provided by the Community Agency Guide, which often meant emailing the volunteer coordinator or director of an organization. Of the 28 community organizations contacted, 14 (50%) responded with interest and willingness to participate in the study.

Interviews were analyzed through grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Initially, we looked for patterns in the data that might shed light onto the research question being investigated. After memos and annotation of the 14 interviews, five prevailing themes were found from the 32 categories and 77 propositions. These five key themes are discussed in the following section.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The five key themes discovered from the data are listed and discussed below.

1. Service learning partnerships benefit both the student volunteers and the community organizations involved.

There was a strong theme prevalent throughout the research that the partnerships were not a waste - they amounted to benefits for both the organization and the students. The theme of a beneficial relationship is not a new discovery. In fact, it was one of the most prominent findings of Sandy's 2007 study in California. During her study participants identified partnerships as benefitting the community organizations by fulfilling a direct need and enriching the agency (p.20). These observations are echoed in the current findings.

The majority of the participating organizations spoke about the work force of students being a positive for the organization. Some specific characteristics were that the students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and majors, are large in number, and bring a sense of energy to their work. One respondent said, "Not to put anyone else down, but when I have a project and am approached by a group that works at a bank or a student group, I know I'm going to get a lot more production out of the students just because of the energy they bring to it," (P69).

In many of the interviews there was even a sense of dependence on the students by the organization. One respondent, referring to a large annual event put on by their organization, went as far as to say that, "we would not have been able to run the event without the UW-L students." This particular organization's reliance on student volunteers may be more significant than others in the community. Nevertheless, if there is a need for volunteers, having access to such a large base is certainly considered a benefit for the organization.

Yet not all the benefits listed were for the community partners alone. Several participants discussed the concept of the partnership being a "win-win," where both sides of the partnership are benefitting. This two-sided coin mentality agrees with the findings of Sandy, who lists students as benefitting through internal transformation, better understanding of their academics, developing a commitment to service, and creating deeper ties with their community (2007, p.24).

Benefits to students listed for the present study similarly ranged from the external to the internal. Most of the organizations believed that volunteering improved the students' chances when applying for graduate schools, academic programs, or jobs. This benefit was identified as a positive consequence for the students entering the community. Several organizations brought up "real life experience" or "community engagement" as positives to service learning partnerships, as well as the reason why volunteering looks good when applying to programs.

There was also the hope that service-learning would lead to future volunteering on the part of the students. One coordinator expressed that she, "would like to see students who come here when they are freshman and work all the way through their senior year," (P62). In the end, every organization was able to identify several benefits to both the students and their agency through their partnership with the university.

2. Communication is critical, and relationships foundational, for university-community partnerships to be successful.

One of the strongest themes that was immediately noticed through analysis was the importance of communication. There was not a single organization that did not at least briefly mention the need of quality communication between the university and the community partner.

What was most interesting about this finding was that inevitably the stress on communication was connected to the success of the relationship. There was certainly a noticeable association between comments such as, "we have a good relationship with UW-L" (C14) and, "I'm in contact with the professors and the university," (C8). In contrast, the less positive, "the professors are hard to get ahold of and follow up with," was related to a university-community relationship perceived as more challenging (C28).

This theme is supported by Sandy (2007), when she writes that amongst her community partner focus groups, "aspects of valuing and nurturing the partnership relationship were uniformly stressed as the highest priority," (p.14). It is clear that communication is critical for a solid relationship, and that a solid relationship is critical for university-community partnerships to be successful.

While there were a few comments made about successful avenues of communication, or methods of contact with faculty outside of official channels, most of the responses about communication focused on its need to improve. One community organization representative said, "The best partnerships are...where we can offer the most full learning experiences, but that the university understands that our primary focus is on [the people we serve]," (P63). Comments such as this reveal the tension that organizations face between serving their primary benefactors, and accommodating the university and students.

The need for relational improvement between university faculty and community partners was made clear by the majority of organizations, as exemplified in the following statement: "I think professors need to be more involved in the community and seeing what's really out there, instead of just giving them a list and saying 'here are a bunch of nonprofits, go and do whatever you need to do,'" (P73). Such sentiments were also found by Sandy's research. She writes, "There was an overwhelming clamor among these community partners that faculty should be more directly involved with their sites, and faculty should work to better understand the culture, conditions and practices of their community co-educators," (2007, p.30).

