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# Service Learning from the Supply Side Community Capacity to Engage Students

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*The rapid increase in the use of service learning raises important public policy questions about who is being served and whether partner agencies have the capacity to meet student demand for community-based experiences. This article uses a large sample of nonprofit organizations and a comparative framework to examine the characteristics of partner agencies and the scope and nature of college student community involvement. Multivariate analysis tests these factors on a community agency's ability to engage more students, particularly service learners. The findings are generally optimistic about agency willingness to involve students, suggesting widespread community benefits from their involvement. While organizational size and capacity predict current student engagement, an agency's past experience with students and its perceptions of student benefits have the greatest impact on its willingness to take on future students.*

**Keywords:** *volunteers, volunteer management capacity, service learning, universities and colleges, education*

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COLLEGE STUDENT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT and experiential education take many forms: internships, practica, and other forms of field experience; volunteerism and community service; and community-based service learning and educational activities attached to college courses. Given this diversity, college student community engagement can be viewed through at least three lenses: as a form of student learning, as a public policy instrument to promote student civic engagement, and as a service delivery tool involving community service labor. Most research has emphasized the first of these perspectives, examining service learning's impact from the limited perspective of a student's pedagogical experience and the campus's ability to support service learning (Bailis and Ganger, 2006; Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; Bushouse, 2005; Cruz and Giles, 2000; Edwards, Mooney, and Heald, 2001; Imperial, Perry, and Katula, 2007; Jones, 2003; Sandy and Holland, 2006).

This article is part of a larger research project that addresses the second and third of these perspectives. From the broader, community-oriented point of view, we argue that the rapid increase in the use of service learning nationally raises public policy questions about who is being served as well as whether agencies have the capacity to meet student demand for community-based experiences (Stoecker and Tryon, 2009). Our broader perspective addresses both the "demand" side of the equation, as campuses push for more student engagement, as well as the "supply" side, or the community capacity to engage students.

### Service Learning as a Community-Based Activity

Campus educational programs are designed to help students learn through experiential activities. Many of these experiences are community based, intended to take students off campus under the assumption that embedding students in the community will enhance the educational experience. Experiential forms of education include preprofessional training such as internships and also comprise community-based volunteerism and service activities that may or may not be designed with educational goals in mind but can provide students with hands-on lessons about human interaction, philanthropy, or the implementation of public policies. Experiential education opportunities increasingly take the form known as "service learning": community-based student service activities attached to college courses and led by faculty (Furco, 1996).

As the use of these experiential activities has increased, the scholarly and theoretical explanation of service learning has become more sophisticated. According to Furco (1996), service learning is best understood as a multidimensional concept for which an important distinction among the various models is the intended focal point

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or beneficiary of the activity. Thus, some activities emphasize student learning, perhaps through interviews that students conduct with professionals to collect information for course papers or to help a student understand an occupation. Other activities emphasize community benefits, such as direct services that students provide to organizations and clients.

### Service Learning from a Volunteer Management Capacity Perspective

Because students often work alongside community volunteers in carrying out aspects of service learning (this may be an intentional part of the educational experience), managers can easily come to view students as volunteers. Yet many educators are uncomfortable talking about student service learners as volunteers. Work assigned by a professor is not entirely voluntary, and the labor students provide and the benefits they obtain from experiential activity may differ from that expected of community volunteers. Nonetheless, community agencies often treat student service learners as volunteers, either because the agencies do not perceive differences among the students they encounter or because they do not have the luxury of affording these students particular attention and support. A volunteer coordinator may recruit, coordinate, supervise, recognize, and evaluate service learners in the same manner as he or she would community volunteers.

Involving students can create additional expectations and work for agency staff and leaders. Staff may need to supervise students involved in different aspects of the organization's work. Agency staff may need to design meaningful projects that can be completed in eight to sixteen weeks. Additionally, agency staff must supervise students and student projects, often on a tight, semester-long deadline, which requires staff to expend more time and resources supporting service learners than they would with traditional volunteers. In their analysis of one service-learning program, Porter, Summers, Toton, and Aisenstein (2008) identified organizational capacity to involve students as a key factor in success.

