

Significant Findings in Campus-Community Engagement: Community Partner Perspective
Sean Creighton, PhD, Executive Director, Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education

Background

This article discusses in depth several significant findings from an action research dissertation study that developed community partner indicators of engagement. Specifically, the article examines three of the community partner indicators--*usefulness of service-learning*, *relevance of research*, and *equitable treatment*--and their associated descriptors, for effectiveness and ineffectiveness. The unique aspect of this study was that the indicators were generated by the community organizations participating as stakeholders in campus-community partnerships. For this reason, the study makes a relevant contribution to the scholarship on campus-community engagement by giving voice to different perspectives involved in campus-community engagement. Higher education is dependent on partnering organizations for engagement opportunities. This study finds serious enough concerns among community partners that civic engagement and service-learning programs could be threatened if their dissatisfaction escalated.

Introduction

A lack of understanding of community-organization partners persists in the scholarship on civic engagement. In fact, scholars have been calling for extended research on community partner perspectives for some time (Braskamp and Wergin, 1998; Darlington-Hope, 1999; Fullbright-Anderson, et. al., 2001; Giles, et. al., 1991; Pew Partnership for Civic Change, 2004). Instead, service-learning has been researched primarily from a paradigm in which colleges and universities are the key stakeholders (Giles and Eyler, 1998). Although the scholarship has dutifully validated service-learning as an effective teaching method with long-term implications for the creation of engaged students (Astin, et. al., 2000), only a handful of dissertations and published studies consider the effects on agencies that provide the service experience (Blythe, 2004; Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; Bullough, 2004; Cox, 2000; Darlington-Hope, 1999; Fullbright-Anderson, et. al., 2001; Leiderman, et. al., 2003; Risley, 1992; Shaffett, 2002; Vernon and Foster, 2002). Clearly, a body of scholarship on service-learning that describes effective service-learning from a community partner's perspective is a critical step toward building strong relationships between institutions of higher education and their community partners.

Partnerships are dependent on a common understanding and agreement among not only community organization leaders, but also among higher-education administrators and faculty (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002). More recent studies (Bushouse, 2005; Miron and Moely, 2006; Sandy and Holland, 2006) have begun to build this new body of scholarship, prioritizing community organization and agency

perspectives as relevant and critical to the research on civic engagement. The research study discussed in this article helps to corroborate these recent studies and makes new contributions to understanding civic engagement activities from a community partner perspective.

Research Study

The central purpose of the research study was to develop common indicators of engagement for civic initiatives between institutions of higher education and their community organization partners. The unique aspect of the study was that the indicators were generated by the community organizations participating as stakeholders in campus-community partnerships. The study advocated for research that provided a deeper understanding of the perspectives of community organizations. Consequently, a formal set of community partner indicators of engagement was developed by the participants in the study and disseminated to higher-education leaders. Action research was the selected method of inquiry since it enabled community partners to participate directly in the development of the indicators, engaging the community partner leaders “in a collaborative process of critical inquiry” (Argyris, et. al., 1985, p. 236). Unlike other methods of inquiry in which research is conducted “to” or “on” a community, action research permitted an inclusive approach in which the inquiry was done “by” and “with” the community (Anderson and Herr, 2005, p. 3).

Selection of participants. The selection of participants for the study was purposeful. The participants represented community organizations from the health and wellness sector in Dayton, Ohio. Particular to the organizations was a mission and purpose that included advocacy, research, and/or other health and wellness services to the Dayton community. Further, each organization had previously partnered with four prominent Dayton-area colleges and universities that engaged regularly in campus-community partnerships.

Data collection. As part of the data collection, the study included interviews and conference-style focus groups with participants. The interviews provided a basis for building acquaintances among the participants, discussing the study and process, and obtaining preliminary data on their perspectives on successful civic partnerships.

