



*Community Service Learning and its Impact on
Community Partners: An Assessment Study*

Introduction

In 1997, San Francisco State University (SF State) established the Office of Community Service Learning (OCSL) in order to promote opportunities for faculty to incorporate CSL¹ into the curriculum. In 1998, principles of best practice were created in order to foster those partnerships. In 2003, the OCSL conducted a study to determine the impact of the work SF State students had on community-based organizations (CBOs), and to determine if the program continued to meet the guiding principles developed in 1998. For purposes of this assessment, it was important to understand how community partners perceived student work and the effects on their services in order to identify needed improvements to further community/university partnerships.

Methods

Surveys were mailed and many focus groups were held with community partner directors or coordinators. Participating organizations and their leaders were currently engaged in partnerships with SF State faculty teaching CSL courses.

Organizations were randomly selected to participate in the survey and focus groups. One hundred seventeen (117) surveys were mailed to community partners. Fifty-two percent (52%) of respondents had been working with SF State faculty for one to three years, 43% over three years, and 5% under one year. Thirty-three percent (33%) of respondents were social service organizations, 26% were in education; 26% were in health related fields; 7% were agencies working on housing/tenant issues; 4% were environmental organizations; and 4% were organizations that did not meet the above criteria.

Principal Findings

Overall, respondents were extremely satisfied with the quality of SF State student interns. Ninety-two percent (92%) of survey respondents and 100% of those who attended the focus group indicated that the micro-level benefits of having an intern significantly improved the quantity and quality of services the organization offered, and increased the number of clients they were able to serve. Other benefits included a renewed sense of creativity and energy in the CBO, and ***active involvement of SF State in the community***, thereby bridging theory with practice.

The long-term, macro-level impact of CSL was that the presence of students 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 the demand upon staff time (25%), insufficient project time, and little contact with faculty (13% respectively); the need for better communication between the community partner and SF State faculty (80%); and confusion over roles and students' learning expectations.

Overall, 91% of respondents indicated that they would continue using CSL students in their organizations.

Having a SF State intern could make a big difference: it may be one day sooner that a life can be saved...that intern, in whatever small way, is responding to an entire family, and to a community by putting band-aids on sores of major injuries...the more band-aids, the quicker [the wound] heals.

(Program Coordinator of a Free Clinic and Suicide Hotline)

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."