

Community Partners' Satisfaction with Community-Based Learning Collaborations

Rona J. Karasik and Elena S. Hafner

Abstract

Community-university partnerships offer the potential for a number of mutual benefits, yet working with institutions of higher education can pose unique challenges for community participants. To better understand the community perspective, this paper explores community partners' satisfaction with their involvement in various forms of community-based learning (e.g., service-learning, internships, community-based research). Drawn from a larger, mixed-methods study of community partners across 13 states, the current analysis assesses community agency representatives' ($N = 201$) satisfaction with their community-university partnerships in general as well their satisfaction with specific elements of these collaborations. While the findings reflect generally positive levels of satisfaction overall, several areas of concern are identified, including communication with and presence of faculty, commitment and efficacy of students, and partnership equality and recognition of agency contributions. These findings provide a starting point for improving the community partner experience.

[Community-university partnerships] are sometimes more work and more hassle, but not often enough and not badly enough to disincite me to continue.

—Community partner survey respondent

Community engagement opportunities offer college students many potential benefits, ranging from personal growth and development to career preparation (Conway et al., 2009; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Educational institutions also stand to gain from community-university collaborations in terms of civic responsibility, public perception, increased visibility, reputation, student recruitment, and student postgraduation employment prospects (Bringle et al., 2014; Bureau et al., 2014; Fitzgerald et al., 2012). While achieving these many student and institutional benefits depends on creating and sustaining strong community partnerships (Karasik & Wallingford, 2007; Trebil-Smith, 2019), much less is known about the community partner perspective. This exploratory study seeks to broaden our understanding of community partners' points of view by assessing their satisfaction with their community-university collaborations and identifying areas in need of improvement.

Community Side of Community-University Collaboration

Academic institutions, often insulated by a host of real and perceived barriers ranging from the

mundane (e.g., parking and campus navigation) to the bureaucratic (e.g., administrative policies and procedures), are not known for their ease of access. Moreover, colleges and universities have the reputation—deserving or otherwise—of being removed from (ivory tower) or at odds with (town-gown divide) their surrounding communities (Bruning et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2005). Given the many challenges associated with working alongside an institution of higher education, why might a community organization enter into and remain in an academic partnership such as service-learning, an internship program, or community-based research? One reason is the actual service that students and/or faculty can provide (Bell & Carlson, 2009; Darby et al., 2013). Students may be seen as supplemental (and most often, unpaid) human resources that can both assist agencies with their basic work and help them expand existing programs and/or advance new undertakings (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Cronley et al., 2015; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Vernon & Foster, 2002). Likewise, community partners may believe that university students bring new energy, opportunities, and knowledge into the workplace (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Vernon & Foster, 2002). Bell and Carlson (2009), who referred to these efforts to increase an organization's potential as “capacity building,” have suggested, however, that these are not the only incentives for community partner participation.

A second reason, what Bell and Carlson (2009) called “altruistic motive to educate the service-learner” (p. 20), focuses on what participating students may get out of the experience rather than on what they provide. More specifically, community partners may be motivated by the opportunity to educate students. Such education may focus on professional mentorship (Cronley et al., 2015; Leiderman et al., 2002) and/or helping students develop civic knowledge and responsibility (d’Arlach et al., 2009; Sandy & Holland, 2006). Similarly, Bell and Carlson’s (2009) third motivational category, “long-term motives for the sector and organization” (p. 20), speaks more broadly to wanting well-educated graduates who are prepared to continue the work of the field (Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006). Finally, a fourth motivation reflects community agencies’ desire to forge relationships with higher education institutions to access resources (e.g., students, faculty) as well as be considered for future opportunities (e.g., research, visibility, academic expertise) that may become available (Bell & Carlson, 2009; McNall et al., 2009).

Clearly, these motivators are not mutually exclusive, and community partners likely enter into relationships with educational institutions for multiple reasons. Moreover, Worrall (2007) raised the possibility that community partners’ motives for staying in a partnership may change over time. For example, community agencies who enter into a relationship for the purpose of increasing their capacity (i.e., “free labor”) may subsequently shift or expand their focus to include student education. Alternatively, given that the quality and effectiveness of student assistance have yet to be determined early on in a partnership, Basinger and Bartholomew (2006) suggested that community partner commitment may initially have less to do with building capacity and more to do with loyalty to the educational institution and/or student education.

