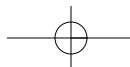


# **Volunteer Management Capacity and Student Service-Learners: A Study of Indiana Community Agencies**



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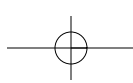
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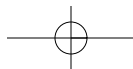
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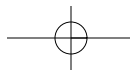
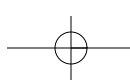
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## INTRODUCTION

Service-learning is a form of applied or experiential education in which students' academic instruction is connected to voluntary community service. Service-learning is growing in usage: at present, most Indiana colleges and universities have formal civic engagement programs, policies, or resources to support faculty in the effective use of experiential learning.

To date, most service-learning research has focused on student outcomes (Eyler et al., 2001). Much less is understood about the agencies that involve these students and the impact of service-learners on agency management (Bushouse, 2005; Cruz and Giles, 2000; Edwards, Mooney, and Heald, 2001; Sandy, 2007). In this study, we ask: How do agencies involve student service-learners, and how is managing student service-learners different than managing other kinds of volunteers? What value do community agencies see in student involvement, and what challenges do they encounter? What contributions do host agencies make to student learning? And what can we learn from these agencies when it comes to understanding the activities that make service-learning work best?

This report uses focus group interviews from 21 Indiana agencies and case studies of three agencies to describe the host agency's perspective on student service-learners. Generally, the results suggest a strong motivation on the part of these community agencies to work with students and to help them achieve their learning goals. In turn, the agencies hosting these student volunteers often receive tangible benefits such as better client service and an expanded labor force. However, there are tradeoffs. Variations in the quality of student volunteers and projects can burden agencies with volunteers they may not wish to involve. Staff time and attention is diverted to short-term student volunteers. And agencies report that the faculty supervising these projects are often less engaged than they should be. The nature of the demands on an organization's resources and the ways in which host agencies have learned effective management techniques for college service-learners is the main focus of this study. This report concludes with agency recommendations for improving the management of service-learning volunteers.



## WHAT IS SERVICE-LEARNING?

*Service-learning* is a form of applied or experiential learning in which students receive credit for volunteer services related to their academic objectives. Service-learning has two elements: a volunteer activity and opportunities to reflect on its meaning. Service-learning is different than extra-curricular student volunteerism because activities are linked to course goals, and students are expected to acquire pedagogical benefits from the experience (e.g., the opportunity to practice textbook lessons).

Service-learning is one of several pedagogical activities grouped together under the name of “community-based learning.” *Community-based learning* includes a variety of experiential opportunities, such as internships, practica, pre-service training, work-study assignments, and community service that occurs through academic courses. While this study examines only service-learning at the college level, we note here that the activity is also practiced at the secondary school level and in many other forms. Community-based learning occurs at small businesses, nonprofit organizations, local government agencies, and K-12 schools. Some students are paid for their experience, but in most cases, students are expected to volunteer their time in exchange for the learning opportunity.

In college courses that use service-learning, students are assigned by their professor to volunteer with an agency or to carry out a community-based project. Examples include

*Service or community-based learning is a form of applied or experiential learning in which students receive credit for volunteer services related to their academic objectives.*

graphic arts students who help design posters for a youth organization, information technology students who upgrade a city department’s Web site, or accounting students who help a nonprofit complete its annual tax return. Like other kinds of service-learning, course-based service-learning also varies widely from class to class and campus to campus in terms of the expected deliverables and the way that the work gets done.

As these examples illustrate, service-learning is a diverse field with many differences among participants in the structure of assignments, the kind of remuneration, and the motivation of those who participate. Some of these dimensions are captured in Table 1.

### The Growth of Service-Learning

Nationwide, college courses using service-learning have increased steadily in number (Campus Compact, 2004).

Locally, 66 classes on the Indiana University–Bloomington (IUB) campus, and 52 on the campus of Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) offer service-learning opportunities at an estimated 400 or more community sites annually (with a seven-fold increase in sites in the past four years at IUPUI alone) (COPSL, 2007). IUPUI’s campus-wide Civic Engagement Strategic Plan (2007) and the Indiana University–Bloomington Student Association have both set explicit, ambitious goals for the growth of civic engagement on their campuses, including an intention to integrate service-learning scholarship into the campus mission (Lodge, 2005). Policymakers and private organizations such as Learn and Serve, AmeriCorps, and Campus Compact have encouraged the growth in student civic engagement with funding and other resources.

### Service-Learning and the Principle of Reciprocity

An expectation of mutual benefit underlies service-learning activity. Students, instructors and community agencies are all expected to benefit from the student efforts—students

**Table 1. Variation in Service-Learning Models and Structures**

Types of Student Involvement				
Dimensions	Volunteer	Intern	Work Study	Service Learner
Student’s motivation	Free will	Relatively un-coerced		Obligation to volunteer
Remuneration	None	Varies	Stipend/low pay	None
Structure	Informal	Formal		
Intended beneficiaries	Others	Other/self		

Adapted from Cnaan et al., 1996, p. 371



have the chance to test classroom knowledge in real settings, instructors can teach more effectively, and community agencies can benefit from the infusion of volunteer labor and expertise. Research also finds some evidence of secondary benefits, such as more pro-social behavior by students and stronger town-gown relationships.

Yet, service-learning programs can also challenge the capacity of agencies to manage these student volunteers. Semester-long deadlines on student projects can require agencies to expend more time and staff resources supporting service-learners than they

would with other volunteers, and on a tighter timeline.