Student motives may affect the partnership as well. When service learning or a class project is an assigned or required activity, agency staff may need to expend extra effort to motivate or supervise reluctant students. Assignments from faculty may impose pressure on agencies to involve students without consideration of whether or not student efforts support the organization's most important needs and priorities. However, when instructors create assignments in collaboration with agency staff, benefits are greater for both the student and the organization. For example, instructors and agencies can work together to define projects with agency benefit and set realistic expectations so that the service project will be completed.

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### Service Learning from a Supply and Demand Perspective

When students provide services on which community agencies depend, agencies can develop expectations that students will continue to arrive on their doorsteps without additional effort. Community agencies in college towns with a large supply of student labor can readily assume that some of their labor needs will be met by student service learners. Likewise, faculty and administrators may assume the supply of community opportunities will continue to meet student demand for experiential activities. Service-learning research rarely examines whether either of these assumptions is true. To our knowledge, even the most comprehensive studies of service learning with a community focus have sampled only those agencies that already engage students (see, for example, Sandy and Holland, 2006; Stoecker and Tryon, 2009; Worrall, 2007). Convenience samples cannot address differences in attitudes that community agencies might hold toward students, particularly when the policy goal is to engage new community agencies in welcoming students for the first time.

Moreover, most research emphasizes student and campus outcomes, with little study of the impact of student programs on the community partners. One assessment of the literature identified just 5 of 107 studies of service learning in which community outcomes are examined (Imperial and others, 2007). Rarely do studies attempt a broader, comparative approach to other forms of experiential learning.

We have observed the overemphasis on the demand side of volunteerism elsewhere. Public policymakers often shape messages and financial incentives to promote volunteerism without attention to building the supply side, or organizational capacity in the nonprofit and public sectors needed to effectively engage more volunteers (Gazley and Brudney, 2005). Charities can display a general willingness to engage more volunteers but do not necessarily have the support systems and other forms of operational capacity in place to achieve effective volunteer involvement (Ellis, 2002). Although the supply/demand question has not been applied to service learning, some data offer an indirect look at what we might expect to find. Hager and Brudney (2004b) found in a national study of charities and congregations that nearly all were willing to take on additional volunteers, although the number of volunteers that organizations can accommodate depended heavily on organizational size, capacity, the quality of their volunteer programs, and their relative dependence on this labor.

### Research Questions

Our overarching objective was to assess the ability of community agencies to take on more student labor, a proposition that has been

tested in other volunteerism contexts but not with respect to service learning (Hager and Brudney, 2004b). We suggested that there is theoretical value for the service-learning field in mapping, on a generalizable level, the nature and relative distribution of student involvement in community-based learning. By avoiding a convenience sample, we compared characteristics of organizations involving student service learners with those that do not.

## Data and Methods

In the summer of 2009, we surveyed a random sample of all non-profit and religious organizations in Marion and Monroe Counties (noncontiguous), the two counties in the state of Indiana with the largest postsecondary student populations. According to the Indiana State Commission on Higher Education (2008), these two counties account for 28 percent of all college students in the state and are home to several colleges and universities, including two Ivy Tech Community College campuses, Indiana University–Bloomington, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, Butler University, Marian College, and the University of Indianapolis. A survey of two counties offered an opportunity for a comparative analysis, because Marion County is a large metropolitan area, the site of the state capital, and home to a large and diverse nonprofit community, while Monroe County is a smaller, more traditional college community with a strong tradition of campus–community engagement. As Table 1 illustrates, both counties have higher poverty rates and lower incomes than the state average, while Monroe County is less ethnically diverse and more educated. Prior to administering the surveys, we spent three years in these counties conducting focus group interviews, developing case studies, and tapping the knowledge of practitioners and service-learning experts to design a research agenda (Gazley, Littlepage, and Meyers, 2007).

For this research, we conducted a two-stage data collection, first sampling all nonprofits to determine which involved students as volunteers or learners and then asking those organizations a series of questions. We began with a random sample of nonprofit and religious organizations, of which 1,804 were found to be actively operating in the two counties. The nonprofits identified for the survey included all tax-exempt categories (that is, both charitable and non-charitable). This approach was necessary to capture student involvement in a range of organizations, including both secular and religious institutions and noncharitable organizations such as chambers of commerce, political organizations, and fraternal associations.

