STUDENT AND COMMUNITY PARTNER EXPECTATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

- Encouraging student insight and community partner feedback into their community-engaged learning (CEL) experiences can lead to understanding promising learning practices. However, students' and community partners' voices are not often heard during CEL development.

RESEARCH DATA & METHODS

We conducted a thematic analysis on two typesv of data:

I. *Student Perspectives on CEL - presented at a public workshop*

- 5 students (from Business, Law, Biological Sciences, Arts, and Human Ecology) with experience in co-op, practicum, and service-learning placements discussed CEL expectations and experiences negotiating community and university CEL expectations

II. *Community Perspectives on CEL Partnerships - written responses to open-ended survey question*

- 45 non-profit partners (from a broad range of community development, recreation, social services, educational, and health organizations) discussed characteristics of effective student placements from the perspective of their organizations

FINDINGS

I. Student Perspectives on CEL - Placement Expectations

A Safe Environment to Learn Skills and Challenge Themselves

- Students expected to acquire management skills, exercise leadership skills, and be given responsibility.
- Students considered their placement to be a safe environment where they could take risks, challenge themselves,v and try new things.

"I think that the biggest expectations were that I would have some responsibility and some opportunity to delegate—no matter how small or how big it was—I think that's really important. And just the expectation that you will be respected for your qualifications that you bring to it and that you'll be given ample opportunities to really get your feet wet."

Opportunity to Put Classroom Learning into Practice

- Students expected their placement to be a place where they could test learned skills and abilities in a professional setting.
- Experiences in the real world meant students could attach faces and stories to theories learned in the classroom to more fully develop their understanding of a topic.

Exposure to Multiple Perspectives

- Students expected to get a variety of perspectives on how others view their expertise and areas of interest.
- Students recommended being open to new experiences and learning from mentors and the people one will meet in a community placement.

An Involved Community Supervisor

- Students expected their placement supervisor to provide an orientation of the organization and the tasks expected of them, provide on-going supervision, and highlight the significance of their work/duties.

"For my supervisor I expected maybe to have a little bit of direction, a little bit of structure, maybe an orientation in the beginning. That would be really helpful. And maybe to explain the meaning behind the work I am doing because that is really, really important I think. To know the purpose of my work rather than just being relegated to a task and being left by myself."

II. Community Partner Perspectives on CEL Partnerships

Community partners appreciated being able to negotiate the length of CEL placements based on their organization's needs (see Figure 1). Key characteristics of CEL partnerships were grouped into three areas: placement, student, and university partner (see Figure 2).

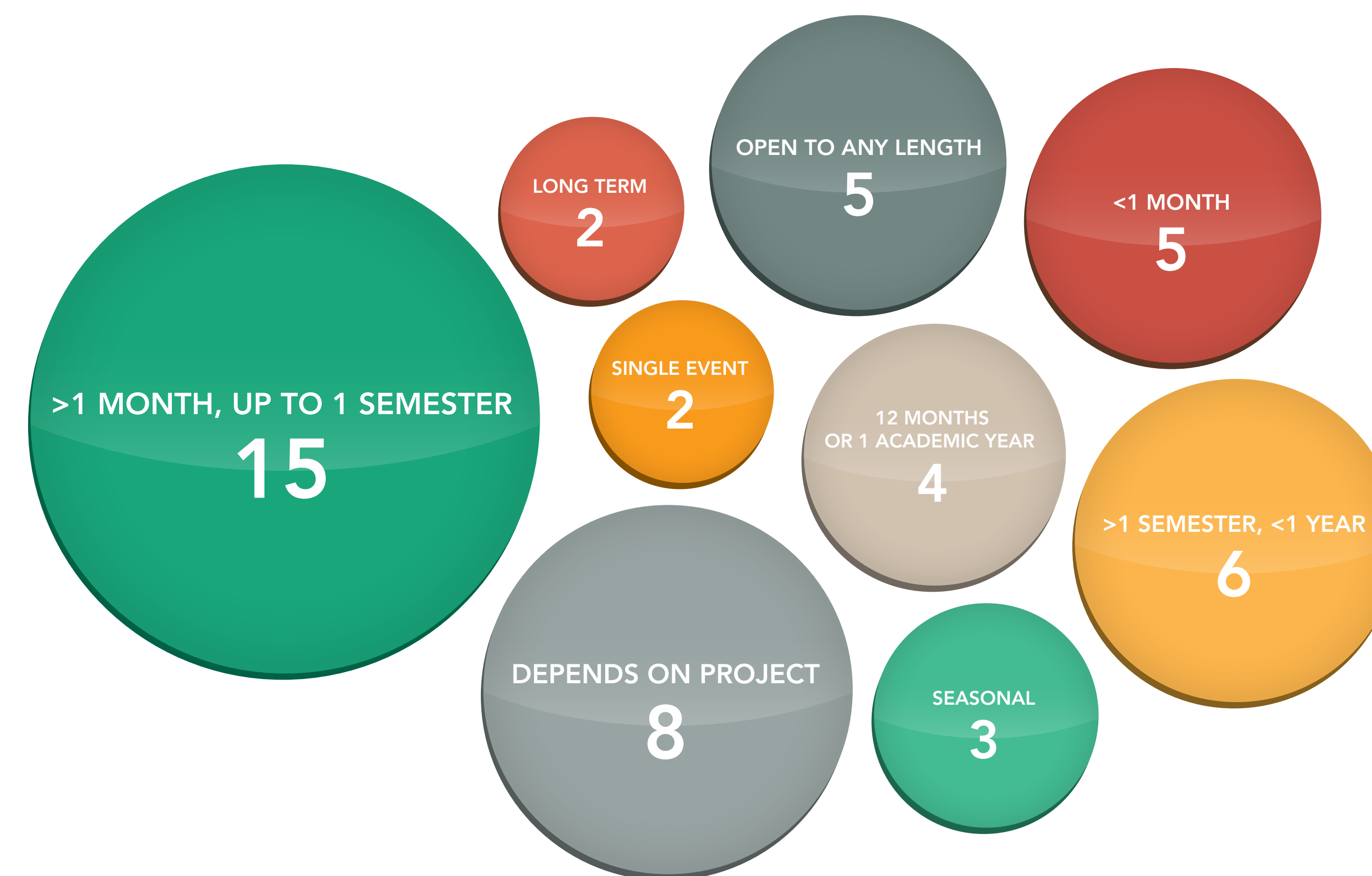*Figure 1. Community Partners' Ideal Length of CEL Placements*