Challenges for Community Partners

There is an element of risk in entering into untested partnerships, and there are often obstacles to overcome. Some challenges stem from the nature of working with students and academic institutions. Continuity, for example, can be an issue given the academic calendar and the fact that student schedules shift on a quarterly or semesterly basis. In addition to service gaps, constant turnover can absorb significant time and

resources (e.g., orientation, training, background checks, and other legal requirements) for each new participant (Karasik & Wallingford, 2007; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008; Worrall, 2007).

Additional challenges are grounded in the type of work to be exchanged and educational goals to be fulfilled. For example, differing expectations about what can and should be done by whom create the potential for mismatches between students and tasks (Blouin & Perry, 2009). On one level, this might leave students underutilized and/or limited in their learning experience. Alternatively, negative outcomes can result when students do not have the necessary maturity or commitment to adequately handle tasks assigned to them (Cronley et al., 2015). Blouin and Perry (2009), for instance, described how student unreliability can place stress on agency staff and/or adversely affect clients who depend on the students’ work. Liability and safety can also be issues when advanced training is needed. Sandy and Holland (2006), therefore, have cautioned faculty and community partners to be mindful of the tasks assigned to particular students or community sites.

Positive Community-University Collaboration

Along with the emerging literature on community partner motivations and challenges, work has begun to identify essential components of healthy community-university partnerships. Tryon and Stoecker (2008) grouped these components into three categories: communication, commitment, and compatibility. Not surprisingly, several studies highlighted the importance of developing and maintaining multiple avenues of high-quality communication (Gazley et al., 2013; Karasik & Wallingford, 2007; Price et al., 2013; Sandy & Holland, 2006). To ensure strong communication, some authors have advocated establishing formal written agreements between collaborating parties (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Gazley et al., 2012). Others have highlighted the importance of facilitating the ongoing gathering and multidirectional sharing of assessment and feedback (Miron & Moely, 2006; Petri, 2015; Wolff & Maurana, 2001). In other words, partners need to talk with each other regularly.

In addition to good communication, equal commitment from all parties is essential for positive community-university collaborations (Cronley et al., 2015; Gazley et al., 2013; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Some community partnerships called for long-term and year-round investments of time, interest, effort, and resources (Curwood

et al., 2011; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). Equitable division of labor and responsibilities—for example, sharing responsibility for training, motivating, and supervising students—is also important. For some community partners, university commitment may also look like having a designated office or coordinator to manage community partnerships (Gazley et al., 2012; Vernon & Foster, 2002).

The third category, compatibility, is a complex one that requires mutual interests among community and university partners. On one level, compatibility means that student skills and course learning goals should be in line with partnering agencies' capacity and needs (Gazley et al., 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006). On another level, compatibility includes mutual understanding and respect (McNall, 2009; Wolff & Maurana, 2001; Worrall, 2007). To avoid town-gown divisiveness, compatibility must also be present in terms of shared power and planning at all stages of the partnership, from project development, implementation, and sustainability (d'Arlach et al., 2009; Leiderman et al., 2002; McNall et al., 2009; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Wolff & Maurana, 2001), to shared responsibilities and credit for collaboration outcomes (Christopher et al., 2008). Moreover, it is important to recognize community partners as co-educators who possess valuable specialized knowledge (Darby et al., 2016; Williams, 2018). Studies have also begun to look at how service impacts a community both in the short and long term (Geller et al., 2016; Olberding & Hacker, 2016; Vizenor et al., 2017), and they have raised the question of how satisfied community partners actually are with partnership experiences and their outcomes.

Research Goals

To further expand our understanding of the community partner perspective and with the goal of identifying areas in need of improvement, the current analysis explores community partners' levels of satisfaction with their community-university collaborations. A broad lens is used to look across states, types of higher education institutions and community-based organizations, and forms of community-based interaction. The latter is particularly important given Gazley et al.'s (2012) observation that community agencies may not make the same distinctions as academics do between different types of community-based learning (e.g., internships, service-learning, volunteering, community-based research).

Methods

Participants

The institutional review board at St. Cloud State University approved this exploratory study of representatives ($N = 201$) from community partners across 13 states. Participants were surveyed as part of a larger study of community partner collaborations (Karasik, 2020) and include community agency representatives largely from Minnesota ($n = 113$, 56.2%), Washington ($n = 33$, 16%), Colorado ($n = 13$, 6.5%), and Wisconsin ($n = 10$, 4.9%), with additional respondents from California, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Maine, North Carolina, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island. Agency demographics and partnerships types are reported in Tables 1–3.

