Community Impact Checklist

With resources scarce and requests plentiful, educators need written criteria for deciding where to place students.

Recognize this scene? You've just returned from a three-day NCSL workshop anxious to try out some of those recently acquired ideas. While you were gone, you had so many telephone calls and visitors that messages cover your desk like confetti.

After dealing with a few urgent calls, putting aside others to be handled next week, and delegating a heap of messages to your staff in the name of time management, you are left with a stack of notes and letters reflecting the deep-seated, too often ignored problems that sent you to the workshop.

Here is a sampling from that stack.
- Urgent pleas from four agencies that heard about your program recently and want 10 students each. (And you can't even provide enough volunteers to the agencies you're currently working with!)
- The County Home wants five more students this year than they had last year, doing what they did last year. (And as far back as you can remember.)
- The students who work at the housing project are clammering that they are "only being band-aids" and not working on the residents' "real problems." (Who's to say which problems are more real than others?)

Setting Criteria

Perhaps one way that some of these problems can be dealt with is to do an exercise used at the workshop. In the exercise, a small group developed a checklist of criteria for determining the agencies with

which a service-learning program might work most closely. The group listed qualities that an agency should have if a high school or university program is to agree to work with it. The exercise was based on the idea that a service-learning program has a finite number of resources—people, skills, budget, facilities—and that these should be used discriminately and effectively to meet both the service and learning goals.

Of course, not everyone agreed on what should be included in the lists. One workshop group decided to separate the criteria into two general categories—service (or community issues) and education (or student-centered issues). The final lists reflected only the criteria on which everyone agreed. Each item was worth a possible 5 points. The closer an organization complied with the criteria, the higher the score it would receive for that item. Organizations that consistently ranked high on both sets of criteria were the organizations that the service-learning program would work with most closely.

Using this assessment system probably means cutting down on the number of organizations in which a service-learning program places students or, to put it another way, it may mean decreasing the quantity in order to increase the quality. It also nudges a service-learning program to choose serving and learning areas to emphasize. The program no longer will try to respond to every social need; rather, the program will focus on a few community issues.

The workshop participants decided that this checklist system could offer several benefits, some administrative and others programmatic. Among them were the following.
- The entire staff could be involved in developing the checklist. This would give

everyone a part in making program policy. It would standardize policy so that agency placements could be made more objectively.
- The criteria list can be evaluated and changed each year. If the criteria prove unrealistic, the staff can eliminate or modify the list.
- The list will help agencies understand your service and learning goals.
- The organizations with highest scores will be the ones to which you direct the most resources; their goals will be supporting your goals, and vice-versa.
- Organizations that scored low on the checklist can be included in a catalog of miscellaneous placement opportunities. You don't end up turning agencies completely away.

Limiting the numbers and types of organizations with which you work does not necessarily mean limiting the numbers and types of placements. If your staff members have decided to work on senior citizen issues and the Senior Center ranks high on your criteria checklists, many projects are possible within this one organization, e.g., drama club, continuing education courses, a handbook on bargains for people over 65, a beauty salon, an income tax service.

The Criteria

The workshop participants—all secondary and postsecondary educators—found it easier to come up with items in the education column than in the service column. They decided that in order for a service-learning program to devote a lot of its

resources toward working with a particular agency, the agency had to support the students by: providing orientation and periodic training sessions; either making transportation available or reimbursing the students for public transportation; providing developmental placements, i.e., volunteers would have more responsibilities and more complex duties in their second term than in their first; completing an evaluation form or writing a letter of recommendation after the students finish their placements.

The service or community list took longer to develop and was more controversial. A few of the items decided upon are listed here, along with the reasons for including them.

Are those for whom the service is intended part of the decisionmaking process?

The participants unanimously agreed that the answer should be affirmative, yet they were able to name a dozen organizations that make decisions for other people. Deciding on the problems of and the solutions for others without involving them is, the educators felt, a bit paternalistic. Too often they had seen suburbanites making decisions for urban dwellers, whites making decisions for blacks, the young making decisions for the elderly, and the middle class making decisions for the poor.

To determine who takes part in the decisionmaking, the educator may ask the following questions. Are community members part of the agency's staff? Are they on the organization's advisory board? Members of evaluation teams? Does the agency have citizens' committees or planning councils? Does it have public hearings or policy meetings? These are all indicators of how really community centered the organization is. High scores should go to agencies that can answer yes.

Is the organization addressing an issue your service-learning program is working on?

If an organization isn't doing this, it probably won't be able to help you meet your goals. The group felt that a program should beware of spreading its resources too thin. It's better to make a small impact in a few areas than flounder around in many. Again, many types of placements can be developed within one good agency.

Are the organization's mission, goals, and objectives clearly stated, and is it periodically evaluated on the basis of these goals and objectives?

By developing your checklist (and *your* mission, goals, and objectives), you are being up front about your business. Are they? The workshop group complained about the time and effort it takes to write these up, but in the end agreed that they are necessary for a well run service-learning program or agency. Stated, measurable goals are easy to evaluate.

The following questions are relevant. Who evaluates the agency? Are previous evaluations available for you to look at? How were the goals and objectives chosen? (This goes back to who makes the decisions.) Do they have readily available descriptive material that clearly states their purpose? These are indicators of

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where they are going. Then you can decide whether or not you want to join them in going there.

Are the organization's services easily available to its target group?

What good is an agency with excellent services if it requires five forms (in triplicate), a four-month waiting period, and approval by three other organizations? This is an indication of how responsive the agency is to the community's needs. You may want to check on whether the agency has bilingual services, materials written in large type, and well publicized, easily accessible services. Accessibility earns high scores.

How is the organization funded?

One workshop participant told of a neighborhood clean-up campaign funded principally by a local factory—a factory that had more than 12 court injunctions pending against it for pollution violations. His service-learning program soon found out that the campaign was concerned with the trash in the neighborhood parks but not with the more important issues of trash in the neighborhood air and water supply. Participants noted that whosoever giveth the funds, controleth how this bounty is spent.

Is the organization working on both the causes and the symptoms of the community problems?

The workshop participants discussed this point at length. Some felt that the best service-learning programs aim at changing the status quo, at making institutional changes. Others felt that a service-learning program should be a service provider, not a change agent. Emotionally charged arguments ranged from "Give people control over their lives" to "As outsiders we shouldn't meddle in their lives," from "We're just helping to build a dependency upon these agencies" to "Our students aren't sophisticated (or skilled) enough to deal with the sources of problems." The group finally decided that highest scores should go to agencies providing *both* direct service and advocacy opportunities. The educators agreed that it's important—and cost effective— to attack a problem; but it's also important to meet immediate needs.

Working with agencies that use both approaches allows a service-learning program a wider variety of placements for students with a range of interests and skills. Developmental placements can be designed for those students who wish to move into new areas within the same agency, much as a good organization has developmental positions for its paid staff.

These criteria and rationales were listed during one checklist exercise. The staff of every service-learning program will come up with a different set, but that's fine. Your final product will be a mutually agreed upon yardstick for measuring just how involved you will become with any organization. If you decide that an agency can receive up to five points for each item and you have listed 20 items, you may decide that you'll work with those organizations that have gotten at least 50 out of the possible 100. Or perhaps you'll decide to work with the top 10 scorers.

The important point to remember is that you have valuable resources to provide some organizations within your community. You and your staff have the responsibility for choosing the best agencies to receive them. The checklist is a tool for deciding how to distribute your resources objectively and equitably and to ensure that you are working toward your community service goals. ☐