

# **First Encounters, Service Experience, Parting Impressions: Examining the Dynamics of Service-Learning Relationships**

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## **Abstract**

Through a collected case study, this research study examines the relationships between college students and community partners in three separate service-learning projects. Although all of the service-learning relationships can be characterized as transactional, the reciprocity within each relationship manifests in different ways based on the presence and complexity of Mills' (2012) "four furies." Findings from this study can inform and help to redeem university–community partnerships operating under less than ideal conditions (e.g., limited service-learning hours, unorganized service-learning projects). The study suggests that transactional service-learning relationships have merit and can serve as a positive introduction to service-learning for both college students and community partners.

*Keywords:* service-learning, community partnerships, civic engagement

## **Introduction**

There is a general consensus that service-learning experiences contribute to positive outcomes for both college students (Borden, 2007; Dawson & Freed, 2008; Helm-Stevens & Griego, 2009; Jacobson, Oravec, Falk, & Osteen, 2011; Reising, Allen, & Hall, 2006; Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2010; Yorio & Ye, 2012) and community partners (Svensson, Huml, & Hancock, 2014; Tryon & Stoecker, 2009). Despite research on the outcomes for participants in service-learning projects, relatively little is known about the relationships between college students and community partners (Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010). Scholars in the field have called for research concerned with the relationships between college students and community partners engaged in service projects (Mills, 2012; Svensson et al., 2014). Mills (2012) asserted: "Given the importance of the link between service-learners and their agency hosts, it is surprising that there has not been more exploration of this crucial relationship" (p. 33). Clayton et al. (2010) suggested "delineating the nature of relationships in civic engagement, including characterizing their attributes, provides a basis for evaluating their status, understanding the changes that occur in

them over time, and nurturing them in desired outcomes” (p. 5). By understanding how to distinguish and cultivate quality relationships, the overall service-learning experience can be enhanced to produce coveted results.

This study explores the establishment and evolution of relationships between college students and community partners engaged in three separate service-learning projects. As a community-engagement-focused practice, service-learning requires a balance between the needs of the students and those of community partners. Findings from this study examine the transactional and transformational characteristics of service-learning relationships and explore how reciprocity is negotiated in these different relationships. Additionally, the study’s findings contribute to the field’s overarching understanding of the diversity, depth, and dimensions of how service-learning relationships are formed.

### **Background Literature: Service-Learning Relationships**

Research on service-learning projects between college students and community partners has been well documented in the literature. The primary focus of these studies has been on student outcomes (*Davis, 2013; Kearney, 2013; Moely & Ilustre, 2014; Rubin & Matthews, 2013; Steinke & Fitch, 2007*) and, to a lesser extent, community partner outcomes (*Blouin & Perry, 2009; d’Arlach, Sanchez, & Feuer, 2009; Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Schmidt, Marks, & Derrico, 2004*). Although it is important to fully understand the outcomes of service-learning for all parties involved, researchers must also more fully explore how relationships are formed (*Clayton et al., 2010; Lee, 2012*). To inform the study at hand, the purpose of this literature review is to examine current research on transactional versus transformational service-learning relationships and explore the role of reciprocity within the context of each.

There is limited research on the service-learning relationship and the shared outcomes resulting from the collective experience between college students and community partners (*Eppler, Ironsmith, Dingle, & Errickson, 2011; Gerstenblatt, 2014; Reynolds & Ahern-Dodson, 2010*). Bringle, Clayton, and Price (2009) called for an advancement of understanding and analyzing relationships that are forged in service-learning experiences. Examining relationships is important to the continued evolution of service-learning and contributes to the understanding of college students’ and community partners’ intentions and expected outcomes of service-learning participation

(Gerstenblatt, 2014). Existing research substantiates the importance of communication, as well as shared goals and expectations.

Communicating the expected goals in a way that is mutually agreed upon by both the college students and community partners is critical in maintaining a productive service-learning relationship. Steiner, Warkentin, and Smith (2011) emphasized that the perspective of community partners must be heard and valued or the service-learning relationship will be negatively impacted. Their findings recognized the need for continued investigation of the establishment of the service-learning goals as well as the impact of service-learning on the relationships between students and community partners. Additionally, Conville and Kinnell (2010) stated that “the service site is a nexus of relationships that must work together harmoniously if the community service-learning is to be successful” (p. 28). To this end, a succinct scan of past studies on service-learning relationships provides a scaffold for better understanding the specific dynamics and formation of shared service-learning relationships.

