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The Long-term Outcomes of Community Service-Learning

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Edmonton
2014

Acknowledgements

First of all, we would like to thank the former community service-learning course students who participated in our online survey, dialogue sessions, interviews and focus groups. Also, we gratefully acknowledge research assistance from Shannon Paton, Rebecca Saul, Taylor Rubin, Paige Larsen, Josh DeJong, Zane Hamm, and CSL staff. As well, we would like to thank Karsten Mündel the Director of Learning and Beyond Augustana Campus and CSL staff for their support during this study. Funding for this study was provided by the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund, University of Alberta.

Title:	The Long-term Outcomes of Community Service-Learning
Authors:	Alison Taylor and Milosh Raykov
Publisher:	University of Alberta
Place:	Edmonton
Year:	2014

Executive Summary

This study analyzed survey data from 525 students (29% response rate) who took a community service-learning (CSL) course between 2005 and 2012 at North campus, Augustana or Campus Saint-Jean at the University of Alberta. This includes 438 community-based students and 87 classroom-based students (the latter were in CSL courses but did not participate in off-campus projects). The average age of the survey participants at the time of the survey was 24.3 years and 80% were female. 83% of respondents were living alone.

The most common CSL community activity was teaching or mentoring (mentioned by 42%), followed by education and outreach (34%), and research and evaluation (33%). Extremely high proportions of respondents (95% or higher) felt that participation in community organizations is important for overall social development, developing employability skills, and developing networks. Nine out of ten former CSL students would likely recommend this form of learning to other students.

More than two-thirds of respondents believe that their CSL experience has been beneficial for making further education decisions and almost two-thirds consider their CSL experience to be beneficial for making career decisions.

Around half of respondents reported that CSL influenced their thinking about their university program and 56% felt it influenced their career plans. Almost a quarter of community-based respondents continued to volunteer with their CSL partner organizations after their course ended.

More than half of community-based respondents saw their CSL participation as important for their development of leadership skills and approximately two-thirds believe that their engagement has had a significant impact on the development of their ability to respond to complex real-life social issues (61.0%) and ability to work effectively with others (69%).

Open-ended questions were highly positive in tone with several comments about the impact that CSL had on their learning, understanding of community, and plans for further education and career. Some of the concerns expressed will inform thinking of improvements to the CSL program at the U of A.

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Background and aims

The Community Service-Learning (CSL) program exemplifies the U of A's commitment to promoting innovative teaching and an outstanding student experience (Dare to Deliver, 2011-2015). The program at the U of A has grown from 134 student participants in 2005/06 to more than 900 in 2012/13 (**Figure 1**), and is one of the largest and most successful CSL programs in Canada.

Service learning at the U of A involves course-based experiential learning. Students participate in community projects and are encouraged to reflect on the relationship between their community and classroom learning (cf. Bringle & Hatcher 1996). CSL is housed in Arts but operates in faculties across campus.

The program is evaluated at the end of each semester through surveys with students, instructors, and community partners involved in CSL classes for the purpose of informing CSL as a mutually beneficial form of community-university engagement. Annual evaluation reports (www.csl.ualberta.ca/Resources) have been produced every year since 2005 based on data from these surveys.

This study

This study extends the current CSL evaluation program. A grant from the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TFEF) has permitted this longitudinal evaluation, which is intended to inform teaching and learning at the U of A. Comparing outcomes for community-based and classroom-based CSL students also contributes to understanding of CSL as a distinct pedagogical approach. The study is focused on the following research questions:

- How does participation in CSL impact students' future education and career plans?
- Does this influence vary for students (e.g., by program, by gender, etc.)?
- What skills and abilities do students develop through CSL?
- What kinds of CSL experiences are most effective, and why?
- Does CSL participation impact students' subsequent knowledge of and involvement in their local community?
- How do students compare their CSL learning to learning in other classes?
- How important was CSL to their U of A experience overall?

Our main objective is to learn more about the longer-term impacts of participation in curricular CSL on students in order to provide valuable guidance for program conceptualization and course delivery. Findings from this mixed methods evaluation research will inform teaching and learning at the U of A, directly through dissemination to current and potential instructors and community partners, and indirectly, through CSL staff who support experiential learning partnerships.

The study builds on a previous, 2012-2013 Killam-funded study led by A. Taylor involving interviews with CSL staff from ten Canadian universities and analysis of current U of A evaluation data (Taylor, 2012, 2013). Interview findings to date suggest that longitudinal tracking is an activity that is highly recommended but little practiced in these programs. This research therefore makes a contribution in this area.

The study also expands the prior research on the CSL program at the U of A (e.g., Dorow et al., 2011; Rukavina & Richards, 2012; Raykov, Taylor & Dorow, 2012; Simpson, 2012; Taylor, 2014) and a qualitative follow-up study of CSL students at the U of A by Bell and Ocampo (2011).

This study involves a larger sample of former CSL students, integrates quantitative and qualitative methods, and compares CSL student outcomes at all U of A campuses. To place our CSL survey results in a broader context, we have also analyzed relevant data from the 2011 National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE), which included 3,662 first and fourth year students at the University of Alberta.¹

Research design

This study applies a unique mixed-method research design involving a combination of exploratory and explanatory sequential methods (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). To assess the long-term outcomes of CSL, an online survey of former CSL students, and telephone and online surveys with former CSL certificate² students were conducted. Online surveys were developed with input received from a few focus groups with current students, instructors and community partners and also with assistance from two CSL students in the CSL 100 class and two undergraduate research assistants in fall 2013. These students also helped to complete surveys with CSL certificate students in December 2013. Survey and interview participants who provided consent were also invited to participate in focus group interviews (currently underway) to discuss results of this study and to provide further input into our understanding of the outcomes of CSL.

The survey and guides for individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups build on the existing CSL course evaluation instruments, with added focus on longer-term impacts of CSL participation. The CSL student survey (CSL SS) included a core group of questions for all students and modules specific for community and classroom-based CSL students.³ The CSL

¹ Sixty-eight Canadian institutions from 10 provinces participated in NSSE 2011. Of these, 24 institutions were from Ontario, 13 from Quebec, seven each from Alberta and British Columbia, six from Nova Scotia, four from New Brunswick, three from Manitoba, two from Saskatchewan, and one each from Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island. Report accessed March 14 at: http://nsse.iub.edu/2011_Institutional_Report/pdf/NSSE_Overview_2011.pdf

² The Certificate in Community Engagement and Service-Learning is an embedded undergraduate certificate, which involves a more intensive CSL experience including 15 credits in a CSL-approved course or 12 credits and a non-credit opportunity in the community.

