

# Community Voices:

A California Campus Compact  
Study on Partnerships

## Executive Summary

Written by Marie Sandy, Ph.D.

Research Team:

Elaine Ikeda, Ph.D., Nadinne Cruz, M.A.,  
Barbara Holland, Ph.D., Kathleen Rice, Ph.D.,  
and Marie Sandy, Ph.D.

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California | Campus Compact



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**California Campus Compact (CACC)** is a membership organization of college and university presidents leading California institutions of higher education in building a state-wide collaboration to promote service as a critical component of higher education. Information about CACC can be found at [www.campuscompact.org](http://www.campuscompact.org).



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The research team for this project included Elaine Ikeda, Ph.D., Principal Investigator, Nadinne Cruz, M.A., Barbara Holland, Ph.D., Kathleen Rice, Ph.D., and Marie Sandy, Ph.D. The data analysis for this project was the result of the collective effort of this team, in collaboration with community partners. We are especially grateful to the service-learning directors and coordinators at the participating campuses and the 99 community partners for helping to make this project possible.

The research team extends our heartfelt thanks to Jane Rabanal for her superb work in creating the graphic design and layout of this report.

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## I. Context of This Study

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*“I think a great partnership is when you stop saying MY students. They’re OUR students. What are OUR needs? We share these things in common, so let’s go for it.”* — Community Partner

### Overview

This study grew out of a conversation among service-learning practitioners at a retreat hosted by California Campus Compact. “What do our community partners think about service-learning? We think they are benefiting, but how do we know? Why do they choose to partner with us in the first place?” While reciprocity of benefits for the community has long been an intended hallmark of service-learning practice (e.g., Ferrari & Chapman, 1999; Honnet & Poulsen, 1989, Sigmon, 1979, Waterman, 1997), service-learning practitioners often do not know if, when and how this is achieved.

### Research Question

As recommended (Cruz & Giles, 2000), our unit of analysis was the community-campus partnership, perceived through the lens of community partner eyes. Our research considers community perspectives on effective partnership characteristics as well as their own voices regarding benefits, challenges, motivations they have experienced in partnering with an academic institution.

### Participants Involved with this Study

Service-learning coordinators at eight California campuses self-selected a total of 99 experienced community partners to par-

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ticipate in fifteen focus groups. A mix of urban and rural, four-year and community college, public and private, faith-based and secular, research-intensive and liberal arts institutions were included from diverse geographical regions. Participants were primarily staff members from non-profit community-based organizations and public institutions, such as K-12 institutions, libraries and hospitals. The researchers considered them to be in the advanced stages of partnership (Dorado and Giles, 2004).

### **The Possibility of Reciprocity in Research Design**

The ethic of reciprocity informed the research model. This resulted in a two-tiered approach that included: 1) designing eight campus reports with information particular to each participating campus, and 2) synthesizing findings from all sites to inform service-learning practitioners and researchers more broadly. Applied hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1960/1970; Herda, 1999) and community-based research (Stoecker, 2005) provided the theoretical framework.

The research team took extensive measures to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the community partners was respected. Higher education representatives from the campuses were not present during the study, nor did they have access to the data before the findings were approved by community participants. This study took a “place-based approach,” in that each focus group included partners from one institution only, and all were held in locations on or near the participating campuses.

### **Relevance of the Findings**

This is the largest study of community partner perspectives that we are aware of in the literature. Given the diversity and size of the sample and the care in our approach, we fully expect these findings to have broad applicability to other campus-community partnerships. One caveat is that the participants in this study represent a “convenience sample,” in that they were self-selected by their higher education partners. And, this sample selection included experienced partners only, so the conclusions here may or may not have implications for newer partnerships.

## II. Characteristics of Effective Partnerships

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Several entities in higher education have developed criteria for best practices of partnerships in various ways. Holland (2005) notes that while many of these lists contain unique aspects related to the context in which they were developed, there is a high level of convergence in their recommendations. In our study, we hoped to see how these best practices developed by higher education relate to feedback from community partners based on their experiences. Here is a comparison of the top characteristics emphasized by community partners with the recommendations for best practices prescribed by higher education:

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### **Community Partners: Characteristics of Effective Partnerships**