## **Characteristics of Service-Learning Relationships**

Understanding the characteristics of service-learning relationships is critical in truly comprehending what it means to have a mutually beneficial experience for both college students and community partners in a service-learning project; however, the available research on service-learning relationships in regard to “relational dynamics” (Mills, 2012, p. 33) is lacking. Relationships are quite complex, in any context, and the research on service-learning relationships is in the beginning stages of exploration. In fact, “the nature of the research questions yet to be answered makes clear the significance of the stakes underlying investigation of relationships in service-learning and civic engagement” (Clayton et al., 2010, p. 19). Bushouse (2005) explored the relationship between community nonprofit organizations and a university and found that community partners wanted a cost–benefit relationship, which can be seen as transactional. Sandy and Holland (2006) found that community members would like to transform relationships with the university through service-learning. Worrall (2007) concluded that although some community organizations enter service-learning partnerships in a transactional manner, the desire for more transformational relationships might emerge over time.

At first glance, relationships that form from shared service-learning projects may seem impenetrable because of complexities

involved in the individual experience of college students and community partners. As complicated as comprehending relationships may be, starting with a focus on the overarching types of service-learning relationships is a start. Many scholars (Bringle et al., 2009; Clark, 2002; Clayton et al., 2010; Keffer, 2015; Shor, Cattaneo, & Calton, 2017) have looked at transactional and transformational relationships that form between college students and community partners during service-learning ventures. Bringle et al. (2009) noted that “there is little empirical basis for knowing the distribution of relationships in civic engagement across the exploitive-transactional-transformational continuum” (p. 9). The research on transactional versus transformational service-learning relationships has been expanding; however, this area needs to be further investigated to understand service-learning relationships (Clayton et al., 2010).

Mills (2012) identified what he termed *the four furies* in an “attempt to articulate the conflict and misunderstanding” (p. 36) that was witnessed during his research observation. Mills highlights the challenges in service-learning relationships and identifies four tensions in the relationships between students and host agencies: “a) student emphasis on hours vs. agency emphasis on commitment; b) student emphasis on learning vs. agency emphasis on efficiency; c) student emphasis on flexibility vs. agency emphasis on dependability; and d) student emphasis on idealism vs. agency emphasis on realism” (p. 33).

With any relationship, we have sometimes to address some of the more challenging and contentious aspects; the same holds true for service-learning. Some service-learning relationships are transactional in nature, and some are more transformative. Shor et al. (2017) asserted that “transformational service learning is one pathway that leads to social justice oriented attitudes and behaviors in college students” (p. 157). Similar to some of the themes identified by Mills (2012), service-learning relationships that are transformational go through points of contention, misunderstanding, and discomfort.

Keffer (2015) introduces the idea of relationship-based service-learning, entrenched in authenticity. Relationships built in this context “foster students’ understanding of the complexities and issues addressed in traditional course texts through active listening and continuous substantive engagement with the same community partner” (p. 135). All service-learning relationships do not have to be transformational; a transactional relationship may be best for the needs of the community partner and student. However, it is important to consider that “one way to frame the often encountered

disconnect between universities and community partners is to note the different views they bring to service-learning, their inherently different agendas and priorities” (Conville & Kinnell, 2010, p. 28). This brings up the focus on the concept of reciprocity and its place in understanding service-learning relationships.

## **Constructs of Reciprocity Within Service-Learning Relationships**

Dostilio et al. (2012) positioned reciprocity as a core principle of service-learning and community engagement, while acknowledging that the field does not possess an agreed-upon definition of the term. To address this limitation, Dostilio et al. conducted a concept review of reciprocity in the literature and distinguished three broad categories to achieve greater meaning and specificity in the use of the term. Dostilio et al. (2012) identified three conceptualizations of reciprocity: exchange-oriented, influence-oriented, and generativity-oriented. Exchange-oriented reciprocity can be defined as the “interchange (or giving and receiving) of benefits, resources, and actions” (p. 22). To further nuance this definition of exchange-oriented reciprocity, the authors underscore three ideas that can be present at the individual and/or collective levels: “(a) differing motivations exist for enacting reciprocity; (b) these motivations yield differing means of continuing reciprocity; (c) reciprocity can produce equitable interchanges but can also be maintained in inequitable conditions” (p. 22). Next, influence-oriented reciprocity is “characterized by its iterative nature and by the condition of interrelatedness—personal, social, and environmental factors iteratively influence the way in which something is done” (p. 23). Dostilio et al. (2012) suggest that “reciprocity can be present within a process, an outcome, or both; further, it can actually be a process or an outcome of engagement, depending on the type of interaction at play” (p. 24).

