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social justice

Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

PROCEEDINGS

01

Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance

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PROCEEDINGS

Vol. 1
Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance

Organizers and partners

ENHANCING GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT: INSIGHTS FROM THE FLY PROGRAM IN EUROPEAN INTERUNIVERSITY SERVICE-LEARNING

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Service-learning (SL) combines university engagement with community needs, fostering co-responsibility and solidarity. It supports intercultural growth and integrates local and global perspectives, encouraging collaboration to address societal challenges. This paper focuses on the FLY program, a European inter-university SL initiative involving universities from Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Slovakia. Active since 2021, FLY organizes over 50 annual SL projects across 14 countries, promoting reciprocity, social justice among universities, students and partners. This study evaluates the 2023/2024 program's impact on community partners. The results show that community partners identified significant impacts including increased visibility and networking opportunities, new perspectives, strengthened community interactions, and the educational value for students through hands-on learning and meaningful relationships with the community.

service-learning; global engagement; interuniversity cooperation; higher education

INTRODUCTION

In the UNESCO Global Report (2021, p. 10), education is described as "the foundation for the renewal and transformation of our societies", connecting people and providing the knowledge to address challenges for a socially inclusive, just, and sustainable future. Teaching and learning must link to civic

engagement, defined by the APA (2009, paragraph 2) as "individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern". Education fostering such engagement helps students connect with reality and build a fairer society where diverse knowledge is valued (UNESCO, 2021).

The purpose of the Service-Learning (SL) pedagogical approach is to bring civic engagement into the curriculum by connecting students and social partners to practise solidarity and cooperation while learning knowledge and developing curricular and extracurricular skills. To be applied, SL needs the whole community because it is based on reciprocity between university and territory in facing common challenges to positively transform the reality. In this process, the curricular and transversal knowledge and skills of the students are the tools for engaging and acting in the real world. In the same way, the knowledge and skills of the community involved in SL, are the educational resources for the students and for the joint action in collaboration with the university.

At the European level, many universities are promoting civic engagement through SL, e.g. through SL based Erasmus + projects, which since 2015 have been more than 25 (Culcasi et al., 2024). This synergy of commitment among universities contributes to a more comprehensive approach to addressing global challenges and offers more opportunities of engagement for students and community partners.

This is the case of FLY, the European inter-university volunteering and Service-Learning program that promotes the co-design of innovative SL pathways by involving students and community partners worldwide.

This contribution presents the impact gathered in the academic year 2023/2024 within the unique FLY program. Specifically, it is intended to present the results of the evaluation and reflection of the community partners they completed after the experience to assess the project and the program's effectiveness in general. This focus on the community partners is for both because they represent a fundamental building block for the SL to be effectively implemented and to meet a gap in the literature (Compare et al., 2023).

1. THE FLY INTERNATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING-BASED PROGRAM

According to the European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE, 2019):

> Service-learning is an experiential educational pedagogy in which students engage in community service, reflect critically on this experience, and learn from it personally, socially and academically. The activities address human,

> social and environmental needs from the perspective of social justice and sustainable development, and aim at enriching learning in higher education, fostering civic responsibility and strengthening communities (...).

In international SL, students participate in a structured program in another country. They do community service to meet local needs, learn through interactions and discussions with diverse people, and reflect on the experience. This helps them better understand their course material, appreciate the host country and their field, and feel more responsible as citizens, both in their local area and worldwide. (Bringle and Hatcher, 2011) SL emphasises the importance of shared community and the systemic interdependencies that connect us to address contemporary challenges (Culcasi et al., 2023).

FLY is an International SL based-program focused on reciprocity at personal and institutional levels (students-locals, students-students, university-university, university-social partners, etc.) where the richness of diversity and social justice are core values. The program runs from the 2020-2021 academic year. FLY is coordinated by eight universities in Europe (5 in Spain, 1 in Portugal, 1 in Italy and 1 in Slovakia) and offers more than 50 different SL projects in 14 countries worldwide every year (Brozmanová Gregorová et al., 2024). The SL projects cover 3 main impact areas: "migrants and refugees", "people at risk of social exclusion", and "people and community care"; projects vary in duration from one week to two months and take place in the summer period. To date, more than 550 university students have participated in 150 projects in 14 countries.

2. THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS IN SL

SL is only possible with community involvement. Effective and sustainable SL depends on mutually beneficial partnerships between the university and the community. Indeed, community partners play a pivotal role in identifying or assisting students in analysing community needs while serving as the primary point of contact for faculty and students. Community partners are uniquely responsible for helping create a real-world experience for the students. Moreover, they provide essential guidance and opportunities that maximise the experience for the students, the community, and the intended beneficiaries. In the context of SL, community partners are not merely partners, but rather co-educators, actively engaged in the student's educational journey.

