



## 10 The Community Standards for Service Learning

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How do we actually implement the three Cs of commitment, communication, and compatibility? What do all four parties—faculty, students, service learning offices, and community organizations—have to do to make service learning as successful for the community as it is for the student?

Remember that this project began in the fall of 2005 with a few community organizations expressing their concerns about how service learning was not fully meeting their needs. By the spring of 2006, we had sixty-seven interviews organized into seven drafted chapters of material. But it was not enough for us to simply write a report and go home; this was, after all, an action research project. If we were going to find problems, we were also going to figure out what we could do about them and act. So in May 2006, we organized a community event with the core group of nonprofits guiding the effort. The students presented poster boards of their research, and organizations told stories of their experiences with service learning—like those described by Amy Mondloch in Chapter 8. At the end of the daylong event, we organized the participants into discussion groups based on the drafted chapters. We asked them to start considering strategies for dealing with the issues expressed in those chapters. At the end of the day, in reporting out the small-group discussion results, we heard a consistent refrain

across all the groups that one of the first things needed was a set of “community standards” for service learning.

We then got to work organizing meetings and strategizing ways to amplify the community’s voice in service learning. We started with the research findings—adding, specifying, and refining the recommendations that naturally derived from that research with the participation of about thirty community organizations. They gave us a limit of one page to work with initially, which we negotiated into a trifold brochure. They did not, however, limit our elaboration on that six-column brochure elsewhere. So this chapter is our attempt to suggest practices that can meet the community’s standards (see Stoecker and Tryon, 2007). You will notice that the standards refer mostly to things that those of us in higher education institutions should do. Given the structural power imbalances between higher education institutions and community organizations, this is fitting. Higher education has set the agenda of service learning for too long. Professors have determined which students will perform service learning and what courses will support it. Institutional service learning offices have set the purpose of it. Students have chosen placements on the basis of what interests them. Institutional-based actors have created a variety of service learning manuals, but they have all been based on the perceptions, needs, and desires of those on the institutional side of the divide. All of these actors have, consequently, implied to community organizations what they should accept.

This project is a counterbalance to those messages, and these recommendations are developed from the voices on the other side of the divide. During the meetings that hammered out these standards, community organization representatives acknowledged that there are constraints on the faculty, administration, and resources of colleges and universities, and that they didn’t expect all these recommendations to be consistently followed. However, they wanted to express their preferred methods of conducting service learning, with the goal of integrating more and more of them into common practice over time.

Some of these standards come directly from the preceding chapters, others extend what is in the chapters, and others are from new information that came to light through the six-month process of creating the brochure. The standards also prioritize the recommendations of the preceding chapters. However, you won’t see everything that is in those chapters, because that would have taken more than one sheet of paper.

We had to choose the top recommendations and their subissues for this aspect of the project. Also, in contrast to Chapter 9, there are more concrete specifics here. We do not exactly provide a recipe, but we do provide what the community organizations say are the crucial ingredients. Those crucial ingredients organize into the five following categories:

- *Communication*: How and when should contact be initiated, what materials and vehicles are best for guiding the project, who should be responsible, and in what manner should communication be sustained throughout the project?
- *Developing Positive Relationships*: Time commitments, frameworks, ways of behaving, and respecting and clearly defining the expectations of the partnership in an ongoing fashion.
- *Providing an Infrastructure for Service Learning*: Offices of “community engagement” or service learning centers, and their value in helping define and implement projects and streamline access.
- *Managing Service Learners*: Including supervising, evaluating, and troubleshooting problems; deadlines, and ways of handling paperwork.
- *Promoting Diversity in Service Learning*: Developing a framework for cultural competency, including the student’s self-reflection and identification; value of recruiting diverse pool of service learners.

The three Cs are spread throughout these categories. Because, ultimately, the three Cs are ineffective unless they occur in an integrated way. Communication without commitment and compatibility without communication, for example, will not lead to better service learning. In this chapter, then, we present the very concrete ways that the three Cs can be implemented in the most effective integrated way.

## Communication

Communication is the most fundamental component of service learning that serves communities. Even before relationships, communica-

tion provides the glue that allows committed relationships to form and last. And it can't be taken for granted. Those in higher education institutions and those in community organizations exist to a certain extent in different cultures (Batenburg, 1995; Bacon, 2002). They use different words, do different things, and try to achieve different goals, so they need to explain just what it is they mean when using words like "syllabus" or "request for proposals" (RFP). Here are some basic guidelines for good communication:

## Faculty

### Call Ahead

Those faculty who are used to putting courses together at the last minute, or even later, will find these community standards most difficult to implement, for the first standard of communication is to communicate early. One of the most challenging aspects of service learning for community organizations is when a flock of students shows up on their doorstep hoping for an immediate service learning placement to meet a set of course requirements. As we have seen, the organizations try to be obliging and even take on students who don't fit their needs as a service to the student and the faculty—at a net loss for their own productivity. But a little advance communication can dramatically reduce the costs that community organizations have to bear, especially if the faculty expects an intensive service learning placement that lasts more than forty hours, or if they plan to send multiple students to an organization. Faculty preparing a course can generate a lot of goodwill by contacting potential placement organizations ahead of the course, asking if they are willing to take on students, how many they might accept, and the conditions under which they are willing to do so. Allowing organizations to say no, while reassuring them that they will be contacted with the next opportunity even if they refuse this time, will also produce a lot of goodwill.