In addition to the one-on-one interviews, two conferences brought participants together for dialogue and creation of the indicators of engagement; this conferencing exemplified the collaborative work, providing participants a venue for creating a shared vision of common indicators. The first conference included a reflection on the data collected from the one-on-one interviews and an examination

of the indicators proposed by each member. The group had the opportunity to ask questions and reflect on the initial data and discuss issues and concerns related to the information collected. The second conference focused on further development and refinement of the community indicators. In this meeting, a set of shared indicators was proposed at the beginning of the meeting. The participants completed the study by agreeing on a set of indicators that fairly and accurately represented their expectations and perspectives.

Discussion of Significant Findings

Research findings emerged from intense conversations among community-partner participants during the interviews and the conferences. Participants shared their personal experiences with higher education institutions, expressed their views about the way they were treated, and provided observations about logistical challenges and successes in their past partnerships. The data collected revealed thoughtful and exhaustive examples that addressed what the participating community organizations looked for and expected in civic partnerships with higher education. The significant findings discussed in this article are concerned with three indicators: *usefulness of service learning*, *relevancy of research*, and *equitable treatment* of community organizations partners.

Usefulness of service learning. The pedagogy of service-learning has been researched and written about extensively. The popularity of service-learning as a teaching method has increased significantly as it makes for an effective strategy for engaging students in their communities. Much of the scholarship on service-learning illustrates its effect on student learning and is written from a campus-centric position. The scholarship validates service-learning as an effective teaching method with long-term implications for the creation of engaged students (Astin, et. al., 2000). However, little has been written that researches service-learning from the community-partner perspective.

The indicator *usefulness of service learning* included descriptors of both effective and ineffective implementation of service-learning (See Chart A). This indicator made a relevant contribution to the scholarship on service-learning by expressing the voice and perspectives of community partners. In particular, community partners indicated many serious concerns about how service-learning programs are organized and implemented.

INDICATOR	EFFECTIVE	INEFFECTIVE
Usefulness of Service-Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandates fair distribution of service-learning placements to all neighborhoods that are part of the community • Organizes a system for instructing students about service and for coordinating effective placement in cooperation with community partner • Provides helpful and typically low-cost labor by undergraduate students • Provides graduate-student expertise to address community-partner needs and share new academic knowledge with community-partner staff • Views students as role models for the constituencies being served by community partner • Hires students to become employees of the community partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discriminates against providing student service in areas based on race, class, and safety concerns • Permits sense of student entitlement • Fails to recognize that under-prepared undergraduate students tax community partner personnel, placing an increased strain on the infrastructure • Shifts service-learning purpose from community-centered to student-centered • Treats community partners as merely a laboratory • Depends on community partner excessively, resulting in too many students calling for interviews, information, and placement

Chart A: Usefulness of Service-Learning

For colleges and universities to learn from the study, they need to look at the main concerns expressed in the indicator *usefulness of service-learning*. Apparently, the participants perceived a serious lack of organization in service-learning programs. Although some faculty and service-learning coordinators had begun to establish relationships with the participants, the prevailing experiences was that too often students initiated contact with the community partner and were not well prepared by their faculty for the work they were expected to do. Further, the students had little understanding of the purpose of the experience aside from securing the required number of service hours to graduate or pass a class. Community-partner participants also acknowledged that students were ambivalent about the service requirement, having put little or no thought into the type of service experience they were interested in and the value of the experience. The participants expected students to have been adequately informed and the process to be orchestrated in a professional and collegial fashion. Instead, they experienced situations in which students arrived with a sense of entitlement, unwilling to perform certain work they deemed as menial.

In addition, the burden of service-learning on the community partner remained a significant finding in that participants felt added strain on their organizations. Participants noted that it cost them time and money to train students and, in several cases, mentioned the significant cost of police background checks in order for students to be placed at their organization. The participants agreed that they expected higher education institutions to demonstrate that they valued community partners by providing a *quid pro quo* exchange for the service-learning placement. The community partners wanted to

be paid for the training and service opportunities they made available for the colleges and universities and wanted equity for sharing time, expertise, and organizational resources. The burden of service-learning instilled a discontent that fueled this desire for reciprocity.