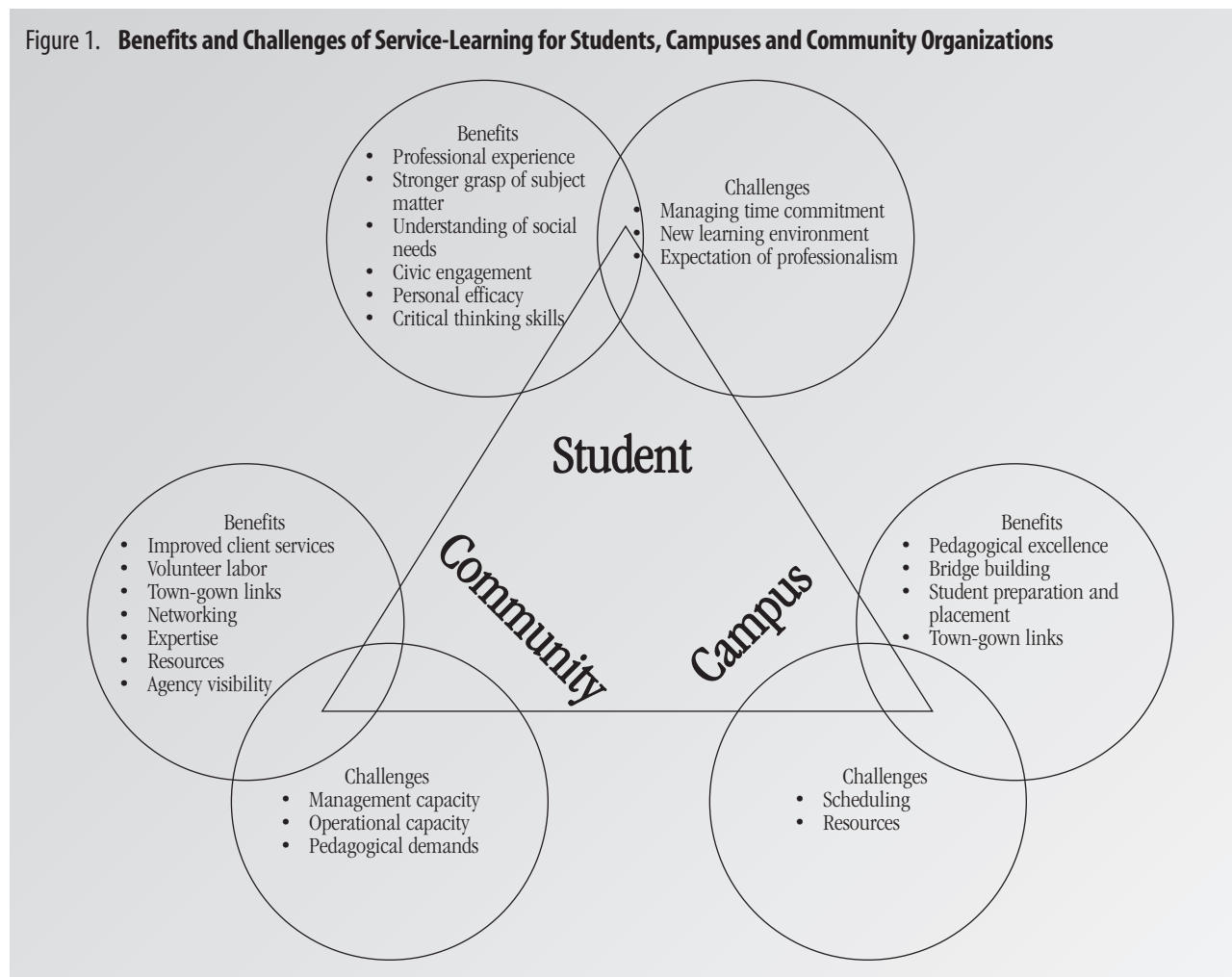
When service-learning is a mandated activity, reluctant students can require extra effort to motivate or supervise. Agencies can feel pressured into involving student service-learners, without consideration to whether these student efforts support the agency's most important needs and priorities. As one nonprofit executive notes, "Working with service-learners has the potential to be more painful and more beneficial than working with [other] volunteers" (Marshall, 2005). These potential

*"Working with service-learners has the potential to be more painful and more beneficial than working with [other] volunteers."*

(Agency manager)

challenges and benefits are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. **Benefits and Challenges of Service-Learning for Students, Campuses and Community Organizations**





## VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT CAPACITY

Management of volunteers of all kinds requires a distinct set of organizational skills and resources equal in complexity to the skills required to manage paid staff. Volunteers must be recruited, screened, and oriented about the agency's mission and priorities. Then they must be trained and supervised. An agency must understand volunteer motivations for service, learn effective approaches for retaining volunteers and minimizing turnover, enrich their experience, and recognize their contributions (Connors, 1995).

In this report, we refer frequently to a groundbreaking national study of volunteer management published by the Urban Institute in 2004 (Hager and Brudney, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). This study has supported the field of volunteer management by building our understanding of specific practices—supervision, training, liability coverage, etc.—that charities across America find helpful for recruiting and retaining good volunteers. An agency's ability to commit organizational time, human capital, and financial resources to volunteer management is called its “volunteer management capacity.” According to Hager and Brudney (2004a, 3), “volunteer management capacity is a function of both staff support of volunteering and adoption of administrative practices necessary for the management of volunteers.” This study's principal finding—that the effective management of volunteers may be the most important factor in an agency's ability to keep volunteers and to involve them effectively in meeting agency goals—is supported in other research (Gazley and Brudney, 2005; Hager and Brudney, 2004b; UPS Foundation, 1998).

### Service-Learners and Volunteer Management Capacity

When we apply the framework of volunteer management capacity to service-learners and other student volunteers, we

must first acknowledge their status as an important but challenging demographic group for community agencies. Nationally, nearly 20 percent of college-age youth volunteer, while the volunteering rate among high school students has doubled in the past 15 years, to 28 percent (Grimm et al., 2006). College-age students have an interesting set of characteristics as they relate to volunteer management capacity because their motivations to volunteer can vary so widely. Many students became involved in community activities during high school, and they enter college eager to serve and to learn. Agencies are keen to attract these volunteers to their ranks. To the extent that agencies succeed

in recruiting motivated student volunteers and meeting organizational priorities through service-learning programs, these agencies enjoy an equal share in the “reciprocal” benefits of service-learning.

However, to the extent that students are required to volunteer to pass a course (i.e., as involuntary or “mandated volunteers”), they can be reluctant helpers and difficult

to motivate and manage. Organizations that feel external pressure to involve student service-learners can be further burdened to the extent that the rationale for involving service-learners is not entirely in line with internal needs and priorities. Young volunteers can also bring great energy but few professional skills. Agencies can experience higher turnover with college student volunteers than with other demographic groups. And, as noted before, service-learning timelines require a shorter but more intensive concentration of organizational resources. All of these factors suggest higher demands on an agency's capacity to manage this unique kind of volunteer.

*“Volunteer management capacity is a function of both staff support of volunteering and adoption of administrative practices necessary for the management of volunteers.”*

(Hager and Brudney, 2004a)





## METHODS AND DATA

The data in this report come from three sources: 1) focus group interviews, 2) extensive case studies of three agencies, and 3) agency source documents. During summer 2006, we conducted focus groups with the executive directors or volunteer coordinators of 24 nonprofit and public agencies. The agencies, from Bloomington and Indianapolis, have all hosted college students in service-learning activities. Participants represented mainly small to mid-sized organizations. Based on these interviews, three agencies were selected for the development of more extensive case studies, which were conducted during spring 2007. The case studies are intended to describe the benefits that agencies have gained through service-learner involvement and to illustrate

ways agencies have addressed some of the challenges. The source documents include things such as agency Web sites, annual reports, internal documents, and other data.

Findings from this study are organized into three

sections. We first summarize the comments made by focus group participants which addressed the potential benefits and challenges to involving student service-learners. In the case studies, we then describe the experience of three agencies with service-learners, with particular attention to how the agencies developed

policies and procedures to manage these student volunteers. We continue with a summary of the recommendations made by all participants in this study about effective managerial practices for service-learning programs.

*“Compared to staff, it takes more time, coordination, and detail to have productive [service-learning] volunteers.”*

(Agency manager)



## FOCUS GROUPS

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the comments made by focus group participants about the benefits and challenges of involving student service-learners. Problems encountered by our respondents fell into three categories: organizational capacity to interact with the service-learner in a mutually beneficial way, student shortcomings, and faculty shortcomings.