Procedure

This undertaking evolved out of an end-of-semester “celebration and feedback” gathering among community partners and faculty in a small academic program oriented toward health and human services. The initial goal of this survey was to collect input from program partners unable to attend the event as well as any feedback that those present may not have been comfortable sharing in person. A total of 42 agency representatives (some from the same agency, many from agencies that had partnered with the academic program for 15+ years) participated in the initial pilot to help the program evaluate and fine-tune its community-based offerings. These initial findings were shared with faculty participating in a campus-wide community engagement learning community, who suggested initiating a broader study using the survey to reach a wider range of community partner agencies working with students from other academic institutions and disciplines. The original survey was then revised to accommodate a broader range of disciplines, institutions, and engagement types.

Two approaches were used to contact potential participants for the broader study. Initially, academic community engagement coordinators were identified from a convenience sample of university engagement offices in the Midwest with the hope of engaging their assistance in the study. University coordinators were sent an email explaining the project and requesting their help in sending survey invitations to their community partners. This process yielded extremely limited results, as only two university representatives agreed to forward the invitation to their community partners. The second approach

Table 1. Respondent and Community Agency Demographics

Responding agency type function	<i>n</i>	%
Advocacy	24	17.3
Arts/cultural	9	6.5
Education	38	27.3
Faith-based	10	7.2
Federal	3	2.2
For-profit	4	2.9
Health care	24	17.3
Historic preservation	1	0.7
Information and referral	11	7.9
Local or state	17	12.2
Multipurpose service provider	20	14.4
Not-for-profit	90	64.7
Nursing home/long-term care/multilevel care	12	8.6
Public housing	4	2.9
Recreation	9	6.5
Senior housing/senior service provider	20	14.4
Transportation	5	3.6
Other	35	25.2

n = 139. Percentages were calculated based on the 139 responses received for this question. Respondents could select more than one category.

Adapted from "Community partners' perspectives and the faculty role in community-based learning" by R.J. Karasik, 2020, *Journal of Experiential Education*, 43(2), p. 118.

involved sending surveys directly to partnering community agencies. Seeking a broad range of perspectives, the selection process involved: (a) randomly choosing two states each from various regions of the United States (e.g., Midwest, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest), (b) conducting web searches using key terms (e.g., "service-learning," "community-based research," "volunteer," "community service," "community partner") to locate academic institutions in the selected states that posted community partner contact information on their websites, (c) creating a database of community partner contacts for the selected institutions, and (d) emailing each of these community partners using small-batch emails to reduce the chances of the messages being lost in potential recipients' spam filters.

Email invitations with the survey link were sent to 1,937 community agency addresses, with 108 emails returned as undeliverable, leaving 1,829 emails which may have reached a potential respondent. In all, 201 surveys were received at least partially completed, suggesting an estimated response rate of at least 10.99%.

Survey Instrument

Questions in the current survey were developed based on the initial local community partner concerns (e.g., student procrastination and follow-through, continuity, cost-benefit of investing in background checks) as well as considerations raised in the literature regarding potential benefits (e.g., Bell & Carlson, 2009; Sandy & Holland, 2006) and barriers (e.g., Karasik & Wallingford,

Table 2. Academic Institution Partnership Data

Partnership type	<i>n</i> = 178	%
Field experiences	67	37.6
Fundraising	33	18.5
Guest speaking to classes	75	42.1
In-services/staff workshops	38	21.4
Internships	117	65.7
Service-learning	104	58.4
Site visits	43	24.2
Special events	47	26.4
Volunteers	126	70.8
Other	13	7.3
Not currently participating	3	1.7
Length of partnership	<i>n</i> = 138	%
Less than 1 year	3	2.2
1–2 years	8	5.8
3–5 years	33	23.9
6–10 years	32	23.2
11–20 years	23	16.7
20+ years	20	14.5
Did not know	19	13.8

Adapted from "Community partners' perspectives and the faculty role in community-based learning" by R.J. Karasik, 2020, *Journal of Experiential Education*, 43(2), p. 119.