The participants had a lengthy discussion about the need for equitable distribution of service-learning placements across Dayton neighborhoods so as not to exclude an underserved population of a community. Without such a distribution, students are sheltered from the realities of inner-city life and kept from engaging fully in their communities. If service-learning is to provide an educational experience in which students engage in initiatives that meet identified community needs (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995), then higher education must fully embrace sectors of the community that have serious needs. It is through direct engagement with neighborhoods in need that students are able to reflect more deeply on the core issues of society that create depressed areas. Although the experience may cause discomfort for faculty and students, they gain firsthand knowledge that broadens their initial perceptions. Those firsthand experiences and the opportunity they provide for self-reflection about service-learning enhance the possibility that students will adopt civic responsibility as a guiding principle in their lives.

The numerous perceptions and expectations that emerged from the research revealed new insights about the pedagogy of service learning. The participants perceived that service-learning programs were more concerned with student learning than with their effect on the community. In some respects, the research process was therapeutic for the participants in that the interviews and conferences provided an avenue for discussion that had not readily been available before.

Relevance of research. Scholars have complained for a couple of decades about the disengaged nature of the research conducted by American universities (Bok, 1982; Boyer, 1996; Checkoway, 2000; Ehrlich, 2000; Harkavy, 1997; Hearn and Holdsworth, 2002; Neave, 2000; Wagner, 1993). Boyer's work addressed this disengagement by calling for a scholarship of engagement. The findings of this study suggested that the disengagement of scholarly practices from everyday reality remains an issue for community partners.

Participants described in the indicator *relevance of research* the effective and ineffective ways to go about producing research that has a meaningful effect on their community constituencies (See Chart B). In this category, they focused on the disconnection between theory and practice as well as the irrelevance of academic research, particularly evaluation research.

<i>INDICATOR</i>	<i>EFFECTIVE</i>	<i>INEFFECTIVE</i>
Relevance of Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflects the priorities of the community partner's research needs • Produces applicable research outcomes and trend data, increasing a community partner's knowledge of its direct service to constituents • Provides research as a partnership, waiving overhead rates and associated fees • Partners on funding for research on community health and wellness that improves direct service programs regionally • Integrates existing models of practice and academic knowledge, enriching relevancy of both theoretical scholarship and direct service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produces research that places stress on community partner infrastructure • Strains the already limited resources of the community partner through an exhaustive research process • Redirects substantial funds toward evaluation research that could otherwise support direct service programs • Impacts negatively a community partner's constituency by charging for research when it could otherwise be provided in-kind • Perpetuates ignorance about a community partner's constituency through shallow research

Chart B: Relevance of Research

Participants noticed little or no progress in strengthening the applicability of higher education research to community-partner needs. Repeatedly, the participants voiced frustration about their time being wasted in working with academic researchers. While the research served to advance the academic profession, they thought it did not improve direct service programs. Further, participants felt that funding for evaluation redirected substantial support away from community organizations to higher education. For example, the participants noted examples of universities charging exorbitant overhead rates to conduct research, while the community partner received little or no support for providing the requested data to the research evaluators. Additionally, participants agreed that much of the research did little to help their constituents. Instead, they felt research perpetuated a misperception of the community and its members, which increased public ignorance of the community.

Further examples of community-partner frustration with academic research emerged during the individual interviews. One example had to do with Community Outreach Partnerships Centers (COPC), the funding system housed within the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of University Partnerships program. COPC provides funds to colleges and universities to apply their intellectual resources to efforts to revitalize distressed communities. Although COPC directs millions of dollars in funding each year to universities, community partners are burdened with the responsibility of writing letters of support and agreements to participate based on their geographic location in a distressed area. Frustration on the part of community partners arose as a result of the perception that the COPC funding stays within the budgets of the universities that received grants and little funding is allocated

directly to the communities in distress. The participants indicated that they valued applicable research and research that served their constituencies, but they also expected fair working exchanges and equal treatment when participating in a grant-funded partnership with higher education.

