Addressing the Impacts of Service-Learning on Communities:

A Recommendation Report

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Executive Summary

This report was prepared based on the findings from the thesis entitled: The Impacts of Service-Learning on Communities: Perspectives from the People (Harrington, 2014). The recommendations in this report were made specifically for the University of Georgia Costa Rica Campus and related offices.

In recent years there has been a push in higher education for a movement towards community engagement and Service-Learning. According to Bringle and Hatcher, a successful model of academic Service-Learning includes meaningful service, academic learning outcomes, critical reflection and reciprocity (1995).

The best practices for Service-Learning indicate that reciprocity between community partners and universities is one of the critical components of a successful Service-Learning model. There is an abundance of research discussing the benefits of Service-Learning for students, and a growing amount of literature that discusses the community and university partnerships that facilitate Service-Learning projects and activities. However, a gap remains in the literature in regard to the benefits of Service-Learning for community members. This study investigated some of the impacts Service-Learning has on communities based on the perceptions of community members in San Luis, Costa Rica, home to the University of Georgia Costa Rica Campus. Twenty-three community members were interviewed on their experiences with Service-Learning and how it affects them and their community as a whole. The researcher found several community identified benefits of Service-Learning as well as areas that need to be improved in order for Service-Learning to provide the most positive impacts for the community.

The recommendations offered in this report are meant to serve University of Georgia faculty, staff and students, particularly in the Office of Service-Learning and the UGA-Costa Rica office. It should be noted that this is not a conclusive set of recommendations, rather a starting point for the encouragement of continuous reciprocal Service-Learning partnerships.

Introduction

        The University of Georgia (UGA) is a land grant institution in the United States which indicates that it was built with education, research and service at its core. The service portion of this mission is upheld through Cooperative Extension and other service initiatives and units across the campus including Public Service and Outreach (PSO). The Office of Service-Learning which is housed under PSO has an important commitment to Service-Learning at the university level. Many students at the university are actively involved in Service-Learning courses and projects throughout the course of their studies at the University of Georgia. During the 2012-2013 school year there were at least 166 Service-Learning courses being taught at UGA across all 17 colleges, reaching over 6,500 students (UGA Office of Service-Learning, 2014). At least 20 of these Service-Learning courses were offered in a study abroad context providing a variety of international Service-Learning experiences for students to choose from.

        The University of Georgia Costa Rica Campus in San Luis of Monteverde, Puntarenas, Costa Rica is an epicenter for many of these service activities. San Luis is a rural area, situated on a mountain near Monteverde, CR. The town is very small and the community (of 300 or less) is extremely tight knit. Agriculture is an important part of their everyday life, because the majority of the residents live and work on farms. University of Georgia students go to San Luis to complete Service-Learning courses that may range anywhere from one week to six months. Students are immersed in the culture, and they are able to work on a Service-Learning project with an end goal of helping the community by using their academic knowledge and newly found understanding of community itself.

