

The Economic and Social Impact of Service-Learning: Strengthening Community Bonds and Institutional Anchoring

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Abstract

This study examines the economic and social community impact of a large regional teaching university's Academic Service-Learning program through mixed-methods research combining institutional data analysis, community partner surveys (n=127), and comparative benchmarking with peer institutions. Findings reveal that the University's service-learning initiatives generated over 180,000 service hours during the 2023-2024 academic year, translating to approximately \$6 million in economic value using the Independent Sector's valuation methodology. While delivering substantial return on investment (\$192.12 in community impact per dollar invested), the program faces implementation challenges including partnership sustainability and quality consistency across courses. Analysis of student outcome data, controlling for demographic variables and prior academic performance, indicates positive associations between service-learning participation and academic persistence, though selection bias remains a limitation. Community partner interviews reveal benefits in organizational capacity and fresh perspectives, alongside concerns about project continuity and institutional power dynamics. The study positions the University's approach within anchor institution theoretical frameworks while critically examining both strengths and limitations of service-learning as a community engagement strategy. These findings contribute to understanding how higher education institutions can effectively leverage service-learning to create meaningful community impact while acknowledging the complexity of university-community partnerships.

Keywords: economic impact, social impact, service-learning, anchor institution, institutional anchoring, higher education, community bonds

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Service-learning has emerged as a significant educational approach that bridges classroom learning with community engagement, creating opportunities for bidirectional knowledge exchange and value creation. This study examines a large regional teaching university in the Intermountain West (hereafter "the University") and its Academic Service-Learning program as a case study to analyze both the tangible and intangible impacts of service-learning on surrounding communities, while critically evaluating its effectiveness as an institutional strategy for community engagement.

Theoretical Framework

This research is situated within two complementary theoretical frameworks: anchor institution theory (Ehlenz, 2018; Birch et al., 2013) and critical service-learning pedagogy (Mitchell, 2008; Bruce, 2018). Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework guiding this analysis.

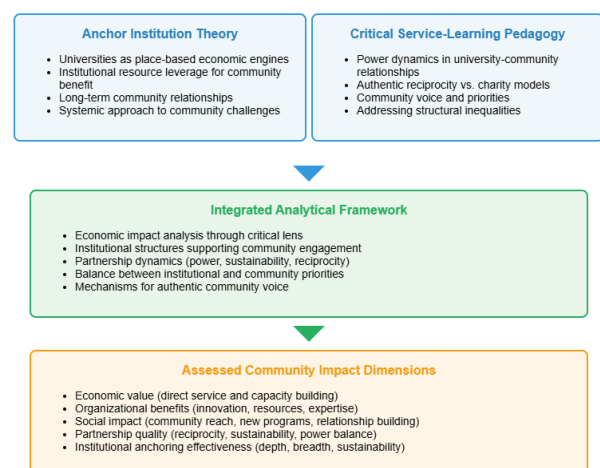
Anchor institution theory conceptualizes universities as place-based entities with economic, social, and cultural influence within their communities. This framework emphasizes how institutions can leverage their resources—including human capital, purchasing power, and intellectual assets—to create sustainable community impact (Dubb et al., 2013). As Ehlenz (2018) notes, universities that effectively function as anchor institutions move beyond transactional community interactions toward transformational engagement that addresses systemic community challenges.

Critical service-learning pedagogy extends traditional service-learning approaches by emphasizing the importance of examining power dynamics, reciprocity, and structural inequalities within service-learning relationships (Mitchell, 2008). This framework challenges institutions to move beyond charity models toward authentic

partnerships that acknowledge and address power differentials between universities and communities (Bruce, 2018; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). As Stoecker (2016) argues, truly reciprocal service-learning requires institutions to center community voice and priorities rather than privileging academic needs.

As seen in Figure 1 below, the integration of these frameworks allows for analysis of service-learning's community impact through both institutional and critical lenses, examining how service-learning functions as an anchor strategy while remaining attentive to power dynamics and partnership reciprocity.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Service-Learning Community Impact



Source: Adapted from Ehlenz (2018), Mitchell (2008), Bruce (2018), and Stoecker (2016)

Research Gaps and Questions

The study addresses significant gaps in the existing literature on service-learning's community impact. While numerous studies have documented student outcomes from service-learning (Celio et

al., 2011; Conway et al., 2009; Warren, 2012), fewer have rigorously examined impacts on community partners (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009) or quantified economic contributions (Hollis, 2002; Gelmon et al., 2018). Additionally, methodological limitations, including selection bias and lack of appropriate comparison groups, have constrained causal claims about service-learning effectiveness (Steinberg et al., 2011; Nilson et al., 2014).

Recent literature has begun addressing community impact more systematically (Gelmon et al., 2018; James & Logan, 2016), but significant gaps remain in understanding the mechanisms through which service-learning functions as an anchor strategy and how partnership duration influences impact (Pickle et al., 2020). Furthermore, little research has examined how community partners experience and navigate power dynamics in service-learning relationships (Bruce, 2018; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019), particularly in large-scale, institutionalized programs.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to address the following research questions:

1. What is the economic value of the University's Academic Service-Learning program to the surrounding community, and how does this compare to program costs and to peer institutions?
2. How do community partners perceive the benefits and challenges of collaborating with the University's Academic Service-Learning program, and how do these perceptions vary by partnership duration and organization type?
3. To what extent does the University's Academic Service-Learning program position the institution as an anchor within its community, and what institutional structures support this function?
4. What structural factors influence the effectiveness, reciprocity, and sustainability of university-community partnerships through service-learning?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) conducted between September 2024 and January 2025. Quantitative data collection and analysis preceded qualitative inquiry, with qualitative findings helping to explain and contextualize quantitative results. This design was selected to provide both breadth (through quantitative measures of economic impact and partnership satisfaction) and depth (through qualitative exploration of partnership dynamics and contextual factors) in understanding service-learning's community impact.

Data Sources and Collection

Institutional Data Collection: The researcher obtained de-identified institutional data from the University's Center for Social Impact and Office of Institutional Research, including:

- Service-learning course enrollments (2019-2024)
- Student demographic information
- Service hours by academic department and community sector
- Student persistence and completion rates
- Program budgetary information

Community Partner Survey: Using stratified random sampling, 200 community organizations were selected from the 1,003 organizations that partnered with the University's Academic Service-Learning program during the 2023-2024 academic year. The sampling framework ensured proportional representation across organization types and partnership durations. A 28-item survey was distributed to these organizations, including Likert-scale items measuring partnership satisfaction, perceived organizational benefits, challenges encountered, and open-ended questions about partnership experiences. The survey instrument was pilot-tested with five community partners and refined based on their feedback.

