

University of Guelph Community Needs Assessment in Experiential Learning

Summary of Findings, 2018

Produced by University of Guelph's Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) and Student Life Department for the Experiential Learning Hub

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Background

This community needs assessment was produced by the University of Guelph's Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) and Student Life for the University of Guelph's Experiential Learning Hub, as part of the University's strategic priority to expand and enhance experiential learning for students.

There were three primary reasons for the community needs assessment:

- Strengthen partnerships between Community Organizations and the University of Guelph;
- The Ministry of Education and Advanced Skills Development (MAESD) identified that it is important to grow experiential learning partnerships between communities and universities;
- The University of Guelph recognizes the importance in understanding community partners' voices and perspectives to ensure mutually beneficial experiential learning partnerships.

The community needs assessment included two phases. The first phase involved a survey that was sent to community organizations in April 2018. The survey was completed by 84 current, past, or potential partner organizations. The second phase included a community roundtable discussion on the morning of June 6th, 2018. Twenty-eight representatives from community organizations attended the roundtable and engaged in a facilitated discussion around the ways to improve experiential learning in Guelph. The facilitated discussion was organized around four main challenges that emerged during the analysis of the survey responses:

- **Making connections and matchmaking** – How can we improve the communication and matching process between (current and potential) partner organizations and the University of Guelph?
- **Improving student readiness** – what level of preparedness do community partners expect and how can those expectations be met?
- **Investment required** – How could we ensure that the investment of time and other resources are aligned with the value of the results?
- **Improving results** – How can we produce high-quality experiences for the students, while also producing high-quality output for the community partner?

Survey results

Of the 84 community organizations that responded, 52% are currently partners, 29% have previously partnered, and 19% have never partnered with the University of Guelph (Figure 1). Approximately 70% of the respondents hold management or director positions within the community organization (see Figure 2). The majority of the survey respondents come from small organizations with less than five staff. Smaller organizational size may also account for why individuals in management roles are filling out a large portion of the community needs assessment surveys (see Table 1).

Figure 1. Current working relationship with the University of Guelph (N=84)

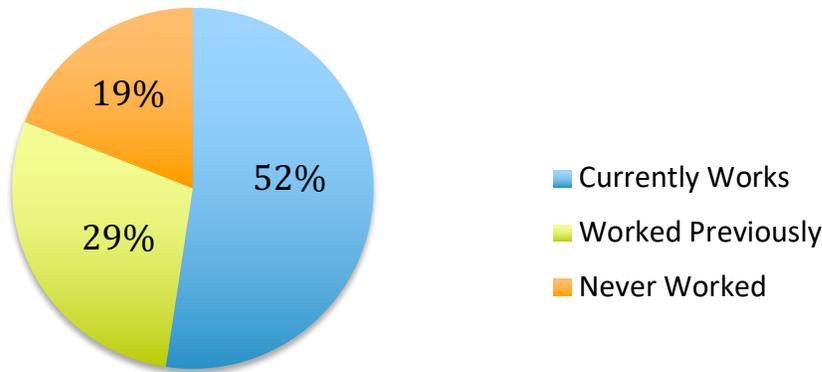


Figure 2. Position of respondents (N=84)

