

# The Unheard Voices

*Community Organizations  
and Service Learning*

Edited by

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### 3 Finding the Best Fit

#### *How Organizations Select Service Learners*

CASSANDRA GARCIA, SARAH NEHRING,  
AMY MARTIN, AND KRISTY SEBLONKA

even the combined motives of community organization staff to both educate service learners and expand services to the community, how does a community organization find and recruit students who fit the bill? We know amazingly little about this question. Perhaps we have not considered the community's role in recruiting and selecting service learners because students historically have been recruited on the college campus and presented to the agencies. In this research, however, the organization staff were as likely to seek out students as they were to simply receive them. And the people we spoke to had plenty to say about the techniques, logistics, and various pros and cons of recruiting and choosing service learners to work with. Some of their comments and concerns presented here overlap with the themes of communication (detailed in Chapter 6) and expectations (a running theme throughout this volume and also described in Chapter 5). But in terms of the nuts and bolts of "how to get people in here to do stuff" at nonprofit agencies, there are a few distinct issues that deserve consideration in a separate space through a distinct lens. The issues we consider here are:

- *Making the First Contact:* How to develop the connections that lead to good service learning relationships.

- *Selecting and Placing Service Learners:* What criteria to use in choosing who to host and what to host them for.
- *Preferred Service Learner Characteristics:* What skills and attitudes characterize the best service learner?
- *The Role of Organizations' Expectations in Selecting Service Learners:* How a match between what the organization staff want and what students can provide influences service learning placements.

#### **Making the First Contact**

The first step in any service learning experience is making the initial connections among the organization, the professor, and the student. This can be initiated by any one or a combination of the three, and can happen through many different mediums (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; Jacoby, 1996; Milalynuk and Seifer, 2008; Pribbenow, 2002).

For nine of the sixty-seven organizations, the professor made the first contact. Organization staff explained that "professors contact us because students want a place they can speak Spanish," or maybe "the professor lets us know who she thinks are the best students and we bring them in for interviews." Sometimes, as two organizations mentioned, the professor recommends a student to an organization or pitches us on a student." Many organization staff welcome this faculty-initiated contact. An alternate approach is for students to make the first contact with the organization, as was the case for another nine interviews. Some organization staff, although happy to have students, are troubled as to how the student learned about them:

It was really interesting because this particular student sought us out. I was surprised when she contacted us and asked us to be our intern. She knew about [our organization], but I didn't know where the information had come from; we must have been on some resource list or I really don't know. She sought us out and said, "I would really like to work with you."

The third situation is when organization staff actively recruit students. There is some advice on recruiting volunteers or service learners written from various professional perspectives (Network for Good,

2007; McCurley and Lynch, 1989) as “how-to” guides to help nonprofits, but virtually no information on how community agencies say they are presently doing it. Web site databases are mentioned as useful recruitment tools, which is more prominent in urban areas such as Madison, Wisconsin, through [volunteeryourtime.org](http://volunteeryourtime.org). The distinction here is that the term “service learning” isn’t a keyword, or even mentioned on many of these Web sites. So the distinction between service learners and the regular volunteer cadre is invisible to an agency visiting or posting on the site, and sometimes they have no way to document where a particular volunteer is coming from. The National Service Learning Clearinghouse has many detailed articles about how faculty recruit service learners, or how umbrella organizations like Learn and Serve America recruit volunteers. Bringle and Hatcher (2002) have mentioned this issue from the community perspective. So this is a hit-and-miss method of finding students, even in places where there are many Web-based options. The challenges can be compounded in smaller towns that have less options for searching out students or making their needs known (Stocker and Schmidt, 2008). In our research, we found that organizations approach recruitment through three identified strategies:

1. Attending volunteer fairs
2. Talking with classes and/or professors of certain classes
3. Using service learning centers and Web sites that post service learning opportunities