        The benefits Service-Learning provides for students have been widely recognized in studies all around the world. As a result of Service-Learning, particularly international Service-Learning, students have reported academic benefits, social benefits and increased skills and citizenship values (Bringle, Hatcher & Jones, 2010; Eyler, Giles & Braxton, 1997). These benefits for students have been demonstrated amongst Service-Learning students at UGA as well, myself included. This study sought to determine if the community of San Luis who has been on the receiving end of Service-Learning students is also reaping benefits from the Service-Learning projects that so often take place in their community.
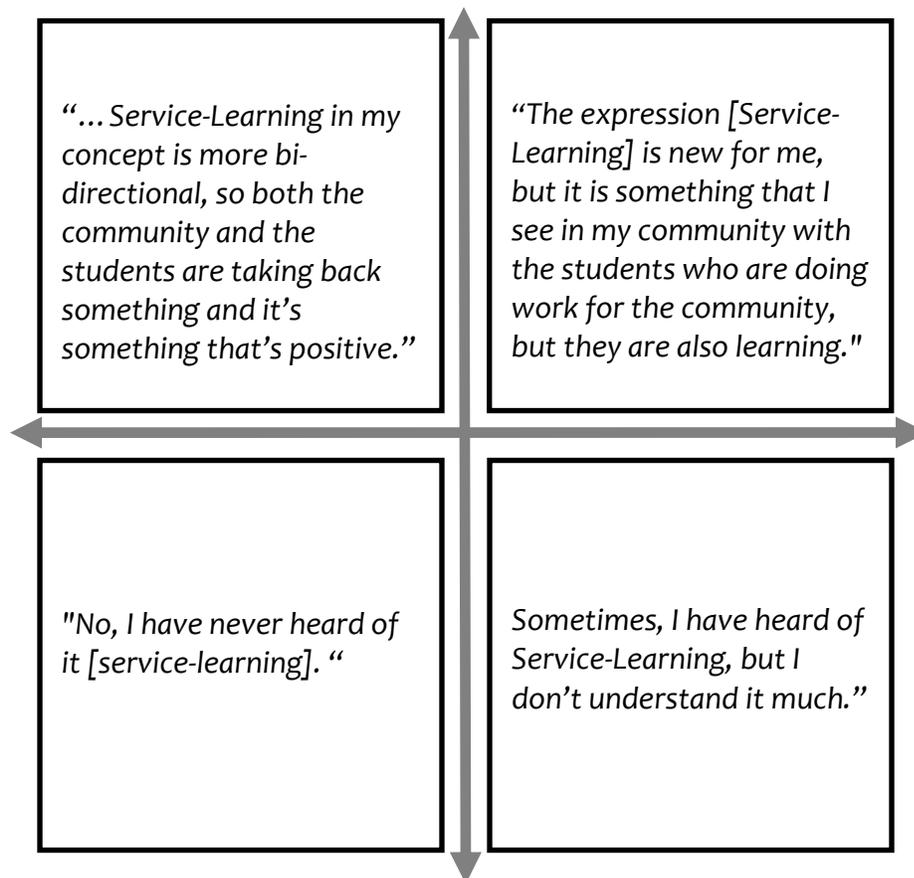
        The purpose of this study was to identify, examine and analyze the opinions of community members in San Luis Valley, Costa Rica relating to the benefits of service and Service-Learning projects in their community. The following objectives were identified in order to fulfill the purposes of this study : (1) Determine how the community understands Service-Learning as a process (2) Determine if the community members perceived any benefits from the Service-Learning projects taking place in the community (3) Determine the negative aspects, if any, that community members perceive from Service-Learning projects (4) Determine how Service-Learning projects could be improved in the future to provide better service to community members and the community as a whole (5) Determine what factors play a role in community perceptions of benefits gained from Service-Learning.

Findings

The researcher found several areas of critical importance that will be shown through figures and notes in this section. For a more in depth review of the findings and discussion refer to "The Impacts of Service-Learning on Communities: Perspectives from the people" (Harrington, 2014).

I.   Community members are not fully aware of what Service-Learning is academically speaking, but they have seen it.

II.   The community recognizes intercultural exchange, economical advantages, transfer of knowledge and productivity as benefits of Service-Learning for their community.

III. Most community members do not view any impacts of Service-Learning as negative. However, issues of community division and the creation of more work for community members came up within the interviews and were documented as negative aspects of Service-Learning.

IV.   Continuity, sustainability, dissemination of research and communication were identified by community members as areas of improvement in order to provide the most beneficial Service-Learning projects and activities in the future.

V.   Community values, community needs and community perceptions of the host institution played an important role in the perspectives community members offered in this study.

VI.   The changes that the community experiences as a result of Service-Learning groups entering their community are viewed as both positive and negative.

VII. While the majority of the community felt that there should be a balance between the community and the institution bringing ideas for Service-Learning projects within the community, a few participants felt that the community members should be solely responsible for bringing these ideas, and an even smaller amount felt that the University should be responsible for bringing ideas to the community.