Figure 2. Characteristics of Effective CEL Partnerships: Community Partner Perspectives

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE CEL PARTNERSHIPS: COMMUNITY PARTNER PERSPECTIVES

Effective CEL Placements...
- are focused and have specific outcomes
- are mutually beneficial for organization and university partner
- do not require financial support from organization
- have good community mentors available for students

"Worked well when focus was specific—important to have a good mentor from the board and a specific focus with the student and in consultation with the agency regarding the student project."

Effective CEL Students...
- are knowledgeable about and responsible for meeting expectations for placement
- have adequate background, skills, and pre-training to support them in their placement
- are enthusiastic, motivated, and ready to learn
- have an interest in the organization and the tasks they will be doing

"In an effective placement, the student would be able to use their education and skills to the greatest benefit to the organization, and would gain valuable experience related to their field of study."

Effective University Partners...
- conduct ongoing supervision of students during placement
- support students to help them get the most out of their CEL experience
- share student's progress with community partners through reports

"Students that are supported by a post secondary co-ordinator and other students in addition to our staff, works best for us."

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Students expect their CEL placements to provide them with opportunities to "marry" theory and practice (Raill & Hollander, 2006; Ralph et al., 2008), develop and test new skills, and build relationships with community partners and university staff (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

- Through CEL partnerships community partners expect to mentor motivated students, have ongoing conversations with university partners (Leiderman et al., 2002), and share mutually beneficial outcomes with both students and university partners (Cone & Payne, 2002).

- Universities need to have structures for students to (a) share past CEL experiences with other students and prepare for CEL placements; (b) have mutually beneficial conversations with community partners; (c) negotiate with university partners; and (d) receive mentoring and support from university and community partners

- Universities need to have structures for community partners to (a) have ongoing conversations with university partners and provide feedback; (b) share what they have learned about making student engagement work; and(c) negotiate CEL placement time lines.

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STUDENT SUGGESTIONS FOR NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY AND UNIVERSITY EXPECTATIONS

Actively Prepare and Communicate

- actively ask questions to clarify community partner's expectations
- have mutually beneficial conversations—before and during placement—to ensure own and community partners' expectations are being met
- talk to other students in class and mentoring professor before starting placement
- take ownership of placement experiences and be responsible for own work

Critically Engage with Community Experiences

- learn theory in the classroom and engage in practicum preparationv
- understand that theory learned in books does not always dictate placement realities
- use problem-solving skills to navigate unexpected situations and challenges

Explore Future Opportunities

- find out if placement can be extended into summer employment; continue to hone skills while the community partner receives services from a trained individual

"I am a big talker and communicator so I was able to just say 'what do you want me to do'? and 'what are you expecting?' So we had a lot of conversations, me and my supervisor, about what she was hoping to get and what I was hoping to get. And we did have to do some negotiating along the way because things came up..."

"One of the biggest challenges is that universities and community organizations don't necessarily work on the same time line...real world time lines aren't September to April."

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Poster can be found at NCEL Resources at http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/ncel/blog/

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