The survey achieved a 63.5% response rate (n=127), providing a representative sample across organization types: educational institutions

(34.6%), social service agencies (26.8%), healthcare organizations (15.0%), government entities (11.8%), community-based organizations (7.9%), and other organization types (3.9%). Table 1 compares the demographics of survey respondents to the overall sampled population, showing good representation across organization types.

Table 1: Demographic Comparison of Survey Respondents to Sampled Population

Organization Type	Survey Respondents (n=127)	Sampled Population (N=200)	Difference
Educational Institutions	34.6%	32.5%	+2.1%
Social Service Agencies	26.8%	25.0%	+1.8%
Healthcare Organizations	15.0%	16.5%	-1.5%
Government Entities	11.8%	13.0%	-1.2%
Community-Based Organizations	7.9%	9.0%	-1.1%
Other Organization Types	3.9%	4.0%	-0.1%

Semi-structured Interviews: Following survey analysis, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 community partners strategically selected to represent:

- Diverse organizational types (4 educational institutions, 4 social service agencies, 3 healthcare organizations, 2 government entities, 2 other)
- Varied partnership durations (5 partnerships <2 years, 5 partnerships 2-5 years, 5 partnerships >5 years)
- Different survey response patterns (both highly satisfied and dissatisfied partners)

Interviews averaged 47 minutes (range: 32-68 minutes) and explored partnership benefits, challenges, power dynamics, and suggestions for improvement. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and member-checked by sending transcripts to participants for verification.

Comparative Benchmarking: Data from the Campus Compact Annual Survey (2023) and direct outreach to four peer institutions with established service-learning programs provided comparative benchmarks for program scale, economic impact calculation methods, and community partnership practices. Selected peer institutions shared the University's institutional characteristics (regional comprehensive universities with 15,000+ students) and had established service-learning programs (5+ years). Table 2 provides an overview of comparative institutions.

Table 2: Comparative Institutional Characteristics

Institution	Student Pop.	Carnegie Class.	SL Program Age	# Partners
The University	42,631	Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs	12 years	1,003
Peer Institution A	27,542	Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs	15 years	568
Peer Institution B	35,982	Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs	9 years	794
Peer Institution C	19,436	Master's Colleges & Universities: Medium Programs	18 years	412

Institution	Student Pop.	Carnegie Class.	SL Program Age	# Partners
Peer Institution D	31,654	Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity	22 years	1,157

Analysis Methods

Economic Impact Analysis: Economic valuation followed methodological guidelines from Independent Sector (2024), using the state-specific volunteer hour value (\$33.50) adjusted for skill level required by different project types. Table 3 outlines the valuation methodology for different service categories.

Table 3: Economic Valuation Methodology by Service Category

Service Category	Description	Valuation Approach	Hourly Value
Basic Assistance	Event support, basic administrative tasks, manual labor	Base rate	\$33.50
Specialized Skills	Tutoring, research assistance, program support	Base rate x 1.25	\$41.88
Professional Services	Marketing plans, database development, program evaluation	Base rate x 1.5	\$50.25

Service categorization was determined through faculty assessment of each project using standardized criteria developed by the University's Center for Social Impact. The criteria evaluated:

- Required technical knowledge and specialized training
- Complexity of tasks and deliverables
- Degree of professional judgment required

- Equivalent market rate for similar services
- Level of direct supervision required

Each project was independently categorized by the supervising faculty member and verified by Center for Social Impact staff to ensure consistent application of criteria.

This differentiated approach provides more nuanced valuation than flat-rate methods while acknowledging limitations in capturing indirect and induced economic effects. The methodology aligns with approaches used by peer institutions while allowing for service quality variations.

Statistical Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using STATA. Descriptive statistics characterized program scope and participation patterns. Multiple regression analysis examined relationships between service-learning participation and student outcomes, controlling for demographic variables, prior academic performance, and number of credit hours completed.

Propensity score matching was employed to address selection bias when comparing service-learning participants to non-participants. The matching algorithm included the following variables: age, gender, race/ethnicity, first-generation status, Pell eligibility, high school GPA, ACT/SAT scores, credit hours completed, and academic major category. Nearest-neighbor matching with a caliper of 0.2 standard deviations of the propensity score was used, without replacement, resulting in 3,846 matched pairs of service-learning participants and non-participants. Matching quality was assessed using standardized mean differences, with all covariates achieving balance (standardized differences <0.25) after matching.

Analysis of community partner survey data included descriptive statistics, chi-square tests examining differences by organization type and partnership duration, and correlation analysis between partnership characteristics and satisfaction measures.

Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Initial coding was conducted independently by the researcher and a graduate assistant to enhance reliability. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa, achieving a coefficient of 0.83, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion to reach consensus on final codes. NVivo 15 software facilitated coding, theme development, and data organization.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Throughout this process, the researcher employed constant comparison techniques to identify patterns across different data sources and participant types.

Limitations: Several methodological limitations warrant acknowledgment. While the community partner survey achieved a strong response rate (63.5%) from the randomly selected sample, the findings may not fully capture experiences of all 1,003 community partners, particularly those with less established relationships.

Social desirability bias may influence both survey and interview responses, with participants potentially reluctant to criticize institutional partners. To mitigate this concern, interviews were conducted by a researcher not affiliated with the University's Academic Service-Learning program, and participants were explicitly encouraged to share both positive and negative experiences.

While statistical controls and propensity score matching help address selection bias in student outcome analysis, the lack of randomized assignment limits causal claims. Finally, the economic impact calculation methodology captures direct service value but may not fully account for long-term or indirect economic effects, and does not address opportunity costs or potential displacement effects.

The single-institution case study design, while providing rich contextual understanding, limits generalizability to other institutional contexts. However, the comparative benchmarking with peer institutions helps situate findings within broader higher education contexts.