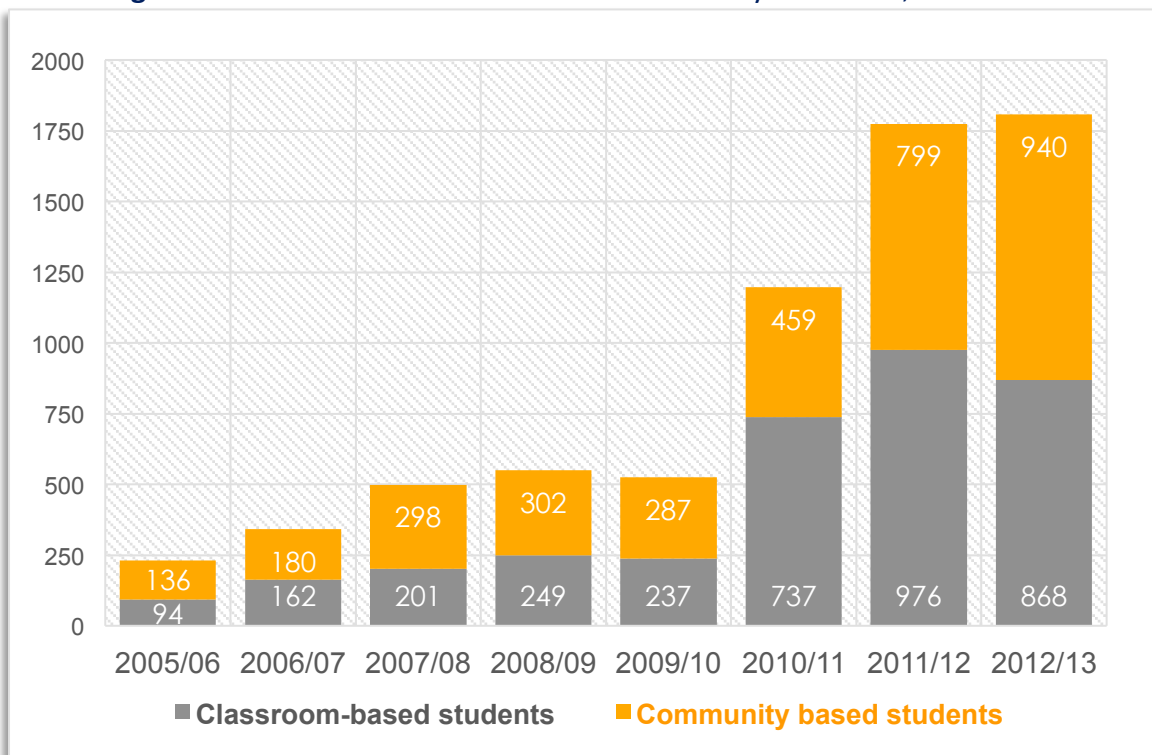
³ While all students surveyed participated in CSL courses, in some cases CSL projects were optional. Therefore, in addition to 438 students who completed community projects (of approximately 20 hours each), 87 students did not. We describe the latter group as classroom-based students in CSL courses.

certificate student survey (CSL CSS) was slightly adapted to take account of the more intensive CSL experience of these students. The design of the evaluation instruments was informed by the relevant research literature, our analysis of data from previous CSL evaluation studies, and the results of our initial focus groups.

Our sample of participants consists of 525 former CSL students who participated in CSL classes between 2005 and 2012 and who provided consent at that time to be contacted again. In total, 1,834 former CSL students were invited to participate between October and November 2013 and the overall response rate was 29%, which exceeds the usual participation rates for this type of study. The sample consists of 438 community-based students and 87 classroom-based students who participated in CSL courses. In addition, 30 former CSL certificate program students took part in this study but these data have yet to be analyzed. Approximately 24 students are expected to take part in six focus group interviews during the final phase of this study in spring 2014. The study involves CSL students from the U of A North campus, Augustana campus and Campus Saint-Jean.

The initial quantitative data analysis uses descriptive and bivariate statistics to establish basic profiles of participants and to evaluate the impact of CSL participation on the outcome measures evaluated through this study. The findings below relate to all 525 respondents (classroom and community-based) unless otherwise specified; the responses are broken down where there are significant differences.

Figure 1: Number of CSL students at the University of Alberta, 2005-2013

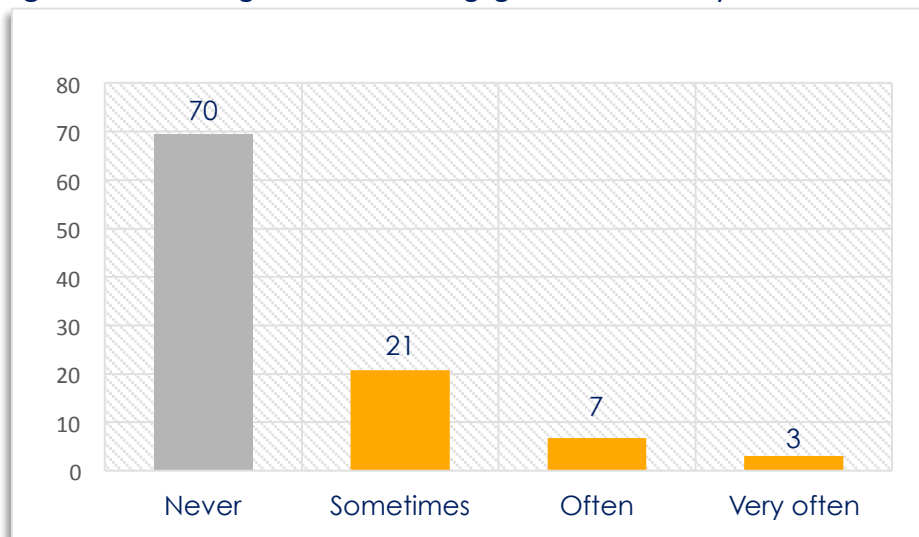


Source: U of A CSL Evaluation Surveys, 2005-2013.

Findings

The NSSE survey is widely used to measure student engagement (Kuh, 2009). Similar to other studies of student social engagement and the outcomes of higher education (e.g. Arum & Roksa, 2011), our analysis of the NSSE data from 2011 (**Figure 2**) shows that a very small proportion of students at the U of A (10%) are intensively engaged in community-based activities.

Figure 2: Percentage of students engaged in community-based activities



Source: NSSE, 2011.