### Send a Syllabus

The second thing that organizations want from faculty is some knowledge of their expectations for the student's experience. Too often, students show up for a service learning placement, and community organization staff have no idea what is being expected of them. Students

can, of course, bring a syllabus with them, but if the faculty are communicating with the organization staff anyway, they can help the organization to better prepare by sending a syllabus ahead of time. Better yet, they can show their commitment to achieving community goals by asking organizations for their input as they develop the syllabus. Faculty who want to impose a ten-hour service learning requirement on their students might learn, if they ask, that many community organizations find such required short-term service learning to be more of a burden than it is worth. They may also learn that community organizations can offer a lot of input into the course substance that can better prepare students for the service learning and even enhance what they learn from the experience. Collaborating with community organizations on syllabus development can also make service learning less of an add-on and more of an integrated feature of the syllabus. Fortunately, along with the wisdom that can be gained from community organization staff, there are also readily available syllabi across the Internet to use as a guide.

### **Invite the Organization to Class**

This may seem like putting yet another burden on the community organization, but many of them very much enjoy coming to the classroom. As discussed in Chapter 3, many community organization staff do not find volunteer fairs all that useful, and see classrooms as places where they can communicate with students and consequently better recruit student volunteers. It is very important to reassure organizations that they will receive future offers regardless of whether they decline the current offer to visit a class. If the community organization representative is doing more than just pitching his or her own program, and is involved in teaching a class session, it is worth trying to find them at least a token honorarium to recognize their value. Setting up a class session with a nonprofit staff person also encourages the early communication that is so helpful for successful service learning. There are times when it is possible to take the class to the organization, meeting on their turf. One of the challenges we are seeing in service learning is the number of students who are reluctant to go far from campus to do their service learning (Stoecker, Stern, and Hathaway, 2007). Holding class on the community organization's turf can support students in venturing off-campus.



## Organizations

### **Assess Your Capacity to Manage Service Learners**

Many of our community organizations are fairly self-critical of their service to students. Remember, they take on students not purely, or in some cases even primarily, out of an expectation that the students will increase their productivity. Often, they believe in the mission of educating the student and hope for some future impact that may shift the student's career aspirations or social consciousness. Because of these altruistic motives, many organizations pay even less attention to their own capacity to take on service learners than they would if they were thinking only of their own self-interest. So the advice that organizations give to each other is to pay attention to what it takes to manage service learners. Not doing so can further undermine the organization's experience of service learning, and also the student's experience. Assessing the organization's capacity to take on service learners starts with knowing what the needs are and what staff time is available. It can be difficult to judge how much time it takes to set up and manage a service learning placement. Organizations with volunteer coordinators are often in a better position to make those judgments than organizations that add volunteer management onto an existing position.

### **Provide Welcome Packets and Guidelines**

Having assessed its capacity for service learning, the organization will also know better what it wants from students and what it can provide to them. One of the recommendations organizations made to themselves for improving service learning is to produce welcome packets and guidelines for students. Doing so has some up-front costs; in the end, however, it can solve some of the recurring problems cited by organization staff. For the numerous students who show up knowing nothing about the organization, it can save making the same presentation innumerable times during the semester. It also provides, in writing, expectations that can allow students to judge whether the placement will be right for them, and can support organizations in holding students accountable for meeting those expectations. This is more general than a memorandum of understanding that establishes specific service learning project expectations, and may focus on things such as professional deportment and overall office operation, which can be helpful for all volunteers.

## **Offer to Give Class Presentations**

The flip side of faculty inviting organization staff to classes is organizations suggesting and accepting that activity. Ideally, organizing a class presentation involves a fair amount of communication between the professor and the nonprofit organization representative. It presents an ideal opportunity to hand out information that explains the nonprofit's mission and programs and guidelines for service learners, and to make face-to-face contact with faculty and students.

