Community Service Learning and its Impact on Community Partners: Program Evaluation

Introduction
In 1997, San Francisco State University (SF State) established the Community Service Learning Program in order to promote opportunities for faculty to incorporate Community Service Learning (CSL) into the curriculum. In 1998, guiding principles of best practice were created in order to strengthen those partnerships. In 2003 and 2011, the CSL program conducted a study to assess, from community perspectives: strengths and areas for improvement; the impact that the work SF State students had on community-based organizations (CBOs); and to determine if the program continued to meet the guiding principles. For purposes of this assessment, it was important to understand how community partners perceived student work and the effects that work had on their services in order to identify needed improvements to strengthen community/university partnerships.

Methods
The 3D Group was hired to evaluate SF State’s CSL office. Surveys were mailed to 315 community partners. Those organizations and their leaders were engaged in partnerships with SF State faculty teaching CSL courses.

Principal Findings
Overall, respondents were extremely satisfied with the quality of SF State student interns. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of survey respondents indicated that the investment in orienting, guiding, and supervising SF State students was worth it. CSL Students positively impacted the community partners’ services by increasing the quality of services and increasing the number of clients served.

We also wanted to see if our community partners’ benefited monetarily from the CSL program. The data showed that for every $1.00 community partners invested they gained $1.77 in return. The community partners invested an average of $682 and gained $1,205, a net in value of $523 for each CSL student volunteer they hosted.

In the 2003 study, we found that the long-term, macro-level impact of CSL students in the community was that it helped leverage grant funding, sustained nonprofit capacity by utilizing volunteers, and created a norm among community members that attending college was possible for everyone. In terms of challenges, respondents indicated that the primary challenge was little contact with faculty, the need for better communication between the community partner and SF State faculty and staff, and confusion over roles and students’ learning expectations.

Overall, community partners viewed SF State students as culturally competent, well prepared to volunteer, and that they provided high-quality work. One community partner expressed what was reiterated by many others, that one of the greatest benefits of CSL was, “Quality students who are engaged, interested and enthusiastic.”

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1 CSL is a teaching method that incorporates academic study with community service to enrich learning outcomes. Research on CSL has repeatedly demonstrated that “students” thinking and reasoning become more complex after taking community service learning courses."