



**SPEAKING OUT:
COMMUNITY PARTNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON
COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING (CSL)**

September 29 and 30, 2007
Toronto, ON

Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning

**COMMUNITY PARTNERS
AND COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING (CSL) IN CANADA**

Toronto Meetings: September 29 and 30, 2007
Centre for Community Partnerships – University of Toronto

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INTRODUCTION TO CSL; FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Think back and remember the first time you heard about this idea of partnering with a campus to involve students in community service-learning:

- Please tell us about the very first time you heard about CSL.
- How did you hear about CSL? How were you invited to participate? What were your very first impressions? What did you feel most positive and/or excited/concerned about?

Response overview:

Almost all the participants reported that the idea of CSL was presented to them and they were invited to participate in CSL by staff or faculty from their local university. In one case, the idea of CSL was presented as a promising approach by individuals involved in a community development initiative. Often, when the topic of CSL was first discussed, the community organizations already had some kind of relationship with the campus; for example, as a Co-Op or practicum placement, or as a member of a committee. Therefore, CSL seemed to some participants to be a natural extension or enhancement of partnerships already established with the campus.

Everyone shared that their very first response to the idea of CSL was positive:

- they felt excited,
- thought CSL was a great idea
- it made sense to them,
- it appeared to offer so much to students (compared to past generations),

- and they thought it had tremendous potential.

First concerns about the idea and practice of CSL centred upon:

- difficulty understanding the concept as different from other types of involvement or experiential education,
- lack of confidence in the quality of the experience they would be able to provide for students,
- sufficient time, staff, energy, resources to participate,
- overwhelming volume of students (at some larger CSL program sites),
- frustration over the short term involvement and a lack of continuity,
- lack of student preparation and orientation for organization involvement,
- locusts of control in CSL partnerships; the need for CSL initiatives to be based upon community identified needs, to be community driven,
- and finally, a challenge which is also an opportunity, is that learning through community service (or engagement) is already out there in community development initiatives in Canada and around the world; it is not owned by post-secondary institutions and there are many models from which to learn and develop community/campus CSL programs.

Throughout this discussion, many of the participants restated that even though the reality of partnering with a campus to do CSL has included becoming more aware of the challenges, it has not changed their positive initial reaction and that they now are interested in what can make CSL really work as well as possible.

WHAT MAKES AN 'IDEAL' PARTNERSHIP TO WORK TOGETHER ON CSL?

Large group activity to define "IDEAL" or "good/successful" and to identify what characteristics are necessary to reach this goal – participants split into three groups to create a 'definition' – then moved between groups to learn from others and revise their original definition as desired. Final outcome – the following three similar definitions of an 'ideal' campus/community CSL relationship, from a community perspective:

- 1) Our ideal community-campus relationship begins with strong communication strategies to ensure two-way understanding of community needs and curriculum requirements. This should begin with a community based animator/organizer who can facilitate dialogue between the two key groups. Preparation, evaluation and reflection will ensure that students and community are maximizing the assets of service-learning. Faculty would receive professional development to help them contribute to the roles, responsibilities, expectations and opportunities that the students and community can expect.

2) The ideal CSL partnership would:

- have a community based coordinator being a 'translator' and facilitating placements and enriching relationships between the university and the community
- see the university invest in training for and making time for the faculty to value CSL and the community agencies; engaging community experts/resources to do this
- develop a framework of common understanding for everyone about what the community and academic work is
- develop a process to facilitate a 'best fit' between community agencies and the students; this would include preparation, student self-reflection and evaluation

3) An ideal partnership requires clear, open communication between all parties; clearly defined expectations that are understood by all; and, a willingness to listen and accommodate according to the needs of all those involved. Additionally, partnerships are enhanced by reflective observations shared with all, in a setting where such reflections create the opportunity for understanding and change.

FIVE KEY RECOMMENDED ELEMENTS FOR CSL RELATIONSHIPS, EMERGED FROM THESE COMMUNITY-INSPIRED DEFINITIONS:

- COMMUNITY BASED COORDINATION
- OPEN AND CLEAR COMMUNICATION
- PREPARATION FOR ALL INVOLVED (Students, Faculty, Community)
- MEETING DEFINED NEEDS FOR ALL
- REGULAR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FOCUSED ON THE PARTNERSHIPS

CHALLENGES and OPPORTUNITIES

Sharing of experiences with challenges to developing 'ideal' CSL partnerships and ideas on practical problem-solving and opportunity-building:

COMMUNITY BASED COORDINATION:

Challenges:

- **University driven ideas:** “solutions” to community issues come from the university (faculty members), without community consultation, before the development of CSL experiences
- **Funding inequities:** little if any investment from university to build relationships based on financial equity (equal control of/access to CSL funds)
- **CSL experiences as ‘add-ons’ to existing courses;** need for more CSL course development based upon the strengths and needs of community organizations and upon CSL as a unique educational approach
- **Power relationships:** it is the decision of the university to engage in CSL relationships (some see it as an obligation) - CSL focus, coordination, perspective, financial resources are university-based

Opportunities:

- **Realities:** community outlines CSL framework based upon their realities, capacities, etc
- **Institutionalized:** community relationships (CSL, etc) need to be perceived by all as a necessary part of how universities operate (part of strategic plans, devoted resources, etc)
- **Social Change:** accesses universities’ considerable resources of all kinds to facilitate change
- **Awareness:** increases faculty members’ awareness and value placed upon community
- **Community Voice:** facilitates community collaborations to discuss and agree upon goal priorities and communicate those to universities, including how to best match assets and build on strengths

OPEN AND CLEAR COMMUNICATION:

Challenges:

- **Cultural:** language of academia versus ‘go-go-go’ – faculty often unfamiliar (and perhaps scared?) of community environments – same possible for community members and campus environments
- **Assumptions:** related to understanding each other, benefits important to each
- **Complexity:** attitude that “any help is better than no help” to community when it is a much more complex issue
- **Volunteer Management:** unstated/defined function

- **Emphasis on Student Reflection for Evaluation:** not evidence-based; experiential and emotional
- **Role Clarification:** who is responsible for what? Missed opportunities for community organizations to play multiple roles, including facilitating meaningful student reflection

Opportunities:

- **Community Participation:** community partners facilitating classroom discussions – understanding and participating more in classroom
- **Coaching:** communication coaching for faculty by CSL coordinators, experienced faculty peers, CSL partners, etc
- **Accessibility:** Teaching Assistants support for debriefing community partners; regular, accessible communication for reflection, e.g. Blogs
- **Analysis:** Teaching Assistants leading critical analysis of communication and relationship development in CSL partnerships
- **Co-creation of communication channels** for community, faculty and CSL coordinators to connect
- **Standardize** some communication needs, e.g. student commitment forms, partnership agreements, etc.
- **Friendships:** between individuals, as part of CSL partnerships, friendships are essential

PREPARATION FOR ALL INVOLVED:

Challenges:

- **Motivation:** little understanding of importance of preparation for CSL
- **Faculty:** little preparation for participation, especially as CSL grows
- **Community Partners:** little preparation, often no information given on CSL course content, learning goals
- **Students:** generally unprepared for a CSL experience
- **Multiple Experiential Education Activities:** Co-Op, Practicums, and CSL all coordinated from same campus – need different preparations

Opportunities:

- **Students:** need preparation in areas of cultural sensitivity, ethical considerations. skills required, etc
- **Faculty and Students:** preparation on specific issues related to community partners

- **Simulations:** what about preparations through simulations of experiences?

MEETING DEFINED NEEDS FOR ALL:

Challenges:

- **Defining/Prioritizing:** Who are the stakeholders? Where to start? Curriculum needs or community needs?
- **Community Needs:** identification/communication process
- **Student needs:** What can they contribute? Not enough understood about their interests and skills (academic and other)? How is CSL evaluated for academic recognition?
- **Faculty needs:** CSL not recognized and/or rewarded by academic system ; lack of faculty commitment
- **Community vs Community Organizations:** two distinct sets of needs; not always recognized

Opportunities:

- **Communication:** absolutely necessary to understand each other's needs – faculty and community partners need to meet and get to know and understand each other
- **Support:** universities could help/engage in process of identifying and prioritizing community needs
- **Community Based:** community defines what skills and knowledge are needed to address identified needs
- **Student Self-Assessment:** put in place process for students to assess their own strengths, skills, and goals
- **Research Needs:** Match community needs to faculty research opportunities
- **Institution's needs and incentives:** leverage these for support for CSL, e.g. ethical community involvement, competition to provide rewarding student experiences, funding opportunities, clear performance of institution's social responsibility

REGULAR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE (as a learning and communication tool):

Challenges:

- **Time:** demands are great on everyone's time
- **Logistics:** where, when, etc
- **Perceived Weight and Value**
- **Narrow Focus:** usually only upon course and student learning

- **Facilitation;** identifying thoughtful, effective, accepted facilitator
- **Safe Spaces:** creating environments where partners can freely discuss what's "really real" and offer constructive criticism without fear of being judged and/or losing opportunities to connect with campus

Opportunities:

- **Create:** collaboratively identify and create a process for regular reflection
- **Value:** campus could lead in demonstrating the value of reflection
- **Share:** communicate results of reflections
- **Action:** act on those results