**Table 2. Benefits of Service-Learner Involvement**

Student creativity and energy  
 Fresh eyes and perspectives  
 Extra hands  
 Improvements in client safety and outcomes  
 Student skills can complement or supplement staff skills  
 Agency ability to tackle tasks that are not high priority for staff  
 Agency advocates  
 Good staff recruits  
 Service-learning leads to other connections and resources  
 Some students become donors and long-term volunteers  
 When a grade is at stake, some service-learners are more dependable than other student volunteers

**Table 3. Challenges of Service-Learner Involvement**

### Organizational Capacity to Support Service-Learners

- It takes time to explain an agency's operations and to set up projects.
- Students come in at the last minute.
- Student expectations may not match the available work.
- It takes more thought to maximize the volunteer experience.
- What students are learning in the classroom does not necessarily match agency needs.
- It is hard for small organizations to create the opportunities, provide training, orientation, and supervision.
- It is hard for part-time managers to meet the complicated schedules of students, especially student teams.
- Service-learners working on consulting projects or carrying out organizational analyses can become change agents, and an agency's internal culture may not be prepared for their recommendations. One person said, "We had a couple of students whose project was to get things down on paper that we needed to get down on paper. Once done it became threatening. . . like they were taking over."
- "We're swamped. We can't handle any more service-learners."

### Problems with Students or with Faculty Preparation of Students

- "It's not worth the effort and time on our part. When we tried it, it didn't pay off. Student reports were inaccurate. We need more give and take to make sure our needs are met."
- Preference for student interns over service-learners.
- Students can be long on theory and weak on its application to the real world.

- Students have knowledge but no context.
- "Sometimes we get students, particularly from service-learning courses, who come in and are shocked that we can write our name."
- "One group of students asked for six years' of financials so they could tell us what's wrong."
- Service-learners are "short-timers" with the high expectations and training needs of long-term volunteers.
- Students are less dependable.
- Some students don't want to be there and bring a poor attitude.

### Problems with Faculty

- Service-learning does not always reflect an equal investment of faculty time.
- Faculty do not understand nonprofit operations
- "Often faculty say here's the project—black and white—take it or leave it, no flexibility."
- "Faculty can have their entire class request interviews, one student at a time [but don't recognize] that's ineffective."
- "I have pretty much made it a prerequisite—if instructors aren't serious enough to make arrangements prior to the start of their course, I'll say no."
- "An instructor's own volunteer experience can matter—everything is not always like it was stated in the book."
- "Faculty need to realize that every agency has a somewhat different set of needs and varying demands."



## CASE STUDIES

This section of this report describes the experiences of three organizations with college student service learners: George Washington Community School of Indianapolis, La Plaza of Indianapolis, and the United Way of Monroe County, in Bloomington. As we noted before, these case studies are not intended to represent the experiences of all community agencies, but rather to help illustrate the ways in which three quite different organizations have accommodated students of varying kinds and the impact service-learners have had on agency operations. We begin by describing each organization's experience separately, then continue with a cross-case analysis that examines patterns in agency experiences.

### *George Washington Community School*

#### **Background and Programs**

George Washington Community School (GWCS) serves approximately 800 students in grades 7 through 12 on the west side of Indianapolis. Their mission is to create a “small community serving students, their families, and neighborhoods through community partnerships.” A

community school brings together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families, and the community. Since reopening as a community school in 2000, GWCS has become a nationally recognized, full-service community school with more than 50 community partnerships providing 60 student and family support services. Information for this report was obtained from interviews with the GWCS Community Coordinator, a teacher who uses service-learners in her classroom, annual reports, and other publicly available secondary data. The Community Coordinator is a full-time administrator with the responsibility for recruiting and coordinating all volunteer activity at GWCS.

GWCS is part of the Indianapolis Public School system (IPS), serving a student population that is more than one-half minority and has more than 80 percent who receive free or reduced-price lunches. During the 2005–2006 academic year, students maintained an attendance rate of 89 percent. Serving inner-city youth, GWCS's strategic plan emphasizes community engagement and covers multiple health and social services (dental, vision, mental health, youth development, academic tutoring, adult programs, afterschool

**Table 4. Staff and Volunteer Involvement in GWCS Programs, 2006-2007 School Year**

<b>Program Description</b>	<b>Estimated Number Of Children Served</b>	<b>Number of Staff</b>	<b>Number of Volunteers</b>	<b>Estimated Value</b>
Math tutoring program for grades 7–9	50	8	0	\$64,000
Support for school/community tasks	908	1	0	\$30,000
Community Outreach Partnership Center health education, promotion, and housing accessibility programs	0	0	0	\$2,500
Service learning students volunteer for tutoring and mentoring activities	54	5	54	\$34,560
IUPUI students mentor GWCS students about going to college	60	1	4	\$75,000
Secondary education students serve as classroom assistants and run after-school program	425	2	36	\$5,376
SAVI database system for community and curricular use	908	6	34	\$23,040
National Society of Black Engineers Pre-College Initiative to encourage minority students to become engineers	15	0	3	\$25,000
Fit for Life nutrition and exercise program	40–50	4	25	\$100,000
Program and support service to community school coordinator and parent liaison	908	0	1	\$50,000
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>27</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>\$409,476</b>



programs, parental involvement, and mentoring). GWCS's comprehensive services for students and their families include financial literacy education, career exploration support, English as a new language (ENL), adult education classes, mentoring programs, life skills and parenting workshops, recreational activities for all abilities, tutoring services, dental exams, teacher resources, and enhancement activities in science and art.

IUPUI was one of the original GWCS service-learning partners. As Table 4 illustrates, for the 2006–2007 academic year, GWCS estimated a total of 157 volunteers and 27 staff involved in service-learning programs, at an estimated value of \$409,476. Estimated value is determined by the amount that IPS would pay people who are not volunteers to do the same tasks.

### **GWCS and Service-Learning**

GWCS works primarily with service-learning students from IUPUI, relying on IUPUI's Center for Service and Learning and individual departments to identify, place, and screen students before they are referred to the school. GWCS keeps a log of students who participate.

GWCS staff report some issues with the dependability of students (e.g., showing up late or not at all). They also enumerate many benefits. Service-learning students have contributed to GWCS by providing assistance with:

- delivery of services, such as tutoring,
- fundraising (e.g., fundraising for band instruments),
- providing general office services,
- management of other service-learners, and
- public relations.

As a specific accomplishment of involving service-learners, GWCS staff offered this example. In a math tutoring program run by service-learners, the math scores among GWCS students improved 20 points, then declined again when the program ended. GWCS staff also described the value of using service-learning as a way to reinforce the value of a college education. GWCS established a partnership with the National Society of Black Engineers Pre-College Initiative, an organization that encourages minority students to become engineers. GWCS students who participate can earn full scholarships to Purdue University. GWCS staff report a strong

and positive impact on student academic achievement for students in the program. In addition, the majority of GWCS's 8th graders have signed up to be Twenty-first Century Scholars, an Indiana college scholarship program

The school held its first commencement in 2006. Of the 80 students who graduated:

- All (100 percent) passed the math portion of the Indiana Graduation Qualifying Exam, and 90 percent passed the language arts portion (half of the 10 percent who did not pass are ENL students). This performance exceeded that of students at all of the traditional Indianapolis Public School high schools.
- Sixty-five students (81 percent) identified the college they planned to attend in the fall and accumulated more than \$1 million in scholarships and financial aid awards.

GWCS has no formal recognition activities for service-learners or volunteers, and has not created a personnel manual for volunteers. However, staff do encourage volunteer training and professional development when appropriate. For example, they might encourage a student volunteer to attend a conference or workshop appropriate for service-learners, such as grant-writing.

