



## **Community Partner Voices: Service-Learning Perspectives from Hawai'i**

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**Spring 2018**

### **Abstract**

This article seeks to fill the gap in the service-learning literature on the impact of service-learning on community partners by examining community partners' views on service-learning and addressing some of the problematic issues they face throughout their interactions with the university. This includes working with the university to ensure a collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship, scheduling of students engaged in service-learning, and institutional capacity for training students in new tasks and skills to benefit the organization and the community it serves.

**Keywords:** University-Community Relationship, Institutional Capacity, Community Partner Mission Impact

### **Introduction**

Service-learning is quickly becoming an integral part of many university curricula (New, 2016). The University of Hawai'i system is no exception. The University of Hawai'i West Oahu is one of four bachelor degree granting universities in the ten-campus system, which serves all of the main Hawaiian islands. UHWO's mission is to "develop life-long learners enriched and informed by career competencies and educational opportunities that address state, regional, and international needs" (UHWO Strategic Plan 2015-2020). UHWO's student population in the fall semester of 2017 consisted of 3072 students, with approximately 66% of students being women, 28% of all students are Native Hawaiian, and students are an average age of twenty-seven. UHWO has the highest proportion of Native Hawaiian students in any of the UH system campuses due to our geographic location near the Leeward coast of O'ahu, where many Native Hawaiians live and work.

Given this information, it is clear that UHWO is not what many would call a "traditional" university in any sense of the word. Our service-learning programs reflect the needs of the communities we serve as well as curricular and pedagogical desires of both students and faculty. UHWO's mission is closely aligned with Hawai'i's workforce development and civic engagement. Our geographic service area contains

the new and rapidly developing cities of Kapolei and Ewa Beach on the southwestern side of the island of O`ahu, as well as the entire Leeward coast, which has the highest proportion of Native Hawaiians of any area on the island. Our service area also includes large tracts of agricultural lands, as well as the tourist destination of the North Shore of O`ahu with a large mainland transplant population mixed with descendants of former sugar plantation workers. These divergent areas and populations contribute to a diverse student body, not only ethnically, but socioeconomically as well. Our student population faces a number of social issues, not the least of which is homelessness as well as extremely high rates of chronic diseases. Many of the university's community partners are focused on helping the houseless population in our service area and several other organizations partnering with the university are geared toward agricultural endeavors, many of which are also rooted in the Hawaiian value of *mālama 'āina* (caring for the land) and its resources.

Much of the emphasis of the service-learning research literature has been focused on the needs of students, faculty, and the university, with little attention paid to the community partners involved in the relationship (Bringle, Hatcher & Clayton 2006). More recently Clayton, Bringle, and Hatcher (2012) have highlighted that our knowledge of community partner outcomes has grown significantly but the primary focus still remains on student outcomes. Indeed, in 2010, Davidson, Jimenez, Onifade, and Hankins argued that the impact of service-learning on community partners was rarely examined in the academic literature. While it is certainly important to focus on student learning outcomes and the ways in which service-learning addresses the university mission, community partner voices are often unheard. This article seeks to fill that gap by examining community partners' views on the service-learning experience from their perspective and address some of the problematic issues they face throughout their interactions with the university, including but not limited to working with the university to ensure a collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship, scheduling of students engaged in service-learning, and the community organizations' institutional capacity for training students in new tasks and skills to benefit the organization and the community it serves. This study examines the voices of community partners, within the context of the literature in this area. The literature review examines existing views on the relationship between the university and community partners. In light of this literature, short interview surveys as well as follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with community partners to understand their views on the impact of service-learning programs on their respective capacities to serve their clients and fulfill their missions. Finally, conclusions were drawn as to the community partners' views on the usefulness of the service-learning for their respective organizations and university policy considerations regarding the community partner/university relationship were addressed.

## **Literature Review**

It is important to include the voices of community partners in the service-learning literature in order to continue to build a flourishing collaborative relationship between the university and the community, as well as potentially create a model for university-community relations. Civic engagement, or civic-mindedness, refers to a person's understanding of her/his community, and her/his place within that community as well as the capacity to "take action when appropriate" (Ehrlich, 2000). Initially, service-

learning provides a space for students to “try out” civic engagement as part of a course, providing a pathway for them to continue that engagement after they have finished the service-learning class or even left the university altogether once they graduate. Civic engagement through service-learning leads to socially responsive knowledge and contributes to a democratic society (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010; Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). Most of the emphasis in service-learning courses is geared toward assessing student learning and making a connection between learning outcomes and the university’s mission (Braunsberger & Flamm, 2013; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Boyd & Brackmann, 2012). The impact of service-learning on community partners has only relatively recently started to be a focus of inquiry.