## **Organizations and Faculty Together**

### **Familiarize Students with the Organization's Programs and Mission**

Certainly it is a good idea for organizations to provide welcome packets and give class presentations as a way to acquaint students with their work. But printing out all those packets and showing up for all those presentations is expensive and time consuming. Faculty can help out here by doing some of this work as well. If they plan on having students work with particular organizations (see "Call Ahead" above), they can assist in acquainting students with the group, using institutional resources to make handouts on the organization. This work will help students judge their compatibility with particular agencies. Given the gulf between the nonprofit world and academia, helping students to bridge the separate worlds of nonprofit work and higher education requires that organizations understand the kinds of things students need to have defined and that faculty understand what organizations want to communicate about themselves. That can only be done by good communication and collaboration.

### **Sign a Contract or Memorandum of Understanding**

Probably the most important part of assuring good communication between the faculty, student, and organization staff is establishing some kind of written agreement between the three of them. The purpose is not just to promote accountability, but to support all the participants in going through the process of creating a good project plan and specifying everyone's part in that plan. Participants should include things in the agreement document like a definition of service learning, learning ob-

jectives, responsibilities, time commitment, timeline, supervision, training, evaluation, and liability/risk management issues (background checks, transportation, etc.). But it is the process that leads up to the document that is important, not the document itself. We are, consequently, somewhat skeptical of cookie-cutter contract templates and, in fact, prefer that collaborators use more of an abbreviated form of strategic planning to create custom-designed agreement documents (Stoecker, 2005; Lyddon, 1999; Alliance for Nonprofit Management, 2003–2004).

## Developing Positive Relationships

Communication provides the foundation for service learning relationships that serve all the partners. But good communication is just a starting point. To achieve real commitment and compatibility in a service learning arrangement, there are also certain efficiencies and frameworks that need to be developed. It is possible, for example, to send a syllabus, call an organization ahead of time, and complete a memorandum of understanding without really serving the organization. And since truly honest communication is something that grows over time as trust develops, there are other relationship issues that need to be addressed from the beginning.

### Faculty

#### **Make as Long a Commitment as Possible**

The shorter the commitment, the less useful it is for the organization. Many organizations want a commitment that runs multiple years, especially from faculty; most want a commitment that runs at least for a full semester. And unless the ten- to twenty-hour service learning projects are very carefully designed, they are often a net loss for community groups. Faculty and students should not expect organizations to provide short-term service learning students with anything more than superficial assignments like stuffing envelopes and setting up chairs for meetings, unless they have carefully worked out a project plan in advance or their agency is geared toward tasks that are in line with the students' skills coming in. If they want deeper experiences, they are going to have to make deeper commitments to the organization, or thoughtfully provide a project plan that the agency finds of value.



## **Clearly Define the Students' Requirements for the Organization**

It is shocking how many organizations don't even know if the students working with them are from a service learning course, an internship or independent study, or just volunteers. If the professor has learning objectives that the students are supposed to meet, the organizations want to know what those are so that they can provide appropriate training and experiences. They can also advise the professor on whether such expectations are realistic within the constraints of the commitments the professor and student are making. Organizations are happy to help provide experiences to support students in meeting course requirements, provided that they get appropriate returns on their investment of time and energy, but they cannot offer the experiences if they don't know what the requirements are.

## **Help Agency Staff Mentor Service Learners**

It is important for community agencies to have some institutional support in mentoring the students in their charge. Faculty too often send students out to do service learning expecting the organization staff to provide free training—effectively reducing the faculty's teaching time without providing any remuneration to the community organization staff who are picking up the slack. Faculty who have long-term relationships with community organizations can provide much of the mentoring themselves, reducing the burden on the organization and creating a stronger connection between the course material and the community experience.

## **Respect the Work of the Agency**

As we have seen, too much service learning privileges student learning over actual community service. As such, whether intended or not, it communicates a fundamental disrespect of the communities and community organizations that host service learners. The community is not a "laboratory" to be manipulated and experimented upon, or where students can learn by making mistakes. Respecting the work of the agency means understanding that they are dealing with serious social issues that need reliable resources, realizing that the communities they work with have their own wisdom that needs to be part of the solution, and knowing that mistakes have real consequences. In practice, this means

respecting staff time, for example, by not sending thirty students individually to an agency to find out what they do. It means respecting organizational priorities, and not sending students two weeks before the end of the semester, expecting them to be offered a ten-hour service learning placement. It means being aware that the organizational calendar, not the institutional calendar, is the basis for organizing the service learning. This will avoid problems like an after-school program that is suddenly without volunteers because the university semester ends a month before the regular school semester. Developing projects collaboratively with organization staff and communicating continuously with them during the course of the project are the most effective ways to implement a respect for their work.