Finally, Dostilio et al. (2012) identify a third category—generativity-oriented reciprocity. In contrast to the first two conceptualizations of reciprocity, generativity-oriented reciprocity “refers to interrelatedness of beings and the broader world around them as well as the potential synergies that emerge from their relationships” (p. 24). The authors contend that this form of reciprocity “emerges within the domain of a worldview in which objects, people, and forms of knowledge exist fundamentally in relation to one other” (p. 24). This form of reciprocity actively considers power, privilege, and oppression and “can lead to transformation and second-order change within individuals, systems, and para-

digms” (p. 24). “Generative reciprocity can affect not only the doing of engagement (as in influence-oriented reciprocity) but also *the ways of being* [emphasis in original] related to engagement” (p. 24). Reciprocity can be seen to exist in both transactional and transformative relationships to differing degrees and with varying success. For service-learning relationships to be meaningful for all parties, some degree of reciprocity should be present.

A better understanding of how service-learning relationships form and develop is needed to support the advancement of service-learning projects. Examining relationships is important to the continued evolution of service-learning, and contributes to the understanding of students’ and community partners’ intentions and expectations for service-learning participation (*Gerstenblatt, 2014*). This is an area where continued research and discussion are required (*Clayton et al., 2010*).

### **Method of Inquiry**

Using a collected case study (*Stake, 1995*), this qualitative study examined three service-learning projects in order to explore the shared experiences between college students and community partners. The study pursued the following research question: How do college students and community partners engaged in a shared service-learning experience establish and develop a relationship? Below, the service-learning projects and participants are introduced. In addition, the procedures for data collection and analysis are explained.

### **Service-Learning Projects and Participants**

This study took place at a large, private university in a major city in the northeastern United States. The participants were first-year students enrolled in a mandatory first-year civic engagement course. The course requirements included the completion of a service-learning project at a community organization. Aligned with the civic mission of the university, the civic engagement course is designed to promote democratic values and active citizenry in students. Per the course syllabus, each student is expected to (a) complete 9 hours of service at their respective site, over the course of three visits; (b) submit two 2–3-page reflection papers on their service experience; (c) attend and participate in six classes on campus with their course instructor and fellow classmates; and (d) complete readings as assigned by the course instructor.

To protect the anonymity of the participants, the three service-learning sites will be referred to as Housing, International, and Resources. Each service-learning site represents a nonprofit organization that has an existing partnership with the university's civic engagement office. These partnerships consist of various civic engagement activities, including the service-learning projects described in the study at hand. Throughout the study, the organizational hosts referred to themselves as community partners. For the purpose of this study, the term *community partners* will be used to reference them as well. All three sites are located within the same large metropolitan area as the university. Housing is an emergency shelter. The mission of Housing is to provide homeless men with a comprehensive shelter experience during the winter season. In addition to providing a safe place to sleep, Housing provides meals, access to bathing areas, and laundry facilities free of charge. Additionally, an important part of the mission of Housing is to provide a space for guests to build community with volunteers.

International is a nonprofit organization that supports the immigrant and refugee community through legal, educational, and family services. There are dozens of staff members and pro bono attorneys who work across these three areas within the organization. There is also a full-time receptionist who works for all three departments and is the first point of contact for anyone who enters International. Part of the mission of International is to help acclimate clients to life in the United States. The goal of the service-learning project was to support immigrants with learning and practicing conversational English.

Resources is a nonprofit organization that helps low-income people gain access to affordable housing, tax preparation, employment preparation, and several other resources. The mission of Resources is to employ social justice efforts to combat poverty and uplift impoverished communities. Community members work one-on-one with volunteers to access information and secure affordable housing, health care, child care, and other public benefits.

There were a total of 11 participants in this study, including 5 community partners and 6 college students.