I. Community members are not fully aware of what Service-Learning is academically speaking, but they have seen it.

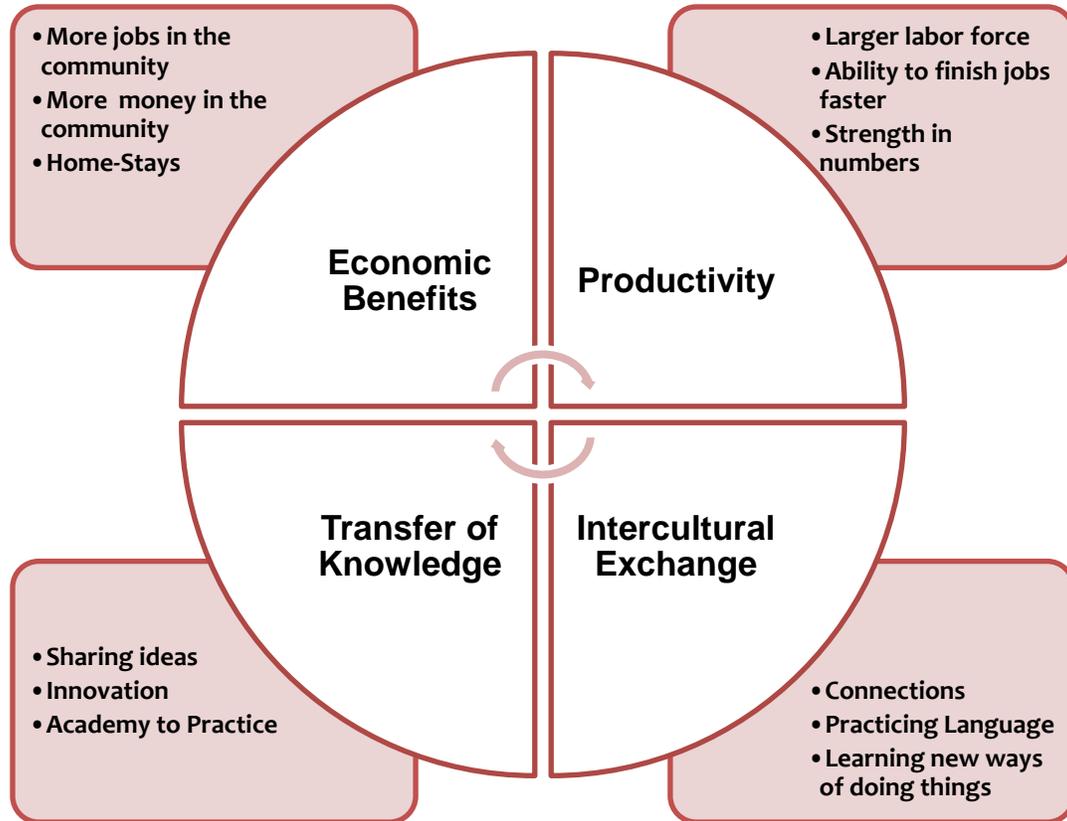|	
"…Service-Learning in my concept is more bi-directional, so both the community and the students are taking back something and it's something that's positive."	*"The expression [Service-Learning] is new for me, but it is something that I see in my community with the students who are doing work for the community, but they are also learning."*
"No, I have never heard of it [service-learning]. "	*Sometimes, I have heard of Service-Learning, but I don't understand it much."*

The results gathered from the interviews demonstrated a lack of understanding of the academic definition of Service-Learning. However, these findings did not support a misunderstanding of the term, rather a different construction of the term.

There was a wide range of understanding of Service-Learning in San Luis which can best be described by four domains:

1. Some understanding of SL-consistent with academic definition

2. Some understanding of SL-not consistent with academic definition

3. No understanding of SL

4. Complete understanding of SL (as defined by academics).

These understandings were bi-directional and representative of Service-Learning from a community perspective, and therefore should not be deemed as correct or incorrect. Most community members had no knowledge or understanding of the term "Service-Learning" as an academic field, but once it was explained to them in depth by the researcher they demonstrated some knowledge of the practice, they had just not been familiar with the terminology.

II. **The community recognizes intercultural exchange, economical advantages, transfer of knowledge and productivity as benefits of Service-Learning for their community.**

- More jobs in the community
- More money in the community
- Home-Stays

Economic Benefits

Productivity

- Larger labor force
- Ability to finish jobs faster
- Strength in numbers

Transfer of Knowledge

Intercultural Exchange

- Sharing ideas
- Innovation
- Academy to Practice

- Connections
- Practicing Language
- Learning new ways of doing things

In order to claim reciprocity as an important tenant for Service-Learning, benefits must be identified for community members as well as students. During the interviews, themes emerged that showcased positive impacts of Service-Learning that the community views as benefits. The areas shown in the figure above were the most common amongst all the interviewees.

It should be noted that the theme of intercultural exchange and transfer of knowledge were initially one theme, but were separated as the researcher gained more clarity from the data. Intercultural exchange deals with cultural knowledge that can be shared between students and the community, therefore providing benefits to both. Transfer of knowledge focuses on the innovative ideas and practices the community can learn from the professors and students in order to put them into practice in their community and in their lives.

