Student and Community Partner Expectations for Effective Community-Engaged Learning Partnerships

Holly Stack-Cutler and Sara Dorow


Student insight and community partner feedback can contribute to understanding and thus improve community-engaged learning practices. Student and community partner voices, however, are not often heard during community-engaged learning development. To ascertain student and community partner expectations for community-engaged learning, thematic analysis was performed on data from two sources: a workshop where five student panelists involved in community-engaged learning discussed their expectations of community-engaged learning, and a survey of community partners (n = 45) to examine perspectives on working with students and university partners during community-engaged learning placements.

Student Findings

From their community placements, students expected opportunities to acquire management skills, to exercise leadership skills, and to be given responsibility. They further expected to be exposed to a variety of perspectives on how others view their expertise, and to have an involved community supervisor who would give an orientation of the organization, provide ongoing supervision, and highlight the significance of the work students would perform in their community-engaged learning placement. Students considered their placement to be a safe environment where they could challenge themselves, test learned skills in a professional setting, and connect faces and stories to theories learned in the classroom. To successfully negotiate community and university expectations, students recommended taking ownership of placement experiences and being responsible for one’s own work; having ongoing conversations to ensure that one’s own and community partners’ expectations are being met; learning theory in the classroom and engaging in practicum preparation; using problem-solving skills to navigate unexpected situations; and exploring future opportunities to hone skills.
Community Partner Findings

Community partners appreciated having flexible timeframes and being able to negotiate length of community-engaged learning placements with university partners based on their organization’s needs. Traits that they attributed to effective community-engaged learning placements and partnerships were grouped into three areas: placement characteristics, student characteristics, and university partner characteristics. Effective community-engaged learning placements had specific outcomes, were mutually beneficial for organization and university partners, did not require financial support from the organization, and had good community mentors available for students. Effective community-engaged learning students were knowledgeable about and responsible for meeting placement expectations; came to the placement with adequate background, skills, and pre-training; were enthusiastic, motivated, and ready to learn; and had an interest in the organization and their placement tasks. Effective university partners conducted ongoing student supervision during placements, supported students to help them get the most out of their experiences, and shared students’ progress with community partners through reports.

Conclusion

To foster effective community-engaged learning partnerships, universities need structures for students to (1) share past community-engaged learning experiences with other students and prepare for community-engaged learning placements; (2) have mutually beneficial conversations with community partners; (3) negotiate with university partners; and (4) receive mentoring and support from university and community partners. Further, universities need to establish structures that enable ongoing conversations between community partners and university partners. University and community partners need to provide feedback, share what they have learned about making student engagement work, and negotiate community-engaged learning placement timelines.

About the Authors

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STUDENT AND COMMUNITY PARTNER EXPECTATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

- Encouraging student insight and community partner feedback into their community-engaged learning (CEL) experiences can lead to a viewing of their learning experience. However, students and community partners’ voices are not often heard during CEL development.

RESEARCH DATA & METHODS

We conducted a thematic analysis on two types of data:

I. Student Perspectives on CEL - presented at a public workshop
- Students expected to acquire management skills, career leadership skills, and to be given responsibility.

II. Community Perspectives on CEL - written responses to open-ended survey questions
- Community partners appreciated being able to negotiate the length of CEL placements based on their organization’s needs.

FINDINGS

I. Student Perspectives on CEL - Placement Expectations

A Safe Environment to Learn Skills and Challenge Themselves

- Students expected their placement to be a safe environment where they could take risks and challenge themselves.

II. Community Perspectives on CEL Partnerships - written open-ended survey questions

- Community partners appreciated being able to negotiate the length of CEL placements based on their organization’s needs.

REFERENCES


III. Community Perspectives on CEL - written responses to open-ended survey questions

- Community partners appreciated being able to negotiate the length of CEL placements based on their organization’s needs.

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DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Students expect their CEL placements to provide them with opportunity to “marry” theory and practice.
- Through CEL, partners are community engaged learning (see Figure 1).

- Universities value outcomes for students to share past CEL experiences with other students and agree for CEL placements.
- Universities value feedback from community partners to share future CEL placement outcomes.
- The student’s perspective: students recommend being open to new experiences and learning from mentors and the people one will meet in a community placement.

- Community partners’ voices are not often heard during CEL development.

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STUDENT SUGGESTIONS FOR NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY AND UNIVERSITY EXPECTATIONS

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II. Community Perspective on CEL Partnerships - written open-ended survey questions

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III. Community Perspectives on CEL - written open-ended survey questions

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