All interviewees were asked a set of questions that mirrored questions from a national survey of volunteer management practices (Hager and Brudney, 2004a; 2004b). Our goal was to understand what resources might be needed to support an increase in service-learners. Such questions are particularly appropriate given the strong national policy efforts to engage more students in volunteering.

When asked about factors that would increase the likelihood that GWCS would involve more service-learners in its operations next year, the Community Coordinator discussed increased funding or staffing to cover expenses of service-learner involvement, and greater availability of service-learners with specialized skills, such as legal, financial, management, and computer expertise. Training or professional development in how to work more effectively with service-learners would also be helpful.

The partnerships with universities in the community, including IUPUI, and by extension, the service-learners, have been important to the success of GWCS.



## *La Plaza*

To obtain information for this case study, we interviewed the Executive Director, Program Manager, and several of their program staff. We also examined their current annual report and other publicly available secondary data.

### **Background and Programs**

In Indianapolis, several key Hispanic/Latino organizations merged to become La Plaza, an organization whose mission is to serve, empower, and integrate the Hispanic/Latino community of central Indiana. Fiesta Indianapolis and the Hispanic Education Center merged on December 31, 2004. They were joined by El Centro Hispano (the Hispanic Center) in May 2005. The Indianapolis Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (now the Hispanic Business Council), while not part of the merger, is a La Plaza partner.

La Plaza serves Indianapolis Latino residents through youth and adult education programs and services. With a small staff of nine people, La Plaza focuses on increasing high school graduation rates and enrollment in colleges/universities, providing mentors to students of all ages, promoting adult literacy and English language instruction, and assisting new immigrants in learning about Indianapolis and adjusting to different cultures. La Plaza also provides essential high-quality health and social services that target the specific needs of Indianapolis' Hispanic/Latino community. One of La Plaza's main events is the annual Fiesta Indianapolis celebration that takes place during the National Hispanic Heritage Month. Fiesta Indianapolis celebrates, educates, and shares the Latino culture through diverse mediums, including art, music, dance, food, and cultural activities.

The following are descriptions (adapted from La Plaza's Web site at <http://www.laplaza-indy.org>) of specific programs where La Plaza uses service-learners.

#### *SUMMER DISCOVERY*

Summer Discovery is a community-based, educational and cultural program operating since 1990 offered to children going into grades 1 through 6. Summer Discovery has an educational emphasis that provides an academic bridge from one school year to the next. It is offered during the summer break, daily from 9 am to 4 pm for six weeks. The program

enhances academic retention in reading and math and, at the same time, offers students enrichment in visual and performing arts, physical education, character education, and community service. In 2006, 93 children were served.

#### *MOTHER-DAUGHTER PROJECT*

The Mother-Daughter Project (MDP) empowers Latina students to continue their education through high school and beyond by helping them develop their self esteem, foster supportive relationships, explore future dreams and goals, and value the importance of education. At the same time, MDP works with the students' mothers to support and empower them, both in their own lives and in the lives of their daughters. In 2006, 91 mothers and daughters were served.

#### *TU FUTURO*

Tu Futuro is a program geared toward high school and adult non-traditional Latino students. Tu Futuro offers direct delivery of information that increases access and breaks down the barriers to post-secondary education and training by providing presentations and one-on-one support that promotes education to participating students. The program educates students about: college and vocational schools; why a higher education is important; how to make sure you are on track to go to college; financial aid opportunities, including federal and private funding, as well as loans and work-study programs; the college application and enrollment process; how to write a good scholarship or entrance essay; and much more.

#### *EL PUENTE*

El Puente, which is Spanish for "the bridge," is an academic leadership program that supports Latino students during high school and university studies. Student leaders from local schools meet regularly at La Plaza to learn, practice, and hone essential leadership skills. El Puente fosters self-confidence, provides support for college studies, facilitates opportunities for service, and connects students to other Latino leaders throughout the city and state.

#### *COMMUNITY PEDIATRIC TRAINING INITIATIVE*

A collaborative effort between the Department of Pediatrics at the Indiana University School of Medicine and three local



community-based organizations, including La Plaza, the Initiative's goal is to broaden pediatric resident education to instill in pediatricians the skills and knowledge of community-based medicine and advocacy. La Plaza's role is to offer consultation services to pediatric residents regarding the Latino community, culture, and the medical needs which are unique to this population. Additionally, La Plaza offers guidance and assistance with the "Preguntale al Pediatra" (Ask the Pediatrician) radio show service-learning project.

### La Plaza and Service-Learning

La Plaza involves service-learning students from DePauw University (Greencastle), Anderson University (Anderson), IUPUI, University of Indianapolis, Butler University, and Marian College (all in Indianapolis), as well as local high school students.

Each student fills out a short application. The application includes questions about whether they are bilingual and if they have some knowledge of the Hispanic population as well as knowledge of the community in general. The organization encourages people to be bilingual and culturally competent. If the students are going to work with any youth, they are required to undergo a criminal background check. There is a general volunteer orientation as well as specific program training. The organization always has interviews and meets with students to see if it is a good

match for the students and the organization.

Service-learning students have contributed to La Plaza by providing assistance in many different activities such as:

- delivery of services, such as tutoring or other services,
- fundraising (grant writing),
- providing general office services,
- management of other service learners,
- advocacy, such as involvement in lobbying for the Dream Act, and
- creating new programs.

Table 5 lists the various programs for which La Plaza has used service-learning students, the types of students involved, sample activities, and a the number of service-learners per year.

The impacts of service-learners have varied from program to program. Because of service-learners, La Plaza has been able to expand their summer programs. In fact, the Mother-Daughter Project was designed to use service learning students. "Service-learners have helped us to expand our summer programs. It does affect the program because we've had semesters where we haven't had a service-learner, like with Mother-Daughter, and we've had activities that we couldn't do. We have had to make some adjustments with the program."

**Table 5. Involvement of Service Learners at La Plaza**

Name of program	Types of students	Sample activities	Number of service-learners per year
Community Pediatric Training Initiative	Pediatric residents from IU Medical School	Specific projects including topics for Ask the Pediatrician, health education	3-6
El Puente	Undergraduate Education students	Conduct research on best practices in assisting Latino students in graduating and continuing to college. Help plan and facilitate sessions.	1-2
Mother-Daughter Project	Undergraduate IUPUI School of Social Work	Planning and leading sessions	4 (2 per semester)
Summer Discovery	Undergraduate	Organize field trips, maintain records, create and manage the weekly bilingual newsletter, assist in the classroom, tutor	1-2
Tu Futuro	Undergraduate	General office services, plan and prepare for events and presentations, follow up with students, co-present	1-2
Fiesta Indianapolis	Undergraduate/ graduate Philanthropic Studies	Plan and prepare for event	1-3
La Plaza (no specific program)	Undergraduate	Grant writing, organize front area, help with applications, volunteer recruitment, research.	1-2



Students have also taken on specific initiatives at La Plaza, including creation of a scholarship/financial aid guide for Latino students, and the successful pursuit of several mini-grants for La Plaza programs. Service-learning students have also been involved in recruiting other student volunteers.

Service-learning has changed over time at La Plaza in that they are using more service-learners and trying to be more strategic about the students' placements and to build more structure. La Plaza has had some service-learners return as volunteers and employees. They also assist service-learners in finding employment at other organizations.