2007; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008; Worrall, 2007) to community-university partnerships. Suggested best practices regarding the need for strong communication (e.g., Karasik & Wallingford, 2007; Sandy & Holland, 2006); balanced, formalized commitment (e.g., Blouin & Perry, 2009; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009); and compatibility (e.g., Gazley et al., 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006) also informed the survey construction. Additionally, to accommodate the broader reach of this survey, a few discipline-specific questions were eliminated from the initial survey, and additional community partner demographic variables (e.g., state, academic partner's type of institution, participating students' academic fields) were added. The final online survey included both fixed-choice (seven demographic, nine evaluative) and open-ended

(three qualitative experiential) questions on a range of collaboration-related topics. The current analysis focuses on the quantitative findings from the six fixed-choice questions related to partners' reasons for participation, their evaluation of specific barriers and benefits, and their overall satisfaction with their relationships with higher education institutions.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated for fixed-response questions in this exploratory study. Some percentages may not add up to 100% due to questions that allowed for more than one response and/or rounding errors. Not all participants chose to respond to every question, so percentages were calculated based on the number of responses for

Table 3. Student Partnership Data

Student field of study	<i>n</i> = 166	%
Anthropology	10	6.0
Arts/music/theater	12	7.2
Biological/physical sciences	16	9.6
Business/marketing	38	22.9
Counseling	38	22.9
Early childhood studies	40	24.1
English/language arts	22	13.3
Environmental studies	12	7.2
Foreign languages	14	8.4
Geography	7	4.2
Gerontology	27	16.3
Health services	62	37.4
Math/statistics	9	5.4
Nursing	40	24.1
P-12 education	53	31.9
Physical education/sports	14	8.4
Political science	19	11.5
Psychology	59	35.5
Science and engineering	6	3.6
Social work	106	63.9
Sociology	57	34.3
Speech and language pathology	13	7.8
Other	36	21.7

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each question. Additionally, a few illustrative quotations are included from participants' open-ended responses to the "Other—Please Explain" option from the fixed-choice questions relating to partner satisfaction. Qualitative findings from the three open-ended questions regarding community partners' perspectives on the faculty role in community-based learning were analyzed using dual-rater axial/open coding methods and are reported elsewhere (Karasik, 2020).

Findings

Reasons for Partnering

Respondents (*n* = 152) could select one or more reasons why their agency participates in community-based learning with college students (Table 4). Over half of the respondents identified the following items as motivating factors for their participation: "Opportunity to share experience/knowledge" (*n* = 126, 82.9%), "Fill unmet needs at the agency/organization" (*n* = 105, 69.1%),

“Develop relationship(s) with university for future projects” ($n = 102$, 67.1%), and “Fulfills mission of agency/organization” ($n = 94$, 61.6%). Four respondents (2.6%) indicated that their agency was not participating in community-based learning at this time, while five (3.3%) responded “Other” and wrote in the following reasons: “Provide students with opportunity to be involved in the community,” “Attract future volunteers,” “Provide opportunities for cross-cultural learning,” “Broaden the understanding of our mission,” and “Opportunity for fresh ideas from students and for us to offer an alternative view of dementia.”

Satisfaction

Satisfaction with academic participants. Respondents ($n = 148$) rated their satisfaction with their student and faculty partners (Table 5). Most indicated being “somewhat” or “extremely” satisfied with their academic participants, although each of the following categories received at least one “not satisfied” response: “Faculty associated with service-learning,” “Undergraduate interns,” “Faculty associated with student interns,” “Service-learning students,” “Student volunteers,” “Student research assistants,” and “Faculty associated with community-based research.” Write-in comments offered by a few respondents under the “Other” option offered some additional insight. One respondent wrote,

My “somewhat satisfied” ... is actually “satisfied”—but not “extremely.” [Community-university partnerships] are sometimes more work and more hassle, but not often enough and not badly enough to disincline me to continue. Some colleges/universities work out better than others. The faculty is probably the major factor. One school has a very close relationship with us. Others simply need places for their students to fulfill their requirements. Those faculty still care, and are responsive, but the control is at a different level. The underlying explanation is probably that our top-notch connection is a private university, with higher standards for admission.

Similarly, another respondent wrote,

Faculty [are] not always on board with our needs. They may send out antiquated lists of agencies to contact for Service Learning requirements. This is a real disservice to us. It leads to students “carpet bombing” institutions looking for opportunities. A far better solution is the community engagement or Service Learning department having direct contact with us so we can coordinate the effort and share administrative duties.