Community organization reactions to volunteer fairs were interesting. Some of the organizations that had staff members sit at volunteer fair booths suggested that this activity allowed them to present their programs to a wide audience all at once and keep current on the higher education institutions’ service learning programs. But the majority of interviewees who discussed participating in volunteer fairs did not see them as efficient, since the large amount of time spent staffing a booth rarely produced new service learning recruits. Volunteer fairs were especially problematic for small agencies that really couldn’t afford the time away from daily operations for a minimal return. To add insult to injury, some institutions charge a booth fee, which could mean that a nonprofit might actually come out behind if no one signs up to volun-

teer with them. Even if the organization doesn’t have to buy booth space, the time commitment can be a net loss:

We’ve taken part in the . . . volunteer days where you can go in and sit at a booth and talk to students . . . but if you sit there all day and end up with one volunteer, it’s hard to justify that [use of time].

Volunteer fairs also tend to lump service learning and volunteer activities together, so in some cases agencies don’t know whether a student’s interest is to complete civic engagement for course credit.

Other organization staff look to take a bit more control over the situation by making the first contact with either a class whose topic is relevant to their work or a professor in a discipline compatible with their needs. They will make the first move to find out what field might be suitable and then work to find an instructor who is amenable to the idea of allowing an in-class presentation:

Generally, they are in some type of class that has a connection to an issue here: poverty, class issues, [or] education. We rarely get volunteers who have nothing to do with the issues.

If our work has some interest or something to offer students or professors whose classes they might be coming from . . . I try to find out what that connection really is and to make that work.

The organization staff person sums up the effects of visiting a class by saying that, after presenting to the class, “everyone is always intrigued and wants to do their student teaching or internship with us.”

Sometimes it is difficult to determine who made the first contact with the professor, the student, or the organization because a number of the contacts are made through relatively informal connections or even simply through word of mouth. But this can be a hit-and-miss proposition. While some interview participants talked about how students passed the word about their organization, others felt that “the momentum [is not] carried through from the student side of things.”

Stronger relationships seem to work better for recruiting students. Three organizations mentioned using their personal connections, and

about twelve said they rely on professional connections—often professors they already know—to jump-start service learning involvement in their organization. Three more organizations said they had firmly established contacts with professors at a higher education institution because staff within the organization were alumni of that institution. Others stressed the fact that the longevity of a relationship only strengthened their ties: “One school has been sending students to [our organization] so long, and they know what we have to offer, and it is a good fit for them.”

The timing of the first contact, in whatever form, is crucial. Organization staff agree that the contact should be made early on, preferably before the semester begins (Peacock, Bradley, and Shenk, 2001). They also encourage students and possibly the faculty to be energetic in establishing a relationship with the organization:

Students need to realize that nonprofits are working on limited resources and that it is really better to call ahead and to plan ahead. . . . Make sure that the students know that it is good to be assertive—send an application in, make the call, find out what is going on, and that will be very helpful.

Of course, it is also helpful for that initial contact to have some depth and structure. Otherwise, some community organization staff may wonder if they are wasting valuable time:

Usually, for some reason, every single [course] requires that they interview the director about our program and our funding sources . . . [laughing] I'm tempted to videotape it and just plug it in for them!

This preterm contact is recommended in service learning manuals (Cress et al., 2005; Campus Compact, 2003), but many of our organizations gave the impression that they believe few faculty or students read those manuals. A number of organizations, especially those who need to do a background check on every volunteer they utilize, expressed frustration when “someone [calls] on Friday and says, ‘Oh, I’d like to be a tutor,’ and they need something signed by Monday saying they’re going to be placed.” Agencies also said that they do not appreciate

it when someone “come[s] in the third week of February saying, ‘I need seventy hours by April.’” This puts an unfair burden on the organization to restructure volunteer opportunities to fit the student’s needs if they want to have that help at all.