La Plaza has had to turn students away for several reasons, such as a lack of Spanish language skills or an appropriate assignment. The students who only need eight hours of service are often a hard fit, because La Plaza wants the experience to be a learning one, and it can be difficult to design a short-term experience with learning objectives. As they said, "We do not want students cleaning bathrooms." The organization won't individualize a project for eight hours: "It's just not worth it." They receive more calls from service-learners than they are able to place. Overall, however, they indicated that the time spent with service-learners is worth it. They see it as a way of helping students be more prepared in the workplace. When they have a Latino service-learner, they are not only helping students, but also furthering their organization's mission.

La Plaza does not have any formal recognition activities for service-learners or for volunteers in general, except for the Mother-Daughter Project. They do not have a volunteer manual. Although these formal support processes have not yet been developed, they do provide opportunities for training and professional development. When they see conferences or workshops that are appropriate, such as grant-writing workshops, they encourage service-learners to attend. When La Plaza staff attend free events, they invite service-learners to accompany them.

Service-learners are integral to the programs at La Plaza, with 13 to 20 service-learners per year contributing to programming and supplementing the work of the nine staff members. La Plaza interviews, places, screens, orients, and trains the service-learners while trying to ensure a meaningful experience for each student. The accomplishments of the service-learners include expansion of

programs, new funding for La Plaza, and volunteer recruitment. If more support were available, La Plaza would be able to use even more service learners. "Staffing is always an issue, so it's always nice to have support for the organization. That doesn't mean there aren't challenges with service-learners, but overall we've enjoyed it."

### *United Way of Monroe County*

#### **Background and Programs**

United Way of Monroe County seeks to "to improve people's lives by mobilizing the caring power of our community. [They] address critical needs today and work to reduce those needs tomorrow" (United Way of Monroe County, 2006). They provide funding to 26 partner agencies and dozens of additional nonprofits through a community-wide annual fundraising campaign. In 2006, this campaign raised nearly \$1.5 million, including \$670,000 from the Bloomington campuses of Indiana University and Ivy Tech Community College. These activities are carried out by a full-time staff of six.

In addition to its central role as a financial resource for human and social service agencies, the United Way of Monroe County also plays an integral role in the operation of several collaborative initiatives in Monroe and neighboring counties, described below. The United Way has supported these joint efforts with technical assistance, professional development, and research that defines area needs. At present, United Way funding is targeted at seven community needs identified through community research: food assistance, housing, health care, emergency services, child and youth services, workforce support, and senior services. Programs and activities to address those needs include:

- *SCAN*: Production of the Service Community Assessment of Needs (SCAN) report, community-wide data on Monroe County human service needs, and the IRIS Directory, a comprehensive listing of nonprofit agencies serving Monroe County;
- *211*: Support and promotion of the 211 Initiative, providing free telephone information and referral assistance to callers in Monroe and Owen counties, in partnership with the Area 10 Agency on Aging;
- *Born Learning*: In partnership with Monroe County Family Resource Centers, distribution of Born Learning



materials, easy-to-use tools for parents and caregivers to integrate learning into everyday activities;

- *Nonprofit Resource Center*: Facilities and staffing for a collection of books and journals on fundraising and nonprofit professional development, and a free searchable database of Foundation Center grant sources;
- *NPA*: Facilities and infrastructure support for the Nonprofit Alliance of Monroe County, an independent consortium of area agencies organized for advocacy and collaborative purposes;
- *Labor/Workforce Development Resources*: Collaborative and financial support for the Workforce Preparation Network, a community education effort on skills development, and a longstanding partnership with the White River Central Labor Council to assist displaced workers;
- *Volunteer Promotion*: Sponsorship of and leadership in many other activities to promote civic engagement and volunteerism, including the Ivy Tech Community College O'Bannon Institute for Community Service, the annual Week of Caring volunteer event, and National Philanthropy Day.

### **United Way and Service-Learning**

This description of United Way involvement with service-learning was developed from interviews with two executive staff and the present and former executive directors of the United Way of Monroe County, and supplemented with organizational documents. According to these sources, the United Way of Monroe County first involved college students as service-learners in the early 1990s. Most of the initial placements occurred through the Indiana University Kelley School of Business' Civic Leadership Development Program. Some of the first student volunteers provided data entry services. Other students contacted the United Way to

complete course papers on community issues. Student involvement grew over time to incorporate service-learners and interns from the schools of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA), Informatics, and Journalism. At present, the United Way hosts student volunteers every semester and throughout the summer, both individually and in teams. The majority of service-learners come from SPEA's nonprofit management courses, from both undergraduate and graduate levels.

*The current executive director is a former member of the IU faculty; and the former executive director is a current member of the faculty. Such close associations very likely result in a staff with a higher than average understanding of student needs and interest in supporting the pedagogical goals of service-learning.*

Some students are assigned to write a course paper or to conduct applied research, and the agency does not choose the manner of their involvement. Other students serve the agency as programmatic volunteers, working alongside staff on projects of the agency's choice.

In the latter category, since 2005, undergraduate student service-learners have provided the only regular staff for the Nonprofit

Resource Center and have irregularly worked with the United Way on database and Web site content needs, and supported fundraising activities. Other students have worked as interns in general office support, accounting, and communications. A graduate student intern staffed the Nonprofit Alliance of Monroe County in its first year, and another graduate student coordinated the IU Student Campaign for the United Way. A college student also supports the United Way's Workforce Preparation Network program. Some supervision of other service-learners has also occurred through graduate student interns. The SPEA Service Corps is a financial aid program funded through the Indiana Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Agencies match university funds to secure a student intern, and the United Way has chosen to use its Service Corps Fellow in key roles in its community impact





and resource development initiatives. The general philosophy regarding the placement of student service-learners at the United Way is to place them “on projects that staff would like to be able to work on but can’t get to . . . higher level tasks.”

The United Way tracks interns, but otherwise maintains minimal records on volunteer or service-learner involvement. They are considering a more formal time-keeping system to record the general value of volunteer contributions to the agency. In addition to one or two interns, an estimated eight to twelve students work with the six United Way staff as service-learners in any academic semester. Little formal policy exists to direct service-learner involvement. In the past year, a personnel manual was developed for student interns, itself the result of a graduate service-learning team. Most volunteers also sign emergency contact and ethics forms. Most service-learners are recognized alongside other volunteers in the agency’s annual report.

Quality control for those serving the agency is maintained principally through pre-screening of all volunteers and careful supervision. In fact, those service-learners entering through the Indiana University Kelley Business School Civic Leadership Development (CLD) program are screened twice: once by the CLD staff and once by United Way personnel.

For those whose primary interest is completing a university assignment, staff try to provide them with necessary support. If they phone for a paper assignment, the staff tries to treat them with the same consideration as any other member of the public seeking information.

All United Way of Monroe County staff interviewed in this study state that they are generally pleased with student programmatic involvement. Strong connections between the United Way and the Indiana University campus have fostered the agency’s support for service-learning. IU faculty or family members have served on the United Way board; the current executive director is a former member of the IU faculty; and the former executive director is a current member of the faculty. Such close associations very likely result in staff with a higher than average understanding of student needs and

interest in supporting the pedagogical goals of service-learning.