Results

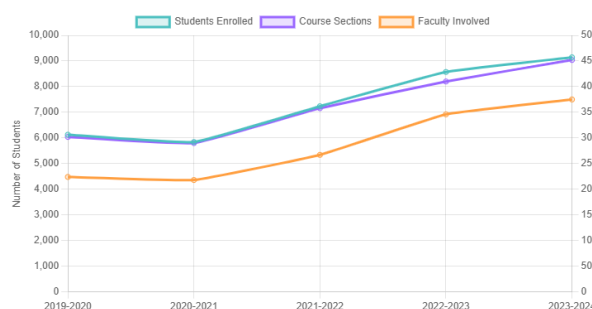
Program Scale and Demographics

The University's Academic Service-Learning program operated at significant scale during the 2023-2024 academic year. Institutional data revealed:

- 9,142 students enrolled in service-learning courses
- 452 service-learning course sections offered
- 375 faculty members engaged in service-learning instruction
- 1,003 community organizations partnering with the university
- 1,578 distinct community projects implemented

Figure 2 illustrates the program's growth trajectory over the past five academic years, showing steady increases in student participation, course offerings, and faculty involvement despite pandemic-related disruptions in 2020-2021.

Figure 2: University Service-Learning Program Scale (2019-2024)



Source: University Center for Social Impact institutional data (2019-2024)

As seen in Figure 3, demographic analysis revealed that service-learning courses demonstrated greater diversity than the overall University student population in several dimensions. Figure 3 illustrates these differences, showing that service-learning courses had higher proportions of female students (58.6% vs. 51.7% university-wide), first-generation college students

(38.2% vs. 31.9%), and students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (27.3% vs. 19.6%). These differences were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and have remained consistent over the past three academic years.

Figure 3: Demographic Comparison: Service-Learning vs. Overall University Population (2023-2024)



Source: University Institutional Research data (2023-2024). All differences statistically significant at $p < .001$

Economic Impact Analysis

As seen in Figure 4, during the 2023-2024 academic year, the University's Academic Service-Learning program generated 183,516 verified service hours in the community. Figure 4 presents the economic impact analysis, showing how these hours translate to community value using the differentiated valuation approach outlined in the methodology.

Using the Independent Sector's valuation methodology with the state-specific value of \$33.50 per volunteer hour, adjusted for skill levels required by different project types, this service represents \$6,147,786 in economic value to community partners.

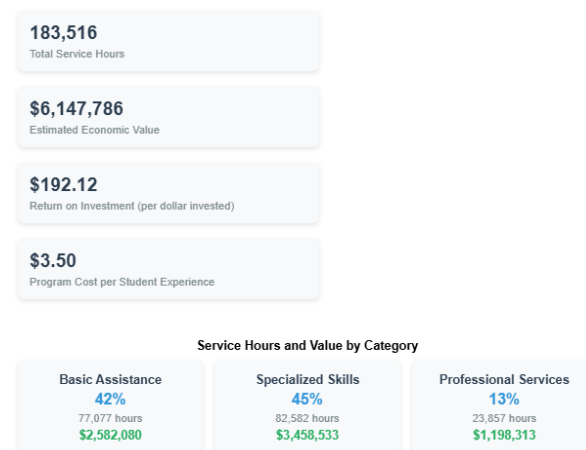
The direct program operating budget, excluding faculty and staff salaries, was \$32,000 for the same period. This translates to:

- \$192.12 in economic impact per dollar invested in the program
- \$3.50 of direct program expenditure per student service-learning experience

Comparative analysis with four peer institutions revealed that the University's return on investment ratio (\$192.12:1) is exceptionally high among sampled institutions, as illustrated in Figure

5. This comparative analysis provides important context for interpreting the University's economic impact metrics.

Figure 4: Economic Impact Analysis of University Service-Learning (2023-2024)



Source: University Center for Social Impact data (2023-2024); Independent Sector volunteer value rates

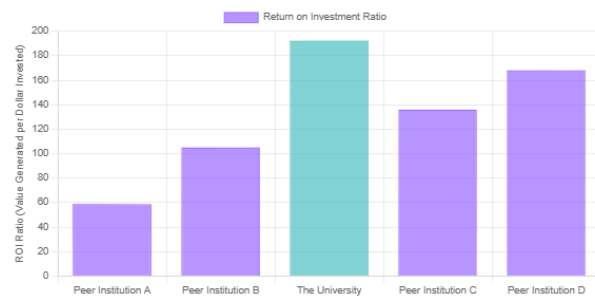
Methodology Notes: Economic value calculated using Independent Sector's volunteer hour valuation methodology. Base rate of \$33.50 (state-specific value) adjusted by project type skill requirements:

- **Basic assistance** (e.g., event support, administrative tasks): Base rate (\$33.50)
- **Specialized skills** (e.g., research assistance, tutoring): Base rate \times 1.25 (\$41.88)
- **Professional services** (e.g., marketing plans, database development): Base rate \times 1.5 (\$50.25)

Service categorization based on faculty assessment of project requirements and skill levels using standardized criteria developed by the University's Center for Social Impact. Total direct program budget (\$32,000) includes funding for program operations, faculty development, assessment activities, and project support. Faculty and staff salaries are excluded from this analysis.

It is important to note that this economic valuation has several limitations. First, it captures only the replacement value of direct service hours and does not account for potential multiplier effects, long-term economic benefits, or opportunity costs. Second, service hours may not fully capture the quality or impact of services provided. Third, the economic valuation does not differentiate between services that would otherwise be provided through paid positions versus those that represent additional capacity.

Figure 5: Comparative Return on Investment Among Peer Institutions (2023-2024)



Source: Institutional data collection and comparative benchmarking (2023-2024)

Note: Peer institutions anonymized. ROI calculated as estimated economic value generated divided by direct service-learning program budget (excluding personnel costs). Methodological variations exist in how institutions calculate economic impact and define program costs.

Additionally, as noted by Handy and Srinivasan (2004) and Salamon et al. (2011), volunteer valuation methodologies have inherent limitations in capturing the full social and economic value of volunteer contributions. The approach used in this study, while aligning with established practices in the field, should be interpreted as a conservative estimate of service-learning's economic impact.

Community Partner Perceptions

As seen in Figure 6, survey responses from community partners (n=127) revealed generally positive perceptions of partnership value, with 83.5% rating their overall satisfaction as "satisfied" or "very satisfied." Figure 6 illustrates the distribution of satisfaction ratings.