Socio-demographic characteristics of CSL survey participants

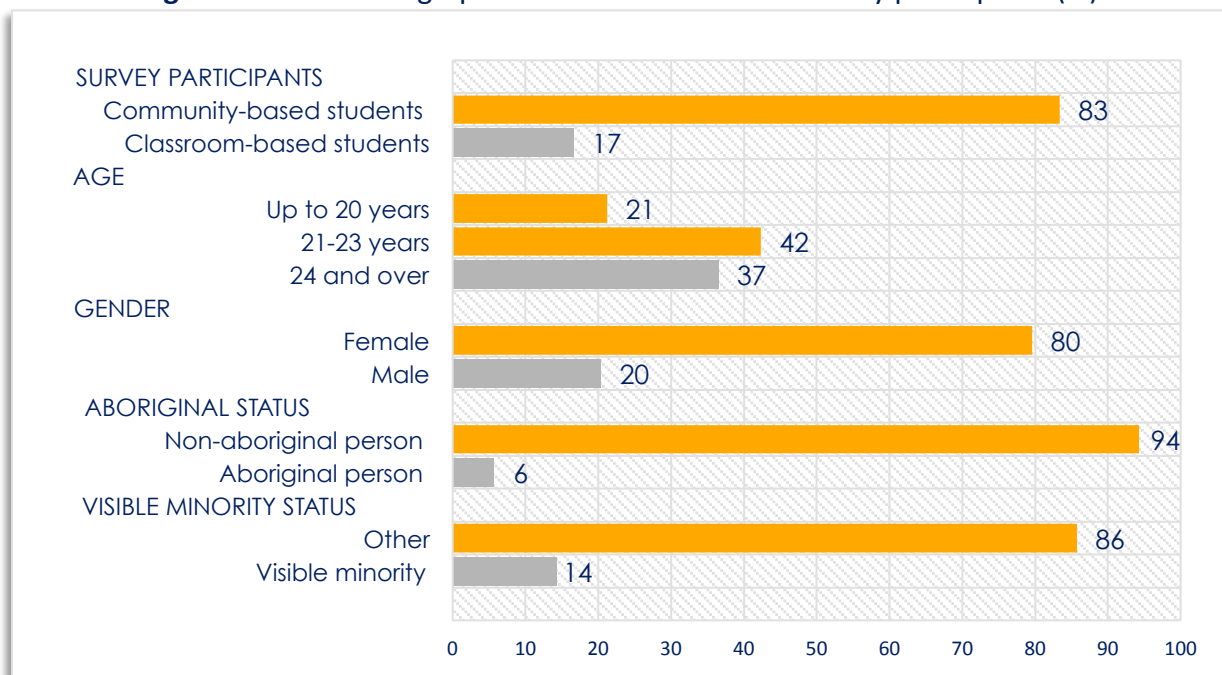
The survey included 525 former students who participated in one or more courses with a CSL component. A significantly greater proportion of respondents (83% vs. 17%) participated in a community project. Our comparisons of community-based and classroom-based students found no significant socio-demographic differences. Findings in this report therefore include all 525 except in some cases when the reference group is explicitly indicated.

The average age of the survey participants at the time of the survey was 24.3 years, more than one-third of participants (42%) were between 21 and 23 years of age, approximately one-third of participants (37%) were 24 years of age or older. The remaining 21 percent were below 20 years of age (**Figure 3**).⁴

⁴ Although our intention was to target older students in our survey, those under 20 years are likely to be students who participated in a CSL course in their first year of university in 2012.

A majority (80%) of the CSL survey participants in the survey was female, and this result is similar to findings of the annual U of A program CSL evaluation surveys (71 % of 940 community-based CSL students and 66% of 525 classroom-based CSL students were female in 2012/13). Our surveys of instructors also find that the majority is female.

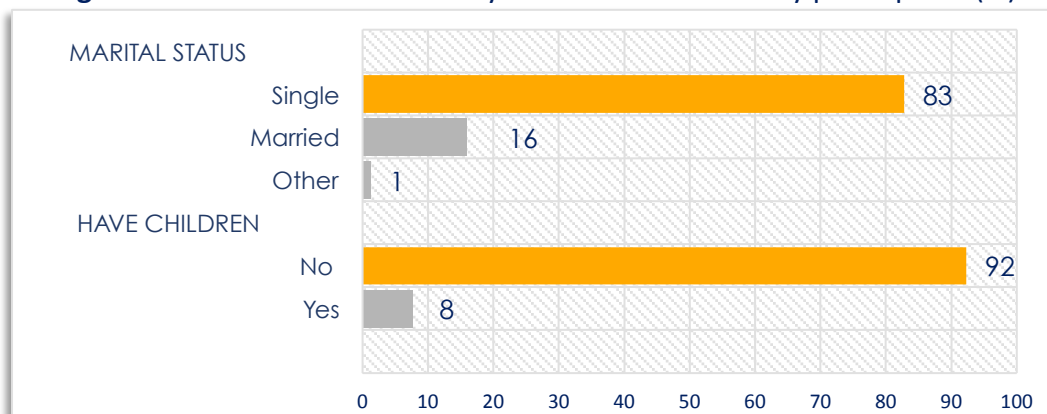
Figure 3: Socio-demographic characteristics of CSL survey participants (%)



Source: CSL Survey 2013.

A relatively small proportion of participants (6%) self-identified as Aboriginal (Status Indian, Non-status Indian, Inuit, Métis) and 14% considered themselves to be members of a visible minority group.

Figure 4: Marital status and family structure of CSL survey participants (%)

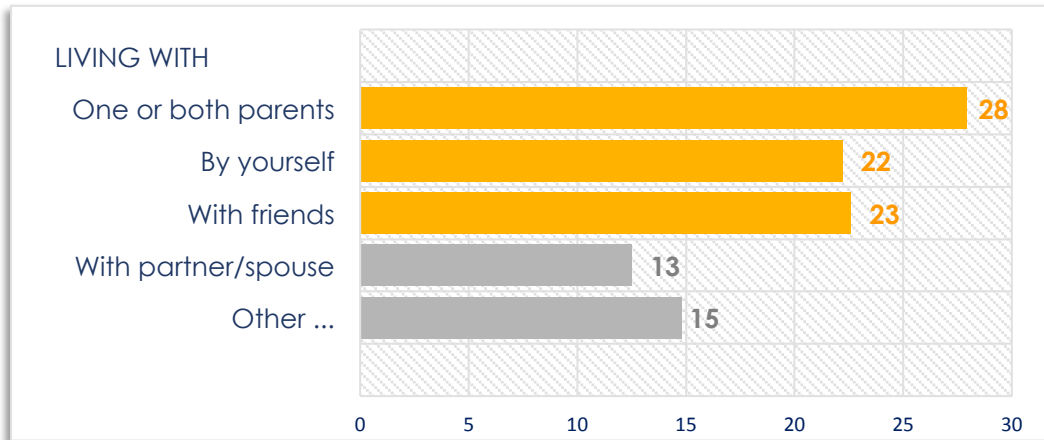


Source: CSL Survey 2013.

Most participants in this study are living alone (83%) while 16% are married or common-law, and a very small number (1%) are divorced or separated. A relatively small number (8 percent) of participants reported having children (**Figure 4**).

As **Figure 5** shows, at the time they participated in a course with a CSL component, the most common response from participants in this study was ‘living with both parents’ or with a ‘single parent’ (28%).

Figure 5: Living arrangement at the time when participated in a CSL course



Source: CSL Survey, 2013.

Almost a quarter was living alone (22%), and an additional quarter was living with friends (23%). The remaining participants were married or in common law relationships (13%) and approximately 15% percent were living in some other household arrangement.

Parents’ Educational Attainment and Occupation

The survey found that 42 % of former CSL participants’ mothers attained a university degree and an additional 32% have some college, trade or CEGEP diploma or certificate (**Figure 6**).