**Table 1. Participant Demographic Information**

| Service Site  | Affiliation       | Pseudonym | Gender | Race/Ethnicity             |
|---------------|-------------------|-----------|--------|----------------------------|
| Housing       | Community Partner | Bob       | Male   | White                      |
| Housing       | Community Partner | Mary      | Female | White                      |
| Housing       | Student           | Clarice   | Female | Black                      |
| Housing       | Student           | Katy      | Female | White                      |
| Resources     | Community Partner | Lucy      | Female | Asian                      |
| Resources     | Student           | Melissa   | Female | Latina                     |
| Resources     | Student           | Jane      | Female | Asian                      |
| International | Community Partner | Dawn      | Female | White                      |
| International | Community Partner | Sharon    | Female | Latina                     |
| International | Student           | Monica    | Female | White                      |
| International | Student           | Kim       | Female | Biracial (White and Asian) |

## Data Collection

Yin (1994) and Stake (1995) identified six sources of evidence that can be collected in case study research: documents, archival records, direct observations, interviews, physical artifacts, and participant observations. For this study, documents, interviews, physical artifacts, and participant observations served as data sources. Collecting data from multiple data points added to the validity of the study (Maxwell, 2005), providing a holistic picture of the service-learning relationship between college students and community partners. More than 30 hours of observation, 11 extended interviews, and the collection of documents, physical artifacts, and archival records provided data. Given that all data collected informed the development of the findings, the observations of the service-learning projects and interviews with participants form the heart of the data presented in the findings in Table 2.



**Table 2. List of Sources of Evidence**

| Source of Evidence      | Resources   | Housing   | International   |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| Documents               | Course syllabus; copies of course readings; assignment directions; quarter sheet flyer the students passed out while canvassing; information sheet on the “cans and cant’s” of the organization; full sheet information flyer about community organization; 2 student reflections | Course syllabus; copies of course readings; English classes pamphlet; general pamphlet about mission of community organization; 4 student reflections | Course syllabus; copies of course readings; 2 student reflections |
| Interviews              | 1 community partner; 2 students   | 2 community partners; 2 students  | 2 community partners; 2 students                                  |
| Participant observation | 12 hours  | 9.5 hours   | 10 hours  |
| Physical Artifacts      | 3 pictures  | 1 video; 2 pictures   | N/A   |
| Archival Records        | Past records of the community organizations’ involvement with the university’s civic engagement efforts   |   |   |

To elaborate on the primary data sources, a total of 31.5 hours of participant observation took place over a 3-month period. 10 hours at Housing, 9.5 hours at International, and 12 hours at Resources. Observations included the college students’ first days at the service sites and the duration of the service-learning experience. At Housing, Author 1 was a participant observer during the initial meeting with the community partner and during the engagement activities with the residents. While at International, Author 1 observed the ESL classes with the students and participated in the language exchange sessions. At Resources, Author 1 was a participant observer during the community canvassing, reflection times, and community-building activities.

In addition to the observations, 11 in-depth interviews were conducted with both community partners and college students across the three sites. At Housing and International, two community partner and two student interviews were conducted. At Resources, one community partner and two student interviews were conducted. The semistructured interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, with the average interview around an hour. The interviews were conducted in locations that were designated by and

convenient for the participants. With participants' permission, the interviews were recorded.

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process employed for this study was ongoing and iterative. A case study database (Yin, 1994) was created to store all data by case in one place, including interview transcripts, field notes, student reflection papers, and pictures. All field notes and interviews were transcribed, then carefully analyzed. Analytical memos were employed in three ways: (1) after each set of field notes was written up, (2) after each interview was transcribed, and (3) after carefully reviewing the additional data sources. NVIVO 9.0 statistical software was employed to assist with the analysis of the data.

The field notes and interviews were then coded using an a priori code scheme and an inductive approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). With an a priori code scheme, a preestablished set of codes guides the data analysis process. For this study, predetermined codes taken from the research literature were used to code the data. An inductive approach was also utilized for this study, allowing additional codes to emerge from the data. This process continued in stages and, at each stage, the list of codes was reconsidered and culled as necessary. Cooccurring codes were explored and renamed to apply best fit and meaning to the data, and in a way that related to the research question. A master list of codes was maintained throughout the process.

The triangulation of multiple sources of evidence (Maxwell, 2005; Yin, 1994) was of particular importance to the trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability of this study. Information from both community partners and students was collected using a variety of methods, including interviews, documents, archival records, participant observations, and physical artifacts. All sources of evidence were compared against each other to ensure thoroughness and accuracy in the data analysis process. For example, students' reflection papers were triangulated with their responses to interview questions. Rich data (Maxwell, 2005) was also incorporated as verbatim transcripts of interviews and observation field notes were used. Extant information gained from archival records and physical artifacts was further triangulated to inform the data analysis process. A logical chain of evidence was also demonstrated (Miles & Huberman, 1994); each code, construct, and emerging theme was systematically woven together in a sound and cogent manner.