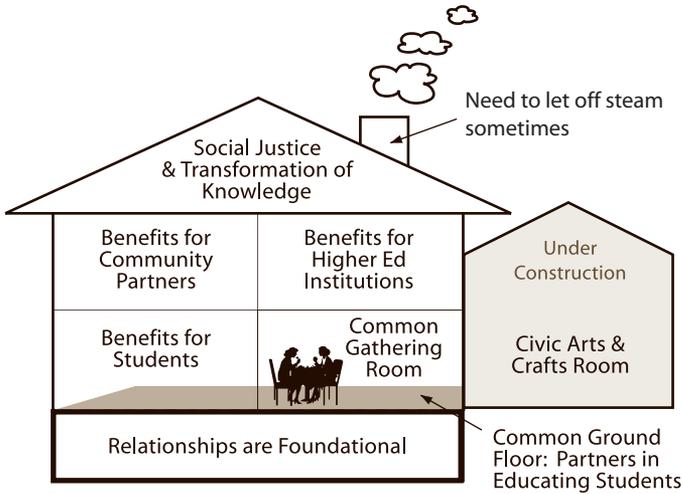
*(List of highest ranked characteristics  
from community partners)*

### **Higher Education: Best Practices of Campus-Community Partnerships** *(Paraphrased from Holland, 2005)*

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- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Relationships are essential                            | 1. Explore and expand separate and common goals and interests                            |
| 2. Communication—clear and ongoing                        | 2. Understand capacity, resources and expectations of all partners                       |
| 3. Understanding one another’s organizations—mutual goals | 3. Evidence of mutual benefit through careful planning and shared benefit                |
| 4. Planning, training, orientation, and preparation       | 4. For partnerships to be sustained, the relationship itself is the partnership activity |
| 5. Shared leadership, accountability                      | 5. Shared control of directions  |
| 6. Access to, and support of, higher education            | 6. Continuous assessment of partnership process and outcomes                             |
| 7. Constant evaluation and reflection                     |  |
| 8. Focus on students—placement fit                        |  |

### III. Emerging Themes: A Walk through the House that Partnerships Built

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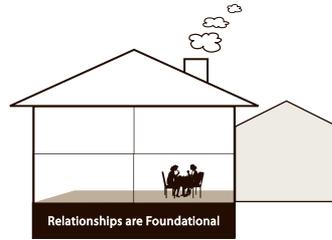


To organize the themes of this study, we will borrow the visual metaphor of a community-campus partnership as a house, developed by Susan Gomez, a member of a community-campus partnership in Ontario, California (Sandy, 2005). This section also includes anonymous quotations from focus group participants.

*“You can’t assume the partnership will stay what it is. It needs to be fed.”*

— Community Partner

*“If you’re just going to do an event, and another event and a project, a project, a project, it doesn’t feel like you’re connecting the dots. You’re not growing anything. It has to be sustainable, and I think you only get sustainability when you’re building relationships and there’s a certain humanity to the whole thing.”*



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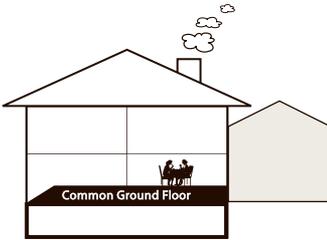
**The Most Essential Characteristic: Relationships are Foundational**

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Community partners stress that the relationship itself is foundational to service-learning and that all collaborative activities or projects stem from this. Aspects of valuing and nurturing the partnership relationship were uniformly emphasized as the highest priority among all the groups. They said that building effective community-campus relationships involves communicating roles, goals and responsibilities clearly, informal connections, working to better understand workplace cultures, demonstrating sensitivity about how to best communicate with one another, and expressing appreciation.

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*“We are co-educators. That is not our organization’s bottom line, but that’s what we do.”*



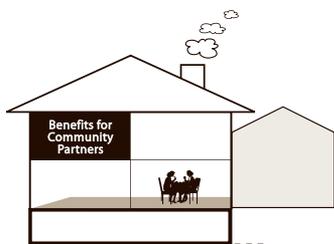
### **Educating College Students: Common Ground for Community Partners and Higher Education**

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One of the most compelling findings of this study is the profound dedication of community partners to educating college students, even when this is not an expectation, part of their job description, or if the experience provides few or no benefits for their organization. They spoke of their goals regarding student learning at the *inception* of the partnership. One explanation for our finding is that community partners who are motivated to educate college students may be more likely to remain in long-term partnerships. Overall, this study seems to demonstrate that more community partners are motivated by this desire than we previously knew. They expressed a great depth of knowledge about potential benefits of service-learning for students and higher education institutions.

### III. Emerging Themes: A Walk through the House that Partnerships Built

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*“Our program would probably not survive if we do not have service-learners.”*

#### Distinct Benefits for Community Partners

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While all partners demonstrated a deep dedication to the education of college students, their description of other motivations and benefits for being involved in service-learning varied.



#### Benefits for Community Partners

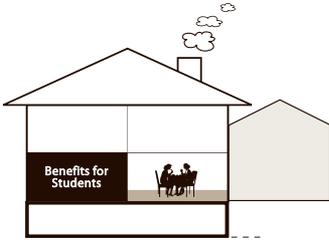
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##### 1. FULFILLING A DIRECT NEED

- a. By engaging in relationships with non-profit clients, college students have a positive impact on client outcomes, such as youth, the elderly, homeless.
- b. Service-learners help sustain and enhance organizational capacity. They are critical additions to the workforce.