While the United Way staff see certain advantages of interns over service-learners, they also note that service-learners often have particular skills that make them more appropriate for certain tasks than community volunteers, and they will schedule community volunteers to fill in between semesters when service-learners are not available. They cite the quality of their supervision as a key ingredient in success. “We make sure we communicate well with [students].” They also note the value of good university administrative support: “for Joan (pseudonym), you know in a matter of an hour, if you have a question, you’re going to get a response. And that’s what makes it work. We’ve always felt that we were supported.”

*“Agencies need tools to be able to effectively manage service-learners”*

(United Way executive)

Working with service-learners, however, requires agency staff to change as well. The United Way has added workstations, revised professional expectations of staff, created a volunteer training manual, packaged agency material for students, and created other ways to relay the mission to students in preparation for their work. The United

Way staff have also devised numerous ways to surmount the “16-week barrier”—the semester-long limitation on how long the volunteer works within the agency. For example, United Way staff built relationships with one professor who teaches a service-learning course every semester, resulting in a steady supply of volunteers for ongoing projects. This is how the Nonprofit Resource Center is staffed. The ability to keep students longer reduces recruitment and training needs, and increases the quality of volunteer work. At other times, the United Way has deliberately moved away from staffing projects with service-learners because they saw a need for more consistent program staffing. This is the case with the Nonprofit Alliance of Monroe County. The United Way staff also regularly “promote” service-learners to longer-term positions, often with pay. Nearly all of the current student staff at the United Way—office staff and interns—first encountered the United Way in course-based service-learning projects. In this way, service-learning offers opportunities for United Way to recruit paid staff.



A principal challenge for staff in working with service-learners is the time commitment involved. Semester-long projects take regular weekly supervision, and even students with only writing assignments will ask United Way staff to read and critique their papers. Staff also note that service-learners come in with higher expectations than many other kinds of volunteers: “It’s time consuming. You feel like a teacher.” “You have to have an investment of time with service-learners.”

In addition, supervision can become a tricky task with students who come into the agency with assignments more akin to consulting relationships: “they don’t want to stuff envelopes.” On occasion, students also will initiate activities without consulting staff, or resist agency procedures because “we weren’t taught in class how to do it this way.” As they learn how to manage service-learners effectively, staff observe that their projects with students have also grown more ambitious.

United Way staff also made a distinction between service-learners and interns, based on how they structure their work. It is generally easier to supervise interns who are on a regular weekly work schedule compared to service-learners who hold irregular hours and might perform most of their work outside the agency. Staff also observed a very low level of interaction with faculty. Two of the three current staff interviewed could

not recall the last time they had direct communication with faculty about student service-learners they supervised. In many instances, United Way relies on the university program staff who serve as “middlemen” or brokers of student volunteer labor to manage this task. And while one interviewee reported more regular interaction with faculty, this person still expressed frustration with some faculty who had not clearly communicated with staff prior to the start of an assignment. The most pressing concern expressed by staff was that faculty with a low level of personal involvement would rely on students for potentially inaccurate information about the agency.

Despite these challenges, staff at this United Way agency note an improvement in the quality of student participation over time: “I think faculty [are learning] better ways to instruct the students in how to deal with nonprofits. We used to get phone calls from students who thought you could drop everything [to tell them] everything you know about hunger. I have not gotten a call like that in a long time.” As they have become more expert at recruiting student service-learners, staff also observe how students have added value to agency services: “Could I have done the same amount of stuff in the same time? I don’t think I could have. It was really value-added to me.”



## LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommended Practices for Managing Service-Learners

The nonprofit managers we interviewed in our focus groups and case studies offered numerous recommendations to other agencies about effective involvement of student service-learners. These are described below. Some suggestions are addressed to faculty and campus administrators. Most, however, can be implemented by community agencies through volunteer management policies and programs. In fact, most of the suggestions we heard involve the focused application of widely accepted volunteer management practices such as screening, training, supervision, and recognition of volunteers. According to the Urban Institute's national study of volunteer management, more than three-quarters of charities and congregations nationwide have screening and data collection procedures for any kind of volunteer, written policies and job descriptions, recognition activities, and training and professional development opportunities (Hager and Brudney, 2004a). This stage of our study does not compare the agency practices used with all volunteers to those used with student service-learners. We only observe that most of the agencies in our study already have the means at their disposal to adopt current volunteer practices to meet the needs of student service-learners. And, we expect that such an approach would improve the outcomes for both students and the agencies they serve.

*Agency managers point out the difficulty in designing short-term experiences for students that can achieve long-term learning objectives.*

### Recruitment, Screening, and Placement

Our case studies of three agency experiences and our more than 20 focus group interviews describe a wide range of approaches to finding good student volunteers. Some nonprofit managers find it most useful to focus on building a relationship with one college or university, or even with one department. This approach benefits community agencies by assuring a better understanding of mutual needs. We find, for example, that George Washington Community School has worked primarily with students from IUPUI, and the United Way works primarily with IUB and Ivy Tech students. In

contrast, La Plaza has hosted service learners from several local campuses. To help assure quality control, GWCS and United Way rely in part on campus programs or trusted faculty and administrators to screen service learners. La Plaza relies on staff to interview and screen each student.

In setting selection criteria for these students, interviewees and focus group participants noted the value of identifying and publicizing in advance the needs that students can meet and the skills required to address them (e.g., fluency in Spanish at La Plaza). Managers also pointed out that they need to have the option of turning down students who cannot meet current program priorities. They observed that this last suggestion is not as simple as it sounds, since agencies do not wish to appear ungrateful about accepting volunteers or uncooperative about campus civic engagement programs.

Managers observed that the amount of time a student is expected to commit to a service-learning project can become a particularly important selection criterion. Students who are expected by their professor to volunteer for just a few hours over a semester are the hardest to fit into agency programs. Agency managers point out the difficulty in designing short-term experiences for students that can achieve long-term learning objectives. Some felt

that agencies (rather than faculty) should set minimum standards for the number of hours students would be expected to volunteer, based on agency needs rather than course expectations.

### Staffing Service-Learning Projects

The research on volunteer management capacity suggests that dedicating a full-time or part-time staff to coordinate volunteers can be an effective response to volunteer recruitment and retention challenges (Hager and Brudney, 2004a). But it can be difficult for smaller agencies to find the resources to dedicate to volunteer coordination. In the case of service-learner involvement, some agencies depend on campus programs that assume the burden for at least part of the volunteer management functions, such as tracking student hours and providing reflection activities. Agencies can



also reorganize internally to involve students. One way to avoid diverting too many staff resources to service-learning projects is to take advantage of other students who work on-site as supplemental coordinators.

A number of focus group participants noted the help provided by the Indiana University–Bloomington (IUB) campus in this respect. IUB has developed two ways in which students help to coordinate service learning for other students: the ACE and Service Corps programs. At the undergraduate level, Advocates for Community Engagement (ACEs) are placed in work-study positions as part-time, agency-based coordinators of other student volunteers.<sup>1</sup> These positions are aimed at expanding volunteer management capacity for agencies that are heavy targets for student volunteerism. In the case of Indiana University, the campus, rather than the agency, pays the student's small stipend. One focus group participant observed: "ACEs [are] a brilliant idea. They are like another staff person—orientating, supervising [service-learners], responding to requests for help."

