

1.8 Common Community Concerns

When planning a service-learning course it is important for faculty to be aware of the common concerns community organizations have about short-term service-learning commitments that last a semester or less. A study of 64 community organizations and their experiences with service-learners, published in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, revealed the frequent challenges encountered by community organizations which are grouped into the following five categories.¹¹

Time Investment

A lot of short-term service-learning is done as a class requirement, creating a dual sense of frustration for the community organization. First, the experience is often too brief to greatly benefit either the organization's mission or satisfy significant learning objectives. Second, the often mandatory nature of such short-term service-learning requires the organization to deal with the potential for student resistance or resentment and less-than-quality performance. Nine organization representatives said they were hesitant to invest time in service-learners who treated their service experience as a class requirement or obligation, and thus lacked altruistic dedication and commitment. Even when the students are thrilled to be there, the simple fact is that these brief service-learning relationships lack continuity, and thus are sometimes a poor time investment for the agency. Many nonprofit organizations are operating within tight or precarious budgets and can not afford to spend a lot of time and energy planning and implementing service-learning projects that do not give them a good return.

Capacity to Supervise and Train

The biggest part of the service-learning time investment for organization staff is in training and supervision. Since many cash-strapped small- and medium-sized nonprofit organizations need to rely at least somewhat on skilled volunteers, their meager staff often must spend significant time in managing them. With short-term service-learners it is not efficient to spend 20 hours training someone but then only receive 15 hours of service. In many cases it is simply not time efficient for the organization staff to provide the same formal training and oversight to short-term service-learners that it gives to people who make a longer commitment.

Direct-Service Difficulties

Short-term service is often a particularly bad fit or inappropriate for direct service, especially when working with youth. Oftentimes, programs for young people are aimed at correcting problems associated with lack of good role models and other inconsistencies in their lives. The short-term service-learners' transient nature, and their potential to be unreliable and lack commitment, only exacerbates those problems.

Timing and Project Management

The challenges with managing service-learning placements include having ample time to prepare for working with students, delegating work to them, and finding time for

¹¹ Adapted from "The Challenge of Short-Term Service-Learning," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* p. 16-26

reflecting with students and evaluating their projects. Nearly one-third of the organizations noted the difficulty of designing a meaningful service-learning project to fit a semester-long or shorter period. Some staff expressed doubt in their ability to provide educational support for short-term service-learners, noting that their own stressful jobs prevented the depth of planning and thought they would have liked to put into service-learning projects. On the whole it seems that service-learning projects are more successful when there is a clear, realistic goal between the higher education institution, the student, and the site supervisor – or as one organization put it, a “shared possible goal.” Along the same lines, another organization staff member noted that both parties’ satisfaction is contingent upon “mutually agreed-upon objectives.”

Calendar Issues

There is certainly recognition out there that campus and community calendars do not correspond very well. This is actually a problem with all service-learners, including even those who commit to an entire year. What we have not recognized is that the incompatibility of the two settings can create serious problems in a short-term service-learning context. Midterms, finals, school breaks, and lack of continuity in the academic workload present challenges for consistency in short-term service-learning projects. Agencies have to find ways to fill in during those times when students are not technically in session and don’t feel any obligation to work at their service-learning site. [Additionally,] if a class does not consistently send approximately the same number of service-learners each semester, there will be holes in the volunteer pool of the organization.