First, it is important to define community partners. Behrman (2011) argues that communities are not only a geographic place, but also a group of people who share a certain commitment to their common welfare. Within the service-learning relationship between the university and various community partners, attention to communication and collaboration on an even playing field is particularly important as there seems to be a tendency for the academic side to take over in driving the agenda. However, a partnership between the university and a community organization where care has been taken to structure the relationship thoughtfully and equally can produce useful results for both the university and the community partner (Jones, Gray, Paleo, Braden, & Lesser, 2008; Siemens, 2012). In Hawai‘i, this is an issue particularly fraught with cultural significance as many community partners address issues relevant to the Native Hawaiian population and cultural protocols must be learned and respected by students and faculty alike. Understanding the culture and remaining humble and open to direction and critique is key to creating a partnership based on mutual respect (Lefever-Davis, Johnson, & Pearman, 2007; Minkler, 2004; Prins, 2005; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008; Wehling, 2008). Building that cultural competency is an additional benefit for students beyond the tasks they may be performing for and with the community partners. Again however, the focus tends to be on what benefits the students may be accruing, or even how the university is benefiting from these service-learning experiences and partnerships (Kiltz, 2010). The emphasis tends to be on the service hours performed, the number of faculty involved, or the number of community partnerships counted (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). Impact is normally measured and assessed in this way, with little attention paid to the impacts on community partners, or to their respective impacts on the communities they serve through the service hours provided by the students/university through service-learning classes and supportive faculty. These models tend to reify important power dynamics between the university and community partners engaged in the service-learning relationship.

Community engagement must be perceived as a partnership and collaborative effort, rather than simply quantifying/assessing what students may have accomplished for the community partner(s) (McDonald & Dominguez, 2015). Indeed, service-learning models should not reflect or reinforce unearned privilege and power in our society by imposing a stratified relationship between the university and the community partners through the perception that students are providing services for the disadvantaged in order to remedy deficits in the community (Hess, Lanig, & Vaughan, 2007) reflecting attitudes of unearned privilege and sometimes even racism (Heiselt & Wolverton, 2009). This view contributes to the argument that involving the community partners

and assessing outcomes from their perspective is important in order not to reinforce this hierarchical relationship with the university as the dominant partner and the community partner at subordinate. Many university/community partner relationships are full of good intentions, but due to the inherent nature of quarter or semester-based timelines for classes, students and faculty drop in and out of certain projects or organizations for relatively short periods of time, losing the opportunity to develop sustainable collaborative relationships (Aslam et al., 2013). As Karasik (2007) argues however, "relationships are works in progress" (p. 778), so building connections between the university and community partners over time and maintaining them by tending to the goals of both the university and the community partners' needs results in both entities working toward mutually beneficial goals. That said, it is much easier to measure student contact hours, or service-learning tasks performed than to receive open and honest feedback from community partners, assessing what the impacts of service-learning might be on the community as a whole, or even developing policy to support both university and community partner missions equally.

An ideal service-learning relationship benefits both students and communities, facilitated by either faculty and the university or the community partner. Not only are the relational aspects of the service-learning embedded within the experience, but the service performed has the potential to have a larger impact – especially when driven and directed by the community partners served (Beran & Tubin, 2012). While this does not necessarily override the inherent inequalities within the relationship between the university and the community partners, if the latter is consulted and invested in the service projects, the student work does end up benefiting the community. This is particularly salient to ensure that the implementation of service projects done by the students gives community outcomes the same weight as student learning outcomes in crafting the relationship between the university and the community partner(s). A balance must be negotiated between the two and neither one should take precedence over the other (Thomson, Smith-Tolken, Naidoo, & Bringle, 2011). Community partners are a rich source of expertise and can be valued teachers for service-learning students (McMenamin, McGrath, & D'Eath, 2010). Ensuring that these relationships are maintained contributes to the long-term sustainability of the service-learning programs (Jue, 2011), classes, and student civic engagement gains as they participate in projects with the community partners. These projects are embedded within specific contexts and particular organizations, and they may end up shaping the nature of the interactions between students and communities as well as the university and community partners (Oldfield, 2008). Recognizing the inherent value in community partner knowledge and experiences reinforces the value of the service-learning experience both for students and for the university's outreach to its surrounding community.