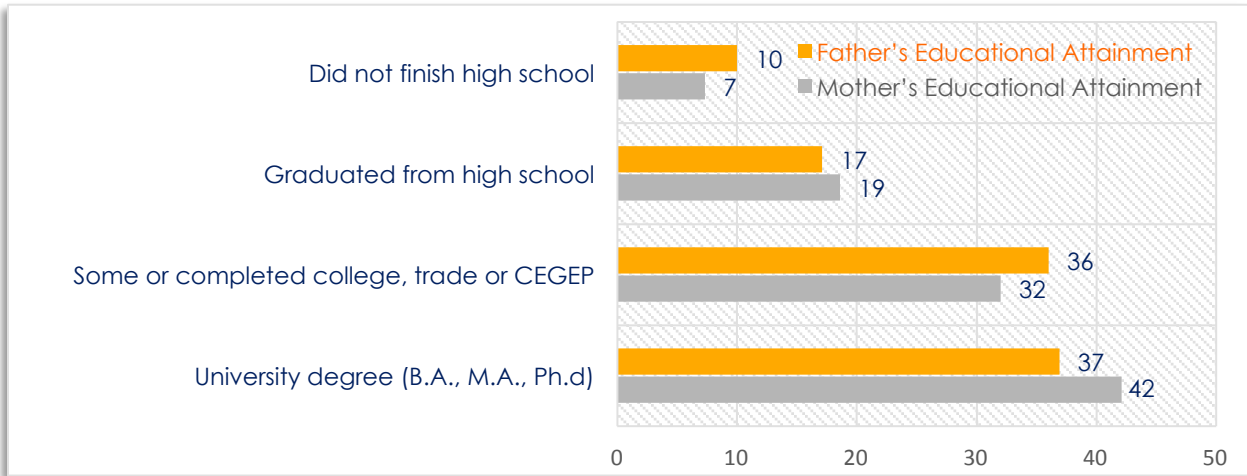
Further analysis comparing mother's educational attainment from the CSL SS and the 2011 recent NSSE data shows a very similar distribution of mother's educational attainment. Statistical differences between the samples are not statistically significant (Chi-Square = 4.507^{n.s.}). Results confirm that most mothers of U of A students have educational attainment that is significantly higher than in Alberta and Canada (Statistics Canada, 2009).⁵

Comparing CSL survey participants’ father's educational attainment with the NSSE data shows significant differences between fathers. According to our study, fathers from the NSSE sample were more likely to have attained a university degree (47% vs. 37%). In contrast, fathers from

⁵ Other writers note the positive correlation between university enrolment and parental education (e.g., Davies and Guppy, 2014).

the CSL survey more frequently reported some college, trade or CEGEP diploma or certificate. Chi-square is 21.49 and significant at a level above .001.

Figure 6: Parents' educational attainment



Source: CSL Survey, 2013.

When community-based respondents were asked about their primary activity in their CSL projects, 42% mentioned teaching or mentoring, followed by education and outreach (34%) and research and evaluation (33%) (Figure 7). Less commonly mentioned activities included marketing and fund development (5%). These responses may reflect the kind of CSL courses offered at the U of A and instructors' learning objectives. Previous evaluation found that most classroom-based participants do not participate in CSL projects because of time constraints.

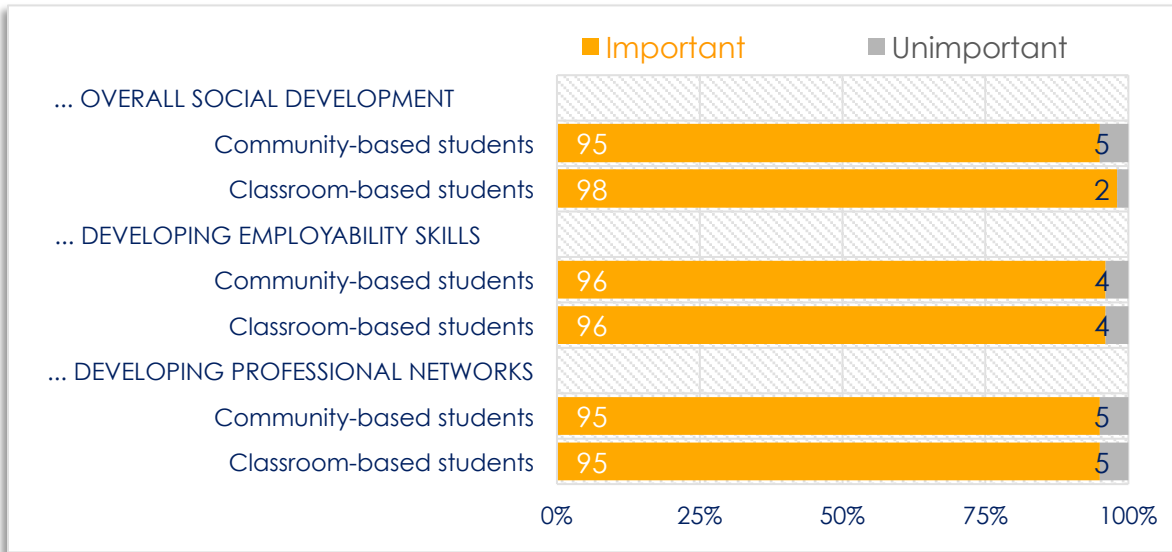
Figure 7: Primary activity Involved in CSL placement



Sources: CSL Survey 2013.

An overwhelming majority of both former community-based (98%) and classroom-based students (95%) believe that participation in community organizations is important for overall social development (**Figure 8**). Identical numbers of both groups, community-based and classroom-based students also felt that CSL participation was important in developing their professional networks (95%) and employability skills (96%).

Figure 8: Beliefs about community service-learning



A statistical test shows that differences between former community-based and classroom-based students regarding beliefs about community service-learning are not statistically significant.

A great majority of former community-based students (87%) have a positive attitude towards CSL (**Figure 9**). Most of them perceive CSL as an excellent (45%) or good (42%) learning strategy. Further, nine out of ten former CSL students would recommend this form of learning to other students.

Figure 9: General attitudes toward CSL

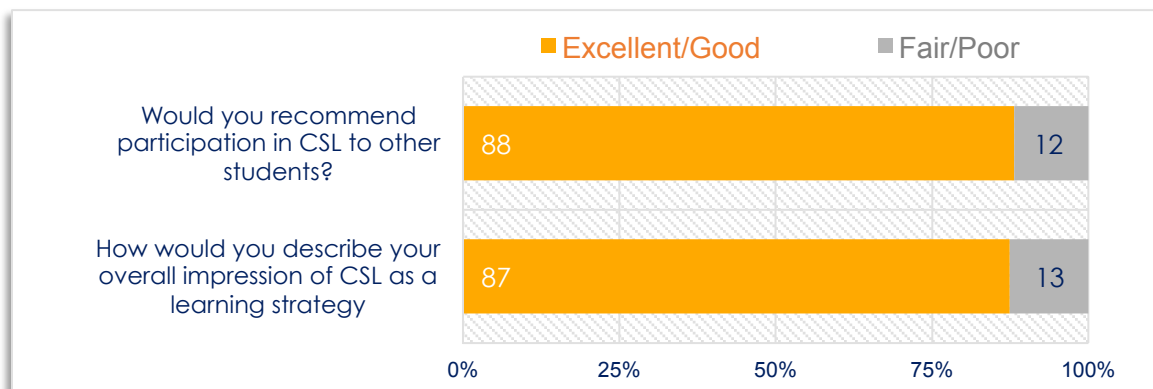


Figure 10: Would you recommend participation in CSL to other students?