The above responses showcase the desire of community partners for open communication - that the university understands the organization's effort towards providing a quality learning experience for students, but realizes where the organization's priorities lie. The fact that these comments and similar ones were made suggests that such an understanding relationship does not currently exist.

Acknowledging that improved communication can ameliorate the university-community relationship, several organizations provided suggestions for moving forward. One common recommendation was that of a single point of contact at the university, so that direct communication would be simpler. Suggestions for future improvements, based off of the current research and past studies, will be elaborated upon in the *Recommendations* section of the paper.

3. There are pros and cons to requiring students to volunteer a certain number of hours at an organization.

The majority of organizations involved with the study mentioned requiring students to volunteer a set number of hours during their interview, most often when giving a reason to why students volunteered. In the past there has been research on the effects of service learning on students, including results of required hours (Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray 2001). Most of these studies, however, are from the perspective of the university or the students. It was thus fascinating to record what community partners thought about students' required hours.

Unsurprisingly there was a wide range of opinions, with some organizations believing required hours are hugely beneficial, while others viewed it as a negative practice. Similarly, some organizations noticed a dramatic difference between students volunteering as part of a class requirement and those that were simply interested, while others exclaimed that they, "...can't see too much of a difference between service learning students and normal volunteers," (P53).

The most common benefit cited as stemming from required hours was simply the workforce, along with the hope that students will return once their hours are completed. As one interviewee stated: "Students sometimes start volunteering for a class requirement, and once they are finished come back again," (P30). This is really the hope of most organizations when it comes to syllabi requiring students to volunteer a set number of hours. It is a chance for the student to get to know an organization, how it is run and what it exists for, and perhaps with that knowledge be encouraged to continue volunteering beyond their minimum requirement.

In contrast, many organizations cited issues with required hour amounts. Some expressed the difficulty it places on students when, "with hours and working and school and everything else that students have going on, it can get to be a lot," (P35). Others cited the negative impact required hours had on the organization: "Sometimes somebody will come in with a negative attitude, just doing hours so they don't really care," (C21). One participant confidently

exclaimed that, "A student who wants to be there, because they want to make a difference, is a volunteer that isn't doing it as part of a class requirement," (P29). These are strong opinions, but were validated by several other organizations, suggesting that it is not a unique case for a single organization.

In support, Sandy found similar results in her study from California. She writes that, "Overall, community partners expressed a high level of frustration with mandatory hour requirements...Many felt that the designated hour requirement sends the wrong message to students and were sometimes distressed by the amount of paperwork this requirement generates," (2007, p.35). The findings of Sandy reveal that these challenges faced by La Crosse community organizations are not an isolated incident, but reflective of other parts of the country as well.

4. University events and programs can assist community organizations in carrying out their mission.

The fourth theme that developed through the research was the ability of the university to help organizations achieve their goals through events and programming. This is primarily done by providing opportunities for community partners to engage students and reach a wider volunteer base. Multiple organizations mentioned the Leadership and Involvement Center on campus as being a helpful tool (C1). The Leadership and Involvement Center offers a physical office where students and community organizations can go with volunteer inquiries, but also has a useful online presence. On the Center's website students are able to find announcements and links to community volunteer opportunities, as well as the Community Agency Guide which was discussed earlier in the Methods section.

Another important function of the Leadership and Involvement Center is its hosting of the annual events known as the Involvement Fest (Fall semester) and the Volunteer Fair (Spring semester). Several organizations reflected on their attendance at these events, with some going into such detail as even remarking the positive impact having the Involvement Fest outside had on student interest (P3). However, an organization's success at these events differs from one organization to another, especially depending on the type of volunteer work. Organizations that need a large, constant in-flow of student volunteers generally find these two events more useful than organizations seeking longer-term, committed volunteers. One participant remarked that, "we've never had a strong turnout for what we do at the fair. I'd spend four or five hours there and leave without any students signing up; it was a waste of time," (P39).

Another great opportunity for community organizations is connecting with specific classes and professors. Some organizations have teamed up with classes to work on special projects, or to speak about their work (P13), while others have yet to find a partnership but remain optimistic ("I'm sure there could be some really amazing partnerships developed with specific classes") (C22). University agencies, events, and specific classes can all be beneficial for local organizations in carrying out their mission.

5. Partnering with the University has its challenges.

Despite the many positive potential opportunities that may arise from university-community partnerships, the final theme that was unveiled testifies to the challenges and difficulties that community organizations face when working with the university.