Author 1 conferred with Author 2 throughout the data collection and analysis process, and Author 2 provided recommendations and alternate interpretations in order to refine the analysis of the data. It is important to note that Author 1 took into account her own subjectivities (*Maxwell, 2005*) and reflected on her own personal bias throughout the data collection and analysis process.

## Findings

This section is organized by service site: Housing, International, and Resources. To carefully examine the service-learning relationships at each site, the presentation of the sites is arranged by first encounters, service experience, and parting impressions. We will draw on existing frameworks within the research literature to elucidate some of the major characteristics identified in the cases presented below.

### Housing

As previously stated, Housing is a homeless shelter for men. The participants at Housing included two community partners, Bob and Mary, and two college students, Katy and Clarice. A look at the first encounter, service experience, and parting impressions helps to explain why this service-learning relationship was transactional in nature and troubled by several of Mills' (2012) identified furries. Reciprocity was a challenge for this service-learning relationship.

**First encounter.** When Housing agreed to be a service site for the college students, there was an apparent misunderstanding. Bob, Housing's volunteer coordinator, explained:

So we are always kind of scrambling to look for volunteers, and the way this was billed to us was that we would get just the source of volunteers. But we didn't know that they would only be there every two weeks. So, what we are really hoping for was like the stable volunteer base that could come and kind of engage with the guests. That's a big thing with us; we want to build community.

The community partners' goal for this service-learning partnership was to acquire a stable and consistent group of students to be involved in the community-building activities of the shelter. Unfortunately, the stable volunteer base that Bob and Mary expected ended up being a transient group with new students who

required training every 2 weeks. Given this first encounter at the Housing site, the relationship between college students and community partners was largely transactional in nature. The community partner expected to have an organizational need met while helping the college students fulfill a service-learning requirement.

When Katy and Clarice arrived for the first night of their service experience, they waited outside along with several men trying to register for a bed in the shelter that night. The Housing staff ignored them, because it was Bob's responsibility as the volunteer coordinator to greet and orient them. It was not learned until much later that Bob was not on site. Bob had become overwhelmed with the number of students who needed orientation in the previous weeks. In addition, the pacing of the orientation for the new students had become unmanageable. This was the context for Katy and Clarice's first impression of Housing.

**Service experience.** Katy and Clarice perceived Bob's absence and the lack of an orientation as a sign of disorganization on the community organization's side. Clarice stated:

They don't seem to have time for volunteers who come in. They do want volunteers for sure because they do need help, but they are so busy they can't organize for the volunteers, so everything seems disorganized and then the volunteers are not happy because they feel like people organizing don't care about them.

The ensuing relationship between the community partners and the college students at Housing was not ideal. There was not a warm welcome from the community partners, and the college students were frustrated with the experience. The goals of the service-learning project were discussed, albeit briefly and not with the level of detail that students required in order to understand the service-learning goals or their purpose.

When asked about the goal of the service-learning partnership, Katy replied:

I guess the goal was to give [the shelter residents] people to talk to. I wasn't really sure what the specific goal for this specific place was, because it wasn't really like we were doing much like feeding them or really any activities, we just walked around and talked to them.

Katy articulated that she was unsure of the goals of the service-learning project. Without an orientation and clear explanation of the goals and expectations, Katy resolved to make sense of the service-learning experience to the best of her ability. In this case, neither the college students' nor the community partner's needs appeared to be met with any real satisfaction.

**Parting impressions.** By the end of the service-learning experience, both the college students and community partners were ready to conclude their relationship. Throughout the service, the students felt unclear on the expectations and were constantly concerned about their safety. As a result, the college students did not perform to the level expected by the community partner. Bob reflected:

I kind of forgot what freshmen were like before I like starting working with them again. They were surprisingly naive about like everything. . . . I know a lot of my fellow volunteers have commented on just kind of how like not really engaged they were, and there are definite exceptions though. There are some people who just kind of got in there. They were very, very good, but that was the exception rather than the rule. And I don't know, they kind of had to be told what to do.

The community partners took the college students' lack of engagement as a sign of their immaturity and disinterest, whereas the college students felt that they lacked direction and support. Katy and Clarice did not receive an orientation on how to engage the shelter residents. Although they understood that they were expected to interact with the residents, there were differences in the level of interaction required to achieve the community-building that the community partners envisioned.

As evidenced, the Housing service-learning project was rife with tension from the onset. The tension emanated from a structural flaw: the university's limited number of required service-learning hours for students could not meet the community partner's need for a consistent group of students for an extended period of time. This tension subsequently undermined the relationship between the college students and the community partners.