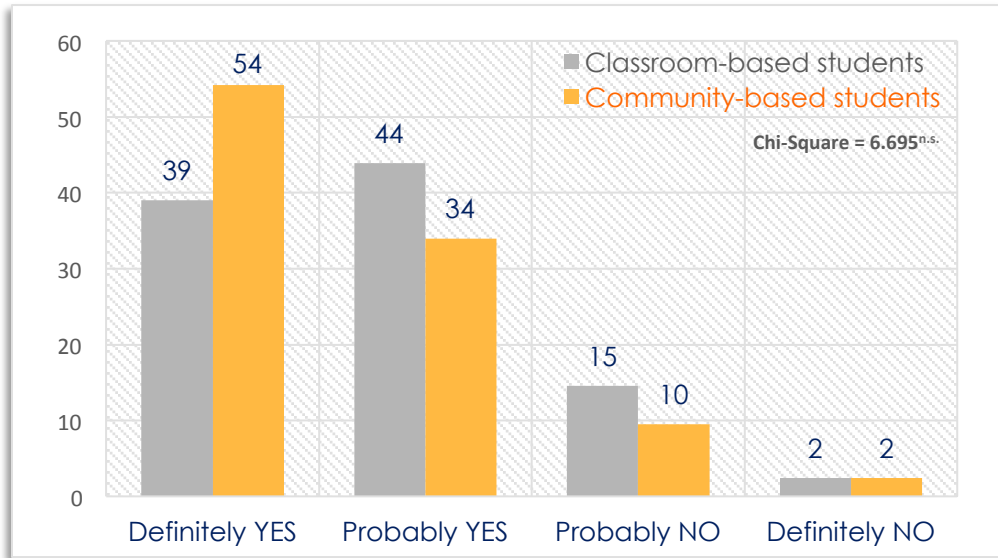
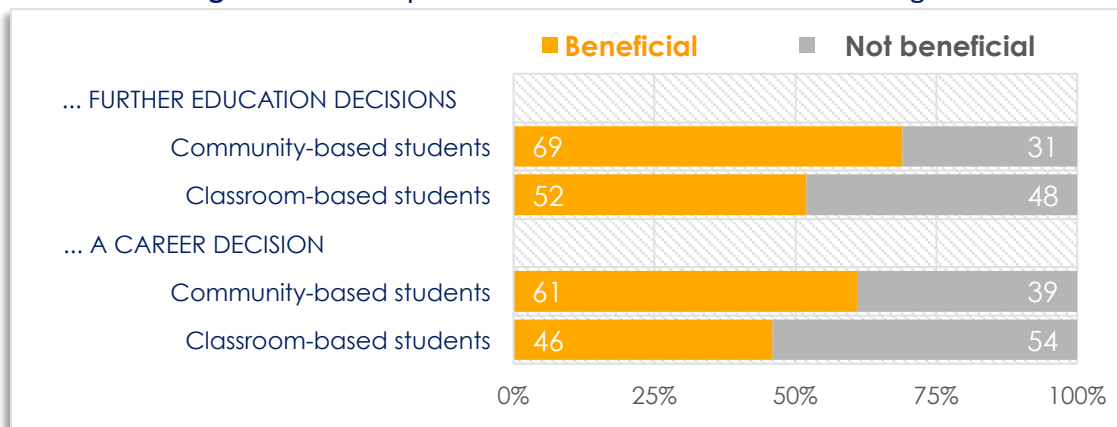


Figure 10 suggests that both classroom-based (83% yes) and community-based CSL students (88%) share these positive attitudes toward CSL. Therefore, although classroom-based students choose not to participate in a community project off campus, the vast majority sees a benefit to participating in a CSL course. This finding suggests also that in most CSL courses, community-based learning is being effectively integrated into classes (e.g., through CSL students sharing their learning with classmates informally or formally).

In addition to the very positive perceptions of their involvement in a CSL class, a large number, more than two-thirds (69%) of community-based students believe that their CSL experience has been beneficial for making further education decisions (**Figure 11**). As well, almost two-thirds (61%) consider their CSL experience to be beneficial for making career decisions.

Figure 11: CSL experience has been beneficial for making...

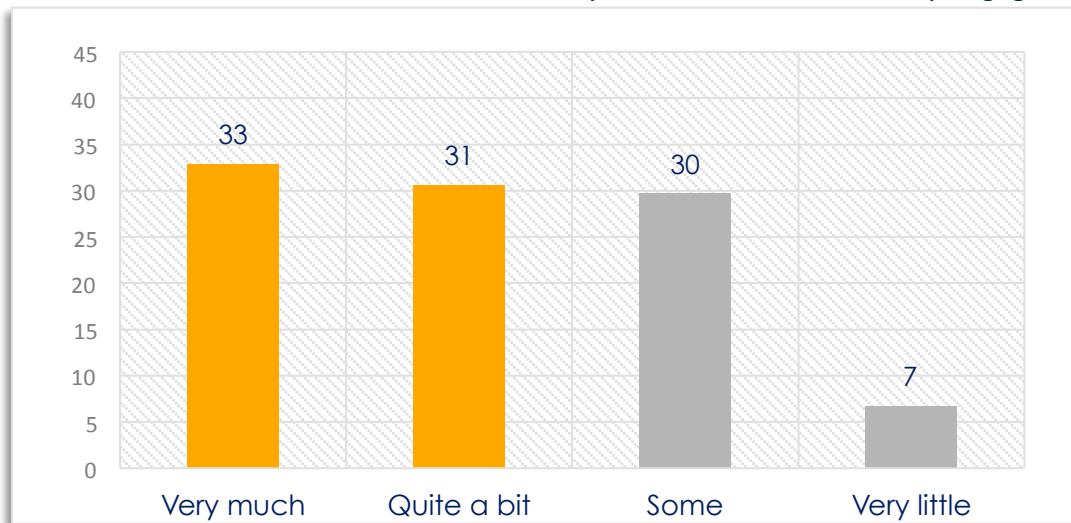


A statistically significantly smaller number (52%) of classroom-based students also believe that CSL has been beneficial for making further education decisions (Chi-square= 8.506, $p=0.004$). Similarly, a smaller number (46%) of classroom-based students consider that CSL has been

beneficial for making their career decisions (Chi-square= 6.199, $p=0.013$). It should be noted that despite these statistically significant differences, approximately half of classroom-based students consider CSL as significant for their education and/or career decisions.

Almost two-thirds of former community-based students (64%), believe that their participation has significantly contributed to their increased interest in community engagement (**Figure 12**).

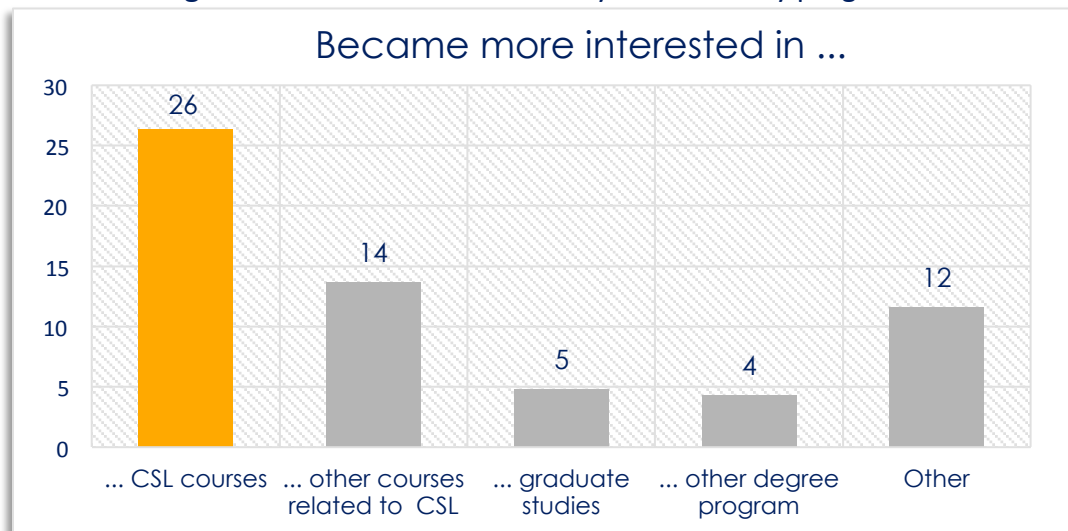
Figure 12: To what extent did CSL contribute to your interest in community engagement?