Table 4. Agency Reasons for Participation in Community-Based Learning

Reason for participation	<i>n</i> = 152	%
Attract future employees	64	42.1
Develop relationship(s) with university for future projects	102	67.1
Fill unmet needs at the agency/organization	105	69.1
Fulfills mission of agency/organization	94	61.6
Opportunity to share experience/knowledge	126	82.9
Provide clientele with opportunities for inter-generational interaction	49	32.2
Provide students with opportunities for inter-generational interaction	66	43.4
Does not currently participate	4	2.6
Other	5	3.3

Table 5. Satisfaction With Academic Participants

Participant Type	Not satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Extremely satisfied	N/A	n
Faculty associated with community-based research	1 (0.8%)	13 (10.4%)	25 (20.0%)	86 (68.8%)	125
Faculty associated with service-learning	5 (3.7%)	34 (24.8%)	54 (39.4%)	44 (32.1%)	137
Faculty associated with student interns	1 (0.7%)	32 (23.2%)	58 (42.0%)	47 (34.1%)	138
Graduate interns	0 (0.0%)	18 (13.1%)	63 (46.0%)	56 (40.9%)	137
Service-learning students	1 (0.7%)	46 (33.3%)	62 (44.9%)	29 (21.0%)	138
Student research assistants	1 (0.8%)	15 (11.7%)	16 (12.5%)	96 (75.0%)	128
Student volunteers	1 (0.7%)	59 (41.0%)	65 (45.1%)	19 (13.2%)	144
Undergraduate interns	1 (0.7%)	43 (30.5%)	68 (48.2%)	29 (20.6%)	141

Satisfaction with student characteristics. Overall, positive satisfaction ratings were indicated for “Respect shown to staff,” “Respect for privacy rules (e.g., HIPAA),” “Respect of boundaries,” “Appropriate behavior,” “Following directions,” “Level of enthusiasm,” and “Appropriate attire.” Characteristics receiving lower ratings included “Available when needed,” “Level of relevant knowledge,” “Level of overall commitment,” “Level of preparation,” and “Follow-through on projects and assigned tasks” (Table 6).

Perceived outcomes. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed with the statements “Partnering with the university on community-based learning is good for my agency” and “Partnering with the university on community-based learning is good for the students.” Most respondents also agreed with “I feel appreciated for my efforts working with the students on community-based learning.” Responses were more mixed with regard to “Community-university-based learning partnerships take more time/effort than they are worth” and “More planning is needed to make community-university-based learning partnerships work well.”

Respondents overwhelmingly disagreed with the statement “If I had a choice, I would

NOT participate in community-university-based learning” (Table 7).

Barriers. Respondents were asked, “To what extent do you see each of the following as barriers to your agency’s participation in community-based learning partnerships with college students?” (Table 8). Items consistently ranked as “never” or “rarely” a barrier included “Concerns from agency leadership,” “Agency policies,” “Client confidentiality/HIPAA,” “Concerns from agency staff,” “Safety/liability concerns,” “Associated costs,” and “Communication with faculty.” Items more often ranked as “occasionally” or “often” a barrier included “Associated time,” “Number of hours students can provide,” “Student dependability/maturity,” “Having enough/appropriate tasks for students,” and “Timing of university classes/calendar.”

Changes. Three items (“Increased communication,” “Increased student hours on site,” “Stronger commitment from students”) stood out in response to the fixed-choice question “What would you like to change about your relationship/interactions with your university partners with regard to the community-based learning experiences you have had?” (Table 9). Other items receiving a strong response

Table 6. How Satisfied Are You with Each of the Following in Regard to the College Students Who Participate in Community-Based Learning at Your Agency?

Quality	Not satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Extremely satisfied	N/A	n
Appropriate attire	0 (0.0%)	62 (44.0%)	74 (52.5%)	5 (3.6%)	141
Appropriate behavior	0 (0.0%)	52 (36.9%)	86 (61.0%)	3 (2.1%)	141
Available when needed	12 (8.7%)	79 (57.3%)	42 (30.4%)	5 (3.6%)	138
Following directions	2 (1.5%)	50 (36.5%)	81 (59.1%)	4 (2.9%)	137
Follow-through on projects and assigned tasks	6 (4.3%)	71 (51.1%)	57 (41.0%)	5 (3.6%)	139
Level of enthusiasm	4 (2.8%)	52 (36.9%)	82 (58.2%)	3 (2.1%)	141
Level of overall commitment	6 (4.3%)	70 (50.0%)	60 (42.9%)	4 (2.9%)	140
Level of preparation	6 (4.4%)	72 (52.2%)	54 (39.1%)	6 (4.4%)	138
Level of relevant knowledge	7 (5.1%)	65 (47.5%)	56 (40.9%)	9 (6.6%)	137
Respect for privacy rules (e.g., HIPAA)	1 (0.7%)	26 (18.6%)	94 (67.1%)	19 (13.6%)	140
Respect of boundaries	2 (1.5%)	42 (30.4%)	87 (63.0%)	7 (5.1%)	138
Respect shown to residents/clients	0 (0.0%)	30 (21.6%)	96 (69.1%)	13 (9.4%)	139
Respect shown to staff	0 (0.0%)	28 (19.8%)	109 (77.3%)	4 (2.8%)	141
Showing up on time	5 (3.6%)	66 (47.8%)	62 (44.9%)	5 (3.6%)	138

included “More feedback from faculty,” “Stronger commitment from faculty,” “More agency input into options offered,” and “Faculty on site more.” Fewer respondents selected “More recognition of agency efforts,” “More equal partnership,” “More students at one time,” “Fewer students at one time,” “Decreased student hours on site,” and “Less feedback from faculty.” No respondent selected “Faculty on site less.”