All of Mills' (2012) "four furies" were present in this case, but the second fury—the students' emphasis on learning versus the host agency's emphasis on efficiency—best characterized the service-learning relationship. The students were present to learn,

to fulfill a course requirement, and to have a meaningful learning experience. However, the community partner was ill-equipped to serve as a coeducator for the students because the service-learning project did not meet the very basic need for more staffing—the fundamental problem that the partnership was intended to address.

## **International**

At International, the purpose of the service-learning project was to pair college students with immigrants who needed more time to practice speaking English. The participants included two community partners, Dawn and Sharon, and two college students, Kim and Monica. By looking at their first encounter, service experience, and parting impressions, the service-learning relationship can be characterized as largely transactional. Although there is more evidence of reciprocity in this relationship than in the previous case with Housing, several of Mills' (2012) furies are also present.

**First encounter.** On the first day, Kim and Monica waited for 30 minutes to be recognized and greeted by International's receptionist. Eventually, Dawn arrived and welcomed the students before delivering a brief and informal orientation. She devoted the majority of the orientation to a description of the organizational mission and all of its units. She did not provide students with concrete examples of what they would be doing beyond the general expectation that the students would help the immigrant (ESL) students with their English. Dawn and Sharon intentionally refrained from planning the exact activities that the college students would perform. They wanted to develop service-learning activities that the college students would genuinely enjoy carrying out. Unfortunately, this left the college students confused as to the goals, expectations, and their roles in the service-learning project. In this largely transactional service-learning relationship, the community partners' primary concern was providing their immigrant students with opportunities to practice speaking English. They wished for the experience to be engaging for the college students, but did not express any desire to enhance the college students' understanding of the immigrants' experiences or immigration policy.

**Service experience.** Similar to Housing, the community partners at International encountered the structural challenge of managing large groups of transient students. Sharon stated that the "biggest challenge is the number of folks who come for short periods of time. So you know doing it in this way where you get different people all the time is confusing to the [ESL] students." In

addition, Dawn discussed the challenges associated with preparing first-year college students for service-learning: “I have learned that these freshmen who are you know just starting college really have a lot of energy and devotions.” Interestingly, Kim, a college student, was able to see International’s organizational challenge: “We [college students] are only there for a little while and they [International] always have like new people coming in and out. So they [International] have to teach the same things over and over again.”

Early in the service experience, Kim and Monica shared dissatisfaction with their relationship with the community partners at International. Kim shared her initial negative reflection: “Unfortunately, this service experience was extremely frustrating to me as a volunteer as I felt useless and as though my time were not being used well or effectively in order to accomplish any of the organization’s missions.” Since Kim and Monica did not understand the goal of the service-learning experience, they felt their time and service were not being properly utilized. In reality, engaging the ESL students in conversation with native English speakers was the goal of the organization, and, according to the community partners, certainly helped the organization’s mission. Although the community partners were clear on how the relationship benefited both the college students and the ESL students, the college students did not see any real benefit to either side. In a twist on Mills’ (2012) second fury (student emphasis on time versus agency emphasis on efficiency), the college students felt that their time was not being used effectively to benefit the ESL students or themselves.

**Parting impressions.** By the end of the service experience, Kim’s perspective had changed drastically:

My time spent at International demonstrated to me that helping out one’s community does not automatically equate to laborious tasks, but that just sitting down and taking the time to talk to someone and listen to what they have to say can mean the world to them and positively impact them.

Instead of focusing on the frustration she experienced and counting her contribution as trivial, Kim was able to reflect on her experience and appreciate how her involvement could make a difference to a community member at International.

The service-learning relationship between the college students and community partners ended amicably. The community partners

at International thanked Kim and Monica for working with them, and for their patience throughout the project. Kim and Monica responded with mutual thanks for the experience and for allowing them to work with International's ESL students. At the conclusion of the service-learning relationship, the college students and community partners could both identify how they mutually benefited from the relationship. The exchange was a positive experience for both parties and left a positive lasting impression on the college students.

## Resources

Resources was a community-based organization that endeavored to provide social services and resources to the neighborhood residents. The participants at Resources included one community partner, Lucy, and two college students, Melissa and Jane. Similar to Housing and International, the Resources service-learning relationship exhibited a transactional approach but was more successful in providing a meaningful learning experience for the college students. The community partner accepted that the service-learning relationship is marked by the characteristics of an exchange-oriented reciprocity between the community partner and college students. Interestingly, Mills' (2012) furies were largely absent from this relationship because of the community partner's implementation of the principles of service-learning into the students' experience with her community-based agency.