Influence of CSL on Student's University Program

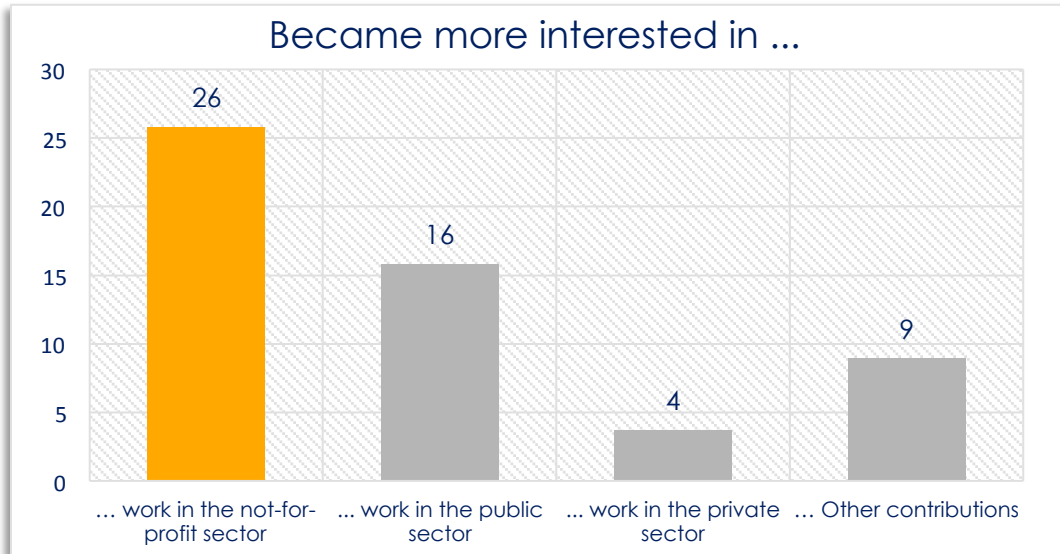
Half (51%) of community-based students reported that CSL influenced their thinking about their university program. Of this group, the most common influence was to encourage them to take more CSL courses (**Figure 13**). For a smaller group, the change was more dramatic (changing degree program or deciding to go on to graduate studies).

Figure 13: How did CSL influence your university program?



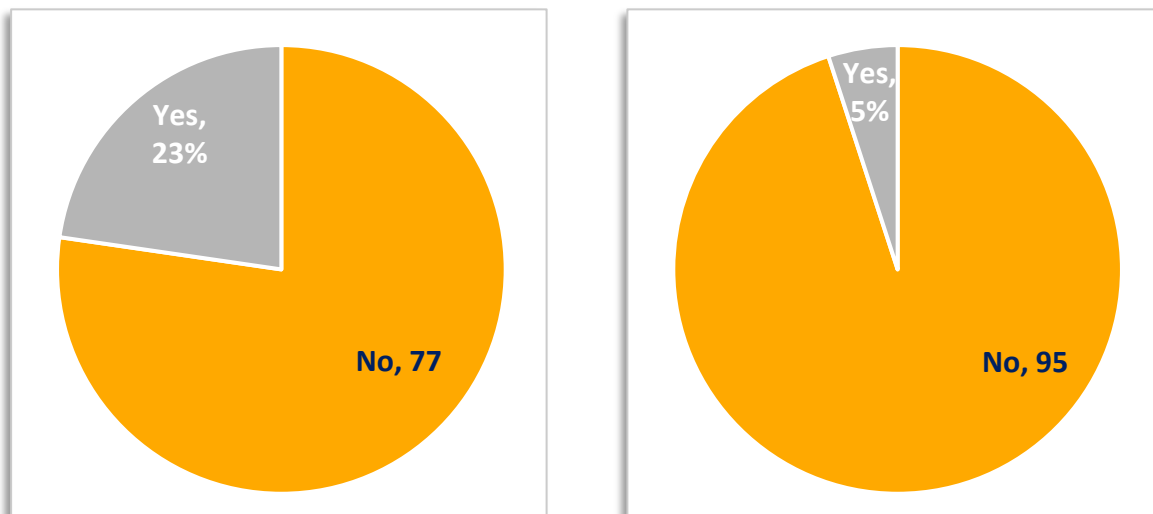
For more than half of respondents (56%), taking a CSL course influenced their career plans. Of this group, the most common response was to become more interested in working in the not-for-profit sector (**Figure 14**).

Figure 14: How did CSL influence your university program?



In addition to positive attitudes toward participation (**Figure 15**), almost a quarter of community-based respondents (23%) continued to volunteer with their CSL partner organizations after their course ended. Despite the short duration of CSL placement, some former community-based students (5%) obtained some form of paid work with CSL partner organizations after their courses were completed. While employment is not the primary goal of CSL, this finding raises questions about how a CSL experience might connect to a paid internship for students.

Figure 15 Continued volunteer and paid work with CSL organization



As **Figure 16** shows, more than half of community-based respondents (59%) perceive their CSL participation as important for their development of leadership skills and approximately two-thirds believe that their engagement has had a significant impact on the development of their ability to respond to complex real-life social issues (61.0%) and ability to work effectively with others (69%).

Figure 16: Participation in community service-learning and student knowledge and skills