The list of nonprofits was extracted from a database created to provide comprehensive baseline information about Indiana's nonprofit

**Table 1. Comparative Demographics of Counties**

	<i>Marion County</i>	<i>Monroe County</i>	<i>Indiana</i>
2010 population	903,393	137,974	6,483,802
Median household income*	\$41,201	\$36,031	\$45,427
2010 percentage nonwhite	40.5%	9.0%	18.5%
Percentage with bachelor's degrees or higher*	27.7%	40.1%	21.9%
2009 percentage below poverty	19.7%	21.9%	14.4%
2010 percentage under 24 years of age	36.0%	45.0%	35.0%

\*Average from U.S. Census Bureau (2010).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2011).

sector. The inclusive methodology, developed by Grønbjerg and others (Grønbjerg, 2002; Grønbjerg, Liu, and Pollak, 2010), combines a variety of data sources (for example, Internal Revenue Service [IRS] records, state incorporation records, phone books for nonincorporated entities) and was our preferred approach because it incorporated the largest number of nonprofit organizations that might engage students. We observed, however, that such an approach omitted governmental agencies as well as any business entities that host students. In addition, such an approach required a great deal of screening to identify those organizations that are active, operational, and involve students. This more comprehensive dataset is substantially different from the datasets employed by the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) and other sources that rely exclusively on IRS listings of tax-exempt organizations, meaning that direct comparisons to NCCS data cannot be made.

Multiple telephone calls using a professional survey research center reached 1,019 of operating organizations, or a 56 percent return rate.<sup>1</sup> Of these, 66 percent of respondents (*n* = 672) reported that they involved college students in any capacity (as volunteers, interns, or service learners). These organizations were asked to complete a Web survey (with an alternative paper option) to describe student participation in their organization. A total of 290 organizations completed the full survey, for a response rate of 43 percent. Among respondents, 59 percent were senior staff, 14 percent described themselves as volunteer coordinators, and the remainder held other staff roles.<sup>2</sup>

Our analysis involved an examination of descriptive statistics of the scope of student community engagement and two regression models to test the influence of organizational or student characteristics on our variable of interest: an organization's ability to engage students. We first examined the kinds of community agencies that involved students in any capacity. We then tested the impacts of agency mission, age, and size (as key indicators of volunteer management capacity) on the likelihood of student engagement. We tested

**Table 2. NTEE Classification of Organizations Responding to the Survey**

	<i>Statewide Distribution of Nonprofits*</i>	<i>Distribution of Organizations Responding to Telephone Survey (n = 1,019)</i>	<i>Percentage of Sample Reporting Student Involvement</i>
Health	5%	5%	86.8%
Human services	29%	13%	82.0%
International	2%	1%	80.0%
Arts, culture, humanities	4%	5%	77.6%
Environment/Animal protection	3%	2%	73.9%
Public and societal benefit	19%	9%	72.1%
Education/Library	8%	6%	69.4%
Religious or spiritual	24%	41%	67.8%
Mutual benefit	8%	19%	48.6%
<b>Average</b>			<b>68.3%</b>

\*Source: Grønberg and Allen (2004).

capacity-related characteristics on the reported ability of agency respondents to take on one kind of student (service learners) in concert with other attitudinal characteristics that might also predict receptivity to students. These included prior experience with students (as a measure of willingness to involve more students), whether or not a respondent had had experience with service learning as a student (as a measure of familiarity with service learning), and the strength of benefits reported or constraints observed in hosting students.

## Findings

The varying missions executed by nonprofit organizations have been categorized for many years into the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE). Our distribution of sampled nonprofits by NTEE classification is similar to that of the state as a whole (Table 2), except that we reached more religious organizations and fewer human service and public benefit organizations. There is no existing data on the distribution of college student labor by nonprofit subsector to which we can compare these results for possible evidence of a sampling bias. However, it is possible that we effectively undercounted student volunteers because our findings revealed that religious organizations were less likely to involve students than did human service and public benefit organizations. Those nonprofits reporting that they did not involve students were predominately member-serving, mutual benefit organizations with missions that did not depend on volunteer labor (reported by 34.2 percent).