On the other hand, a few organizations said they themselves were the cause of missed opportunities because they did not get their requests for service learners out early enough, and lacked adequate planning and recruitment on their side:

As far as recruiting volunteers and service learners, we don't really have anything formal right now. I'm trying to do a little volunteer coordination, but I don't really have a lot of time for it . . . I've sent some volunteering queries, but no one has taken me up on it. I think I need to get into classrooms and make a pitch or something and take the time to be over there personally because e-mail is just not doing it right now.

Most important, a number of our organizations had not developed a public strategy for recruiting and using service learners; often because they were too busy just doing the day-to-day work of the organization. Developing a service learning plan and actively recruiting students is a luxury for which too few organizations have the capacity. Organizations that are farther away from the higher education institution need to recruit especially hard, as students will more likely want to fill their service obligations as conveniently close to campus as possible. This can be especially burdensome for rural organizations, but the challenge is present even for those organizations that may just be a few miles from campus.

## Selecting and Placing Service Learners

Once the organization gets in contact with a student, the selection and placement process begins. Some of these organizations start from the position that they will not “just accept whoever is available.” Almost half of our interviewees mentioned holding interviews with prospective service learning students, and some even do a follow-up interview to make sure the organization and student fit well with each other. Others use a more orientation-style interview, where organization staff

"arrange a meeting with them and get to know them; tell them about our organization and find out in a more holistic sense what they are about."

The range of selectivity varies among organizations, sometimes because they need only a certain number of volunteers. One agency staff person justified their selectivity by saying that "when you have too many volunteers, there will be one or two who do a really good job and there will be one or two that just sit around and do nothing." Another nonprofit representative explained that "it's sort of that fine line between being really beneficial to the student and the organization and kind of failing for both the organization and the students." Some organization staff are "very selective" in choosing service learners, setting aside any fears that their high standards may alienate those who provide the students. Conversely, along with having a plethora of nonprofits in this city, at least one-fifth of the population is college students, a likely target for volunteer recruiting.

I have worked with other organizations and they have a real crisis or panic mind-set, like whenever volunteers come in the door we have to take them because we won't get more, and I am really of the exact opposite mind-set. This is Madison, Wisconsin. If there is any place with an abundance of volunteers. . . . It is our goal to make our volunteer program as volunteer-friendly as possible, but at the same time, we don't need to take an inappropriate volunteer or a bad match because there is always someone else that will step up and take their place.

Other agencies just require that potential service learners have passed a background check and are in moral agreement with their mission. Finally, there are organizations that do not turn any students away. They are "willing to take anybody willing to do it."

Approximately twenty of the interviewees said they try to place students in activities that fit the students' interests. They generally attempt to determine those interests either during an interview or through casual conversation. A few organizations mentioned receiving letters of interest from students, and they wished more students would submit such letters. One interviewee also noted that writing a letter of interest prepares students for writing application cover letters. A few

organizations have encountered students who specify certain experience or client contact, such as:

For certain types of children—Special Ed, ESL, a wide range of different types . . . it runs the gamut. If we know about what people are looking for, almost all of the time we can accommodate them."

And while some organizations find themselves in a position to select among several service learning prospects, other organizations must compete with each other to get the most qualified students with the best fit for the organization:

What often happens is that the service learning program asks me to write up a brief description of what I want the students to do. In some cases the students get to select out of a list, so they might have ten organizations apply but only five of them get selected because that is what the students are interested in. In some cases, it's basically "this is what the students do" and that is it.

### Preferred Service Learner Characteristics

What are community organization staff looking for in service learners? Many do not have clear criteria, but others make important distinctions between categories of students, differentiating first between undergraduate and graduate students, and then making finer-grade distinctions that produce a composite definition of the ideal service learner.

Service learning students include both undergraduate and graduate-level students in a variety of disciplines. Of the sixty-seven research participants interviewed, twenty-six reported that they had worked only with undergraduate students, thirty-three worked with both levels, and eight did not specify. Organization staff saw challenges in working with undergraduates that related to their level of maturity, their level of professionalism, and their work quality.