Throughout the interviews, participants were quick to acknowledge that despite any positives resulting from their partnership their relationship with UW-L could always be better (C15). There are several reasons for this, but the most popular perhaps goes back to the issue of relationships. If there are not legitimate and solid relationships built between the University and the partnering organization, then the University will not fully understand the needs and wants of said organizations, which will inevitably lead to misunderstanding. This is exemplified in the fact that many volunteer coordinators have other jobs at their organization, with coordinating volunteers simply an add-on (C10). Without having a relationship, faculty unknowingly assign required hours and send students to a select number of organizations, which can sometimes overload the organizations' staff. "They don't realize how much work it is to have all these volunteers - a lot of time on the staff at the facilities," reported one respondent. "The university puts the organization in a difficult spot sometimes," (P14).

Another challenge, one that cannot be helped, is that of timing and transition. Most students spend four to six years at the University, so there is a constant turnover of student volunteers and leaders. As one participant put it, "We work with good groups from UW-L, but those groups change. Leaders change, so things get lost from year to year," (P68). A consistent single-point of contact would be beneficial in such cases, so that even if the students are changing there is consistency on the part of the university administration.

Another challenge that exists in university-community partnerships is that of access. To much of the community the university remains a less accessible and more isolated place, even though it is public (Bender 1993). This observation can be linked with the discussion that was had earlier in the literature review, which overviewed some differences in attitudes between academics and the community (Morton 1995; Benson, et al. 2000; Bringle, et al. 1999).

Though there may be different explanations for its existence, there most certainly is a chasm between the community and the University, as evidenced by the following comment: "I think UW-L has a lot of great programs to offer the community, but the community in general is not that comfortable going there or not that aware that programming is available to the general public," (P70). Such comments should cause the University some distress, and lead to an investigation in the area of how comfortable the public is with the University.

After analyzing the interviews of the 14 community organizations, these five key themes emerged from the data. Together they represent the general perceptions community partners have about their partnership with the University. The intention of the research was never to be a purely academic exercise, but rather to provide a practical framework for moving forward in UW-L's university-community partnerships. Thus, the following section will give an overview of several recommendations, inspired by other studies as well as interviewed participants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of data analysis, along with past research, several recommendations will be made to continue the success of UW-L's partnerships and improve them in the future. The various recommendations can be divided into two simple categories.

1. Community Partners and Professors

As was expressed during the literature review, and stressed further through the five key themes, relationships are key to a successful partnership. These relationships must be formed through open communication and exist as mutual, genuine relationships between the professors and the community partner organizations. Time and time again community partners mentioned the desire for a better relationship with the faculty with whom they are working.

Community partners appreciate it when professors stay connected with an organization and are easy to communicate with. "It's nice when professors follow up, which isn't always," said one respondent (P66). Another believed that, "the biggest key is open communication; just more communication directly," (P57).

In addition to communicating, community organizations appreciate it when professors genuinely seem to care about what the organization is doing. As mentioned earlier, one contact spoke about how, "professors need to be more involved in the community and seeing what's really out there, instead of just giving them a list and saying 'here are a bunch of nonprofits, go and do whatever you need to do,'" (P73). Their sentiments were not unique, as several organizations agreed that professors need to get more involved with the community.

These findings agree with Sandy's (2007) conclusions. Of her recommendations, valuing relationships, holding conversations regularly, and involving faculty directly are all included (p.37). It is starting to become apparent that issues within university-community partnerships at UW-L are not unique in the world of cross-sector partnerships.

If relationships are vital, then why does it seem to be so difficult to maintain them? There are two possible reasons for the difficulty. First, professors can sometimes create a divide between what they view as their professional work and the local community (Bender 1993; Keener 1999). If this mindset is present, it is no wonder that relationship challenges exist. Professors must view their professional life as including the community around them. After all, is not the goal of academia to benefit society?

Unfortunately, this challenge is further exacerbated by the second reason professors have difficulty maintaining beneficial relationships with community partners: time. It is simply a reality of the academic world that professors are busy people. With classes, research, boards, and committees community engagement can easily be pushed down the list of priorities. While acknowledging this predicament, a participant in the study provided a potential solution: "Professors have a lot to do, and if community involvement and service learning doesn't count towards their promotion or tenure, then it is most likely to get dropped," (P77). The details of UW-L's tenure and promotion

regulations are not included in this study, partly due to the fact that variations exist between departments. Nevertheless, it will still be stated as a recommendation for future improvement.