The second example, Service Corps, is a program of IUB's School of Public and Environmental Affairs that leverages federal work-study funds to place graduate students in public and nonprofit agencies as part-time staff. In this example, costs are shared, although the campus pays most of the student stipend. In a number of instances, agencies have assigned Service Corps members to coordinate other service-learning projects, although this is not the explicit purpose of the program.

It is likely that other college campuses have also developed innovative ways to surmount the challenge of agency volunteer management capacity. A full scan of these programs is outside the scope of our study. We suggest that agencies wishing to take advantage of such programs contact the civic engagement or service-learning offices of nearby campuses.

*"The more tangible the project, the more likely students will continue to volunteer."*

(Agency manager)

### Managing and Rewarding Student Volunteers

The volunteer management literature describes a range of recommended management practices for volunteers, roughly equivalent to those used with paid staff. Volunteers, like staff, require regular supervision, training in how to perform work, attention to the work that requires improvement, and rewards for work well done. In lieu of pay, experts recommend other tangible and intangible ways to recognize volunteer contributions (e.g., public recognition, opportunities for advancement, training, token gifts). The expected outcome of such an approach is greater retention and lower volunteer turnover, a considerable benefit for most agencies given the amount of time they must devote to volunteer recruitment.

It can be particularly difficult to apply some management tools to student service-learners, particularly when they work off-site or for short periods of time. We found very few agencies that perform background checks on student service-learners or require them to undergo the same training and orientation as other new volunteers. In several instances, when these policies were enforced, the students had difficulty accomplishing much additional project work within a semester's time. These challenges are similar to those encountered by many agencies that involve short-term or episodic volunteers. Most agencies, as a result, find they have to develop shorter training and orientation timeframes to achieve a balance between the timelines of short-term volunteers and the needs of the agency.

Following screening and selection, many agencies use training manuals to familiarize volunteers with agency procedures. Our case studies found two agencies with no personnel manuals for their volunteers, and a third agency with a recently developed manual (itself the product of a service-learning project). Very few agencies in our focus group interviews or case studies had personnel policies in place for staff that explicitly addressed issues related to student service-

<sup>1</sup>Information about this program can be obtained from the Office of Community Outreach and Partnerships in Service-Learning at <http://www.indiana.edu/~copsl/>



learners. On the other hand, we found that the majority of agencies we studied provided some public and personal recognition of student volunteers, and also offered the students opportunities for training and professional development. While we found no instances where agencies subsidized this training, we find it noteworthy that agencies recognize that students are there to learn and signal their willingness to support student learning by connecting students to professional development opportunities.

We also found that despite the gaps in training, supervision, and recognition practices for their volunteers, agencies that had implemented formal practices for students tended to find them helpful in outlining expectations. Finally, we note that several managers we interviewed included their peers and faculty in their discussion of the benefits of training. They suggested that faculty need training to understand nonprofit operations and how to work with agencies, while agency managers need a better understanding of how to use service-learning effectively.

### Getting Results

Measuring the accomplishments of student volunteers requires both measurement tools and planning. On the first count, each of our three case study organizations was able to cite specific accomplishments of service-learners, ranging from improving client math scores and providing role models to clients, to program expansion, grants received, or new volunteer recruitment. On the second count, our interviews with agencies highlighted the need for agencies, students, and faculty to discuss in advance their expectations of what student projects will accomplish. At a minimum, managers told us that faculty should share course objectives and syllabi with agency representatives. Many nonprofit managers also observed the need for more formalized planning tools, including memoranda of understanding between agencies and faculty, or contracts between students and agencies to define the deliverables.

Delineating expectations in advance not only makes it

easier to assess when they are met, it also helps the students understand what they have accomplished. This recognition of their contribution to the agency can, in turn, encourage students to continue to volunteer on their own. As one manager put it, “The more tangible the project, the more likely students will continue to volunteer.”

Above all, agencies emphasized the need for an equal commitment from all three partners to making the project work. They also stressed the need to develop management tools that ensure regular communication between agencies, faculty, and students. A common theme in all of our interviews was the need for greater communication among all partners as service-learning projects are planned and implemented. Communication breakdowns were cited

*A common theme in all of our interviews was the need for greater communication among all partners as service-learning projects are planned and implemented.*

frequently by focus group participants when they discussed service-learning projects that had not worked well. Our interviewees stressed the essential nature of this activity by describing numerous instances where effective and regular communication among the partners would have avoided or ameliorated other common problems, including low student motivation, issues about work quality, or questions

about work priorities. Even in instances where agencies were working with formal university civic engagement programs, very few of the managers we interviewed described examples where they felt that they had received enough communication from faculty. Most agencies received no post-project follow-up from faculty or students. Managers also observed that class groups or student teams often lacked internal organization to facilitate communication, such as a designated spokesperson.

Service-learning programs are also expected to offer students opportunities to reflect on the meaning of their service and their role in addressing community needs. Writing assignments, meetings, or focused conversations with staff or faculty all provide ways to meet this need. These reflection activities can represent a rather alien concept to community agencies that are unfamiliar with the teaching side of the service-learning equation. The question also arises in service-



learning partnerships as to who is responsible for ensuring that these reflection opportunities are provided. While some of our agency representatives considered reflection to be a pedagogical activity for which faculty were responsible, others (especially managers who had longer experiences with service-learning programs) saw enough value in reflection activities to provide them to students as an agency service. We observed several instances where nonprofit managers found that faculty were not providing this activity in the classroom, so they provided it onsite at the agency.

### **Managing Service-Learners: Same or Different?**

An underlying goal of this study was to understand the level at which agencies can approach service-learners using the same management techniques they might use with other kinds of volunteers. Our interviews suggest that at many levels, community agencies can treat student service-learners as they would other volunteers, and can expect students to conform to the same policies and expectations. Students who are involved in programmatic activities where they are working directly with clients are especially likely to be held to this standard. Faculty and campus administrators must understand how these agency expectations can affect service-learning opportunities for students.

However, in other ways, students can require agencies to modify their volunteer management practices to suit the needs and expectations of this particular volunteer group. Our conclusion from this study is that agencies who work regularly with service-learners are willing to put some effort into meeting these additional needs. Most of the agencies participating in our study also believed service-learners required a greater investment of time and effort than other kinds of volunteers. And because most students are short-term volunteers, expected to last no longer than a semester, it can be a challenge for an agency to find a way to maximize the anticipated agency benefits in such a short time period.

Agencies participating in our study met the challenge in various ways. A few provided a very low level of service to student service-learners, with an expectation of little to gain from student involvement. Others turned students away altogether, or refused projects unless certain criteria are met—such as evidence of strong faculty involvement. Other agencies have found ways to surmount the semester-long

barrier and keep students longer. The United Way, for example, has worked with a single instructor to assure a long-term supply of student volunteers for its Nonprofit Resource Center from semester to semester.