Despite those misgivings, there were things that organizations talked about undergraduates. Nine organizations had primarily positive

commentary on working with undergraduate service learning students, and saw the final outcome as positive, even with the challenges. Evidently, undergraduates are in plentiful and ready supply, and in some situations (like working with middle school or high school youth), they are seen as "more hip" by the younger kids and have an advantage over older adults in building rapport. They can also have an almost endless supply of energy and enthusiasm, which is invaluable in situations like after-school recreation programs:

The [undergraduate] college student has really been our key solution. I can't see that changing, despite schedules and short time commitments. . . . I think that's why the college students are such a good fit for our program; they can relate better, they can establish a relationship in trust faster.

With that youthful energy, however, often comes a lack of maturity. Six organizations cited immaturity as a significant challenge in working with undergraduate service learners, especially first- and second-year students, as illustrated by these two interviewees:

Some [service learners] are just more mature, more motivated. The younger the student, the less invested they seem to be.

It might be a maturity issue that students who have been in college a little while longer see their classes as being more of a job or that they need to be more responsible for them. The only time[s] I've had problems in the past have been with much younger, freshman/sophomore-level students.

Related to the issue of maturity and professionalism is the feeling among some agency staff that undergraduates do not understand their importance to the organization and the obligations that entails. A quarter of our organizations saw undergraduate service learners as lacking an understanding of nonprofit professional culture and their role in such a culture. On the one hand are those students who enter the situation with a charity attitude that undermines the goals of service learning and who don't take the situation seriously enough. The charity philosophy, which

colorates perceptions of students as giving handouts and community members as unworthy and needy, is one of the most widely criticized aspects of contemporary service learning in the literature (Noley, 1977; Blume and Westheimer, 1996; Bringle and Hatcher, 1996; Brown, 2001; Atchullo and Edwards, 2000; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2000). One organization staff person expands on those critiques:

It can be really hard with undergrad interns . . . to give them negative feedback or critical feedback that they need to hear . . . there tends to be such an assumption [from the students] that because they're here at all, they should get all kinds of knowledge . . . and the level of maturity, presentation, understanding . . . has just varied widely from individual to individual. . . . You have some folks who spend the whole time talking on their cell phones, or two interns talking to each other, or they want to chat with the staff, which means instead of getting time freed up, you have staff people worried about getting their work done.

This points to a need to train students in professional etiquette specific to the nonprofit world, which we discuss in later chapters.

On the other hand are those students who can only see the work through the eyes of a corporate culture:

Undergraduates often "try too hard to be professional" in such a way that doesn't quite fit into a more informal nonprofit organizational culture. It's hard for some to figure out how to "fit in," but "they do get more comfortable through the course of the semester."

The quality of actual work produced by undergraduates is also a factor in community organization staff's low opinion of them. Fourteen organizations cited work quality as a major challenge in working with undergraduates, and here again we see the contradiction between the learning goals and community service goals of service learning. Undergraduates act differently based on whether they see themselves primarily a learner in the setting, or as a volunteer on whom the organization and its clientele are relying:

I think I've had some prejudice against it [service learning] in a certain way that I kind of imagine, I don't know where this came from—maybe it is from hearing stories from other organizations; that you're seeing the result of some work that you know is sloppy, first-year, freshman undergraduate work. I mean not sloppy—maybe it's very good for where they are, but it's not something that is going to be very useful or up to the standard that we would need.

Sometimes the real consequences of what the students are doing for the client is where the disconnect is. They understand that the client probably relies on this, but maybe they don't realize that the client is banking on it, or the client really needs this to happen for x, y, z reasons . . . they . . . just don't have enough experience with some of these things to be able to make the decisions or to do diligent work that needs to be done.

Consequently, many of the organization staff we interviewed prefer to work with graduate students, or at least advanced undergraduates, and this is also a common preference among community organizations elsewhere (Bacon, 2002). But even places without strong graduate programs can design service learning standards around the characteristics of graduate students that community organization staff value—the maturity of the student, regardless of their class standing, and their ability to commit to longer-term placements. The more-experienced and older college student, especially the graduate student, is often regarded as the gold standard, sometimes even seen as substituting for staff.