III. **Most community members do not view any impacts of Service-Learning as negative. However, issues of community division and the creation of more work for community members came up within the interviews and were documented as negative aspects of Service-Learning.**
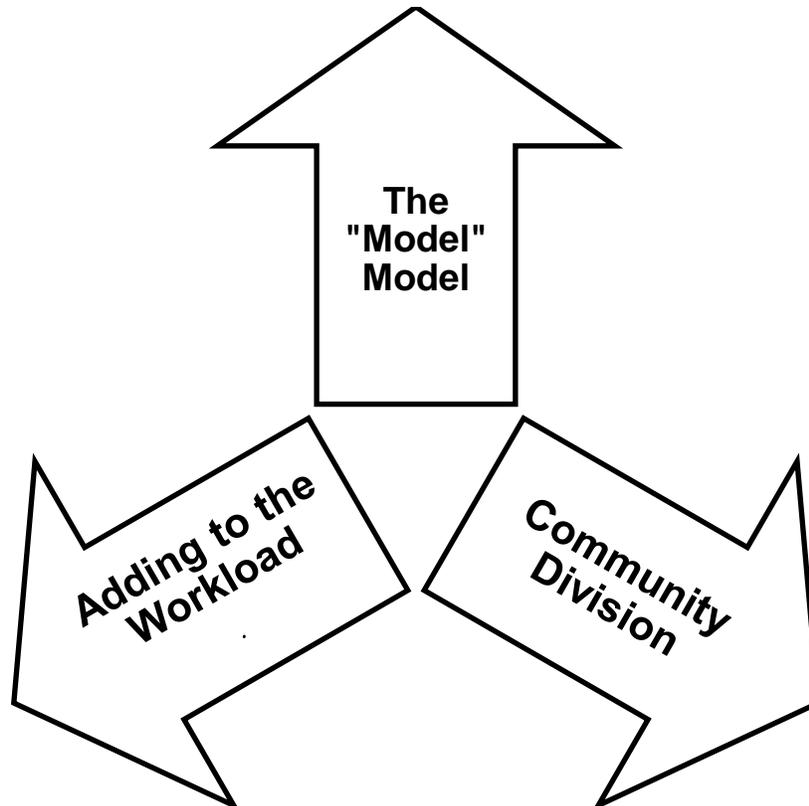
In order to create Service-Learning programs and activities that offer the most positive impacts to a community, we must also understand the potential negative impacts that the service may be causing.

Interestingly, when asked about the negative impacts of Service-Learning in the community, the majority of the participants said that there were no negative impacts and that "everything was good". This implies that the Service-Learning being practiced at UGA-CR is essentially a "model" model and that there are no changes that should be made. However, we know that there is always room for improvement.

Some community members felt that some of the Service-Learning projects taking place in the community actually brought on more work for them. They noted that sometimes the work, time and effort they have to put in to help facilitate a student project is more effort than it would take for them to complete the project themselves.

Lastly, the idea of division in the community emerged as a negative impact of Service-Learning. In a community that is already somewhat divided into upper and lower San Luis, the presence of the University in upper San Luis can have an influence on division within the community. A small number of community members mentioned that residents who live in upper San Luis may receive more benefits from Service-Learning projects than residents of lower San Luis.

IV. **Continuity, sustainability, dissemination of research and communication were identified by community members as areas of improvement in order to provide the most beneficial Service-Learning projects and activities in the future.**

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Sustainability	• *"Sometimes we need people that come and volunteer for projects, but not volunteer for one month and another one comes, and then another one, but I mean volunteers that stay for one year or more. People that can know the community [and] know the ideas, but after that they won't have to go in two or three months."*
Continuity	• *"One example of this is the time when people come to teach English to the kids at the school, because one volunteer comes for one month to teach them their numbers 1-20, the days of the week and colors, and then the next one comes the next month to do the same thing, so there is not a continuation."*
Communication	• *"The problem is when UGA tries to help they basically come and say we need people to do the home-stays or we have students here that can do this or that job, but the community is not that aware, because they don't know what UGA students are doing."*
Dissemination of Research	• *"I think some students leave and the studies go with them and are hiding in some place. Many of them end up in libraries and not in the communities."*

Continuity refers to the idea that Service-Learning should be consistent over time. Some participants felt that when there is no continuity between the Service-Learning projects they become interruptions rather than provide benefits. Within this theme issues of: old projects that were planned, but never started by new groups, projects that never get finished and new groups being unaware of what previous groups did came up more than once.