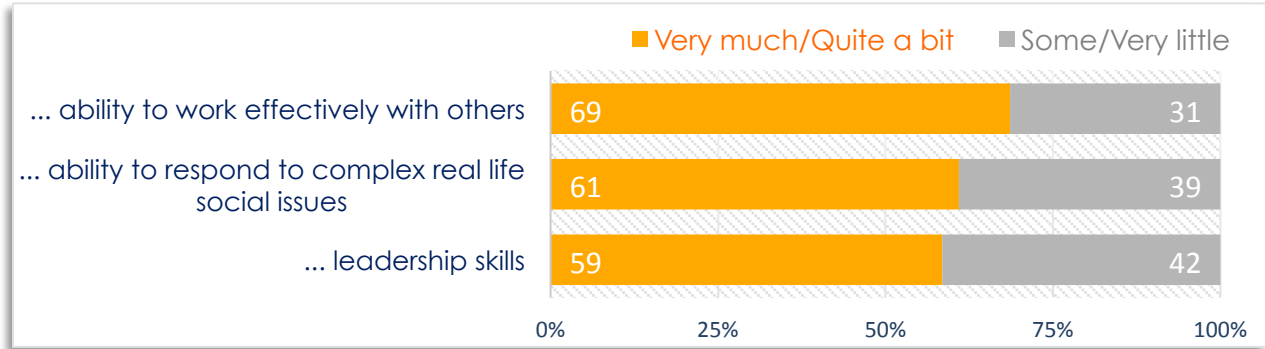
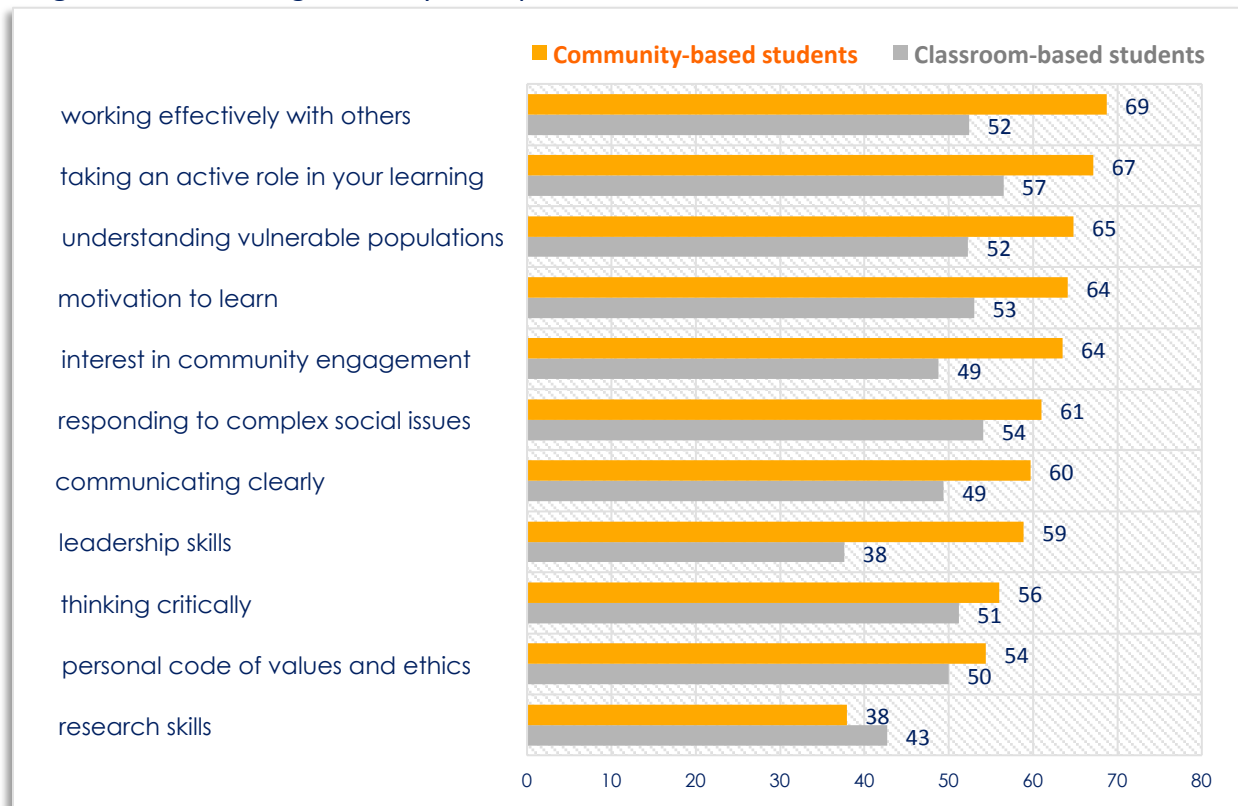


Figure 17 shows differences in the responses of classroom-based and community-based respondents.

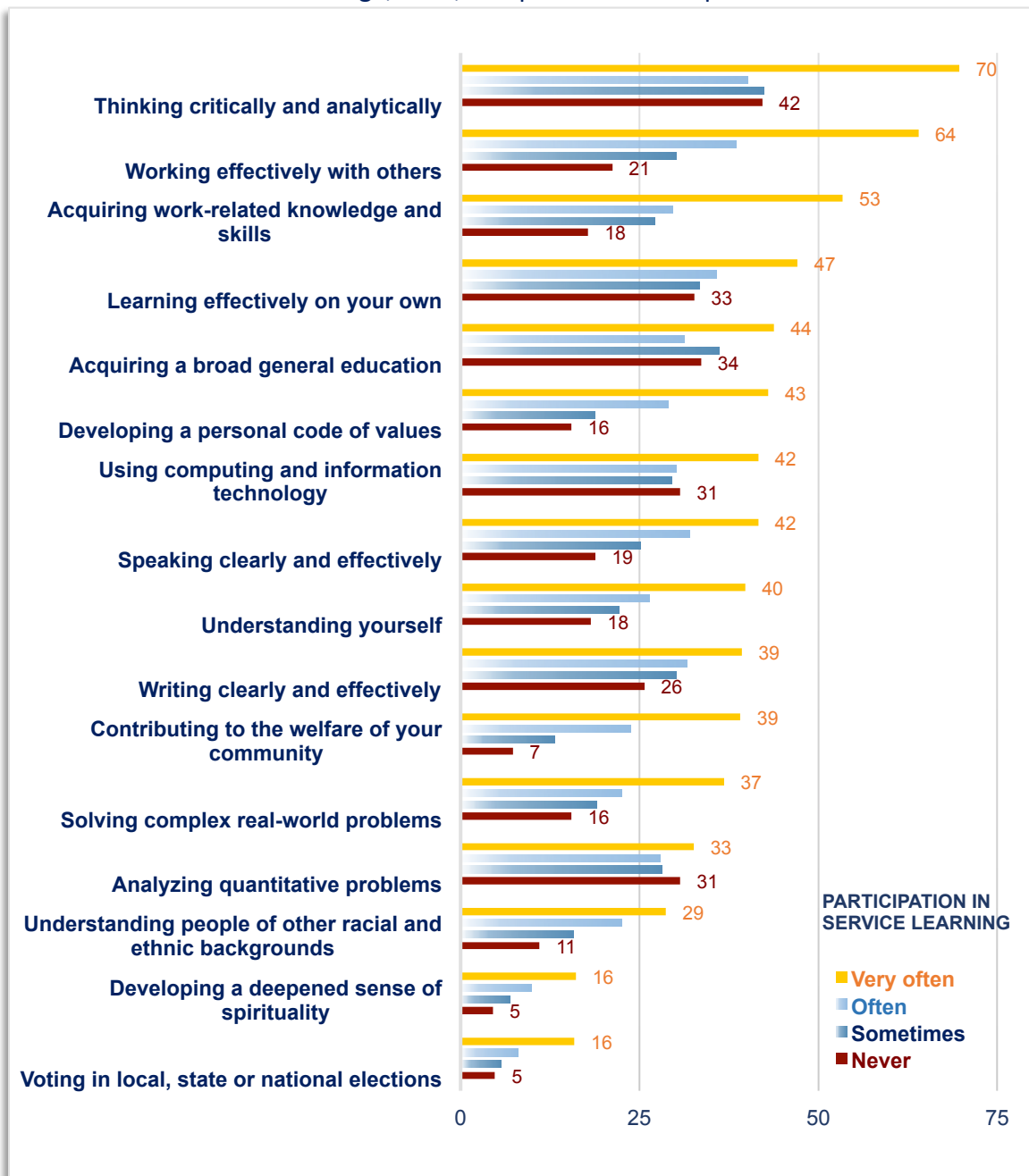
Figure 17: 'Reflecting back on your experience in CSL, to what extent did it contribute to...?'