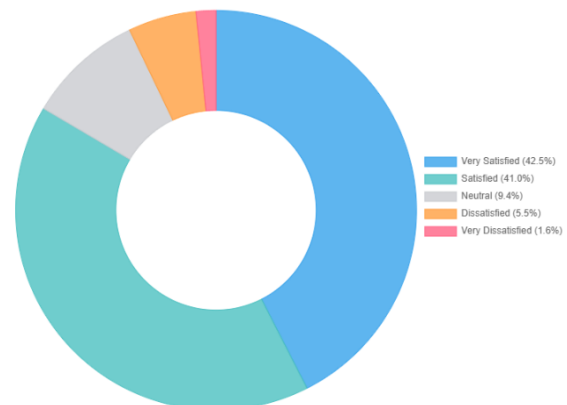
The survey results reveal important patterns by partnership duration. Long-term partners (>5 years) reported significantly higher benefits and fewer challenges compared to new partners (<2 years). This finding aligns with research by Gelmon et al. (2018) suggesting that partnership benefits compound over time as relationships mature and partners develop more effective collaboration processes.

Chi-square analyses also revealed significant differences by organization type, with educational institutions reporting higher satisfaction (91.2% satisfied or very satisfied) compared to other organization types, particularly

social service agencies (76.5%) and healthcare organizations (75.0%).

Figure 6: Community Partner Satisfaction with Service-Learning Partnerships (n=127)

Overall satisfaction with University Service-Learning Partnerships



Source: Community Partner Survey (2024)

Table 4 summarizes key survey findings regarding perceived benefits and challenges, including both overall results and variations by partnership duration.

Table 4: Community Partner Survey Results by Partnership Duration (n=127)

Perceived Benefits	Overall Agreement	New Partners (<2 years)	Established Partners (2-5 years)	Long-term Partners (>5 years)	Chi-Square Sig.
Enhanced organizational capacity	79.5%	72.3%	81.6%	86.7%	p<.05
Fresh perspectives on organizational challenges	81.9%	78.9%	82.4%	84.4%	n.s.
Access to university	68.5%	52.6%	71.4%	84.4%	p<.01

Perceived Benefits	Overall Agreement	New Partners (<2 years)	Established Partners (2-5 years)	Long-term Partners (>5 years)	Chi-Square Sig.
resources and expertise					
Professional development for staff	42.5%	31.6%	44.9%	53.3%	p<.05
Advancement of organizational mission	77.2%	68.4%	79.6%	84.4%	p<.05

Perceived Challenges	Overall Agreement	New Partners (<2 years)	Established Partners (2-5 years)	Long-term Partners (>5 years)	Chi-Square Sig.
Insufficient project duration	63.8%	71.1%	63.3%	55.6%	p<.05
Student preparation inadequacy	37.0%	55.3%	34.7%	17.8%	p<.001
Communication difficulties	44.9%	57.9%	42.9%	31.1%	p<.01
Resource burden on organization	31.5%	47.4%	26.5%	17.8%	p<.001
Misalignment between academic and organizational needs	28.3%	42.1%	24.5%	15.6%	p<.01

Note: n.s. = not statistically significant

Thematic analysis of interview data and open-ended survey responses provided deeper insights into community partner experiences. Table 5 presents the major themes that emerged from qualitative analysis, including representative quotes.

Table 5: Thematic Analysis of Community Partner Experiences

Theme	Description	Representative Quotes
Capacity Enhancement	Partners consistently identified increased organizational capacity as a primary benefit, particularly for resource-constrained organizations.	"Having students allows us to take on projects that have been on our wish list for years but we've never had the staffing to accomplish" (P7, Social Service Agency, 4-year partnership). "The sheer number of hours that students contribute allows us to extend our reach in ways that would be impossible with our limited staff" (P11, Educational Institution, 7-year partnership).
Innovation and Fresh Perspectives	Partners valued the new ideas and approaches students brought to persistent challenges.	"Students ask 'why' questions that challenge our assumptions and help us see beyond our established routines" (P12, Government Entity, 3-year partnership). "Sometimes we get so entrenched in how we've always done things that we miss opportunities for innovation. The students bring fresh perspectives that have led to several program improvements" (P4, Healthcare Organization, 6-year partnership).
Partnership Evolution	Long-term partners described how relationships evolved from transactional to transformational over time.	"In the beginning, we were just looking for extra hands to help with specific tasks. Over time, it's evolved into a true partnership where we're co-creating projects that meet both our needs and the learning objectives" (P2, Educational Institution, 8-year partnership). "The first year was honestly challenging—lots of miscommunication and misaligned expectations. But we worked through it, and now in our fifth year, we have a much more seamless collaboration" (P10, Social Service Agency, 5-year partnership).

Theme	Description	Representative Quotes
		Agency, 5-year partnership).
Continuity Challenges	Many partners expressed frustration with the semester-based timeline of service-learning projects.	"Just as students become truly valuable to our organization, the semester ends and we start over with new students" (P3, Social Service Agency, 2-year partnership)."The academic calendar is our biggest challenge. Our work doesn't fit neatly into 15-week segments, which creates disruption in service delivery" (P13, Healthcare Organization, 4-year partnership).
Quality Variability	Partners reported significant variation in student preparation and project quality across different courses and departments.	"Some students arrive with clear expectations and relevant skills, while others seem unprepared for the realities of our work" (P9, Educational Institution, 3-year partnership)."The quality varies dramatically depending on the faculty member. When faculty are engaged and set clear expectations, the experience is overwhelmingly positive. When they're hands-off, it's much more hit-or-miss" (P15, Government Entity, 7-year partnership).
Power Dynamics	Several partners, particularly smaller community-based organizations, described challenges in navigating institutional power differentials.	"Sometimes it feels like the University's needs take priority over what our community actually needs. We're grateful for the help, but we want to be true partners, not just service recipients" (P14, Community Development Organization, 2-year partnership)."There's an inherent power imbalance when working with a large institution. We sometimes feel pressure to accept projects that aren't perfectly aligned with our priorities because we value the relationship" (P6, Social Service Agency, 3-year partnership).

Theme	Description	Representative Quotes
Relationship-Centered Success	Partners emphasized that successful partnerships centered on relationships with specific faculty members rather than with the institution broadly.	"Our successful partnership isn't really with the University as an institution—it's with Professor [Name] who understands our organization and advocates for us" (P5, Healthcare Organization, 5-year partnership)."The key to our long-term success has been consistent faculty involvement. Even as students change each semester, having the same faculty champion provides crucial continuity" (P8, Educational Institution, 9-year partnership).

These findings suggest that while community partners derive substantial benefits from service-learning partnerships, significant challenges remain in creating truly reciprocal and sustainable relationships that balance academic and community needs. The qualitative analysis also reveals how partnerships evolve over time, with many challenges diminishing as relationships mature and partners develop shared understanding and communication processes.

Student Outcomes and Institutional Anchoring

Institutional data on student outcomes, controlling for demographic variables and prior academic performance through propensity score matching, revealed several significant associations between service-learning participation and academic success indicators, as illustrated in Figure 7.