Sustainability was viewed by the participants as creating more long term projects and thinking about the future. Many participants felt that the small projects such as painting buildings and building fences were important, but a long-term project that could be sustained over a longer period of time would be very beneficial in the community and potentially have more positive long-term impacts on the community.

Majority of the interviewees felt that the communication between UGA and the community was very good. However, some interviewees felt that communication needed to be improved to ensure community members were aware of what Service-Learning groups and activities were taking place in the community.

Dissemination of research was noted as an area of improvement by community members. Several interviewees discussed having been a part of previous studies that have taken place in the community and never hearing about the results or end product.

V. **Community values, community needs and community perceptions of the host institution played an important role in the perspectives community members offered in this study.**
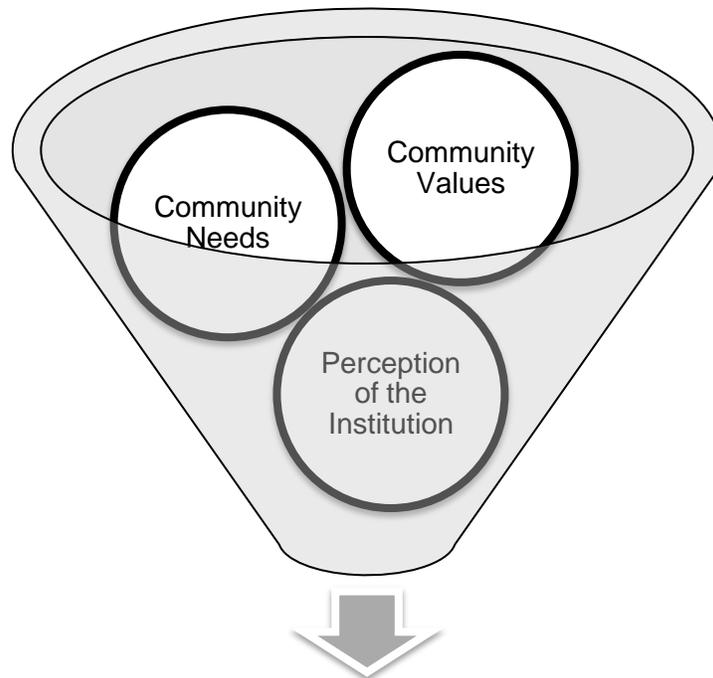
**Benefits of Service-Learning as
Perceived by the Host Community**

ECONOMIC, PRODUCTIVITY, TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE, INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE

It is important to recognize the fact that community perceptions and perspectives are influenced by other factors. Since this study was focused around community perspectives of Service-Learning, the researcher felt it was important to identify some of these factors in order to shed more light on the information gained from the other objectives of the study.

The three main factors that affected community perception were community needs, community values and perception of the host institution. The community shared several values including solidarity, friendship, hard work and service. In essence, these values play an important role on the perspectives the researcher gathered from this study. For example, having service as a value may have an effect on how the community perceives Service-Learning. Because the community values Service, they may appreciate any service that is done in their community and therefore they do not perceive any negative impacts from the service.

The same is true for community needs which were garbage, transportation, educational activities and activities for youth. These community perceived needs along with the perception of the institution have an effect on the communities' overall perception of Service-Learning.

VI. The changes that the community experiences as a result of Service-Learning groups entering their community are viewed as both positive and negative.

One of the themes that emerged from the data was change in the community. It came up in interviews with many of the participants and in different ways. The consistent theme, however, was that the community recognized that the presence of UGA-CR and Service-Learning groups is changing their community.

"[There is] the issue that is always on the table about how the presence of people coming to the community is going to affect our life. I mean probably in Costa Rica one person from Costa Rica to the United States doesn't make a big impact. But if one certain people stay here in Costa Rica it can make a big impact."

The change within the community as a result of the international Service-Learning projects taking place there involves many dimensions. Participants mentioned how the presence of student groups can change their forms of eating, talking and dressing which are changes that happen more on a cultural level. There are also changes that happen on a deeper level and more innately. One of these more discrete areas is the fact that the presence of the institution and other Service-Learning groups may change the way that San Luisenos think and talk about themselves.