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Of those organizations involving students, more than one-half (52 percent) had worked with undergraduates, and most had worked with graduate students (88.6 percent). The most common roles for students were either as general program volunteers (79.2 percent) or as interns (64.1 percent), followed by students involved through service-learning classes (40.4 percent). Of all organizations we surveyed, approximately 60 percent had five or fewer staff and about half had revenues under \$500,000 in the previous year. These levels are similar to statewide averages, where 62.5 percent had five staff members or fewer and 47.6 percent had revenues under \$500,000 in 2002. A total of 83.7 percent of organizations we surveyed used volunteers, higher than the state average of 72.8 percent in 2002.

An analysis of all nonprofits in both counties can be used to determine the differences between organizations that involve students and those that do not. Some types of organizations (health) are more likely to involve students than are others (mutual benefit). Capacity to manage students is another variable that should have an effect on this decision. We measured capacity by number of employees and gross revenues in the past year and whether the organization had a volunteer manager, either paid or unpaid. Hager and Brudney (2004a) have found that having volunteer coordinators improves the ability of organizations to engage volunteers. They have also found that the most effective volunteer programs are those with paid staff members who dedicate a substantial portion of their time to management of volunteers (Hager and Brudney, 2004a).

### **Community Capacity to Engage Students**

As Table 3 illustrates, when we modeled reasons for student involvement, nonprofit capacity characteristics such as revenues, number of employees, and presence of volunteer coordinators were significant and positive. The presence of a volunteer coordinator was significantly related to student involvement independent of the number of paid staff, which was also statistically significant. Approximately 45 percent of nonprofits in our sample indicated that they had a paid volunteer coordinator, while another 17 percent indicated that they had an unpaid volunteer coordinator.

We also found that organizations located in Monroe County, the more traditional college town, were more likely to involve students as service learners, interns, or volunteers. Since 31 percent of the population in Monroe County are college students, compared with fewer than 10 percent in Marion County, this finding is not surprising. Such a comparison is useful to readers who are attempting to understand how their community's geographic profile (for example, metro area, state capital, college town, rural area) might influence student involvement.



**Table 3. Logistic Regression of Organizational Characteristics on Likelihood of Student Involvement**

<i>Had Worked with College Students in Any Role (n = 1,019)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Significance</i>
Intercept	1.798	1.307	0.169
Organizational revenue*	0.053	0.020	0.009
Volunteer coordinator*	0.452	0.234	0.054
Monroe County*	1.022	0.278	0.000
FTE paid staff*	0.362	0.094	0.000
<b>Nonprofit Subsector</b>			
Health	1.532	1.421	0.281
Mutual benefit	-0.408	1.222	0.739
Arts, culture, humanities	0.031	1.279	0.981
Education	-0.202	1.266	0.873
Environmental/Animal protection	0.638	1.438	0.657
Human services	0.408	1.243	0.743
Public benefit	0.123	1.250	0.922
Religious or spiritual	-0.002	1.212	0.999

Note: Nagelkerke pseudo  $R^2 = 0.265$  (DF = 12).

\*Statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  or less.

### Community Willingness to Take On More Students

Given the strong effort to encourage more student community engagement on college campuses and the national policy messages about the value of student engagement to volunteerism, an important public policy question addresses the ability of community agencies to engage more students than they currently did (see Table 4). We found that nonprofit organizations were generally willing to take on more volunteers of any kind. Only 10 percent indicated that they could not take on more volunteers than they currently did. We did find subtle differences in nonprofits' ability to take on certain kinds of students. A total of 83 percent could take on more community volunteers of any kind either "to some extent" or "to a great percent." This figure dropped slightly, to 78.8 percent, for students who volunteer through college courses (service learners) but increased to 81.6 percent for interns. Although the results strongly suggest that organizations have the capacity to engage more students across the board, regardless of student type, the results possibly signal some minor concern about organizational ability to accommodate service learners. Given this small differential among student groups, which was within the margin of error for our sample, we extended the analysis further in an attempt to identify those specific organizational characteristics or experiences that support or inhibit student engagement.