As a result of these findings, this study has challenged progress made in the scholarship of engagement, regardless of the honorable intentions on the part of higher education to reconnect research efforts with community needs. The *relevance of research* indicator was a significant finding and one that needs to be examined carefully by leaders of colleges and universities.

Equitable treatment. During the study, the participants discussed in detail both positive and negative feelings about their relationships with local colleges and universities. The results produced the indicator of engagement *Equitable Treatment* (See Chart C). Participants felt disrespected by higher education partners, expressing the opinion that higher education had an elitist attitude. The feeling of inferiority was a core finding. It can be remedied through a process that engages institutions of higher education and their community partners in discussions that alleviate feelings of mistrust, disrespect, and inferiority.

<i>INDICATOR</i>	<i>EFFECTIVE</i>	<i>INEFFECTIVE</i>
Equitable Treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates respect, fairness, quality, cooperation, integrity, and trust between partners • Adds value to the credibility of the community partner • Provides opportunity for development of relationships with affiliate organizations • Recognizes both partners make decisions based on ethical considerations and financial implications • Emphasizes the importance of civic responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disrespects and under-values community partner • Ignores importance of community partner’s role as a provider of practical knowledge, field experience, and training • Perpetuates the “ivory tower” syndrome, which keeps higher education from utilizing existing services, programs, and expertise of community partners

Chart C: Equitable Treatment

The participants recognized that local higher education faculty and leaders might not have intentionally sought to create ill will, nor instill negative feelings in their community partners. In fact, these feelings may stem from a misunderstanding between differing professional cultures. The participants viewed institutions of higher education as well funded, powerful, and uniquely situated community assets that had significant leverage in Dayton. In comparison, the participants viewed their own organizations as similarly critical assets to the community, yet struggling, in some cases, to survive.

The participants expected higher education to help address community-wide issues and harbored resentment because of poor experiences with certain faculty and students. Essentially, the participants wanted a degree of respect and treatment that put direct-service providers and higher education on an equal level. Unfortunately, they felt unheard by higher education.

Conclusion

Community organizations are local assets, providing programs and services to the public that increase the health and wellness of individuals in the community. They have existed, in some cases, for as long as many colleges and universities. The significant findings from the study show that service-learning and academic research on communities need to be studied more deeply. These findings illustrate concerns about service-learning from the perspective of the community partners. Further, the study focuses on the finding that higher education needs to improve the relevance of its research, which includes increasing its applicability to addressing widespread community issues. For service-learning programs to improve their chances for success, higher education leadership must address these challenges to community partners.

Participants expressed their sincere gratitude toward campuses that included them in the entire process. For the participants, a productive process provides the opportunity to dialogue with peers, reflect on the meaning of effective campus-community partnerships, and agree on action steps that improve campus-community relationships. Throughout the engagement process, campuses must treat the partnering organizations with respect and approach partnerships from the position of equality. Based on this study, if higher education can pursue partnerships from a standpoint of equality, the long-term effectiveness of campus-community engagement will be significantly enhanced.

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About the Author

Sean Creighton is the Executive Director of the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education, a regional consortium of colleges and universities dedicated to advancing higher education through cooperation. Sean earned his Ph.D. in leadership and change from Antioch University. He currently serves on the student access advisory committee for Midwest Higher Education Compact, steering committee for civic and community engagement at Wright State University, education advisory boards for TouchSmart Publishing and The Perseverance Group, and was recently elected to the Yellow Springs Board of Education. Sean lives in Yellow Springs, Ohio with his wife and three children. You can reach Dr. Creighton at: Sean Creighton, PhD, Executive Director, Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education, Phone: (937) 258-8890, Email: sean.creighton@soche.org