Improving the relationship between University faculty and community partners will directly solve most of the challenges mentioned in the fifth theme found in the data. Professors must take service learning seriously and genuinely engage the community if their partnerships are to be successful. If it is too challenging without regulation, then perhaps the University needs to update their requirements to reflect their desire for successful university-community service learning partnerships.

2. Community Partners and Infrastructure

Any challenges brought up in the data that cannot be solved through improved professor-community organization relationships can be solved through improved university infrastructure. Communication once again arises as a major concern. As one interviewee exclaimed, "What would help us, what would be nice, is to have a single point of contact with the ability to disseminate our needs and information across campus and to different departments; a single point person," (P32). If such a method exists, it is unknown to the author and the interviewed community partners.

Currently, if an organization has a request for volunteers, they can contact the Leadership and Involvement Center, who will most often notify students through email or social media about the volunteer opportunity. When it comes to developing sustainable partnerships, however, the process is much more challenging.

One of the study's participants discussed how she wanted to create a partnership for a specific program with the University. Her intention was to get an entire class to assist with her needs, which would be an educational experience. Without any prior relationships with professors it became increasingly hard for her to make her proposed partnership work. She had to email every single professor of a department before one finally responded, and then start from scratch. Similar stories were told by the respondents of Sandy's 2007 study:

> "Focus group participants spent considerable time strategizing together on how to gain greater entree to their higher education institution partner. In larger institutions, the service-learning office may represent only one of several possible connections for community partners. They are well aware that there are often special benefits associated with developing relationships with particular faculty members, departments, or programs...This process can be mystifying even for experienced partners," (p.33).

The University's infrastructure must be able to handle this type of process. Methods should be in place which allow the university to form partnerships at various amount of formality, differing time frames, and multiple purposes (Walshok 1999).

The importance of the university infrastructure on service learning partnerships cannot be overstated. As Dorado et al. writes, "In these partnerships, because of their differences, participants are particularly dependent on the structural factors defining the partnerships to develop relationships conducive to the identification of shared common goals and/or shared destiny," (2008, p.387). Community partners understand this importance, as seen in the study results and themes. One organization requested a modified "volunteer center" that can serve as the one place organizations look to, which, "has a database of volunteers where they just go to get all their volunteers," (P49). This type of center currently exists to a degree with the Leadership and Involvement Center, but the Center primarily focuses on students, not on community organizations.

New infrastructure must be put into place that will let community organizations use the Leadership and Involvement Center or another office as the single point of communication, the liaison, between community organizations and the university. Perhaps an online database, as proposed by one respondent: "There just needs to be a clear, more concise channel of communication between UW-L and all of the community organizations. Something on the website, a concise directory for nonprofits," (P42).

Essentially, the process of an organization finding an interested professor and forming a partnership must be simplified. If an organization is seeking a class to partner with, there must be a single access point where they can make that request. It is then the responsibility of that office or faculty to find if any professors are interested. If an organization desires to partner with a student organization, a similar process must be possible.

As shown earlier, professors are busy with their own responsibilities. Community organizations are busy as well, and most volunteer coordinators have their coordinating responsibilities on top of other job duties. Why not create a position or office at the University whose sole purpose is to serve as the mediator, the single point of contact? Once a partnership is formed, it is no longer the duty of the office to maintain it; it then falls into the hands

of the community organization and the professor. The initial contact, however, must no longer be left open for the parties to fend for themselves. Infrastructural changes must be made if the University hopes to increase and improve future service learning partnerships.

CONCLUSION

Service learning is an "approach to problem-based learning that confronts students with real-world problems and is deemed an effective approach for helping to bridge the gaps between theory and practice while exposing students to public service experiences," (Shea and Weiss 2013, p.730). Much research has been published on the effects of service learning initiatives, from the benefits to students to the benefits to institutions (Bailis 2000; Bortolin 2011; Dorado and Giles 2008). One area that is lacking is the effect of service learning on community partner organizations (Giles and Eyler 1998; Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray 2001).

This research used a grounded-theory approach to study the perceptions of the community organizations in the La Crosse, Wisconsin area. After 14 organizations that partner with the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse were interviewed, the data revealed five key themes. The first is that service learning partnerships benefit both the student volunteers and the community organizations involved. Second, communication is critical, and relationships foundational, for university-community partnerships to be successful. Third, there are pros and cons to requiring students to volunteer a certain number of hours at an organization. Fourth, university events and programs can assist community organizations in carrying out their mission. Finally, the fifth key theme that emerged from the data is that partnering with the university has its challenges.