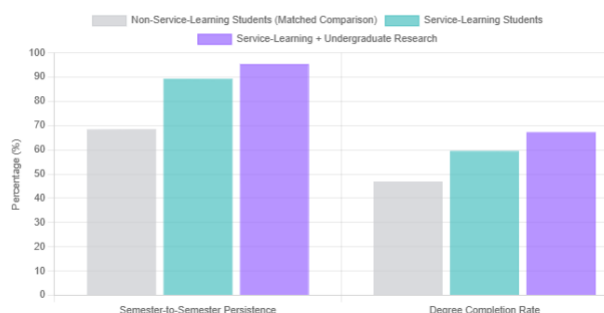
The matched comparison analysis showed:

- Students who completed at least one service-learning course showed 27.3% higher odds of degree completion compared to matched non-participants ($p < .001$)
- Service-learning participants demonstrated 76.8% higher odds of semester-to-

semester persistence compared to matched non-participants ($p < .001$)

- When service-learning was combined with undergraduate research, persistence odds increased by 91.4% ($p < .001$)

Figure 7: Student Persistence and Completion Outcomes (2021-2024 Cohorts)



Source: University Institutional Research data (2021-2024)

Note: Analysis based on propensity score matching controlling for demographic variables and prior academic performance. Service-learning participants defined as students who completed at least one service-learning designated course. Combined group represents students who completed both service-learning and undergraduate research experiences. All differences statistically significant at $p < .001$.

These findings align with previous research on service-learning's positive relationship with student success metrics (Lockeman & Pelco, 2013; Reed et al., 2015). However, even with statistical controls, selection effects cannot be entirely eliminated—students who choose service-learning courses may differ from non-participants in unmeasured ways that influence academic outcomes.

Analysis of the University's institutional structures and resource allocations demonstrates several indicators of anchor institution commitment, as summarized in Table 6.

This analysis reveals that the University has developed relatively strong institutional structures to support its anchor institution role, particularly in terms of strategic integration and cross-departmental adoption. However, interviews with community partners suggest variability in how deeply this institutional commitment translates to

sustained community relationships beyond individual courses or faculty champions.

Table 6: Institutional Indicators of Anchor Institution Commitment

Indicator	University Status	Comparative Context
Strategic Plan Integration	Service-learning explicitly incorporated into the University's strategic plan and mission statements	Among strongest integration compared to peer institutions
Academic Department Adoption	30 academic departments (out of 47) have received service-learning program distinction	Higher departmental adoption rate than 3 of 4 peer institutions
Faculty Promotion & Tenure	Community-engaged teaching and scholarship recognized in promotion and tenure guidelines	Similar to 2 peers, stronger than 2 peers
Dedicated Resources	Budget allocations for service-learning increased by 18% over past three fiscal years	Above median resource growth among peer institutions
Community Voice in Governance	Community partners serve on Service-Learning Advisory Board	Similar to 3 peers, stronger than 1 peer
Geographic Distribution	Projects in 23 municipalities across 3 counties	More geographically dispersed than 3 of 4 peer institutions
Cross-Institutional Coordination	Formal coordination between service-learning, institutional research, and community relations offices	Similar to 2 peers, stronger than 2 peers

Longitudinal Partnership Analysis

A key finding from this research concerns how partnerships evolve over time. Analysis of both survey and interview data revealed distinct developmental stages in service-learning partnerships, as illustrated in Figure 8.

Survey and interview data revealed common challenges in partnership evolution:

- **Stage 1-2 Transition:** Maintaining momentum through academic calendar breaks; developing consistent quality standards
- **Stage 2-3 Transition:** Faculty turnover disrupting established relationships; expanding beyond initial department connections
- **Stage 3-4 Transition:** Institutionalizing relationships beyond specific champions; balancing increased complexity with student capabilities

Only 22% of partnerships surveyed reached Stage 4, with educational institutions and government agencies most likely to achieve transformational partnerships.

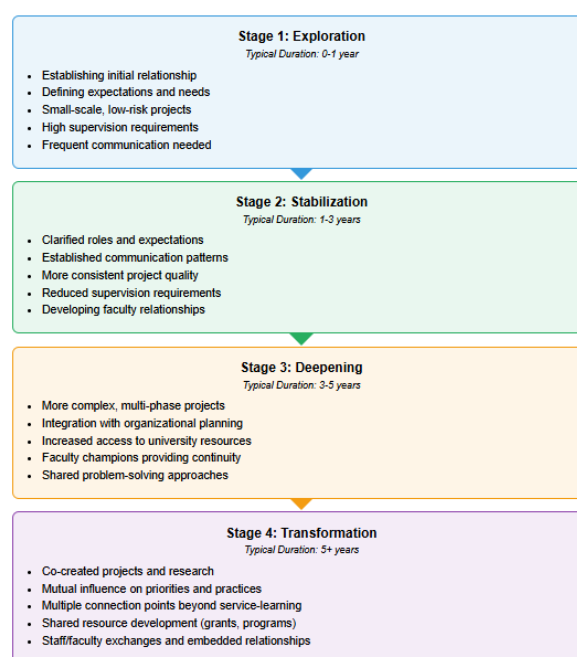
This developmental model aligns with Bringle and Hatcher's (2002) framework for university-community partnerships but extends it by identifying specific transition challenges and success factors based on empirical data from this study. Interview analysis revealed that partnerships face distinct challenges at each transition point, with only 22% reaching the transformational stage.

Several factors were associated with partnerships advancing to more mature stages:

1. **Faculty Champion Continuity:** Partnerships with consistent faculty involvement were 3.4 times more likely to reach Stage 3 or 4 compared to those with rotating faculty ($p < .01$).
2. **Multi-Course Integration:** Partnerships involving multiple courses or departments were 2.8 times more likely to reach advanced stages ($p < .01$).

3. **Formal Partnership Agreements:** Partnerships with written memoranda of understanding were 2.2 times more likely to advance to mature stages ($p < .05$).
4. **Physical Proximity:** Organizations located within 10 miles of campus were 1.9 times more likely to develop advanced partnerships ($p < .05$).

Figure 8: Developmental Stages of Service-Learning Partnerships



Source: Analysis of community partner interviews and survey data (2024)

These findings provide important insights into the factors that facilitate partnership sustainability and development beyond initial transactional relationships.