"The students can learn from an inferior culture and the community can learn from what can be called a "superior culture"… I don't think of this culture as inferior, but many people who come like Americans, they feel that they are superior… I don't know why they think that, but they think they are like "AMERICANS" and we are just like Latin America. A few weeks ago a lady at UGA said I live in Central America, I said me too. She asked me where and I said Costa Rica."

On the opposite end of the change spectrum is the idea that change is impacting San Luis in a positive way which most community members agreed was true. They discussed the innovation that being close to a university brings to their community and they viewed their closeness to UGA and the larger city of Monteverde as a benefit their community has.

"[In other communities] People are still inside a circle of their traditions of their farms of their things and that is going to be more difficult for those communities to change their minds, because they don't see examples as we do here."

These differing views in how change is affecting the community are interesting to compare and, as we continue to practice Service-Learning we must be consciously aware of the way our presence and our serving is changing the community.

VII. **While the majority of the community felt that there should be a balance between the community and the institution bringing ideas for Service-Learning projects within the community, a few participants felt that the community members should be solely responsible for bringing these ideas, and an even smaller amount felt that the University should be responsible for bringing ideas to the community.**

Bottom-Up vs. Top-Down
Model of Development

"The project needs to be led by the community, if we are the owners of the resources; we are the owners of the decisions about how to do the things in the community."

"I think that UGA should be the one that is proposing new projects to the community and starts doing those projects because they have the knowledge and the vision for the future. Here in the countryside in the community people are very comfortable and they need something to get them going. There is a future waiting on us and the people [in the community] they don't have a vision or idea [like UGA-CR does]."

"One thing I really appreciate is UGA being careful of not doing big or huge steps in the community without consultation. It's good that UGA is giving some participation to the community."

Throughout the analysis the researcher found that for the most part community members felt that participatory methods should be used to conduct Service-Learning projects in the community, involving both the community members and the university, but there were some community members who had other views.

These different views are important because they showcase different ideologies within a community that prides itself on living on one accord. The important note to take away however is that the majority of the community members valued the joint nature of developing Service-Learning projects within the community. With this approval it is important that we continue to plan Service-Learning activities with a bottom-up model in mind, involving the community and the university throughout the process, while remembering to take the values, needs and ideologies of the community we are serving into account.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Recommendations for UGA-CR and the OSL

Because every host community is unique and is met with different challenges and outcomes of Service-Learning, the recommendations gleaned from this study focused specifically on the San Luis community. The recommendations have been highlighted in this section to further improve the reciprocal practice of Service-Learning within the community.

Recommendation 1: Student Preparation

One of the most important steps UGA-CR can take to provide the most beneficial Service-Learning projects for the community is to better prepare the students entering the community. The university currently uses a wide variety of ways to get the students familiar with the community they will be serving including an orientation or orientation webinar and a handbook that provides both cultural and logistical information about San Luis and surrounding areas. While these are important tools for preparing students to enter the community, they do not address the areas of self-reflection, eliminating misconceptions about the host community and shifting their thinking paradigms from superior to equal that the research suggests (Galiardi & Koehn, 2011; Wood, Banks, Galiardi, Koehn & Schroeder, 2011). While much of this is accomplished throughout the Service-Learning courses, it is important that we begin the process before the students reach the host community. Students should reflect and train before departure, during the experience and after their return home. Generally most of this content is provided by specific professors and for individual courses at the university, but it may not be consistent across all SL courses that UGA-CR provides. By creating and dispersing a set of training tools that help students reflect throughout the Service-Learning process and that can be used by all Service-Learning students at UGA-CR in conjunction with their course specific pre-departure work and other materials we can create a culture of preparedness within our Service-Learning students that is visible by the community members in San Luis Valley and by the faculty.

Recommendation 2: Faculty Preparation

Essentially, before we can provide Service-Learning students with adequate training, we must first ensure that the faculty members facilitating Service-Learning courses are prepared. The Office of Service-Learning at UGA offers a number of training and development opportunities for faculty involved in both international and local Service-Learning. However, it is very possible that not all Service-Learning course instructors participate in these activities.