**First encounter.** From the commencement of the relationship between the college students and community partner at Resources, communication and transparency were at the forefront. Lucy made a concerted effort to ensure that Melissa, Jane, and other participating students understood the mission of the organization; were able to complete the needed tasks; and had the opportunity to engage in reflection activities immediately following each service experience. During the first meeting, the community partner discussed the organizational history and mission, facilitated ice-breakers to get to know the students better, and conducted role play sessions to help the students feel comfortable performing the service of neighborhood canvassing.

Lucy described the service work in relation to the students by saying:

In this particular instance we are engaging volunteers to participate in about 8 to 10 hours of service. We are engaging them in what I'm calling canvassing, so we're



taking volunteers around neighborhoods . . . to raise awareness of Resources and its services. So, engaging in conversations with community members, assessing what their needs were and really just getting more information about what Resources could do to assist them.

The college students described their work in an almost identical manner. Jane stated: “For Resources, our job was kind of to enlighten people and forward people to the program. And so, we would approach people and ask them if they’ve heard about it, and tell them basically that we can help them.” Melissa explained: “We’re just going around and canvassing, letting people know about Resources and what they do. . . . The goals are basically to let people know as much as we could about these opportunities.”

Looking across the service experience descriptions shared by Lucy, Melissa, and Jane, there is evidence of a shared understanding of the organizational mission and service goals. All three participants refer to the canvassing and indicate that this form of communication with the community is intended to connect neighborhood residents with the service and information available through the organization. There is an undeniable synchrony and synergy in the way all three participants described and implemented the goals of the service-learning project. For the duration of the service-learning relationship, Lucy, Melissa, and Jane worked in collaboration toward the common goal of raising awareness and increasing foot traffic into the Resources offices. This shared understanding between the community partner and college students is markedly different from what transpired with Housing and International. The community partner’s realistic understanding of the students’ limited service hours and supportive approach to working with the college students eliminated tension in the relationship. The community partner’s approach also established appropriate expectations for the service-learning experience.

**Service experience.** Lucy played the role of teacher in the relationship with the college students throughout the service project. She understood the service site as a place for educating the students: “[Resources] is centered completely around service learning. So, we are always engaging college students too.” Resources is partially staffed by AmeriCorps members, which explains—in part—the organization’s focus on service-learning. Lucy made it very clear throughout the service experience that in addition to utilizing the students to assist with carrying out the mission of the organization, part of the mission is to also engage and educate the students

through exposure to social justice issues. Lucy described how she views service-learning:

Having hands on experience rather than learning just from a textbook that you're learning not necessarily theory, not just you know words in the textbook, but you're learning your life learning if that makes sense, learning the skills that are going to be required for a career as opposed to learning skills that are going to be required to pass a test. And I really find a lot of value in that and I think that service-learning needs to be something that's more a part of all of our colleges and universities. . . . I think there is so much value in teaching our students to be engaged in the communities that they're in.

Lucy emphasized the *learning* in service-learning, and structured space for reflection at the end of each service experience. She saw the service project as an opportunity to facilitate students' learning and the community as the "textbook" for lessons learned. As a proponent of service-learning, the community partner was able to create a context to positively influence the students and serve the community members.

**Parting impressions.** Both the college students and community partner at Resources agreed that they shared a productive relationship. Students gained perspective and the community partner was able to perform the role of teacher. Melissa, a native of the city where the service took place, was surprised by the reactions of Jane and other students who were unaware of the level of need of low-income urban residents. In an interview, she expressed: "I can't believe that that you'd [suburban classmates] be so naive. But then at the same time, I kind of like to step back and like, well, if all you knew was where you were brought up." Jane, who grew up in a suburban context, recognized her privileged status: "I've probably learned that it's a lot harder for so many people and that we are so privileged with the life we live. I've never felt more privileged until I went out with Resources." Jane was introduced to a social world that had been previously invisible to her.

Resources also benefited from the service-learning experience. Lucy noted:

Resources has definitely benefited from having [the college] students participate in our canvassing. Some

really tangible outcomes have really come about just in hearing clients that have come to our doors saying, “Oh yeah, I got this flyer on Saturday from a bunch of people who were walking around passing on information.” I have definitely seen our numbers in terms of clients reach a level where I’m satisfied.