Two write-in responses were student-directed. One respondent wanted students to be

“more proactive in planning or setting goals in their projects,” and another wanted students to be “interested ... in the long-term, rather than just for a short stint to satisfy a class requirement.” Two other responses were related to agency representatives’ tasks: “I dislike very much having to go each term to the class to represent my program. In fact, I no longer partner with schools that require this waste of my time” and “When providing service opportunity for a group of students it is a big burden to evaluate each student.”

Table 7. Perceived Outcomes

Statement	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Some-what agree	Strongly agree	N/A	<i>n</i>
Community-university-based learning partnerships take more time/effort than they are worth.	42 (30.0%)	40 (28.6%)	30 (21.4%)	16 (11.4%)	10 (7.1%)	2 (1.4%)	140
I feel appreciated for my efforts working with the students on community-based learning.	1 (0.7%)	5 (3.6%)	15 (10.9%)	40 (29.0%)	69 (50.0%)	8 (5.8%)	138
If I had a choice, I would NOT participate in community-university-based learning.	93 (68.9%)	25 (18.5%)	9 (6.7%)	2 (1.5%)	3 (2.2%)	3 (2.2%)	135
More planning is needed to make community-university-based learning partnerships work well.	6 (4.4%)	20 (14.7%)	34 (25.0%)	46 (33.8%)	27 (19.9%)	3 (2.2%)	136
Partnering with the university on community-based learning is good for my agency.	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.4%)	2 (1.4%)	27 (19.2%)	109 (77.3%)	1 (0.7%)	141
Partnering with the university on community-based learning is good for the students.	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.7%)	3 (2.1%)	14 (10.0%)	120 (85.7%)	2 (1.4%)	140

Table 8. To What Extent Do You See Each of the Following as Barriers to Your Agency's Participation in Community-Based Learning Partnerships with College Students?

	Never a barrier	Rarely a barrier	Occasionally a barrier	Often a barrier	N/A	n
Agency policies	31 (23.7%)	66 (50.4%)	17 (13.0%)	4 (3.1%)	3 (9.9%)	131
Associated costs	33 (25.2%)	44 (33.6%)	28 (21.4%)	14 (10.7%)	12 (9.2%)	131
Associated time	6 (4.6%)	31 (23.5%)	53 (40.2%)	38 (28.8%)	4 (3.0%)	132
Client confidentiality/HIPAA	33 (24.8%)	55 (41.4%)	25 (18.8%)	5 (3.8%)	15 (11.3%)	133
Communication with faculty	16 (12.3%)	58 (44.6%)	30 (23.1%)	12 (9.2%)	14 (10.8%)	130
Communication with students	13 (9.9%)	56 (42.8%)	49 (37.4%)	8 (6.1%)	5 (3.8%)	131
Concerns from agency leadership	40 (30.8%)	58 (44.6%)	20 (15.4%)	1 (0.8%)	11 (8.5%)	130
Concerns from agency staff	34 (26.4%)	53 (41.1%)	26 (20.2%)	5 (3.9%)	11 (8.5%)	129
Having enough/appropriate tasks for students	20 (15.0%)	38 (28.6%)	42 (31.6%)	30 (22.6%)	3 (2.3%)	133
Number of hours students can provide	8 (6.1%)	35 (26.7%)	56 (42.8%)	26 (19.9%)	6 (4.6%)	131
Safety/liability concerns	29 (21.8%)	58 (43.6%)	30 (22.6%)	6 (4.5%)	10 (7.5%)	133
Student dependability/maturity	7 (5.3%)	43 (32.6%)	58 (43.9%)	20 (15.2%)	4 (3.0%)	132
Timing of university classes/calendar	11 (8.4%)	42 (32.1%)	50 (38.2%)	22 (16.8%)	6 (4.6%)	131

Table 9. What Would You Like to Change About Your Relationship/Interactions with Your University Partners with Regard to the Community-Based Learning Experiences You Have Had?