In 2010 UGA-CR and the Office of Service-Learning collaborated to create the UGA-CR Toolkit for Academic Service-Learning. This document included steps for faculty getting started with a new Service-Learning program at UGA-CR (Irwin, UGA Costa Rica Staff, Community Member, 2010). The toolkit had sections on establishing community needs and partnerships, designing a Service-Learning course and evaluation and assessment. While the document serves as a great starting point for faculty who wish to engage in ISL at the UGA-

CR campus, it should be built upon in order to provide support for Service-Learning Faculty on the campus who have already been implementing Service-Learning on the campus for several years. Many of these faculty members may want to begin doing advanced evaluation of their program to determine its long term impact not only for their students, but for San Luis as well.

As the Service-Learning programs expand at UGA it is important that faculty development continues to expand as well. Collaboration is becoming a buzz word in nearly all sectors today. In higher education we have the opportunity to collaborate with people from all different areas of expertise. These potential collaborations can lead to the encouragement of the interdisciplinary nature in Service-Learning. While some of this work has already begun at UGA-CR, it is important that we continue to cultivate these relationships so that the benefits they provide can become sustainable over time both for community members and for students.

One way that training and development can be expanded is through collaboration between different departments across campus in the assessment of community needs and community dialogue. An example of this idea in action could include a summit at the UGA-CR campus in which all faculty members leading a group to UGA-CR during the upcoming school year could sit down together and discuss their plans, goals and community needs being addressed. As of now several of the Service-Learning programs at UGA-CR operate individually and all faculty members are not necessarily aware of other programs that take place during the year in the same community. By creating an opportunity for all UGA-SL program leaders to share a network, we are opening up the possibility of creating more sustainable and more consistent practice. Rather than starting a wide variety of new SL programs within the community, faculty members will be able to explore the option of expanding on a Service-Learning project that may have been started by another group, but not necessarily finished.

An event of this nature could also serve as a way to share and gain knowledge with and from the community, develop more consistent relationships with stakeholders throughout the year as opposed to only when the program is in session, and provide an opportunity for future leading Service-Learning faculty to learn from the experiences of other Service-Learning programs and learn about the Service-Learning work that is currently being done and has already been done in the community.

Recommendation 3: Share with the Community

An important recommendation that came about as a direct result of talking to the community is the idea of sharing research findings and impacts with the members of the community. One of the most important aspects of the reciprocal process is that we "Do with, Not for" (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Community members have a desire to be actively engaged with the work taking place in their community. Creating a platform where students could display their work and results and share it with the community would be

ideal in San Luis, a community that loves to share. This could be accomplished in several ways such as a conference workshop set-up, poster presentations or just open conversation.

Because a large number of students come in and out of the community frequently, it would be important to hold an event of this nature bi-annually, at the least, to provide community members with the most current information. Examples of items that could be shared are results from research conducted in the community, photos and descriptions of completed Service-Learning projects and incoming Service-Learning groups. This event would be an opportune time for the university to continue developing a reciprocal relationship with the community as they listen to the needs of the community members and begin to plan future SL projects. This would also give the residents an opportunity to get to know the students and faculty who are visiting the community.

With the approval of the San Luis Development Association, this event could be held at the community center in order to provide access to the event for all residents of San Luis. If this is not feasible, it could be held at the university and transportation could potentially be provided for community members who would like to attend. The most important aspect is that the information gets back to the community, as it should in all participatory efforts.

Recommendation 4: Address Community Identified Needs and Suggested Improvements

The goal of this study was to begin to understand the impacts of Service-Learning impacts from the perspective of the community. We must use the knowledge we gained from the participants in order to advance the practice of Service-Learning on the UGA-CR campus. We can do this by attempting to address the needs and areas of improvement that the community recognized as being important. This begins with continuous needs assessment and open dialogue with the community. The primary needs identified by the interview participants were: garbage, transportation, educational opportunities and activities for youth. The improvements the community suggested to enhance their reciprocal relationship with the university regarding Service-Learning were: sustainability, continuity, communication and dissemination of research. This information provides us insight into future potential Service-Learning activities and projects that could better meet the needs of the community and how to improve the existing Service-Learning at UGA-CR.

Conclusion

It is with these recommendations that the researcher feels we can continue to advance the knowledge and practice within the international Service-Learning field at the University of Georgia Costa Rica campus. By doing so, we are bettering the service we provide, enhancing the education we provide students and conducting research that will continue to grow and be shared with the community. By cultivating these three areas we are ultimately striving and headed towards fulfilling the true mission of all land grant institutions across the United States.

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