Our next level of analysis concerned service learners and examined predictors of agency willingness to involve more service learners in the future. Each kind of student volunteer brings distinct

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**Table 4. Nonprofit Reports on Ability to Take On More Volunteers**

	<i>To No Extent</i>	<i>To Some Extent</i>	<i>To a Great Extent</i>	<i>Don't Know/NA</i>	<i>Total</i>
Community volunteers of any kind	10.4%	50.7%	32.3%	6.6%	100.0%
Interns, preservice, or practicum students	9.4%	55.2%	26.4%	9.0%	100.0%
Students who volunteer through a college course	10.1%	50.3%	28.5%	11.1%	100.0%

Note: n = 288.

**Table 5. Reported Benefits of Service-Learner Involvement**

	<i>To No Extent</i>	<i>To Some Extent</i>	<i>To a Great Extent</i>	<i>Don't Know/NA</i>	<i>Total</i>
Increased our agency's visibility in the community	15.9%	53.1%	18.4%	12.7%	100.0%
Increased our agency's visibility on campus	18.0%	39.6%	24.1%	18.4%	100.0%
Continued to volunteer after their initial commitment	18.0%	51.4%	15.1%	15.5%	100.0%
Improved client services	12.7%	42.0%	19.2%	26.1%	100.0%
Made program recommendations that we have implemented	19.6%	44.1%	13.9%	22.4%	100.0%
Increased agency program capacity	23.3%	35.5%	18.4%	22.9%	100.0%
Helped build campus–community relationships	20.4%	39.6%	21.2%	18.8%	100.0%
Was hired as result of their experience with the organization	37.6%	30.2%	8.2%	24.1%	100.0%

Note: n = 245.

demands on agency time that must be treated separately, and service learners represent the greatest challenges for agency managers because of the expectation of reciprocal, mutual, campus–community benefits. Table 5 displays a comparison of the reported agency outcomes of student engagement for those students involved in service-learning activities. The results suggest that students bring a range of benefits that are enjoyed at least to some extent by most agencies. The greatest potential benefits appear to be related to increased campus or community visibility for the agency and improved client outcomes.

**Table 6. Linear Regression of Organizational Characteristics on Willingness to Take On More Service Learners**

	<i>Standardized Coefficient</i>	<i>Significance</i>
<b>(Constant)*</b>		<b>0.005</b>
Organizational staff are eager to work with students	0.185	0.122
Organization already engages students through a service-learning class*	0.425	0.001
Organization engages graduate students	-0.235	0.122
Organization engages undergraduate students	-0.095	0.442
Respondent is a service learner	0.171	0.164
Respondent reports time constraints as barrier to student engagement*	-0.406	0.001
Respondent reports lack of space as barrier to student engagement	-0.147	0.196
<b>Monroe County</b>	<b>0.090</b>	<b>0.493</b>
Organizational revenue for the most recent year	-0.106	0.440
Number of FTE paid staff	0.009	0.944
Organization has a volunteer coordinator (paid or unpaid)	0.012	0.925
<b>Reported Benefits of Student Involvement</b>		
Increased our agency's visibility in the community*	-0.360	0.016
Increased our agency's visibility on campus*	0.432	0.012
Continued to volunteer after their initial commitment	-0.073	0.524
Improved client services	0.037	0.825
Made program recommendations that we have implemented	0.047	0.735
Increased agency program capacity	0.189	0.209
Helped build campus-community relationships.	0.014	0.918
Been hired as result of their experience with the organization	-0.058	0.630

Note:  $n = 245$ . Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.332$  (DF = 19).

\*Statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  or less.

We performed a second linear regression analysis in which we tested respondent and organizational characteristics—those related to agency capacity and those related to perceptions of student value—on agency willingness to involve more service learners in the future (Table 6). The dependent variable, willingness to take on more service learners, had possible responses of “to no extent,” “to some extent,” “to a great extent.” In addition to the impact questions, we included the top two reasons respondents gave for difficulty in engaging students (time constraints and lack of space) as well as a question concerning the staff’s attitude toward students

(“Our staff is eager to work with students”). To control for organizational capacity, we asked whether the organization currently engages students as service learners, number of full-time equivalent (FTE) paid staff, organizational revenues, and presence of volunteer coordinators (paid or unpaid). Type of nonprofit organization was excluded from this second model because of its lack of significance in the first model (Table 3).