The grad students are actually working on providing direct services, twelve to fifteen hours a week . . . we do training for a couple months, that gives us four or five extra hours of staff time, of client time, for the next six months, so that's worth the investment . . . and it's promoting our services; we only have one and a half staff members in our Community Education Department . . . and the amount of time that they spend supervising interns is pretty minimal.

Interview participants stated several benefits to working with graduate-level service learning students, which in many cases involved more intensive internships and practicum rather than the more frequent short-term service learning. Community organization staff gave such field-based education programs extremely positive feedback. Some graduate students tend to be coming out of specific programs that require fieldwork and longer terms of service, the experiences on the whole were much more structured, involved more time, and produced more skilled service than many undergraduate service learners are capable of, as these three interviewees describe:

I've seen it work much better with the grad students, because their practicum supervisors come in for the meetings, and so there's a definite change—you know that person and you have some relationship to the goals of the program.

Graduate student interns are fantastic and spend a lot of time here . . . they know what we're doing, the pros know what we're doing, the work they contribute is significant.

Graduate students are more motivated, more focused, [with] more skills. They are building their career, and that works better for us . . . undergraduates on the other hand might lose their interest in our work after a semester. There is no continuity.

Discussing the advantages of graduate-level service learners produces an initial foundation on which to build a definition of the ideal service learner. Again, that definition begins with the issue of maturity. Four organization staff members stated directly that they were looking for students who were self-motivated, who "can move forward and just do it" without "standing around and waiting for specific instructions." Some also prefer active people who get involved, get "down and dirty" in the activities of the organization, and "don't consider anything beneath them." In the same sense, they are looking for students who are outgoing and work well with people, especially when working with populations of different backgrounds than those of the students:



When I think about the number of interns that we've had, they've been regular students who've come from small towns; this is a new experience for them. . . . In terms of my experience, [they are] very conscientious, wanting to learn, really valuing the whole family structure, open and wanting to have an experience with a diverse population.

They prefer those students who are interested in gaining general experience in the field, exploring "new passions" and possible career paths, and developing personal skills. They appreciate those students who "want to learn about people that are different than them," and "care about our community."

Organization staff also tend to look for professional and responsible students who—regardless of age, work experience, and busy schedules—are "able to manage [their] time very well" and be accountable for their actions. One organization director who worked with two service-learning students on the same project provided a very insightful comparison of the two service learners in relation to these variables:

One of the downsides of [service learners] is that you never know going in if this is going to be one of those stellar people that perform like a staff person and you wish you could hire them, or if they're going to flake out midway through and not follow through . . . especially in the context of one semester, it's really not enough time to figure that out, if that's somebody who's going to be worth putting time and energy into. . . . One of [the students] worked on media and outreach and analyzing our [sexual assault awareness] . . . and was just phenomenal. [She] put in way more time than required. The other one was a really good-hearted person that just didn't have the time to meet the commitment that the program asked, which wasn't even to go above and beyond like the other person did, so we had a really mixed experience just in that little microcosm. . . . They came from the same class; one was a sophomore premed that was way overwhelmed, the other was a senior communications/media major, with hardly any classes left to take, and just

really wanted to do this . . . so I think that individual situations make a huge difference.

Actual skills are also an important consideration for organization staff when they think about the ideal service learner. The vast majority of organizations mentioned a preference for service learners with some type of applicable knowledge. As one interviewee explained:

We have some people that were kind of high maintenance that came in. . . . And then we spend the day, here is the computer . . . and you have got to spend a lot of time getting people oriented to how we do things. People have to come here with a certain level of skill.

