

Too much of a good thing?

Re-focusing the benefits of community-engaged learning

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With a new perspective each month, Trends & Issues features timely, relevant, and thought-provoking stories from people and organizations in the non-profit sector who share their thoughts, opinions and musings on a range of topics relating to HR and workplace issues.

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Can you ever have too much of a good thing? Some non-profits think so. Without more intentional thought to the impact of student involvement in community organizations, goodwill, positive intent and benefits may be lost to ineffective relationships and untapped potential.

Because of its potential to generate many benefits, community-engaged learning (CEL), supported by campus-community partnerships, has expanded dramatically in recent years. Whether through service-learning, practicums, field work or other forms of applied learning, students participating in a CEL program are exposed to a wide range of experiential learning opportunities through work placements in community-based organizations. It sounds like a win-win for both campuses and communities. So what's the problem?

In 2007-2008 I conducted a research study in the Edmonton region in order to garner a better understanding of the impact of student involvement on the capacity of community-based organizations. Sponsored by the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, the study included a series of interviews with executive directors, volunteer managers and HR managers who described their experiences with student placements in their organizations. Below is an overview of some of the study's findings.

The popularity of CEL can be overwhelming for organizations

Participating organizations noted that in addition to post-secondary institutions, elementary, middle and high schools have expanded their interest in experiential learning, civic responsibility and community service. With greater focus on citizenship and community involvement, well-known agencies may receive hundreds of unsolicited inquiries for placements each year - in a major urban centre like Edmonton, organizations receive requests from surrounding

rural areas, from smaller towns, from outside the province and even internationally to place students. Responding to the volume of initial requests for information consumes a lot of limited and valuable staff or volunteer time. As one participant stated, this is especially difficult for organizations that are experiencing a shortage of employees:

“The current staffing shortages in non-profit organizations negatively impact the agency’s capacity to manage and support the student learning experience. As the human resources crisis continues to erode community organizations, a significant number of opportunities to partner will be lost.”

Research Participant

Effective CEL needs careful and considerate planning

Many of the study participants reported benefiting significantly from well-planned and supported relationships with university and college programs. The majority of student placements generated value for community groups, however as one respondent noted:

“There are three kinds of student placements. It’s like a continuum. There are those that don’t ask a lot, don’t give a lot, and don’t get a lot, but we all benefit enough that it’s OK. There are some that expect a lot, but give a lot, and so get a lot in return. These are great. And then there’s those that expect a lot and have unrealistic expectations and don’t give a lot. They are the main problem.”

Research Participant

Some of the specific planning challenges that organizations reported include the fact that:

- Campus-community partnerships often involve power inequities and non-profit organizations are often afraid to say no to unrealistic or difficult requests from campuses, believing that their agency may be labelled as uncooperative.
- CEL programs are often under-resourced with respect to faculty supervision, placing much of the responsibility for student support on already overburdened non-profit staff.
- Planning for CEL is often non-existent or short-term, not allowing organizations to be strategic in their integration of student skills and energy. Timelines for specific requests are also often very tight causing agency staff stress in accommodating requests.
- Many placements and projects are too short to produce significant outcomes or the reflection required in student learning. Consequently the cost to both the organization and the student exceeds the benefits.
- Campuses often view CEL as separate from or superior to student volunteerism, while most non-profit organizations see CEL as one aspect of the volunteer involvement continuum in their organizations and the community. Campus and community partners often live in different cultures, with varied priorities and goals. The most effective partnerships cited in the research took time to develop.

At the same time research participants were concerned that policy makers and funders recognize the value of CEL and that the costs of student involvement are often found in areas such as program operations, including HR and volunteer management, as well as general administration. To adequately sustain and expand the benefits of CEL, all partners need to consider where the real costs and benefits of student involvement lie and support them realistically. Many research participants also expressed concern for public policy decisions that mandate community service by students of all ages,

without thought to the costs and impact on individual community organizations.

The value of a strategic view of CEL

Participants noted that their agencies saw increased value from student involvement when they as community-based partners took a more strategic approach to CEL. This strategic approach included:

- Intentionally investing in HR and other planning and infrastructure to capture the benefits of student and campus partnerships
- Building long-term relationships with a limited number of programs and campuses, while remaining flexible to emerging opportunities
- Developing detailed web pages on their agency website that allowed both students and faculty to pre-screen and learn more about their organization
- Collaborating with other community organizations and multiple campus programs to focus on more complex community issues that might be transformed through longer term student involvement over years not weeks
- Consider the benefits of student and campus initiatives on their mission and long term goals, as well as negotiating realistic immediate benefits

Recommendations for post-secondary institutions

Study participants representing community-based organizations also suggested that colleges and universities consider a number of ways to improve the CEL experience by:

- Developing and supporting a centralized CEL staff/student resource centre while maintaining decentralized control over placements. Campuses that support students, faculty and community partners with effective infrastructure and policies continue to develop and sustain valuable experiences.

- Developing and supporting effective campus or collaborative online communication tools to connect community partners with many areas of campus activity, especially those faculties and programs that encourage CEL.
- Mandating community consultation on CEL when new campus programs are being approved or when established programs are evaluated.
- Adequately supporting and recognizing faculty and staff who facilitate experiential community-based learning.
- Developing opportunities for staff and leadership volunteers in non-profit organizations to be co-educators regarding their subject matter expertise and non-profit sector issues

Final thoughts

So is CEL too much of a good thing? It all depends. While the benefits of CEL have been widely studied through the lenses of students and their campuses, less attention has been paid to its impact on the capacity of non-profit community partners. These collaborations must be mutually beneficial to both community organizations and campuses to be sustained and developed. While some community-based organizations can effectively integrate students, unplanned or unrealistic CEL results in diminished capacity in non-profit groups, which in turn has an adverse effect on an organization's ability to deliver programs and services. What may be perceived as a gift of student time, skills and energy by campuses, in fact may be a liability to some groups. As demand for community-engaged learning placements grows, and the ability of community partners to integrate students is challenged, disproportionate costs and benefits for non-profit partners threaten the long term survival of these kinds of partnerships. Without greater thought to current challenges, the benefits of CEL to all partners may be lost.

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