Several important journals in the field of service-learning research such as *The Journal of Community Engagement in Higher Education*, *The Journal of High Education Outreach and Engagement*, *The Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, *The Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, *Partnerships* and others have been leaders in remedying this disparity in focus on student success instead of community partner benefits with a number of articles dedicated to this important issue (Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Bushouse, 2005; Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Ferrari & Worrall, 2007; Miron & Moely, 2006; Sandy & Holland, 2006;

Schmidt & Robby, 2002) over the past decade and a half. Indeed, Srinivas, Meenan, Drogin, and DePrince (2015) went so far as to develop a Community Impact Scale (CIS) so as to be able to assess the perceived benefits and costs associated with service-learning partnerships for the community partners themselves (p. 5). While the CIS is useful and current, it contains a 46-item scale, perhaps too detailed for the scope of this article. In view of the social problems and lack of resources faced by many of UHWO's community partners, it would be difficult to ask them to submit to such a lengthy survey instrument without straining their capacity to perform their regular services for the communities they serve.

Following Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker Jr., and Geschwind's call (2000) to listen to and include community partner voices, the community partners were queried for information on the ability of organizations to achieve their missions and address potential problems within the university/community partner relationship through explicit university policy actions. Reflection on the service-learning experience, both from students and from community partners is critical to a continued successful partnership between the university, the community and the students. There are multiple players involved here and students and faculty are representatives of the university in the community, contributing to the overall ongoing partnership. The community partners working with the students and the university should have a voice in order to reflect on their relationship, as well as looking introspectively at how that relationship can flourish and continue to grow. As James and Logan argue, if we "indeed value our partners' voices and ideas, then we ought to work harder to engage them not only in our practice, but also in the stories we tell about our practice" (Waters & Anderson-Lain, 2014). Probably the most frequent means of including partner voice is through the analysis of partner responses to summative feedback surveys" (2016, 18). While this may be the most common type of feedback from community partners, it is by no means the only type of feedback available to faculty and the university regarding the impact of service-learning on community partners and how university policy can address their needs. That said; alternative methods are hard to document. This project attempts to fill a portion of that research gap through analyzing the community partners' responses to specific questions designed to elicit a range of feedback concerning the challenges they face when hosting service-learning students from the neighboring university.

### **Mixed Methods**

This study focused on short interview surveys initially through email contact and followed up with several additional in-depth interviews with 5 community partners. Subsequently to applying for, and receiving, Institutional Review Board approval from the Human Studies committee at the University of Hawai'i (UH) system for this project, email questionnaires were sent to 110 community partners in the UH system service-learning database. Of those 110, only 85 email addresses were valid, showing that the database is somewhat outdated. Of those 85 email queries, the author received 16 responses for a response rate of 18.8% - unfortunately, a rather low percentage. The email queries contained a description of the project, along with three open-ended questions so as not to impose a lengthy electronic interview process on the community partner respondents. The responses came from a variety of different kinds of organizations and nonprofit agencies that accept service-learning students from the university system given that UHWO does not have a large number



of community partners but does use the UH system service-learning database to place students with various organizations throughout the island, ranging from a museum to a farm; from the American Lung Health Organization, to the Committee on the Status of Women, and among many others. Some responses were just a few sentences in length and others a few pages. One respondent wrote as much as few pages on each one of the questions.