### **“Globalize” Opportunities**

If we shift service learning thinking from what faculty, students, and higher education institutions need to what communities and organizations need, one of the things we begin to look for is how to orient the work of the academy differently. While faculty are used to attending lots of meetings where very little happens, community organization staff don't have such luxury. They are not as willing, nor do they have the capacity, to attend six separate meetings with faculty who want to place service learning students, or serve on multiple “advisory groups” to multiple service learning efforts. Consequently, we need to look for efficiencies at the academy. Such strategies include combining or piggybacking on existing meetings. Faculty can attend organization board meetings or many professors can meet simultaneously with an organization. Faculty and students can even do group tours of a community site or group orientations. Such things take some coordination time by both faculty and organization staff (who are likely the only ones who will have a list of all the faculty trying to place students with them), but it is important not to expect organization staff to take sole responsibility for organizing these collective activities.

### **Protect Organization Choice**

We have seen that the control of service learning by higher education institutions has created structures, such as volunteer fairs, that are not always very useful for community groups. Nevertheless, the organization staff still feel compelled to show up, even when they don't expect

to get anything out of it, for fear that they will not receive other offers if they decline. Institutions need to explicitly tell organizations that they will not be removed from any list except by their choice, regardless of what they participate in or what criticisms they provide of institutional activities. To a large extent, this is something that should be addressed by institutional policy, but in the absence of such policy, individual faculty will need to provide these assurances.

### **Encourage Organizations to Be Selective**

Similar to protecting organization choice, institutions need to support them in making sure service learning meets their needs, not just those of faculty and students. They should not take on students who have nothing to offer them or their communities. Faculty can support the organizations by explaining to students that they may have to apply and interview for service learning positions and can be rejected, so that they may have to try somewhere else where their skills are a better fit. Restricting access to service learning in such a way will also encourage the institution side to better prepare students to provide quality service.

### **Providing an Infrastructure**

One of the most concrete ways to nurture the relationship between faculty and community organization staff is to provide professional resources to help create successful service learning experiences. If the institution is forward-looking, it probably already has or is now developing some type of "Center for Community Engagement" or other office of service learning. The people who staff these offices are a crucial link to the long-term success of service learning. Ideally, they are on the payroll to facilitate engagement activities and act as a liaison and technical assistance provider to parties both inside and outside the college or university. They can provide assistance in innumerable ways, helping to: develop projects, find matches between faculty and community organizations, facilitate communication, advocate for nonprofits, provide training, and troubleshoot placements. The community organizations' recommendations for community engagement and service learning offices cover these and other issues, showing how valuable this service can be to the university-community relationship.

## **Help Define “Service Learning”**

Many of the community organizations we interviewed did not have a clear definition of service learning. Not all community organization staff are familiar with the language used in higher education to define service learning as a concept distinct from volunteering. The community engagement office can help present the office’s mission statement and explain their definition of service learning, emphasizing the idea that students are receiving course credit for an engagement experience and thus certain learning objectives have been set. Based on what non-profit staff said about the students sent to them, we suspect many faculty don’t have a good definition of service learning either, and may require the same service.

## **Streamline the Process of Finding Matches**

There are always requests from community organizations for project support, and requests from faculty looking for service learning opportunities that fit specific academic criteria. If an office can keep tabs on both streams of information, it is easier to make connections that serve all parties. It is important, however, not to take the easy way out and just create a set of Web forms. Organization staff in particular value personal relationships, and the community engagement office should support such relationship building.

## **Create Databases**

While it is important not to rely solely on electronic databases, it is still important to develop them. Such databases should include a list of professors who teach service learning classes or have community partnerships, opportunities posted by organizations that faculty and students can access, and a listing of organizations that accept service learners. These databases need to be constructed with the needs of their audiences in mind. In some areas, there are several institutions attempting to develop partnerships in the community. We heard a few times from community organization staff: “It’s a pain to have to sign up and send updates to different places—we’d like to do it just once.” Sadly, such interinstitutional coordination is still beyond the abilities of most higher education institutions, but if we really care about serving the community organizations, we will create regional clearinghouses where community organizations can input their information just once

in a location where students from multiple institutions can access it. In addition, many databases are not structured to maximize communication to the most appropriate students. For example, a good database should allow a neighborhood center that needs help with its outreach and communications to word and target its request to be attractive to marketing majors, communication arts, or graphic design students, or to students with whatever particular combinations of skills that would be of most value.

### **Keep in Touch with Community Partners**

In many ways, community engagement offices need to build relationships and maintain communication with both nonprofit staff and faculty to support the fragile communication chain between student, faculty, and agency, and maintain accountability for service learning projects. This often requires site visits or other face-to-face meetings. It can also add an additional communication burden on the organization, but most organization staff are receptive to an occasional follow-up call from a service learning office after students have been placed to make sure everything is going okay. When things are not going well, having a third party can help with sometimes emotionally challenging troubleshooting.