In the FLY program, community partners have a specific role. A partner university recruits them to collaborate and offer SL projects for students. A representative of the university meets with a representative of the community

partner at the time of planning the program, together they clarify expectations and define the needs of the organisation, the workload of the students, their role and the expected learning outcomes and benefits. A representative from a community organization also defines the profile of students suitable for the project and their numbers. In this way, the student's learning experience is co-created with the community partner. The mentors from community organizations are in contact with the students before they arrive in the country, organising independent sessions with them to prepare them for the implementation of the project in another country and life in another country. During the implementation of the SL projects, the partners accompany the students through the whole process, providing them with instruction, feedback, mentoring, supervision, and responses to the questions and needs of the students. In the end, they participate together in an evaluation and reflection of the learners' experience. With the university representative, they reflect on their cooperation, the student's involvement and the benefits for the partner.

Concurring with Rubin and Matthews (2013), comprehensive academic research into education incorporating international experiential components and SL should also prioritise examining the impacts on the host communities of these programs. This broader focus aligns with SL as a reciprocal experience where all stakeholders – students, faculty, and community members – benefit mutually (Celio et al., 2011).

3. RESULTS OF FLY COMMUNITY PARTNERS

In the academic year 2023/2024 17 community partners were involved in the FLY program: 7 partners from Spain, 3 from Slovakia, 2 from Italy, 2 from Brasil, 2 from Africa and 1 from Honduras. All partners had previous experience in community service or SL at the time of evaluation. They assessed the program considering all the parties involved; specifically, they analysed the benefits of collaborating with universities in terms of the impact on their own organizations, the communities they serve, and the students involved.

Figure 1 shows which areas community partners identified as having experienced an impact. The greatest impact is perceived on the organizations participating in the program (33,3% of responses). This impact encompasses various dimensions, including: the fresh perspectives that students bring to the organization, which in turn improves the work environment; the willingness of students to collaborate with the local team, especially during a time of year when volunteers are generally less available due to summer vacations (many

partners emphasized that some activities they propose for the communities they serve during the summer can only take place thanks to the presence of university students); and the adaptability and flexibility of the students, along with their capacity to integrate into the context and with the people served.

 A high percentage of the community partners (30%) consider that the university collaboration has positively contribute to: gaining greater visibility as organization and becoming part of a network where the support of universities becomes a pivotal element of fieldwork; increasing visibility for the community served and the projects implemented; expanding opportunities for access to international volunteering and cooperation; gaining new perspectives through partnerships with universities.

Another highly valued aspect is the impact on the communities served (16,7%), particularly in terms of the new forms of interaction developed by beneficiaries through their engagement with university students from different cultures. Additionally, the strong interpersonal connections formed between the students and the broader community ensure that the impact extends beyond the direct beneficiaries to the community as a whole.

Finally, community partners recognize the educational value of the experience for university students, who gain the opportunity to engage in hands-on learning, deepen their awareness of the social issues underlying the activities of the partners they support, and build meaningful relationships with members of the community.

Fig. 1. FLY impact according to community partners
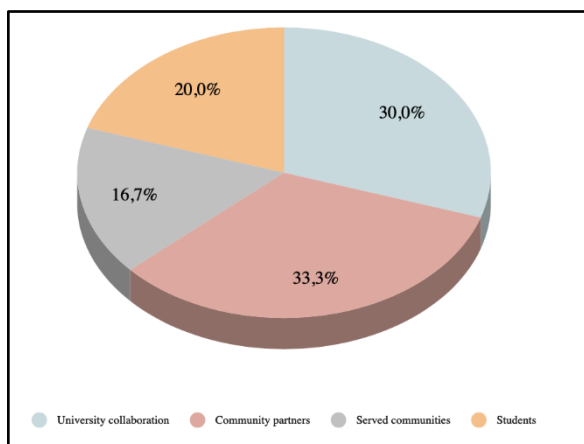
4. CONCLUSION

According to Dorado et al. (2004. p. 26), "Service-learning partnerships can be traveling on at least three qualitatively different paths: tentative, aligned, and committed". Tentative partnerships are typically newly established and involve instructors and community organizations with little or no prior experience in service-learning. Aligned partnerships, on the other hand, represent a more advanced stage, where participants have successfully navigated the tentative phase and are actively working to refine and adapt the collaboration to better meet the needs of students and the community. Finally, committed partnerships are defined by a deeper, long-term dedication from all parties, extending beyond the scope of individual projects.

This framework offers a valuable lens for understanding the development and sustainability of SL initiatives. Community partners, as co-educators, play a pivotal role in ensuring the relevance and sustainability of SL initiatives. Their feedback underscores the program's impact on organizational dynamics, community relationships, and the overall quality of services offered. Key contributions include fostering social networks, increasing visibility, and promoting intercultural exchange —outcomes aligned with the core principles of SL. Furthermore, the partnerships forged through FLY emphasize the importance of collaboration across diverse cultural and institutional contexts, enriching all stakeholders involved.

Ultimately, this contribution advocates for a new social contract for education that integrates formal, non-formal, and informal knowledge and skills through SL. By emphasizing mutual respect, cultural diversity, and shared goals, the FLY program advances the vision of education as a tool for social inclusion, justice, and sustainability. Moving forward, fostering deeper commitments among partners and scaling such initiatives will be essential to address global challenges and build a more interconnected and equitable world.

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