##### 2. ENRICHMENT FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND PARTNER AGENCIES

- a. Community partners receive personal satisfaction by contributing to educating students and the university overall, and by making a difference in their community.
- b. Community partners remark that enthusiastic students are a pleasure to work with.
- c. Community partners enjoy opportunities for learning and reflection:
  - Opportunities to reflect on practice enhances their organizational development;
  - Opportunities to learn content knowledge from students and faculty; and
  - Opportunities to gain access to expertise and participate in research.
- d. Partners may enjoy greater prestige through their association with higher education, which may lead to a greater ability to leverage resources.
- e. Partner organizations identify future employees, volunteers, donors.
- f. Community-campus partnerships increase community capacity by building social capital among community agencies.



*“We embody what they’re there at the college to learn.”*

## Benefits for Students

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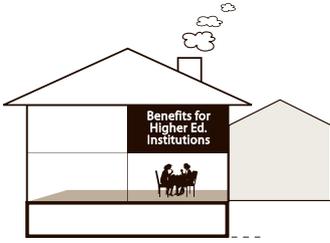
During the focus groups, community partners spoke most passionately about their hopes for students. They expressed a great depth of knowledge about potential benefits for students and a commitment to the learning goals. Their descriptions mirror the benefits described by advocates of service-learning in higher education.



### Benefits for Students

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1. Students engage in opportunities to experience diversity, overcome stereotypes, and build intercultural communication skills.
2. Students may experience internal transformation, and cultivate their “humanity.”
3. Students better understand academic content.
4. Students gain exposure to and awareness of organizations’ core issues and the non-profit world.
5. Students benefit from career planning, workplace preparedness, and skill building.
6. Students practice civic engagement and participation in politics/government.
7. Students enjoy deeper connections with community that can enhance well-being.
8. Students may develop a sense of greater self-efficacy and enjoy being treated as a professional.
9. Students may cultivate a commitment to lifelong service.



*“All aspects of the community are serving the university by being in relationship to them... The exchange goes both ways.”*

#### **Benefits for Higher Education Institutions**

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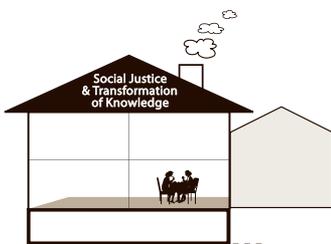
When discussing the benefits of partnership for higher education institutions, community partners often emphasized the many benefits for students. Some benefits they discussed were unique to the institutions as a whole, however.



#### **Benefits for Higher Education**

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1. Community-campus partnerships and service-learning fulfills the university mission for student learning, such as providing:
  - Critical, engaging educational opportunities for students;
  - Opportunities for students to develop experience with diversity and multicultural competency;
  - Workplace experiences for career preparedness for students; and
  - Opportunities for civic engagement for students.
2. Community-campus partnerships provide positive publicity and community “credibility.”
3. Service-learning for students can provide a “safety net” for some students that can increase the retention rate.
4. Community-campus partnerships help further research goal through greater access to research sites, and more opportunities to publish, and obtain research grants
5. Higher education partners learn from community partners about how to engage in partnerships.
6. Campus-community partnerships help build connections among higher education institutions
7. Community-campus partnerships can help fulfill the higher education mission for social justice and contributing to the common good.



*“Being a participant in social change—this should be the ultimate goal.”*

## **Commitment to Social Justice**

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### **1. Motivated by the Common Good**

Like their higher education partners, some community partners described their motivation for being involved with community-campus partnerships as related to a common struggle for social justice and equity, a way to strengthen common values, build their community, and impact the greater good.

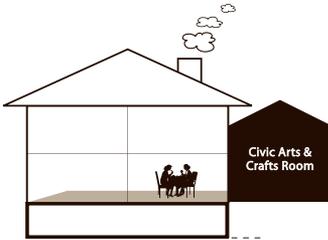
### **2. Transformational Learning for the Common Good**

At several focus groups, community partners spoke of the ways in which community-campus partnerships can transform knowledge by bridging the gap between theory and practice, providing opportunities for reflection and furthering new theory that can change both our knowledge and practice.