### **Run Orientations for Service Learners**

To reduce the burden on organizations, and compensate for the understandable lack of faculty knowledge on how nonprofits operate, community engagement offices can organize and implement orientations on things like office etiquette, professional behavior, and cultural competence. As we heard from some agency staff, students sometimes arrive unprepared to “be in an office.” And while agency staff do not expect them to live up to the exact standards they set for themselves, they do need students to be prepared to be productive participants in the office. Dress code, phone manners, interaction with staff members, and especially cultural competency are all areas where training can be developed and standardized at the institutional level through an office dedicated to community engagement.



## Run Orientations for Organizations

While many nonprofit staff may have gotten their degrees at the same local higher education institution, accessing the institution as a community organization is very different from accessing it as a student. Thus, community engagement offices can also provide orientations for organization staff on how to access campus resources, and provide information about service learning in a user-friendly environment.

## Provide Organizations with “Zero-Dollar Appointments”

Agency staff often justifiably feel that, when they are supervising service learners, they are essentially acting as their instructors—and, indeed, they are. Maybe they are not teaching out of a textbook, but they are providing an experiential education that is impossible to duplicate in the classroom. Even if we give them zero dollars for their work, it makes sense to give them the respect due to an instructor by offering them access to the institutional resources that are available to faculty, and which allow organization staff to better mentor students. Many organization staff need library access, others would like computer network access to various online resources and services only available to those with a user name and password, and others need parking benefits to facilitate meeting with faculty and students. Providing access to campus recreational and entertainment resources also symbolically recognizes the importance of the community mentor. Zero-dollar appointments can include all of these privileges.

## Managing Service Learners

The pieces of managing, evaluating, and supervising service learners are critical to the success of a service learning project. Although there is overlap here with the section on communication and relationships, it bears repeating that work done at the beginning of the project will pay off many times over—just as laying a solid foundation for a building ensures that the walls and roof are straight. The following recommendations from our community organizations focus on the specific kinds of communication and relationship-building practices that are important once the project has commenced:

## Organizations and Faculty Together

### **Determine the Organization's Role in Evaluation**

The first step in assessing the student's performance in a service learning assignment is to agree on what role organization staff will play in the evaluation. We heard of significant variation in the evaluation of service learners. Some faculty have never evaluated student performance at the service learning site and consider the students' impact on the community to be unimportant. From a community perspective, that position is untenable. But there is also variation in how much organization staff want to be involved in evaluating students, so discussion with agency staff about their role in evaluation is very important. Some agencies don't know whether anything they say has any impact on the student's grade, so they would like to be consulted about the evaluation process up front. Knowing what is being asked of them also helps them judge their own capacity to take on service learners. It also allows the organization to give input into what methods of evaluation should be used.

### **Agree on the Criteria and Process That Will Be Used to Evaluate the Student**

Even if organization staff don't want to be involved in the evaluation, they likely have some standards that students should meet, so most organizations would like to have a part in the control of this piece of the service learning experience. If the student does an outstanding job and the organization staff gives a glowing evaluation, it's nice for them to know that the work they put into writing it actually has some effect on the grade the student receives. By the same token, occasionally students will not take their service learning placement seriously or will do actual harm in the community, and the agency can get very frustrated if they have no vehicle to let the instructor know what did or did not happen.

### **Evaluate Midway and at the End of the Course and Use the Evaluations to Improve the Course**

The midpoint is a good time to check in on the student's performance, so that the assignment can be tweaked and any problems that may have arisen can be worked out before it's too late. Sometimes this is as simple as a midterm phone call to check in, and sometimes it is more formal. Having a memorandum of understanding in place and an agreed-upon

assessment process can also greatly facilitate the midterm evaluation, as all parties will know what goals are to be considered.

### **Limit Paperwork**

If we keep in mind that service learning is not the organization's primary mission, and that real service is essential, we will come up with forms of managing and evaluating service learners that support quality work without unduly burdening organization staff. Consequently, a phone call interview or e-mail response may be easier than extensive forms: We heard that many organization staff were hard to reach and hard-pressed to return phone messages, so they preferred a quick e-mail asking a few pertinent questions. Others were happier talking by phone or even directly face-to-face than writing at all. The key is to find out what method they prefer when making the initial contact with the agency and setting up the parameters of the evaluation process.

### **Determine Who Grades or Checks that Hours and Duties Have Been Completed**

Outside the issue of how to evaluate performance is basic service learning bookkeeping. This can go back to the contract or memorandum of understanding. An important component of that agreement is what role the organization will play in the student's grade. This can relate to overall grading if there is a percentage of the grade that is based on completing all the hours or showing up at certain times. Here, at least some of the burden must fall on the organization, as the instructor is likely not on-site at the agency. Simply tracking hours can also enhance communication.