Change	<i>n</i> = 123	%
Fewer students at one time	14	11.4
More students at one time	19	15.5
Faculty on site less	0	0.0
Faculty on site more	27	22.0
Increased student hours on site	57	46.3
Decreased student hours on site	3	2.4
Increased communication	65	52.9
More agency input into options offered	28	22.8
More feedback from faculty	46	37.4
Less feedback from faculty	1	0.8
More equal partnership	20	16.3
Stronger commitment from students	54	43.9
Stronger commitment from faculty	28	22.8
More recognition of agency efforts	24	19.5
Other	19	15.5

Discussion

Overall, the current findings reflect relatively positive levels of community partner satisfaction, suggesting that participants feel their agencies are getting at least some of the benefits they anticipated. Several important areas of concern, however, are also identified, indicating aspects of the relationships where partner satisfaction could be improved. In particular, problematic areas include communication with and presence of faculty, commitment and efficacy of students, and partnership equality and recognition of agency contributions.

Anticipated Benefits and Perceived Challenges

The reasons respondents gave for participating in community-based learning closely align with earlier findings drawn from case studies and examinations of activity-specific (e.g., service-learning) forms of engagement (Bell & Carlson, 2009; Darby et al., 2013). In the current study, four reasons stand out: The more altruistic “Opportunity to share experience/knowledge” was the most common response, with “Fill unmet needs at the

agency/organization”—what Bell and Carlson (2009) referred to as capacity building—coming in second. “Develop relationship(s) with university for future projects” and “Fulfills mission of agency/organization” round out the top four. “Attract future employees,” another previously cited reason, was slightly less common in this sample.

Factors perceived to be barriers also support earlier findings (Cronley et al., 2015; Gazley et al., 2013; Sandy & Holland, 2006). Time associated with participation was the concern most commonly selected. Continuity-related concerns (e.g., the number of hours students can provide and the timing of university classes/calendar) were also common. With the requisite intake and orientation tasks, needing to start over with new students each term could certainly tax agency staff time, as would two additional commonly cited barriers: “Student dependability/maturity” and “Having enough/appropriate tasks for students.”

Responses to the perceived outcome “Community-university-based learning partnerships take more time/effort than they are worth” were mixed, however, suggesting that while these

collaborations are seen as time-consuming, they are also viewed as having some value. If a partner's only reason for participating were to fill their agency's unmet needs, it would be expected that this extra time cost might tip the balance away from continued participation. Partners tended to agree with the following outcome statements, on the other hand: "Partnering with the university on community-based learning is good for my agency," "Partnering with the university on community-based learning is good for the students," and "I feel appreciated for my efforts working with the students on community-based learning." These responses are consistent with the more altruistic "Opportunity to share experience/knowledge" reason for community partners' willingness to participate despite the attendant barriers.

Satisfaction

Regardless of the various challenges identified, agency respondents did indicate that overall they are at least "somewhat satisfied" with most aspects of their partnerships. Very few respondents indicated that they were "not satisfied" with either their academic partners (students and faculty) or specific aspects of students' participation. Areas with lower satisfaction ratings in need of additional attention, however, included students' availability when needed; students' follow-through on projects/assigned tasks; students' level of enthusiasm, preparation, and overall commitment; and faculty associated with service-learning.

Satisfied or not, community respondents in the current study pointed to several things that would improve their partnerships. The top three desired changes ("Increased communication," "Increased student hours on site," "Stronger commitment from students") are in line with the components that Stoecker and Tryon (2009) suggested are essential for a healthy partnership: communication, commitment, and compatibility. These findings also support Trebil-Smith's (2019) recent recommendations about the need to strengthen student preparation and accountability, particularly relating to "1. general professional etiquette, 2. an orientation to the organization and the work it does, and 3. having the knowledge and preparation to meet expectations and carry out the tasks for which they are responsible" (p. 22).

Other agency concerns (e.g., "More feedback from faculty," "Stronger commitment from faculty," "More agency input into options offered," and "Faculty on site more") are similarly

consistent with Stoecker and Tryon's (2009) essential components and Trebil-Smith's (2019) recommendations. Certainly, identifying areas where community partners' satisfaction can be improved is an important start. Working with the community to develop viable solutions, however, is an essential next step. Ultimately, greater emphasis in the community-engagement literature is needed on the development and implementation of best practices from the community partner perspective.