These themes provide many implications, but lend themselves to key recommendations as well. Simply put, two changes must occur for university-community partnerships to continue to grow and improve. The professors must develop genuine relationships with the community organizations, and if this will not happen naturally then such involvement must be considered for promotion and tenure. Second, the university must adapt their infrastructure to make it easier for organizations to partner with professors, student groups, and specific classes.

While these findings cannot be applied to areas outside of the City of La Crosse, they concur with the previous work of Sandy (2007). A general theme through all the research on university-community partnerships is that of communication and relationships. In regards to these themes, the current study contributes further data that these two attributes are essential in successful partnerships.

Two general recommendations are provided, but future research should use this study as a base to further investigate the specifics of professor-partner relationships and the use of university infrastructure. The study can serve as an outline and foundation for a program evaluation as well. It is the hope of the researcher that the study proves not to be only an academic exercise, but leads to practical changes. Praxis is essential if the academic world is to remain relevant and beneficial to society as a whole.

LIMITATIONS

Only the City of La Crosse was considered, with the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse the subject of the study. The sample size was small, with a 50% response rate of the 28 organizations. Therefore, the study could easily be broadened to include other colleges within La Crosse, more organizations partnering with UW-L, and other cities in the region. The study occurred within a narrow time frame and was not designed to be generalizable to the larger population of regional or national service learning/community partner programs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Bailis, L. N. 2000. *Taking service-learning to the next level: Emerging lessons from the national community development program*. Springfield, VA: National Society for Experiential Education.
Bender, T. 1993. *Intellect and Public Life*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
Benson, L., Harkavy, I., and J. Puckett. 2000. "An Implementation Revolution as a Strategy for Fulfilling the

Democratic Promise of University-Community Partnerships: Penn–West Philadelphia as an Experiment in Progress." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 29 (March): 24–45.

Bortolin, Kathleen. 2011. "Serving Ourselves: How the Discourse on Community Engagement Privileges the University over the Community." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (Fall 2011): 49-58.

Bringle, R. G., and J.A. Hatcher. 1995. "A Service-Learning Curriculum for Faculty." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 2: 112–122.

Bringle, R. G., Games, R., and E.A. Malloy. 1999. *Colleges and universities as citizens*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Dorado, S., and Dwight E. Giles, Jr. 2004. "Service-Learning Partnerships: Paths of Engagement." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (Fall 2004): 25-37.

Dorado, S., Giles Jr., D.E., and Theodora C. Welch. 2008. "Delegation of Coordination and Outcomes in Cross-Sector Partnerships: The Case of Service Learning Partnerships." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38 (368). http://nvs.sagepub.com/content/38/3/368 (Accessed March 15, 2013).

Eyler, J., Giles Jr., D.E., Stenson, C.M., and C.J. Gray. 2001. "At a glance: What we know about the effects of service-learning on students, faculty, institutions, and communities, 1993 -2000 (3rd ed.)" *University of Minnesota: National Service-Learning Clearinghouse* (www.umn.edu/-serve).

Giles Jr., D.E., and J. Eyler. 1998. "A Service-Learning Research Agenda for the Next Five Years." In *Academic Service Learning: A Pedagogy of Action and Reflection*, eds. R. Rhoads and J. Howard. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 65-72.

Jacoby, B. and Associates. 2003. *Building Partnerships for Service-Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Morton, K. 1995. "The Irony of Service: Charity, Project and Social Change in Service-Learning." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 2: 19–32.

Ostrander, S. A. 2004. "Democracy, Civic Participation, and the University: A Comparative Study of Civic Engagement on Five Campuses." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 33(1): 74-93.

Parker, B., and J. Selsky. 2004. "Interface Dynamics in Cause-Based Partnerships: An Exploration of Emergent Culture." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 33(3): 458-488.

Sandy, Marie. 2007. "Community Voices: A California Campus Compact Study on Partnerships." *California Campus Compact*. http://www.cacampuscompact.org/html/publications/communityVoices.html (Accessed March 15, 2013).

University of Wisconsin - La Crosse. Office of Records and Registration. 2013. "UW-La Crosse General Education Program." *2011-2013 Undergraduate Catalog*. http://www.uwlax.edu/records/UGCat/Requirements/Index.htm (Accessed March 15, 2013).