This analysis found a positive association between an organization’s willingness to take on more service learners and its current use of service learners. In addition, respondents who reported that students increased the agency’s visibility on campus also expressed a greater willingness to take on more students. These results suggest a strong level of satisfaction with current service learners. Respondents reported no preference for graduate students versus undergraduate students.

We were also interested whether students increased nonprofit capacity in any other way or whether any limitations on nonprofit capacity limited student engagement. There are three findings of note. First, as expected, respondents reporting that time constraints were barriers to student engagement were less likely to express interest in engaging more students in the future. The reason for this association most likely signals a need for agency managers to plan sufficient time to engage students. We also found that respondents who reported increased visibility in the community were less (not more) likely to express interest in taking on more students in the future. This association seems counterintuitive but may signal that these agencies already rely heavily on students for community outreach, perhaps have succeeded in their goals, or have no need or capacity to engage even more students.

Finally, we observed no statistically significant association between an organization’s ability to take on more students and any other variables reflecting either limits on organizational capacity or an increase in positive outcomes related to student engagement. For example, holding other factors constant, we found that a respondent with a service-learning background was no more willing to take on more students than were other respondents. We also found no association with variables related to organizational size and ability. That result suggests that other factors drive organizational interest in student engagement, related perhaps to the organization’s past experience with students and a respondent’s understanding of the value that students bring.

## Application of These Findings to Practice

As nonprofit organizations face the impact of economic recession, serious thought should be given to the extent to which partnerships

with institutions of higher education can be mobilized to address the resulting needs. Such an effort must begin with an understanding of the potential as well as the challenges of such partnerships.

This analysis addressed the question of what kind of community agencies host student learners, in what capacities, and how likely agencies are to continue to host students. Using a generalizable sample, the results suggest that organizations in two large communities generally value community-based student learners and are willing to include more students. However, the findings also suggest that managers should carefully consider the pros and cons of student involvement, particularly the optimal number of students they can involve based on the organization's size and staff capacity, the amount of time available to properly supervise students and deliver the expected educational benefits, and the ability of agencies to concomitantly create meaningful student experiences that also support nonprofit missions.

Through this survey, we discerned that certain conditions are necessary to create the best environment for both learners and organizational outcomes. Organizational capacity is critical, inclusive of staff size, revenues, and the presence of a volunteer manager, whether paid or unpaid. Our comparative analysis of two counties suggested that organizations located in college towns were more likely to involve students, based perhaps on differences in student availability.

However, organizational capacity mattered less when compared against more subjective factors related to the perceived quality of student engagement. When held constant against these qualitative factors, organizational size and the level of volunteer management staffing did not influence a respondent's willingness to take on more students. Rather, it was prior experience with students and the presumed benefits that mattered most.

This study also suggests that there is an ample supply of community organizations and activities ready to engage students in many aspects of their work. However, universities must take note of the challenges experienced by community partners. Readers interested in understanding these constraints will find Stoecker and Tryon's (2009) qualitative study useful at explaining in greater detail what community partners believe are the most important ingredients of successful partnerships. Among their most important findings are the critical nature of collaboration and communication between higher education and community partners to develop projects and timelines, agree on expectations, and determine appropriate student products and course outcomes. Our study supports this perspective by suggesting that the benefits are possible for both partners but only when universities work alongside agency leaders to plan for and recognize the considerable time expectations of student learners and the impact of service learners on organizations.

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*Managers should carefully consider the pros and cons of student involvement.*

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## Notes

1. Multiple telephone calls were made by a professional survey research center to each organization, and staff used Web sources when available to find current phone numbers. This return rate may signify that some of these organizations are in fact nonoperational or have such a low profile that they are not accessible to community volunteers. In either case, we do not anticipate that a sampling bias exists at this level given that organizations involving students have the same probability of being operational as those that do not.

2. We calculated our confidence intervals for this sample at two levels. The sample of nonprofits that involve students can be assumed to represent the full population of 1,804 active nonprofits in these two counties with a 2 percent margin of error (95 percent confidence level). The surveyed sample of 290 organizations can be assumed to represent all organizations that engage students at a 5 percent margin of error. If there is a sampling bias in our study, it occurs when certain subsectors have a greater likelihood of involving students than others. No comparative data exist to tell us whether such an occurrence is possible.

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