These differences demonstrate the value of community-based experiences on most measures. However, the lack of contribution of CSL to research skills is an area that warrants closer examination. While developing research skills is not the primary focus of CSL, more CSL projects could be oriented toward community-based research.

2011 NSSE results from the U of A (**Figure 18**) also show a relationship between student engagement in community-based projects (e.g., service learning) and self-reported outcomes.

Figure 18: Participation in community-based projects (e.g. service learning) and student knowledge, skills, and personal development



Results of Open-ended Survey Responses

Overall, the open-ended responses were highly positive in tone. For community-based respondents, 81% of open-ended responses were positive, 7% were mixed, and 12% were negative. For classroom-based respondents, 73% of open-ended responses were positive, 9% were mixed, and 18% were negative.

Former CSL students who participated in this study were eager to share how their CSL experiences have been significant in their academic and/or career development. Responses cited are from community-based students unless otherwise specified.

Valuable Experiences in Community Service-Learning

A few respondents spoke about the impact of CSL on their experience as learners:

CSL has changed the way I look at education. I hope that as a future elementary school teacher, I can provide enriching learning opportunities for my students the way that CSL has for me.

CSL made what I learned in the classroom more applicable, therefore making the course much more interesting. I felt as though my work, through CSL work, made my degree experience that much more valuable.

I was almost ready to leave my degree and take a year trying to find out what I wanted to do, and my CSL course helped me make up my mind without having to leave my studies.

A number wrote about the changes they experienced through participation in CSL in a general way. For example:

I loved my CSL course. It changed my life. I wish I had had an opportunity to take more CSL courses.

Completely changed my life in a positive way.

Others specifically talked about the impact on their education or career plans:

I found out about CSL through the U of A website while I was attending high school in Ottawa. The certificate option was a determining factor for my application to U of A rather than Queens U.

I loved it, it gave me a chance to build on what I love which is working with children. It also opened doors for summer employment and I still volunteer with them now.

I secured a job because of CSL ... and it helped secure my interest in the subject leading me to change my degree program.

I found it extremely beneficial. It guided me to my future career, something I may not have realized had I not taken that particular CSL course. I just wish there were more opportunities to take CSL courses ...

Still others spoke about the importance of CSL for understanding community and building relationships:

I became a lot more involved in the community on and off campus which made me more aware of many things from politics to environmental issues that I believe could have passed me by otherwise.

It opened my eyes to a whole new realm of life that was occurring in my community that I was unaware of and had no understanding for.

I did my CSL course in my last term and I wish I would have done it sooner ... I had a great experience and made lifelong friendships and memories.

Classroom-based students also had mostly positive comments. For example:

Even though I was not able to participate in the placement due to time commitment, I really appreciated the class and think the program is fantastic. I learned a lot from the other students, as well as from my independent project. I wish I had known about CSL sooner so I could have taken more classes, as I stumbled upon this by mistake. Taking this CSL class has raised my awareness of certain community groups, as well as encouraged me to engage more in the community.

It brought me into contact with other students I wouldn't have otherwise interacted with, especially since it was necessary we worked productively and communicated openly with each other. Some of the students are still friends to this day. It also encouraged me to take class material from other classes and apply it to the real world situations in our community.

The study of community helped me to choose a direction in law that has resulted in my commitment to access to justice in my rural community.

While the majority of open-ended responses of both community-based and classroom-based respondents were positive, some voiced concerns, which are helpful in thinking about improving the CSL program.

Less favorable experiences

Negative comments about CSL were most frequently focused on the burden of too much coursework exacerbated by the time commitment required of community placements. This was especially so if the placements were not meaningfully connected to coursework or personal goals, or if students were unsupported by their professor or community partner. For example:

CSL was a fun component, but the community placement I was with only used us for volunteer work. I did not learn anything about our topic while volunteering. All we did in our placement was crowd control, setting up chairs, directing people, etc. I wish my placement would have taught me more about elder abuse, etc.

...I found it to be a giant time issue, balancing classes with another type of class that has large time implications is rather difficult for me anyways. I find it can be a useful idea. I just believe it isn't quite communicated well and doesn't offer that much to my program to be honest. It isn't very flexible for different types of programs and doesn't provide much knowledge in general.

These comments point to the importance of thinking about improving the quality of CSL projects rather than constantly trying to expand the number of students involved.

Some students also expressed concern if they felt they were being used as unpaid labour for the community partner or if the instructor shifted some responsibility for grading to the CSL partner. For example:

I feel that it did not affect my U of A experiences at all, I feel that it was a way the professor got out of having to mark a paper.

Clearly, managing expectations and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the different participants are important parts of doing CSL well.

Conclusions

This study has provided additional information about CSL program outcomes that can inform the program. For example, addressing concerns expressed in open-ended questions and attending to areas where CSL could be doing more (e.g. community-based research) are important. This report provides an overview of findings from our preliminary analysis. Additional analysis of survey data will explore relationships between variables; further, the analysis of CSL certificate student data will contribute to our understanding of the outcomes of more intensive CSL experiences. Focus groups will also contribute further insights as we invite responses to these findings and pursue questions that move beyond the limitations of an online survey format. Extending our analysis of NSSE will also contribute to understanding student engagement factor more broadly. The mixed-methods approach is expected to extend our understanding about CSL as an innovative pedagogy.

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Evaluating the Long-term Outcomes of Community Service Learning

This study analyzed survey data from 525 students who took a CSL course between 2005 and 2012 at North campus, Augustana or Campus Saint-Jean at the University of Alberta. This includes 438 community-based students and 87 classroom-based students. The average age of the survey participants at the time of the survey was 24.3 years, 80 % were female, and 83% of respondents were living alone.

The most common CSL community activity was teaching or mentoring (mentioned by 42%), followed by education and outreach (34%), and research and evaluation (33%). Extremely high proportions of respondents (95% or higher) felt that participation in community organizations is important for overall social development, developing employability skills, and developing networks. Nine out of ten former CSL students would likely recommend this form of learning to other students.

More than two-thirds of respondents believe that their CSL experience has been beneficial for making further education decisions and almost two-thirds consider their CSL experience to be beneficial for making career decisions.

Around half of respondents reported that CSL influenced their thinking about their university program and 56% felt it influenced their career plans. Almost a quarter of community-based respondents continued to volunteer with their CSL partner organizations after their course ended.

More than half of community-based respondents saw their CSL participation as important for their development of leadership skills and approximately two-thirds believe that their engagement has had a significant impact on the development of their ability to respond to complex real-life social issues (61.0%) and ability to work effectively with others (69%).

Open-ended questions were highly positive in tone with several comments about the impact that CSL had on their learning, understanding of community, and plans for further education and career. Some of the concerns expressed will inform thinking of improvements to the Community Service-Learning program at the University of Alberta.