Discussion

Economic Impact in Context

The findings demonstrate that the University's Academic Service-Learning program generates substantial economic value for community partners, with an exceptional return on institutional investment. However, several important contextual factors should inform interpretation of these results.

First, the economic valuation methodology captures only the replacement value of direct service and does not account for quality differentials between student service and professional work. As several community partners noted in interviews, student contributions sometimes require additional supervision and training, potentially reducing their net economic value. As one partner explained: "There's a learning curve with every new student group that requires significant staff time. Eventually they become highly valuable, but there's an initial investment period that isn't captured in the hours calculation" (P13).

Conversely, in some specialized projects, students bring current technical knowledge that may exceed what organizations could otherwise afford. A community partner from a small nonprofit described this value: "We could never afford to hire a marketing professional to develop the comprehensive social media strategy that the business students created for us. That project alone provided value far beyond the calculated hourly rate" (P6).

Second, comparative analysis with peer institutions revealed methodological inconsistencies in how service-learning economic impact is calculated across higher education. While the University's approach aligns with emerging best practices, the lack of standardized methodologies limits comparative claims. This limitation aligns with Salamon et al.'s (2011) critique of volunteer valuation approaches more broadly.

Third, the economic valuation does not capture potential negative externalities, such as displacement of paid positions or dependency relationships that may develop between resource-constrained organizations and university partners. Critical service-learning theory (Mitchell, 2008; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019) emphasizes the importance of examining such unintended consequences when evaluating program impact.

Fourth, it is important to note that the ROI calculation in this study (192.12:1) reflects only direct program costs and excludes faculty and staff salaries (as there are no full-time faculty or staff who directly receive their salary in relation to this work). This approach is consistent with how

many service-learning programs calculate their ROI but may overstate the return compared to analyses that include all program-related personnel costs. Even accounting for this methodological choice, the economic impact findings provide compelling evidence that service-learning represents an efficient mechanism for universities to generate community value.

The high return on investment ratio indicates that service-learning delivers substantial community economic benefit relative to program costs, supporting Dubb et al.'s (2013) argument that universities can leverage institutional resources to create significant community economic impact.

Community Partnership Dynamics

The mixed-methods approach revealed important nuances in community partner experiences that would not be captured through quantitative analysis alone. While survey results indicated generally high satisfaction levels, interview data uncovered tensions regarding partnership sustainability, power dynamics, and alignment between academic and community needs.

These findings align with Stoecker and Tryon's (2009) critique of service-learning partnerships, which identified similar challenges in reciprocity and sustainability. The current study extends this work by documenting how such tensions manifest within a large-scale, institutionalized service-learning program with diverse community partnerships.

The thematic analysis revealed that community partners perceive greatest value when: 1) projects align closely with organizational priorities rather than course requirements, 2) partnerships extend beyond single semesters, and 3) faculty members maintain consistent involvement alongside students. As one interviewee noted: "The most successful projects are those where we develop relationships with faculty who understand our organization and can provide continuity even as students change" (P5).

The longitudinal partnership analysis further revealed how partnerships evolve through distinct developmental stages, with specific challenges at each transition point. This finding

extends previous work by Bringle and Hatcher (2002) and Dorado and Giles (2004) on partnership development by identifying specific factors that facilitate advancement to more mature partnership stages.

The identification of faculty champion continuity as the strongest predictor of partnership advancement aligns with findings from Janke (2013) on the critical role of relationship champions in sustaining university-community partnerships. This finding has important implications for how institutions structure and support service-learning, suggesting that faculty continuity may be as important as program infrastructure for creating sustainable community impact.

These findings suggest that the University could strengthen community impact by developing more multi-semester partnership structures, creating mechanisms for partnership continuity across academic terms, and involving faculty more deeply in partnership development and maintenance.

The University as an Anchor Institution

Through the lens of anchor institution theory (Ehlenz, 2018; Birch et al., 2013), the University's Academic Service-Learning program demonstrates several characteristics of effective community anchoring. The program's scale, institutional integration, and documented economic impact suggest that service-learning functions as one mechanism through which the university enacts its anchor role.

However, interview data revealed limitations in how consistently this anchoring function operates across different communities and partnerships. Some interviewees described episodic engagement rather than sustained institutional commitment, particularly in communities farther from campus or with less established university relationships. As one partner from a rural community organization explained: "We feel like we're on the periphery of the University's attention. The students who come are wonderful, but there's no sense that the institution as a whole is invested in our community's success" (P1).

This finding aligns with Harris and Holley's (2016) observation that universities often demonstrate uneven commitment to their anchor institution role, with engagement concentrated in certain geographic areas or institutional priorities. The analysis of partnership development stages further supports this observation, with geographic proximity emerging as a significant predictor of partnership advancement.

The study findings also suggest that the University's anchor institution impact could be strengthened by more intentional alignment between service-learning projects and identified community priorities. Several interviewees noted that while service-learning provides valuable assistance, projects sometimes reflect academic interests more than community-identified needs. This tension between academic and community priorities represents an ongoing challenge in service-learning practice (Butin, 2010; Bruce, 2018).

The comparative analysis with peer institutions (Table 6) indicates that the University has developed relatively strong institutional structures to support service-learning, particularly in terms of strategic plan integration and academic department adoption. However, the institution could strengthen its anchor role by developing more mechanisms for authentic community voice in program governance and project development, consistent with Santiago-Ortiz's (2019) call for critical service-learning approaches that center community priorities.

Theoretical Integration

The findings from this study can be productively interpreted through the integrated theoretical framework presented in Figure 1, which combines anchor institution and critical service-learning perspectives.

From an anchor institution perspective, the University's Academic Service-Learning program demonstrates how universities can leverage student and faculty resources to create substantial economic and social value in their communities. The program's broad institutional adoption, integration with strategic priorities, and significant economic impact align with key tenets of anchor institution theory (Birch et al., 2013; Ehlenz, 2018).

However, the critical service-learning perspective (Mitchell, 2008; Bruce, 2018) highlights important limitations in how this anchor role currently functions. Interview data revealed power imbalances in partnership relationships, with some community partners, particularly smaller organizations, expressing concerns about their ability to influence project direction and institutional priorities. As one partner explained: "There's an unstated expectation that we should be grateful for any help we receive, which makes it difficult to push back when projects don't align with our needs" (P14).

This tension reflects what Santiago-Ortiz (2019) describes as the difference between traditional service-learning, which often maintains existing power structures, and critical service-learning, which explicitly addresses structural inequalities and centers community voice. The University's Academic Service-Learning program demonstrates elements of both approaches, with more transformational partnerships (Stage 4) exhibiting greater reciprocity and shared power, while earlier-stage partnerships often maintain more traditional dynamics.