When asked directly about their management of service-learners in our focus group interviews, agency representatives emphasized that on many levels, they attempted to treat service-learners the same as other volunteers—for example, by requiring them to go through the same training and orientation as other volunteers. However, we observed numerous ways in which agencies change operations to accommodate student service-learners. These practices include:

- setting aside facilities and resources for students to work on projects,
- changing schedules designed for individual volunteer placement to accommodate student teams,
- permitting student access to committee and board meetings,
- offering informational interviews with students for a purpose other than work production,
- initiating and supervising reflective sessions for students, to ensure this element of the service-learning experience is not overlooked,
- creating or diverting staff resources to manage student volunteers,
- involving board members in setting policy for service-learners, or in accommodating service-learners,
- adding reflection questions to the agency's volunteer handbook, and
- offering a higher level of recognition and reward than that given to other volunteers.

### **Conclusion: Reaping the Rewards and Surmounting the Challenges of Service-Learning**

Service-learners are student volunteers who come with specific and highly instrumental expectations regarding their voluntary service, conditions that place additional expectations on host agencies. The scholarship on service-learning often assumes equal benefits for all partners



(McIntyre, Webb, and Hite, 2005). Our research suggests that the host agency’s perspective on student service-learners is much more complicated.

The agency representatives we interviewed described potentially great rewards, but also particular challenges in working with student service-learners when compared with other kinds of volunteers. The benefits are associated with situations where the student volunteers are prepared, committed, and supported, bring special expertise, and focus on a targeted project with clear deliverables. Relationships appear to work especially well when there is a match between campus goals and agency needs and capacities, and where expectations are negotiated, often through a memorandum of understanding.

What tends to be overlooked in the public discourse on service-learning is the fact that the direct supervision of student volunteers rests not on faculty, but on staff within community agencies. In the words of a focus group participant, “The burden of the [service-learning] experience is on the nonprofit.” Service-learners are involved in agency operations in various ways, and the differences can dictate how well they can be integrated into normal volunteer management operations. Other challenges for agencies emerge when faculty are unprepared or supervise students ineffectively.

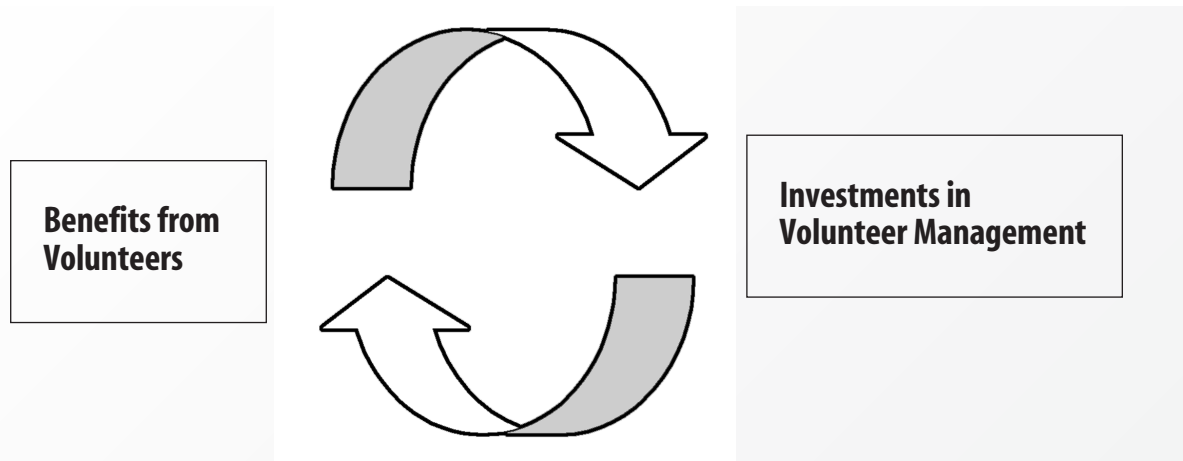
Nonprofit managers are often generous in supporting the goals of service-learning, including managing some of the reflection activities expected of students. However, agency managers can feel an obligation to welcome student service-learners that results in decisions to involve students on the basis of the student’s or university’s need rather than the needs of the agency: “The university is important to all of us, and we have an obligation to give back.”

“We don’t want to turn students away.” Agencies can also conclude that in the end, the effort is not commensurate with the benefits: “It’s too much work.” With adequate support, service-learning may be potentially more rewarding and more challenging for community agencies than other forms of volunteer involvement.

*“ . . . the burden of the [service-learning] experience is on the nonprofit.”*

(Agency manager)

Some challenges may be part of the package and possibly unavoidable. These include the particular difficulties of working with students— younger volunteers can be more difficult to supervise and to retain (Hager and Brudney, 2004b). However, service-learning clearly can be improved from the community perspective. Some of the necessary improvements may rest on agency action, ranging from minor steps such as more involved screening and selection processes, to major actions involving internal reorganization, greater attention to volunteer coordination, or goal-setting and inclusion of service-learner involvement in organizational strategies. One lesson from Hager and Brudney (2004c) that was reinforced particularly



Source: Hager, M. and Brudney, J.L. (2004c). *Volunteer management capacity in America’s charities and congregations*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.



strongly through agency interviews is the value of designating a staff person as coordinator of student service-learners. Colleges and universities that can create funded volunteer coordinator positions for students perform an important service for agencies by helping to meet their volunteer management capacity needs. Such programs can also help to increase overall agency capacity to absorb service-learners.

Other changes will require faculty and campus involvement. Another recommended and widely utilized practice for volunteer management is careful screening and placement procedures for volunteers (Hager and Brudney, 2004b). In our interviews, agency managers called on faculty and campus administrators to formalize the student placement process and involve agencies more fully in initial planning, rather than “throwing” students at community agencies: “It’s common to have students who call on their own. [But] course-based service-learner students are the most difficult to match because there’s often something they need to do [and it’s] not necessarily what we need.” “Class projects are often not constructed in a way that’s helpful [to us].” “How do we support their need to learn, but in a way that will provide the most productivity for us?”

### **Service-Learning and Public Policy**

National promotion of service-learning by policymakers and campus leaders has been built on an assumption that agency demand will meet volunteer supply when it comes to agency absorption of student volunteers. We see this emphasis on the “supply side” in the service-learning literature, which focuses on institutional and political efforts to promote civic

engagement and service-learning, and to provide more opportunities for student service-learners regardless of institutional readiness. Most community impact studies of service-learning have looked at positive impacts without consideration to the institutional costs of time and staff resources (Grantmaker Forum, 2003). A notable exception to this trend is the report, *From Research to Action: A Unified National Response to the 2004 Volunteer Management Capacity Study*, by the National Assembly (NHSA, 2004). This report calls for an investment in volunteer management along with an investment in the volunteer experience that specifically identifies colleges and universities, and national service programs as suppliers of volunteers and calls for better efforts to connect volunteers to opportunities.

We believe more could be done to address the institutional readiness of community agencies to work with service-learners and other student volunteers. We find from our interviews that campus administrators and faculty who assume that community agencies have an unlimited desire—and capacity—to absorb more student service-learners can present problems for agency executives when they must allocate more staff resources to managing volunteers than internal priorities would otherwise dictate. This study is exploratory; it is based on a small and unrepresentative sample of nonprofit agencies, and is therefore limited in generalizations that can be made. However, the information is useful in building our understanding of how organizational decisions to involve service learners are influenced, and how colleges and universities can build stronger community partnerships to ensure that the benefits of service-learning are there for all.





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