Both the college students and community partner were satisfied with their shared experience at the conclusion of the service-learning project. Interestingly, Mills’ four furies do not apply in this case. The tensions that existed in the cases of Housing and International are not present here. The community partner designed a service-learning project that balanced service to the community with student learning, thereby eliminating the four furies described by Mills. The college students in the study may not have transformed as a result of the experience, but they were introduced to a critical social issue and they learned that their actions can make a difference.

## Discussion

This study examined the relationships between the college students and community partners in three service-learning projects. Each set of service-learning relationships can be defined as transactional. The reciprocity found in the Resources service-learning relationship aligned with what Dostilio et al. (2012) describe as exchange-oriented. Despite these similarities, each service-learning relationship was enacted in very different ways and raises important questions for the merit assigned to transactional relationships characterized by exchange-oriented reciprocity.

Admittedly, the cases presented in this study did not reflect many of the best practices touted in the service-learning and community-engagement literature. For example, the college students were limited to just 9 service hours across three separate visits. With so little time engaged in the service activity, the service-learning relationship was transactional by design. The community partners required staffing to advance their missions, and the first-year students needed to fulfill the requirements for a university course. The university brokered the service-learning relationship in order to meet the complementary needs of both the community-based organization and the students. Each reciprocal relationship between the community partner and the college students was intended to work for the mutual benefit of both parties.

Unfortunately, the service-learning relationship described under Housing was not reciprocal. In Housing, the community partners expected a consistent, large group of college students to build community among the shelter residents. The community partners were unprepared for the large groups of changing students who would need to be onboarded every 2 weeks. Although originally designed to be transactional, the Housing service-learning relationship was neither transactional nor reciprocal. This service-learning relationship was plagued by all four of the furies described by Mills (2012), a circumstance exacerbated by the community partner's lack of preparation and organization. For example, the tension between student hours and agency commitment could have been avoided had the community participants selected a less ambitious service activity.

The International service-learning relationship seemed to start with a similar mismatch in expectations for the community partner, but they quickly recovered and were able to forge a reciprocal relationship with the college students. Consistent with exchange-oriented reciprocity, the community partners and college students engaged in the International service-learning relationship mutually benefited from participation in the project. Although the college students did not recount any personal growth or transformation, they were happy to be of service to the immigrants who needed help with practicing English. Characteristic of Mills' (2012) fourth fury, the college students may have believed that they were going to be of greater service and make more of a difference in the lives of the immigrants. Their idealism was tempered by the reality that only so much can be accomplished in 9 hours of service.

Unlike Housing and International, Resources had a well-organized and well-planned service relationship. The community partner worked within the constraints of the students' limited hours and created a meaningful service-learning experience designed to benefit both the college students and the community-based organization. The community partner sufficiently oriented the college students, including designing role play experiences to help the students become competent and confident before embarking on a canvassing campaign. Resources employed the college students to engage in a service-learning experience that was not premised on relationship building, in contrast to Housing (building a sense of community within the shelter) and International (tutoring immigrants in English). The community partner and college students mutually benefited from this exchange. In fact, none of Mills' (2012) furies were identified in this case. The Resources service-learning

relationship provided its students with a positive introduction to service.

Generally, service-learning projects categorized as transactional with features of exchange-oriented reciprocity are understood to be limited. The college students involved experience no personal transformation; they also risk reinforcement of negative perceptions and misinformation about a community or social issue (*Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013*). On the other hand, the community partners may receive little benefit because the time invested in orienting and managing the college students does not yield the desired results. However, as evidenced by these three cases, all service-learning relationships that fall into this category are not created equal.

## Conclusion

Complaint-fueled tension between service-learners and their agency hosts are not heavily featured in the public, service-learning, conversation, though most service-learning professionals will be acutely (and perhaps painfully) aware of one or more of the tensions described above. This is not to suggest that the realities of the field are not reflected in our canon; however, because we witness the power and vitality of this educational approach when it goes well, we sometimes stretch our meaning-making, tension-relieving skills to capacity when faced with any of these furies. (*Mills, 2012, p. 40*)

There is merit to transactional service-learning relationships. Transactional service-learning relationships that accept the limitations of the relationship and design the experience to build on the strengths can capitalize on the arrangement for the reciprocal benefit of both parties. This was, in fact, the case for Resources. The Resources service-learning relationship was transactional, reciprocal, and made an impact on the community partners and the college students alike. Future service-learning relationships working with limited service hours should design service activities that are short term and/or do not require relationship-building. Community partners can avoid clerical work and create impactful experiences in a short period of time. Such experiences help to plant the seed of service in students, introduce them to the possibilities of service, and set the stage for students to participate in subsequent experiences.

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