The longitudinal partnership analysis suggests that partnerships may naturally evolve toward more critical, reciprocal relationships over time, as partners develop trust and shared understanding. This finding extends both theoretical frameworks by suggesting that anchor institution effectiveness and critical service-learning principles may be developmental rather than static characteristics of university-community engagement.

Implications for Practice

This study yields several practical implications for institutions seeking to enhance community impact through service-learning:

1. Partnership Development Framework

The empirical model of partnership stages presented in Figure 8 provides a framework for institutions to assess and nurture partnership development. Institutions should:

- Recognize that partnerships have distinct developmental stages with different needs and challenges

- Develop differentiated support structures appropriate to each partnership stage
- Identify and address common transition challenges to facilitate partnership advancement
- Establish specific strategies to support partnerships in reaching transformational stages

2. Faculty Development and Continuity

The finding that faculty champion continuity strongly predicts partnership success suggests institutions should:

- Create incentive structures that encourage long-term faculty involvement with specific community partners
- Develop faculty teams or communities of practice around partnerships to mitigate disruption when individual faculty leave
- Include partnership relationship management in faculty training and development programs
- Recognize and reward faculty who develop sustained community partnerships

3. Addressing Power Dynamics

To create more authentic, reciprocal partnerships, institutions should:

- Include community partners in service-learning program governance and decision-making
- Develop formal mechanisms for community partners to provide feedback on project alignment with their needs
- Create partnership agreements that explicitly address power-sharing and decision-making processes
- Train faculty and students to recognize and navigate power differentials in community relationships

4. Structural Supports for Partnership Sustainability

To address the challenge of semester-based disruption, institutions should:

- Develop multi-semester course sequences connected to long-term community projects
- Create year-round partnership coordinator positions to maintain relationships between semesters
- Establish project documentation and transition protocols to facilitate knowledge transfer between student groups
- Develop partnership tiers with different expectations and resources based on partnership maturity

5. Economic Impact Measurement

To improve economic impact assessment, institutions should:

- Adopt transparent, consistent methodologies for calculating economic impact that acknowledge both benefits and limitations
- Include community partner assessment of value, not just hour quantification
- Track and report on long-term outcomes beyond immediate service value
- Develop comparative benchmarks with peer institutions using consistent methodologies

6. Integrated Anchor Strategies

To strengthen institutional anchoring, service-learning should be integrated with broader community engagement strategies:

- Align service-learning with institutional procurement, hiring, and research priorities
- Conduct regular community needs assessments to identify priority areas for service-learning projects

- Develop geographic focus areas that allow for concentrated, multi-faceted engagement
- Create mechanisms for cross-department collaboration on complex community challenges

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting this study's findings. First, while the community partner survey achieved a strong response rate (63.5%) from the randomly selected sample, the findings may not fully capture experiences of all 1,003 community partners, particularly those with less established relationships.

Second, although statistical controls help address selection bias in student outcome analysis, the lack of randomized assignment limits causal claims. Students who choose service-learning courses may differ from non-participants in unmeasured ways that influence academic outcomes. Future research employing experimental or quasi-experimental designs with randomized assignment would strengthen causal inferences.

Third, the single-institution case study design limits generalizability to other institutional contexts. While comparative benchmarking provides some context, institutions with different characteristics may experience different outcomes from service-learning initiatives.

Fourth, social desirability bias may influence both survey and interview responses, with participants potentially reluctant to criticize institutional partners, particularly in ongoing relationships. The inclusion of anonymous survey responses and confidential interviews helps mitigate but cannot eliminate this concern.

Fifth, the economic valuation methodology, while aligned with standard practices, has inherent limitations in capturing the full social and economic value of service-learning. Additionally, the ROI calculation based only on direct program costs may overstate the return compared to analyses that include all program-related personnel costs. Future research should explore more comprehensive valuation approaches

that account for indirect, induced, and long-term economic effects.

Future research should address these limitations through:

1. **Multi-institutional comparative studies** examining how institutional characteristics influence service-learning community impact
2. **Longitudinal tracking of partnership outcomes** beyond single academic years to assess long-term community benefits
3. **Experimental or quasi-experimental designs** that better isolate service-learning effects through randomized assignment where feasible
4. **Community-based participatory research approaches** that center community perspectives in research design and implementation
5. **Development of more comprehensive economic valuation methodologies** that capture indirect and long-term impacts
6. **Examination of how online and hybrid service-learning** affects community impact, particularly relevant in post-pandemic contexts
7. **Comparative analysis of different service-learning models** to identify structures that maximize community benefit

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence of the University's Academic Service-Learning program's substantial economic and social impact on surrounding communities while acknowledging important limitations and challenges in university-community partnerships. The findings demonstrate that service-learning can function as an effective mechanism for universities to enact their anchor institution role, generating significant community value while simultaneously supporting student success.

The economic impact analysis reveals a substantial return on institutional investment (\$192.12 in community value per dollar of direct program investment), providing compelling evidence for institutional investment in service-learning. However, the qualitative findings highlight that economic measures alone fail to capture the full complexity of service-learning's community impact, which includes both benefits and challenges that evolve over the partnership lifecycle.

The developmental model of partnership stages contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical application by identifying how partnerships evolve from transactional to transformational relationships and what factors facilitate this development. The finding that only 22% of partnerships reach the transformational stage suggests significant opportunity for institutions to enhance their community impact by developing structures that support partnership advancement.

The integration of anchor institution and critical service-learning theoretical frameworks provides a more nuanced understanding of how service-learning functions as an institutional engagement strategy. This integrated perspective highlights both the potential of service-learning to leverage institutional resources for community benefit and the importance of addressing power dynamics and centering community voice for authentic reciprocity.

As higher education institutions face increasing pressure to demonstrate community relevance and public value, the University's experience offers important insights into both the promise and complexity of service-learning as a strategy for meaningful community impact. The substantial return on investment documented in this study provides compelling evidence for institutional investment in service-learning, while the identified challenges highlight opportunities for program enhancement to better serve both student and community needs.

Future research and practice should focus on developing more sustainable, reciprocal partnership structures that balance academic and community priorities while addressing power dynamics inherent in university-community

relationships. By moving toward more critical, transformational service-learning approaches, institutions can more effectively fulfill their anchor institution role while creating more equitable and impactful community partnerships.