## **Students**

### **Commit to the Organization's Cause**

Like faculty, students need to make the shift from thinking of service learning as serving the student to the student serving the community. This means making a commitment to the community and the organization beyond the course credit they will receive. The historical bias in service learning to student learning rather than community development has meant that students have not been asked to make serious commitments to communities. This is exacerbated by the practice of

required service learning, as there is a limit on how much commitment the organization can realistically expect when instructors make service learning mandatory and give little or no choice of placement. When faculty place students at agencies in which they are genuinely interested, it naturally creates a situation where the experience will be richer and more productive for all parties involved. That is why it is so important for students to understand the organization they might be working with. The obvious examples of a bad fit include assigning a student opposed to contraception and abortion to Planned Parenthood, or the reverse, sending a pro-choice student into an agency that requires volunteers to sign a “pro-life” statement before they can have any contact with pregnant clients. But sending students to work with an antipoverty agency when the student believes that poverty is the result of laziness is also not appropriate. This means that students need to be clear about their own values and faculty need to help them make their values explicit. To make that process accountable, organizations need to feel safe screening students based on their values.

### **Be Self-Directed and Follow the Professional Etiquette of the Organization**

It is most helpful to the organization if students have received an orientation to professional behavior in a nonprofit context, have the requisite social skills, and take to heart whatever directives they have been given regarding dress code, cell phone usage, communication style, and any other ground rules for “being in an office.” Agencies would also like students to do their best to complete tasks without a lot of micromanagement, and pitch in when they see something they might be able to help with. Community agency staff do not see their office as a site primarily for students to learn these basic skills, and students should not be sent into the community primarily for that purpose.

### **Be Responsible for Their Institutional Requirements and Deadlines**

This is part of the training in professional deportment. Organization staff don’t want to be treated as glorified babysitters. If the instructor requires students to get their hours in by a certain time, organization staff expect students to meet their deadlines without burdening the organization. It shows an extreme lack of consideration when a student

shows up at an agency two weeks before the term ends, as one did in this study, and says, "I need twenty hours by the end of this week!" By some odd stroke of luck, the agency might be able to put a student to work for such a large chunk of time right away, but if not, he or she is just deadweight.

Meeting such deadlines also often means working ahead with either a memorandum of understanding or an evaluation form. Remember, organization staff are there primarily for the community, not the student, and they should not be asked for a twenty-four-hour turnaround on an evaluation form just so the student can graduate. Organization staff need a reasonable amount of lead time to reflect on and complete such paperwork.

### **Adapt to the Organization's Scheduling and Program Framework**

Everyone on the academic side of the service learning partnership, including the student, needs to understand that in order to truly serve the community, the community's calendar must take precedence. The needs of the agency don't necessarily stop over holidays, and in fact may even increase, especially at social service agencies like food pantries and crisis centers for family problems, domestic abuse, and the like. These things often don't fit neatly into a "normal" workweek, either. The more flexible the student is, the more likely he or she will have a positive service learning experience and be able to provide useful service. A student who is available at short notice, for example, may be allowed to shadow a staff member doing an intake on a family in crisis, as opposed to expecting those types of situations to occur only from 10:00 to noon on Tuesdays. If, as we hope, community agencies will become more selective about the service learners they take on, the students who show the greatest commitment and most serious accommodation to the organization's needs will have access to the most exciting and rewarding placements.

### **Keep the Lines of Communication Open with Faculty and Organization**

While student learning has been the emphasis in service learning, the neglect of students' impact on the community has also hindered that learning. The lack of communication and relationship between faculty



and organization has meant that the problems students encounter, and sometimes contribute to, often are not addressed until it is too late. We are hopeful that more faculty will begin to take a significant interest in community outcomes, with encouragement and better resources such as those discussed here. Students can help to facilitate communication in the meantime. Sometimes the student is the only one who knows all the pieces of information and all the parties involved. Communicating between the parties, including things like sharing information on course requirements and materials, as well as organization conflicts and trials, will help forestall difficulties or catch problems before they become too large.

## Organizations

### **Complete Evaluations as Agreed Upon**

It may go without saying that community organization staff might feel skeptical that their evaluations would be taken seriously. But turning the ship of service learning to point to community outcomes rather than primarily student outcomes actually requires agency staff to involve themselves in steering that ship. And that means taking advantages of the opportunities that do exist to evaluate both student performance and service learning program effectiveness. It's only fair that organizations make their best attempt to return paperwork or phone messages within the time frame that the faculty has asked. Obviously, if they don't return evaluations, the instructor can't use them to assign the grade. Unforeseen circumstances do arise, especially in the daily-crisis mode of much community agency life, and faculty need to understand short delays. If a homeless and hungry family has just shown up at the doorstep of a social service agency, of course that will take priority over paperwork, and faculty will probably be sympathetic to extending a deadline or working out another way to deliver the feedback.