Limitations and Future Research

The present findings highlight specific components of community-university collaborations in need of attention, serving not only to broaden our understanding of the community partner perspective but also to provide starting points for improvement. The current analysis, however, is not without limitations. For example, as an exploratory study, the survey instrument was designed primarily to collect descriptive data regarding the perceptions of community partners. The format in which the data were collected and the resulting cell sizes limited the analysis to descriptive statistics. Additionally, while the survey initially emanated from community partner feedback, these partners primarily represented health and human service-oriented agencies. Further inclusion of community partner input from a broader cross-section of sectors (e.g., business, technology, government agencies) in the survey development phase may have elicited additional insight from the agency representatives included in the current sample.

The overall representativeness of the current sample is also limited by the low survey response rate. Several factors may have had a role here, including the challenge of determining how many of the emailed survey invitations actually reached a potential respondent (and were not lost to spam filters and the like). Emailing survey invitations to agencies (rather than directly to a specific person) may also have negatively impacted the response rate (Sheehan, 2001). Collaborating with one or more larger community partners in identifying and/or encouraging the participation of additional respondents may be a consideration for future studies.

An additional sampling limitation stems from using university websites to locate community partners. This approach, designed to reduce potential positive response bias from partners known to the research institution, not surprisingly resulted in a sample composed

primarily of community representatives from intact partnerships lasting 3 or more years. While this might suggest some level of satisfaction and sustainability, it also limits our understanding to the perspectives of longer-term partners and does not necessarily reflect the views of newer partnerships and/or those that are no longer active. Further insight might be gained by including the perspectives of community organizations who have not collaborated with an academic institution and/or those who no longer participate in such partnerships. An alternate approach might be to focus on community-based organizations in general rather than those known specifically to collaborate with educational institutions (Trebil-Smith, 2019). In either case, an added issue for this and similar studies is that responding community agency representatives may not fully reflect the experiences of their entire agency. This strategy also may not necessarily provide insight into the perspective of the community members that these agencies serve, who might ultimately be impacted by the outcomes of community-university collaborations.

Finally, the unaccounted-for presence of additional unknown academic partners (other than those initially identified) interfered with the possibility of analyzing community partner satisfaction as it relates to specific institutional classification and/or size. In the current study, almost three quarters of the respondents indicated that their agencies worked with more than one institutional partner concurrently, a finding consistent with those recently reported by the Iowa Campus Compact (Trebil-Smith, 2019). This trend of community organizations having multiple concurrent university partnerships is one that future research might want to explore, along with what, if any, impact community agencies' multiple academic partners have on collaborative competition, consistency, and capacity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the wealth of potential benefits that community engagement is thought to offer college students and the central role that the community plays in providing such opportunities, much more attention is needed to the community partner perspective on community-university collaboration. The comparatively small but growing body of knowledge suggests that community organizations experience both pros and cons when partnering with academic

institutions. In this exploratory study, the overall level of community partner satisfaction suggests that the pros generally outweigh the cons. These findings, however, also identify several areas (e.g., communication, faculty role, student performance, partnership equality) where community partners see considerable room for improvement and highlight the need for additional attention to partnership design both in practice and future research.

Not surprisingly, absent or limited communication seems to be at the root of many of the partner agencies' concerns. Based on the current findings and in conjunction with the previous literature, the following actions are recommended to foster better communication.

1. Create a written plan including the "big picture" (e.g., partnership goals, student learning objectives, achievement milestones), day to day operations (e.g., expectations and procedures for faculty, students, community partners), plans for evaluation and assessment of the goals and objectives, and contingency plans to address internal (e.g., student preparation, behavior) or external (e.g., weather, pandemics) challenges. These plans should be revisited annually. Many universities and agencies (especially in the health care sector) may also require entering into signed memorandums of agreement.
2. Establish a communication protocol, including regularly scheduled meetings (e.g., before, during, and after each semester to discuss and fine tune what is and is not working in the collaboration) as well as emergency procedures (e.g., who, when and how to contact each other "in case of...").
3. Draft a checklist of goals, milestones, and possible pitfalls (see areas of satisfaction noted above). A checklist allows sensitive and/or seemingly small issues to be brought up that might not get addressed otherwise.
4. Be open to brainstorming mutually beneficial solutions together and considering alternative options. Just because it has "always been done that way" does not mean it must continue in the same fashion.

While these recommendations reflect both best practices and common sense, the current findings suggest that they may not be fully implemented in all community-university partnerships.

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About the Authors

Rona J. Karasik, PhD, is a professor and director of the Gerontology Program at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minnesota. Elena S. Hafner is a PhD candidate in the Math Department at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.