While most organizations looked for a certain level of competence and general skills, more than ten had very specific skill requirements, most often knowledge of a foreign language or a certain level of schooling:

And in any event, we require that anyone who works here has had experiences living in cultures that are predominantly English-speaking and cultures that are predominantly Spanish-speaking, so if it is a European American student, we would require that they had spent at least a semester living and studying abroad or just living abroad in a Spanish-speaking country.

Others have more general expectations. For example, one staff member mentioned that, "Usually, in the department [the students come from] they have completed all their course work and I think that is the key." A few of the organizations require students to have had certain relevant life experiences or a certain level of knowledge of the organization; skills not necessarily learned in a classroom:

To be helpful for us, you typically have to bring a range of experiences. . . . A lot of it is connected with comfort with working with regular people.

Then there are the organization staff who prefer that a student have certain skills, but are willing to accommodate those who do not by assigning them different tasks:

Usually I put something in about it being helpful if you speak Spanish or if you want to do these things you need to speak Spanish, so we tend to get people who do at least speak a little, but if they didn't, we can find things, but they're not as . . . [Interviewer: versatile?] Yeah. They can do the food pantry; they can do the ESL course, but not other things like the reception desk.

Professors play into this situation as well. A few of the organizations commented on the role that professors can play in making sure a student is a good fit for a particular organization:

I think where the intern situation works really well is when you have field instructors or university people who know their students and place their students in appropriate placements.

I think it is important for faculty members to spend time with the community to see what happens, build relationships, and make a good fit.

One challenge cited by nearly a third of the organizations is that students participated in service learning primarily to fulfill a class requirement, without necessarily caring about the work itself. The problems caused by this credit-driven motive are exacerbated by the fact that much service learning is not only required but short-term, as we explore in Chapter 4, which is a significant problem in itself. Most organizations were frustrated with this attitude, noting that it produced either neutral or negative results for both the student and the organization:

If they're just doing the twenty hours and they don't really engage themselves in what we're doing, and don't really ask a few questions and don't really get it, then they're not going to take away as much as if they really invest themselves for [a certain amount of time] in what we're doing.

Some organizations echoed the concern expressed by one staff person that "[this] person could just find something else to do because it's a lot of work to make those matches . . . schedules, etcetera."

## The Role of Organizations' Expectations in Selecting Service Learners

Whether or not the organization is able to recruit its ideal service learner, the student and organization must find a match of expectations (Jacoby, 1996). It can't be stressed enough that, if this step is overlooked, the service learning arrangement may run into some serious structural difficulties once the student is actually on-site and working. Some organizations do try to match students with their expectations for the work they need done. However, the matching process can be complicated by students seeing themselves first as learners, and the organization seeing them first as volunteers. The service learning literature emphasizes the difference between service learning and volunteerism or even campus-based community service. Service learning, the experts say, is based on an explicit and essential linkage of service experience and course content, with each informing the other (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Fiske, 2001). These definitions seem to be based on the pedagogy developed and adhered to at many educational institutions.

Maybe the community agencies didn't get the memo. From the standpoint of the organization staff we interviewed, and as seen in chapter 2, the distinction between community service and service learning was not prominent. Only eight agency staff commented on whether or not their expectations for service learners differed from what they expected from other volunteers or staff. Five of those organizations mentioned having the same expectations for students as they do for either regular volunteers or employees, and only three made a definite distinction between the students and other groups. In many cases, the staff we interviewed didn't even know if the students at their agency were receiving course credit. So when we asked the organization staff members about how they determine and communicate their expectations for students, most of them approached the question from the same framework through which they develop expectations for volunteers, and a few apply the same standards as for their staff:

I often do an initial conversation with these folks to say, "I treat our interns like staff; essentially, we have the same expectations that they're going to be here, and if they're not, they let us know." I'm sort of the bad cop, and then their supervisor gets to be the good cop, and that works pretty well [laughing]! Because volunteers that you can't count on, in any capacity, aren't worth having, and we're real clear with people about that going in; it's better than getting midway into it and then ending up getting bad grades from it, and us ending up frustrated with projects undone.