Here again, a commitment to quality planning at the beginning of the project will make a final evaluation so much easier. And for those organizations concerned about being left out of future opportunities, it is not the organization that declines an opportunity that is most likely to be excluded from future offers, but the one that says yes and doesn't follow through.

### **Communicate Challenges or Problems with Students to Faculty in a Timely Fashion**

If everyone has committed to and follows through on the standard of evaluating at both midterm and end-of-term time points, the vast majority of challenges that everyone encounters in service learning will be manageable. But there are also occasions when it is obvious at the beginning that a student is a bad fit, or that the planned project won't work out. If the professor doesn't know, he or she can't help fix the problem. And the fixes that the organization might propose could interfere with the professor's learning objectives. Additionally, the student is ultimately the responsibility of the professor, not the organization, and it is reasonable for agency staff, rather than taking complete responsibility for the student, to alert the instructor to communicate with the student and find out what's going on.

### **Promoting Diversity**

In settings such as Madison, Wisconsin, this is the hardest of all the standards to meet. We have no good models or programs in place that promote diversity in service learning. And our veneer of progressivism makes it very difficult to surface veneer-dissolving issues like institutionalized racism. We suspect more-diverse communities may have less difficulty here, but even in those places, we have no ready models for designing service learning programs to draw on the strengths of diversity and repair the damage that has been done by hatred and forced inequality. Even our community organizations lack the diversity needed to fully address this problem, but they have made a start here.

### **Organizations and Faculty**

#### **Work Together to Develop Goals and Processes for Student Cultural Competency**

The challenge of developing cultural competency, in our particular context, is that neither the nonprofit sector nor the higher education sector effectively operationalizes the diversity they are trying to educate students to appreciate. Achieving student cultural competency involves also attaining such competency among both faculty and organization

staff and modeling diversity in both settings. We don't know what such a comprehensive program would look like, but it is clear that such a program is necessary.

### **Help Students Understand and Reflect on Social Status and Self-Identity**

As discussed in Chapter 7, the path to developing cultural competency begins with understanding oneself. It is true that the majority of service learners are relatively privileged young white women, who our organizations noted to be particularly unskilled when it comes to crossing racial and ethnic boundaries. Some agency staff, however, noted that they had students from working-class backgrounds and minority racial-ethnic backgrounds who could also benefit from self-reflection on how structural dynamics of race, class, sex or gender, ability, and other social categories affect their lives. Ideally, understanding how diversity operates in the student's own life and in the community should occur before the student enters the field, as the student will often be working with people who could also benefit from reflecting on the role of socially structured diversity and the inequality that goes with it. When the student and community member do that together, they take the first step toward strategizing ways to struggle against social structural exclusion.

### **Provide Feedback on Student Cultural Competency, Including Student Reflection**

Because it is so difficult to talk about oppression, much of the cultural-competency training tends to involve lectures and PowerPoint presentations. But cultural competency takes practice and coaching, and that can only be done through interaction. Hopefully, faculty can organize their service learning classrooms in such a way that students can feel safe developing and practicing their cultural-competency skills. If the community is not a place to send students to make mistakes, the classroom is the quintessential site for mistake making. This necessitates a transformation of the classroom process, however. Lectures will need to be replaced with discussions, role-playing, and journaling. Faculty will need to adopt a coaching model of teaching, where they give frequent and custom-designed personal feedback rather than just grading a midterm and a final (Palmer, 1998; Barr and Tagg, 1995). Organization staff can be brought into the classroom to participate and also to

coach, allowing them to see the strengths and weaknesses of prospective service learners and begin to build relationships with those they would invite to their organization and community. They can then continue that coaching in the field. Thinking in this open, inclusive way about assets of the community and the institution together can create powerful new synergy.

### **Work Together with Students to Handle Cultural Conflicts as They Occur**

If cultural-competency training begins in the classroom, involving organization staff and other community members when possible and where there are resources to support their involvement, there will already be relationships when students enter the field. When a student behaves insensitively, there may then be enough of a relationship to use the incident as a learning experience that strengthens rather than weakens the relationships. Liken this to any strong relationship—you don't ask someone about his or her personal life until you establish trust and rapport—there's no shortcut to skipping this step with campus-community partnerships.