Given the unevenness of the qualitative responses both in quality and quantity and the low response rate, the research findings would have necessarily exhibited a paucity of information. Thus, an expansion of the methods seemed to be advisable. Given the author's longstanding involvement in the service-learning community on O'ahu, in-depth interviews with five additional community partners were conducted to increase the depth of the information in several key aspects (see Table 1 below). While the existing literature clearly shows that there is a high emphasis on student learning outcomes and civic engagement in the research and much less emphasis on community partner mission and institutional capacity, the community partners surveyed and interviewed did value the service-learning relationship, all the while remaining aware of its potential drawbacks to the success of their respective missions.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The purpose of the qualitative survey instrument and in-depth interviews intends to measure various metrics that might reflect the community partner voices in explaining how service-learning students help (or hinder) their respective capacity to deliver services to their clients and/or communities, or otherwise perform their duties. Respondents were asked about mission impact from service-learning, about the various work executed by students, and finally whether they encountered any challenges to having university students perform service-learning tasks/projects for them. The specific survey questions used for the study are located below the table. The survey responses were coded according to emergent themes: student experience (both previous and during the service), interaction, impact on program services, challenges to training and the necessity of supervision, lack of continuity/consistency, scheduling, and civic engagement. These six items were then combined into three overarching categories: student experience, interactions, and civic engagement. Bringle and Steinberg (2010) argue that "community organizations that host successful service-learning projects often report anecdotally that such projects help them to: implement their mission, meet community needs that would otherwise go unmet, enhance or increase the services offered, increase the numbers of clients served, increase their ability to leverage funding or other resources, and form new connections with the university or other agencies" (436). This template for community partner needs was covered by all sixteen responses, though more detail would have been ideal. This detail was somewhat present in the more in-depth interviews. All five interviewees mentioned the increased capacity to meet community needs as a positive aspect of the service-learning relationship. All six items from the Bringle and Steinberg study were mentioned at least once, with most being mentioned multiple times and contributing to their coding into the three categories illustrated in the table below.

Table 1  
 Matrix of Community Partner Qualitative Responses N = 16

Community Partner Experiences	
Emergent Themes	Community Partner Needs
Student Experiences	*Mission Impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community needs met</li> </ul>
Interactions	* Enhance/increase services offered <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase number of clients served</li> <li>• Challenges to training/supervision</li> <li>• Lack of continuity</li> <li>• Scheduling conflicts</li> </ul>
Civic Engagement	* Increased ability to leverage funding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form new connections with university</li> <li>• Form new connections with other partners</li> </ul>

Open-ended survey questions:

- 1) What do you think a community partner such as yourself gets out of having students do service-learning for your organization? How does that presence/relationship impact your mission?
- 2) What type of work do the students do? Is it just a matter of "extra hands" at certain times, or is there more? If so, what?
- 3) Are there challenges (or even hindrances) to having university students do service-learning for your organization? If so, how?

The matrix used in Table 1 is designed to provide a descriptive display of the relevant responses included in the study. Each of the 16 survey respondents and five in-depth interviewees answered all three questions but not all responses addressed the metrics identified as significant for this study. From the distribution of the responses, it is apparent that community partners experienced both positive and negative issues with student interaction. It is clear that there exist some challenges with having students perform service-learning in terms of mission impact. Obstacles to training and supervision exacerbated by scheduling difficulties and the lack of continuity among students from one semester to the next seemed to have had the largest impact on community partners' respective capacities to deliver on their mission goals. One survey respondent stated: "The main challenge to having students in service-learning is that they are only here for limited hours to satisfy their requirements. The time spent educating them about the museum seems wasted when they will only be here for two or three-three hour shifts. Some students require too much direction and constant supervision." It is clear that this community partner's view of short service-learning hour requirements do not make it worth the training and supervision of students necessary for both parties to have a successful service-learning experience. However, an in-depth interviewee described the

continuity of the relationship between the community partner and the faculty member who kept returning as critical to building and maintaining a sustainable relationship between the university and the community partner. Two partners surveyed discerned a lack of attachment to a particular program/class as an impediment to ensuring a "quality of experience." Another partner identified lateness, inconsistent attendance, and not following directions as a primary challenge with hosting service-learning students. She replied to question three by saying: "Yes, there are hindrances, such as not showing up, coming late, dropping out and not following directs...." This same partner identified this challenge as an opportunity to increase mentoring and contribute to the students' professional growth while another partner ensured that students were connected with multiple staff members and engaged with various types of projects in order to boost their resumes. In addition, several partners recognized the value of students' previous experiences, especially with social media, as an asset to distributing messages about the availability of their services to a wider audience. Four of the five in-depth interviewees mentioned service-learning student social media skills as an added benefit to their respective organizations.