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Appendix A: Community Partner Survey Instrument

This survey is designed to gather information about your organization's experience partnering with the University's Academic Service-Learning program. Your responses will help us understand the impact of service-learning on community organizations and identify opportunities for improvement.

SECTION 1: PARTNERSHIP BACKGROUND

- How long has your organization partnered with the University's Academic Service-Learning program?
 - ☐ Less than 1 year
 - ☐ 1-2 years
 - ☐ 3-5 years
 - ☐ 6-10 years
 - ☐ More than 10 years
- Approximately how many service-learning projects has your organization hosted in the past academic year (2023-2024)?
 - ☐ 1 project
 - ☐ 2-3 projects
 - ☐ 4-5 projects
 - ☐ 6-10 projects
 - ☐ More than 10 projects
- Which academic departments have you partnered with? (Select all that apply)
 - ☐ Business
 - ☐ Communication

- ☐ Education
- ☐ Engineering
- ☐ Health Sciences
- ☐ Humanities
- ☐ Natural Sciences
- ☐ Social Sciences
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

- What types of service-learning projects has your organization hosted? (Select all that apply)
 - ☐ Direct service (e.g., tutoring, mentoring)
 - ☐ Indirect service (e.g., creating resources, fundraising)
 - ☐ Research projects
 - ☐ Technical assistance (e.g., marketing, web design)
 - ☐ Program evaluation
 - ☐ Event planning/management
 - ☐ Other (please specify): _____

SECTION 2: PARTNERSHIP BENEFITS

For each statement below, please indicate your level of agreement (1 – Strongly Disagree to 5 – Strongly Agree):

- Partnering with the University's service-learning program has enhanced our organizational capacity.
- Students have brought fresh perspectives that have helped us address organizational challenges.
- Through this partnership, we have gained access to university resources and expertise.
- Working with service-learning students has provided professional development opportunities for our staff.
- Service-learning projects have contributed to advancing our organization's mission.
- Please describe the most significant benefits your organization has received from partnering with the University's service-learning program. (Open-ended)

SECTION 3: PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES

For each statement below, please indicate your level of agreement (1 – Strongly Disagree to 5 – Strongly Agree):

1. The semester-based timeline of service-learning projects is insufficient for our needs.
2. Students often lack adequate preparation for the work we need completed.
3. We have experienced communication difficulties with faculty or the service-learning program.
4. Hosting service-learning students requires significant organizational resources.
5. Academic course requirements sometimes conflict with our organizational needs.
6. Please describe the most significant challenges your organization has faced in partnering with the University's service-learning program. (Open-ended)

SECTION 4: PARTNERSHIP QUALITY AND IMPACT

(1 – Very Poor to 5 – Excellent)

1. How would you rate the overall quality of service provided by students?
2. How would you rate your communication with faculty teaching service-learning courses?
3. How would you rate your communication with the University's service-learning program staff?
4. How would you rate your overall satisfaction with the University service-learning partnership?
5. Has your organization been able to reach more clients/community members as a result of this partnership?

6. Has your organization been able to offer new programs or services as a result of this partnership?
7. Has your organization experienced economic benefits from the partnership (e.g., cost savings, increased capacity)?
8. How has your partnership with the University evolved over time? (Open-ended)

SECTION 5: SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

1. What changes would you suggest to improve the University's service-learning program? (Open-ended)
2. What additional resources, support, or training would help your organization better host service-learning students? (Open-ended)
3. Would you be interested in having a more formal role in planning service-learning courses or projects?
☐ Definitely not ☐ Probably not ☐ Unsure ☐ Probably yes ☐ Definitely yes
4. Please share any additional comments or feedback about your experience with the University's service-learning program. (Open-ended)

Thank you for completing this survey. Your feedback is valuable and will help improve the University's service-learning partnerships.

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Community Partners

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is [Researcher Name], and I am conducting research on the impact of the University's Academic Service-Learning program on community organizations. The purpose of this interview is to gain a deeper understanding of your experiences partnering with the University. The

interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes. With your permission, I would like to record our conversation to ensure accuracy. All information will be kept confidential, and your identity will not be disclosed in any reports or publications resulting from this study. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Partnership Background

1. Please tell me about your organization and your role within it.
2. How did your partnership with the University's service-learning program begin?
3. How long have you been partnering with the program, and how has the relationship evolved over time?
4. What types of service-learning projects have students completed with your organization?
5. What were your initial expectations for this partnership, and how have those expectations changed?

Benefits and Value

6. What has been most valuable about your partnership with the University's service-learning program?
7. How have service-learning students contributed to your organization's capacity or mission?
8. Can you share a specific example of a successful service-learning project and what made it successful?
9. Beyond direct service hours, what other benefits has your organization received from this partnership?
10. Has this partnership helped your organization reach new audiences or develop new programs? If so, how?

Challenges and Tensions

11. What challenges have you experienced in working with service-learning students or faculty?
12. How does the academic calendar (semester schedule) affect your partnership?
13. Have you experienced any misalignment between academic goals and your organizational needs? If so, please explain.

14. What resources does your organization commit to hosting service-learning students, and is this sustainable?

15. Have you ever felt that your organization's voice or priorities were not adequately considered? If so, please explain.

Partnership Dynamics

16. How would you describe your relationship with faculty who teach service-learning courses?
17. How much input does your organization have in designing service-learning projects?
18. Do you feel that the partnership is reciprocal, with mutual benefits for both your organization and the University?
19. How has the partnership changed over time in terms of communication, expectations, and outcomes?
20. What factors have contributed to the partnership's longevity (or challenges to sustainability)?

Impact Assessment

21. How do you measure or evaluate the impact of service-learning on your organization?
22. What economic value, if any, do service-learning projects provide to your organization?
23. Beyond economic value, what social or community impacts have resulted from this partnership?
24. How do service-learning projects compare to other volunteer services your organization receives?
25. Has partnering with the University changed how your organization is perceived in the community?

Improvement and Future Directions

26. What changes would make the service-learning partnership more valuable to your organization?
27. How could communication between your organization and the University be improved?
28. What additional resources or support would help enhance the partnership?
29. How do you envision this partnership evolving in the future?

30. What advice would you give to other organizations considering a service-learning partnership with the University?

Closing

31. Is there anything else about your experience with the University's service-learning program that you would like to share?

32. Do you have any questions for me about this research?

Thank you for your time and insights. After I transcribe this interview, I'll send you a copy to review for accuracy. Your perspectives are extremely valuable for understanding how service-learning partnerships can better serve community organizations.

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