## **Institutions**

### **Actively Recruit More Diverse Students to Service Learning**

Many of our community organizations emphasized that they need and value service learners of color who can be role models for members of communities of color. Providing such students is a tall order when so many higher education institutions have problems recruiting students of color in general. But here again, shifting the emphasis in service learning can help. Chapter 7 discusses that students of color are not enthusiastic about the charity model of service learning. That probably also means that they are not enthusiastic about the charity model of social service either, which is the dominant model practiced by non-profit service learning hosts. Recruiting students of color to service learning, then, may require transforming the ways that both service learning and social services are delivered. It may also involve targeting service learning more toward social action and social justice organizations, at least some of which we have learned feel excluded from access

to service learners. Institutions have historically shied away from supporting such organizations and the faculty who work with them, so this is a tall order to fill (Robinson, 2000, 2000b; Gedicks, 1996).

### **Provide Comprehensive Cultural-Competency Training**

While the planning and development of cultural-competency training must come from faculty and community organization staff, its implementation must be supported by higher education institutions. Such training needs to be integrated into the curriculum, officially supported, and funded. Handling service learning correctly, in ways that truly impact communities, requires small classes and takes much more faculty time. If faculty are expected to develop cultural competency themselves and then coach students in it, institutions are going to have to commit far more resources to rebalance teaching loads. However, institutions should also provide training for larger groups of students across courses, such as campuswide seminars, rather than training classroom by classroom.

## **Students**

### **Work to Understand Social Status, Self-Identity, and Community Strengths in Their Service Learning Site**

Even the best cultural-competency training will have little impact, of course, if students do not engage themselves in the process. But asking the students to engage in a process of understanding self and other also means supporting them through the process. And, here again, the problem itself points to the wrongheadedness of current service learning models, especially the required service learning model. If service learning becomes a privilege for which students must apply and interview, one of the criteria for allowing students to undertake service learning can be their willingness to engage in self-reflective cultural-competency work. We must make such work as safe as possible, however, so that students will want to become culturally competent, and grow through it rather than shrink from it. Students certainly have a responsibility here, but only when faculty, organizations, and higher education institutions have put into place the necessary supports.



### **Actively Reflect on Their Experience and Share Those Reflections with Agency Staff**

The community organizations expressed sincere hope and interest in learning what the students' reactions to the environment were after their assignments were over. And why wouldn't they be interested? The feedback from a fresh perspective could, in some cases, be very valuable in assessing an agency's programs and mode of interaction with clients and students. If we are successful in transforming service learning from within higher education institutions, we will have created the infrastructure upon which students can grow to the benefit of their service learning sites rather than at the expense of their host communities.

### **Conclusion: Toward Service Learning that Serves Everyone**

Through working with dozens of community organizations over just the last year and a half, we have had our eyes opened. We have seen how the traditional models of service learning that emphasize required, short-term placements of poorly prepared students doing charity work with little to no communication between agency and institution and with absent faculty, can be less than useful to the community. We are amazed at the willingness of community organizations to take on such service learners as an additional mission, in the hopes that they will be able to impact student attitudes, at significant cost to their own productivity and with no remuneration.

Such a model is unsustainable in the long term. Community impact must be at least as important as student impact. Faculty engagement is a necessity, not an option. Service learning office structure and function needs to be rethought in view of these findings. Institutional rewards must be reprioritized.

We are aware that what we found in our context may not apply in others. We would like to stress that there are many sensitive faculty who "get it" and are engaged with their service learning sites. We work with many who want to handle service learning correctly and are eager to listen to what we've found out and follow it as closely as possible for their class projects. There are service learning offices that are doing their best to prepare students. There are service learning programs

that emphasize community impact. But as yet, we do not have a compendium of promising practices that can guide the ship of service learning away from the rocks.

The starting point, we believe, is to attend to the unheard voices—the staff of community organizations and the members of their host communities, who have been suffering through neglectful models of service learning for too long. Our humble offering for the time being is this list of recommendations from them to you, the reader. There is one caveat: We don't just want the community standards created by the organizations in our community to become a boilerplate substitute for the process of hearing the voices of those in other communities. It's going to work best when each community makes it a priority to amplify the unheard voice in every site where service learning is practiced, and for each community to develop its own standards for service learning. We hope that others find our process more important than our product, for it is the process that builds the relationships needed to design service learning that serves everyone.

The agency staff whose voices you have heard in this volume hope the standards they have created with us will be taken up by our local faculty and administrators and used to help prepare and implement better service learning projects. It is a living document: Since the main presence is Web-based, it can be constantly revised and printed in small quantities so it stays current (as opposed to spending a bundle to print a thousand copies on slick, expensive, glossy magazine stock). The organizations also wanted us to stress that they understand not all the standards can realistically be applied to each and every instance of service learning practice. They are aware that “life happens” and do not by any means intend to sound absolutist about accepting students into their organizations based on whether faculty and institutions can deliver each standard to their strict specifications. But they do want us to try.