The community partners were cognizant of the additional help provided by the students and how it might have increased their ability to serve their clients and perhaps even supplement their services or outreach. One interviewee noted that even if the students had limited interactions with the community, the contact between the students and individual clients enabled the students to place their course knowledge into a larger community context. Given that this is one of the primary goals of civic engagement, and that encouraging students to take action when necessary is a central component to understanding one's role in the community, this community partner reflection is extremely valuable. It was not just a matter of reaching more clients or providing increased services, clearly both mission impact items. Rather it was important to the community partner that the students leave the service-learning experience having understood the meaning behind the service-learning, as well as the potential to effectuate change once the service-learning experience was over. In the current political climate, it seems particularly salient to encourage students to get involved with their own communities in order to understand how to improve quality of life for all. Twelve of the community partners surveyed and all five of those interviewed identified service-learning students as being integral to strengthening communities through instilling an ethic of engagement. Given this clear pattern in the community partner responses, even having dealt with the scheduling and training challenges previously acknowledged, speaks to the power of the relationship between the university and the community.

Many students at UHWO are digital natives (though the university does have a relatively high average of 26 compared to other institutions on O'ahu). This means that their social media and technological skills have the potential to be assets to established community partners. On this subject, one respondent said that "working with students is a valuable source of new ideas to spur innovation. Having new perspectives fuels our creativity. As an organization committed to thinking outside the box, the input of new ideas, especially from younger generations and varying educational disciplines, is a critical piece of our innovation model." Additionally, two respondents identified previous student experiences as enabling them to use the service-learning to create new partnerships. For example, student civic engagement



was seen as helping the community partners both leverage funding and expand other partnership opportunities and/or services. They saw the positive student learning outcomes from the service-learning experience as a way to “enhance [the] relationship with the university which could bring [them] additional needed resources.” Forming long-lasting connections with students was seen as central in cementing their partnership with the university. These connections were fostered and encouraged through reflection on the service-learning experience, both mandated by the faculty, and supported by the community partners themselves. These considerations were especially valued by the community partners if the faculty was exceedingly clear in their expectations of the service-learning experiences. Several community partners had positive experiences with this issue, while others had negative experiences with disorganized courses and/or expectations from, or communications with faculty. Two respondents believed it fell upon them to remedy the situation in order to ensure that the students still walked away with a positive service-learning experience, perhaps even to the detriment of the community partners’ ability to deliver their services to the community. Given these responses, it is clear that university policy should include these community partner concerns and challenges, as well as opportunities, in order to value the voices of community partners in crafting strong and lasting relationships between the academy and the community. In doing so, the community partner/university relationship would be clarified and institutionalized through specific university criteria derived from ongoing conversations with community partners. Engaging the community partners in this dialogue would alleviate the potential for unequal partnerships and would reinforce the value of service-learning to all involved parties: the students, the community partners, the wider community itself, and the university.

## **Conclusion**

Details from community partner voices experiencing service-learning are important to consider when organizing service-learning projects and establishing university policy regarding service-learning. It is critical to understand community partner perspectives in terms of mission impact, the ability to offer or even increase their services, leveraging student experiences to gain additional resources or even accrue other benefits. The community partners offered a variety of responses, but it seems apparent that common themes emerged. Most community partners valued the time and effort service-learning students provided them. They appreciated the simple “volunteer” hours, but also the creativity and abilities of some of the students to provide additional perspectives and/or services to their clients or communities. Community partners did their best to use those skill sets to their advantage in order to both benefit the students and maximize their opportunities to gain additional resources. That said, there were also challenges for the community partners, with a lack of student continuity, unprofessional or immature behavior, and even difficult relationships with faculty and the university. Understanding the complexity of the responses, as well as appreciating that community partners may have positive and negative experiences within the same semester or even with an individual service-learning student is critical to valuing their voices and shaping university/community relations to benefit all parties equally. Student learning outcomes are obviously important to assess, as are the benefits of service-learning project to enabling the university to be a “good neighbor,” but actively listening to community partners and factoring their needs and responses into the maintenance

and/or creation of service-learning projects is what makes for a successful and enduring collaboration between the university and the community. Institutionalizing university policy that supports the inclusion of community partner voices in the creation and maintenance of the community partner/university relationship is critical to forging sustainable and lasting interactions. Taking into account the complexity and nuances of community partner needs in the service-learning process is key to the long-term success of an association that benefits the community. A university working with community partners to create a more robust service-learning curriculum to encourage civic engagement has the potential to lead to social justice – and that is something from which everyone benefits.

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