*“I think what is unique is that it pushes forward this question about what is education for.”*

## IV. Recommendations

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### **Civic Arts and Crafts: Addressing Challenges**

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*“Partnerships are fluid, not stagnant. Things change over the years as the two sides are involved with each other. Hopefully, the development comes from both sides.”*

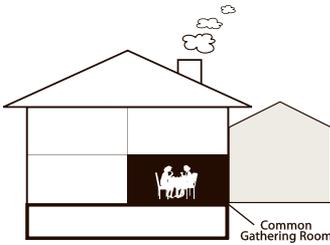
Lack of access to and respectful communication with faculty was the primary challenge described by community partners. This is particularly critical with regard to curriculum planning. In every focus group, participants reported that faculty members required assignments that were illegal or unethical. Experienced partners need a way to connect with faculty to plan the curriculum, negotiate the placement of students, and assess and evaluate the service-learning experience. Here is a list of the primary challenges they described, in order of importance:



### **Civic Arts and Crafts: Addressing Challenges to Improve Campus Partnerships**

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1. Partnerships are stifled when faculty are not involved.
2. There is a need for more collaboration in curriculum planning, adequate orientation and agreement on learning goals.
3. There is a need for greater sensitivity to ensure mutual respect, recognition and celebration among partners
4. There is a need for greater fairness and openness in accessing higher education: reducing “favoritism”
5. There is a need for much more evaluation and feedback
6. Tracking hours is often a hindrance - community partners are more concerned about adequate duration for the learning experience than hours.
7. The academic calendar, additional workload, transportation, and maturity of students were typically mentioned as challenges that partners have learned to live with. Liability was also mentioned.



### **Common Gathering Room: Recommendations**

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The community partners' emphasis on the importance of relationships points to further recommendations for transformations in higher education practice:

*“I can imagine an in-service of some kind for both the university and the cooperating teachers and administrators. Why not? Sit down and have a regular conversation about your expectations...”*



### **Gathering Together More Frequently in the Common Room: Recommendations**

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1. Value relationships.
2. Hold conversations regularly about partnership process and outcomes.
3. Involve faculty directly. Joint curriculum planning, face-to-face pre-semester meetings and orientations for professors and all community partners.
4. Consider ways the academic institution can help build social capital. Design group projects/larger scale community projects.
5. Balance relationships and fairness in expanding communication infrastructure.
6. Develop other accountability options to complement tracking of hours.
7. Get together more. Play together - let off steam!

The following points offer ways of “dwelling with” community and campus partners in light of the concerns and recommendations of community partners:

**1. Value relationships.** On the campus level, new practices may need to be instituted to ensure more equitable access to campuses and limit the perception of favoritism, while on the personal level, all partners must continue to cultivate positive relationships to help ensure all partners continue to feel respected. Adequate attention should be given to the conclusion of partnership activities as well as the beginning.

**2. Involve faculty more directly.** Experienced partners need a way to connect with faculty to plan the curriculum, negotiate the placement of students, and assess and evaluate the service-learning experience. At a minimum, partners desire to see the syllabus and the specific learning goals and expectations for students so they can contribute to an effective learning outcome. Partners want faculty to visit their sites in order to truly understand the partners’ organization and assets.

**3. Hold regular conversations about partnership process and outcomes.** Higher education institutions might wish to consider sponsoring or participating in conversations among all partners to reflect on their formal partnership arrangements, informal communication links, critique current practice and collectively identify ways to strengthen partnerships, document impacts, celebrate achievements, and build networks.

**4. Consider ways the academic institution can help build social capital.** All of these community partners stressed that they would welcome more opportunities to network with their campus partner and other partnering agencies. They indicated that they often desire more coordinated involvement in larger-scale community development initiatives, and some recommend that the campus take on a leadership role in bringing community members together.

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**5. Develop new, more facilitative roles for service-learning office staff.** While these advanced community partners expressed great appreciation for service-learning office staff, they indicate that service-learning offices often function as “gatekeepers,” making it more difficult for them to connect with faculty. Expanding activities related to convening faculty, community and students together for curriculum planning, evaluating, networking and celebration may be more critical roles for service-learning offices to play for advanced partners.

**6. Clarify student accountability.** While tracking hours has been a favored way for higher education to document accountability and impact, this is often seen as an impediment by community partners, and has even led to confusion about the purpose of service-learning. Appropriate duration of the experience and an emphasis on learning may be a more appropriate measure for achievement than hourly requirements.

## V. Conclusion

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While we have outlined many of the elements of a partnership “house,” we recognize that a house is not the same thing as a home. The outcome of partnerships results from the quality of relationships, and the transformational outcome that we hope for is a partnership house becoming a home where we all might belong. We encourage you to consider hosting your own conversations with community partners.

*“[Students] come from the university hoping to help us build a house, but with service-learning in context, that same student would understand why there is a lack of affordable housing, what is the impact of a lack of housing on the community, on a low-income family, on a neighborhood. Part of the challenge is broadening the scope of what the specific work a student might be doing at an agency and helping them understand that in context. That is really a tough thing to do, and it seems like it is often our responsibility as community partners to help make those links.”*

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