Approximately fifteen organization interviewees mentioned the importance of sharing clear and defined expectations with the students during the recruitment process. If they don't do that, they could be recruiting students that they don't want, as these two staff people illustrate:

I think another thing that is really important in doing this is to have some mutually agreed-upon objectives to this project. If you don't have that, then I don't think anybody is going to be satisfied.

I think agencies have to be honest with the students too, you know. You can't just sort of sell this in a way that, you know, you have got to talk about the glamorous things you do, but, you know, on Wednesdays you take the trash down to the curb, Fridays you water plants.

Another aspect of this issue of expectations is the question of *whose* expectations should be a priority in the service learning relationship. Historically, service learning has been structured to meet higher education curricular objectives (Boyer, 1996; Bringle and Hatcher, 2002). Here the service learning dialectic becomes prominent, as the focus on institutional needs can actually undermine community needs. This dialectic has created problems throughout service learning's history for community organizations, as seen in Chapter 2. And it is not as easy as the analysts imply to find a good match between community and student expectations.

Another way that the dialectic exerts itself occurs when the higher education bias of service learning pressures the organizations to support student-defined projects. Five organization interviewees specifically mentioned situations where the outcomes of student-defined projects created problems:

We sort of learned our lesson a couple of years ago. A lot of it comes down to making sure the student is a good fit because we have had a couple of situations where someone came to us saying, "I want to do this." When someone comes to you like that, your gut reaction is, "Well, this is great; we'll find something for you to do." But I really think you have to interview them because we have ended up with a couple of people who came to us saying [that] and then we have realized very quickly that they actually were not a really good fit with what we wanted them to do. I don't think they got much out of it and we didn't either. It ended up just sucking our time rather than helping to build on what we are doing.

One staff member articulated particularly well how they needed to protect their own organization's interests in the service learning relationship:

They came in with really sort of clear learning objectives . . . there was some negotiation at the beginning of that process about what would fit . . . so they get a general sense of the agency's stuff, but the learning comes from the processing they do back in their class and the journals they write and analysis that they do; and from our perspective, that works a lot better than coming in with really rigid goals to do like, these four things while they're here, but these may not be things that we need done . . . so how much are we getting out of the experience, and how much are we accommodating some sort of preformed expectation? We're not an educational agency, so the main point for us—we're glad that they're learning, but we're really focused on the service that we're getting from them, so if it's more about them, then it's not worth it for us to do it because it ends up diverting energy away from our mission.

## Conclusion

We have documented a variety of ways that community organizations find and choose service learners from colleges and universities. The type of student—his or her interests, skills, background of course work, and major—all play into the fit that a particular student will have with an agency. It is really crucial to communicate the expectations on both sides, as we again address in Chapter 6. Aside from these individual characteristics factoring into the success of a project, however, are the ways that the service learning has been structured by the institution. As we have alluded to in this chapter, underlying the issue of finding the right students for a certain organization's needs are problems created by the institution's focus on structuring service learning as primarily a short-term learning experience for students, rather than a long-term commitment to the community. The short-term service learning model is so great a problem that we needed to add a separate chapter of evidence on this phenomenon. It was one of the most provocative findings of this research, as we didn't go into the interviews expecting this to come up, and most of the current literature did not alert us to be on the lookout for it.

## 4 The Challenge of Short-Term Service Learning

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### Introduction

Perhaps one of the most popular forms of service learning today is the service learning component grafted onto a regular course, which nearly always involves a short time commitment on the part of the student. In this study, one of the most consistent themes involved the challenges associated with short-term service learning, which is somewhat surprising given how seldom the problem of "time" has been raised in the literature (see Wallace, 2000; Daynes and Longo, 2004; and Birdsall, 2005).

Loosely, short-term service learning would be described as serving a few hours at a time over the course of several days, or an hour or so a week during part of a semester. But even service learning experiences lasting as long as a full semester are considered short-term by many of our community organizations. In our research, twenty-one participants

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