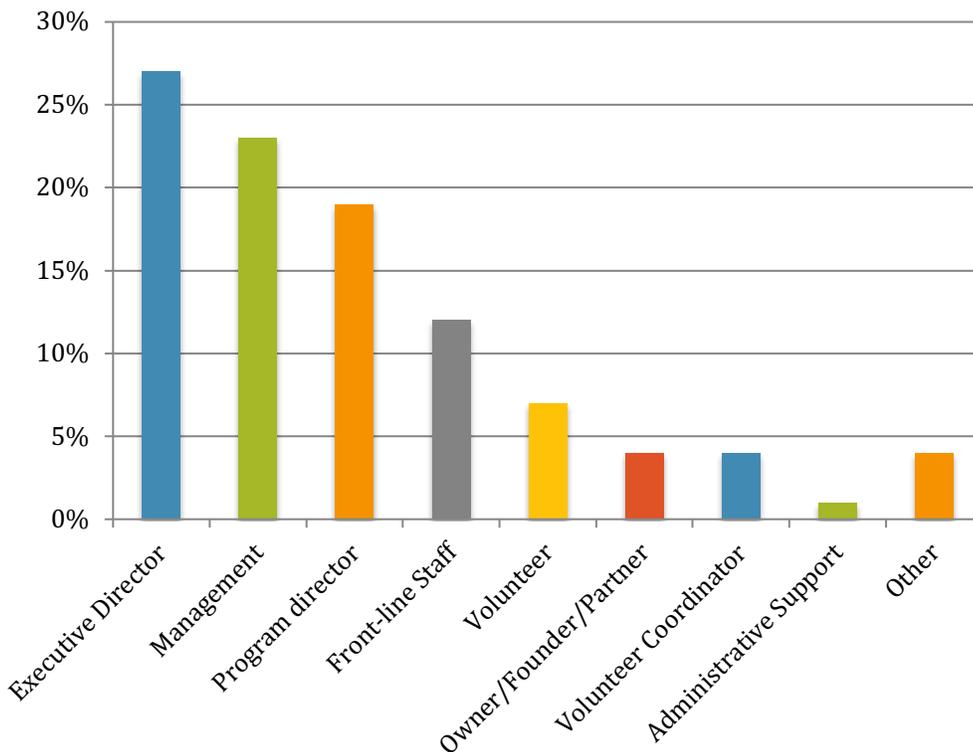


Figure 3. Number of employees at community organization (N=84)

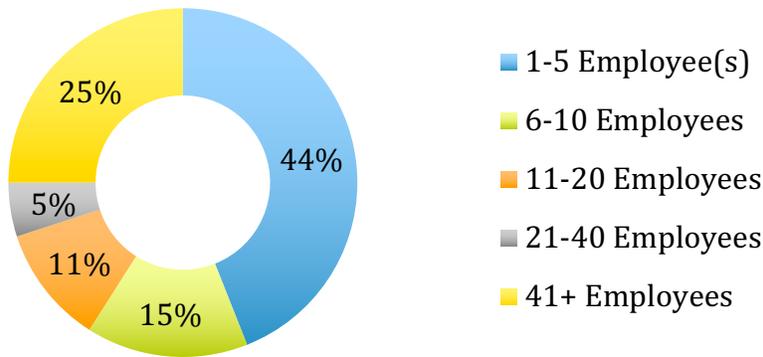
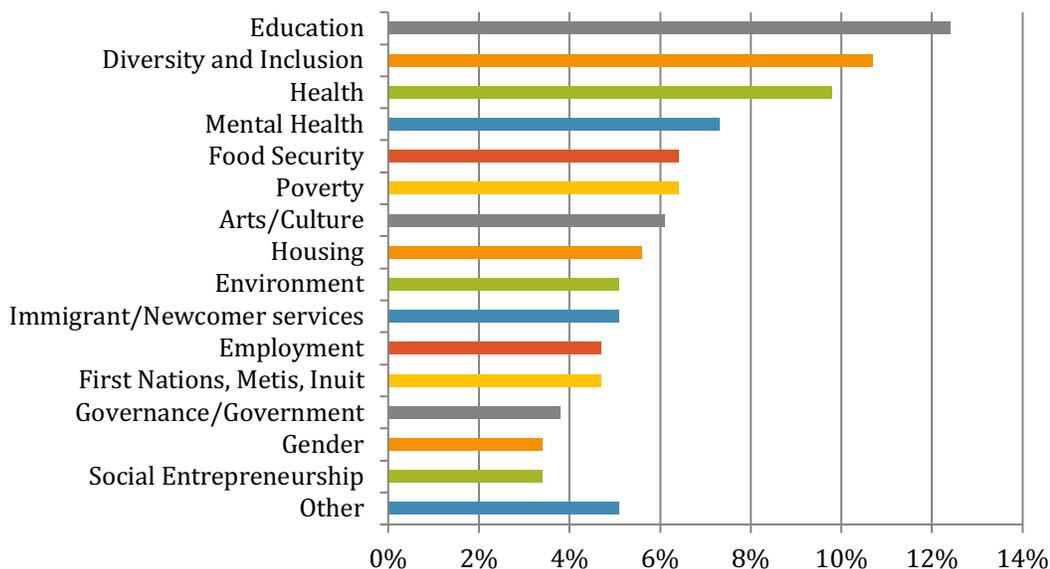


Table 1. Cross-tabular analysis with the number of employees and the respondent’s position (N=84)

Position	Number of Employees	
	1-20	21+
Management, Executive Director, Program Director, or Founder	43 (73%)	18 (72%)
Frontline Staff, Administrative Staff, Volunteer, Volunteer Coordinator	16 (27%)	7 (28%)
Total	59 (100%)	25 (100%)

Of the community partners who filled out the survey, education, diversity and inclusion, and health were selected most often when asked what sector their organizational mandate covers. Sectors that were the least likely to be selected were social entrepreneurship, gender, and governance.

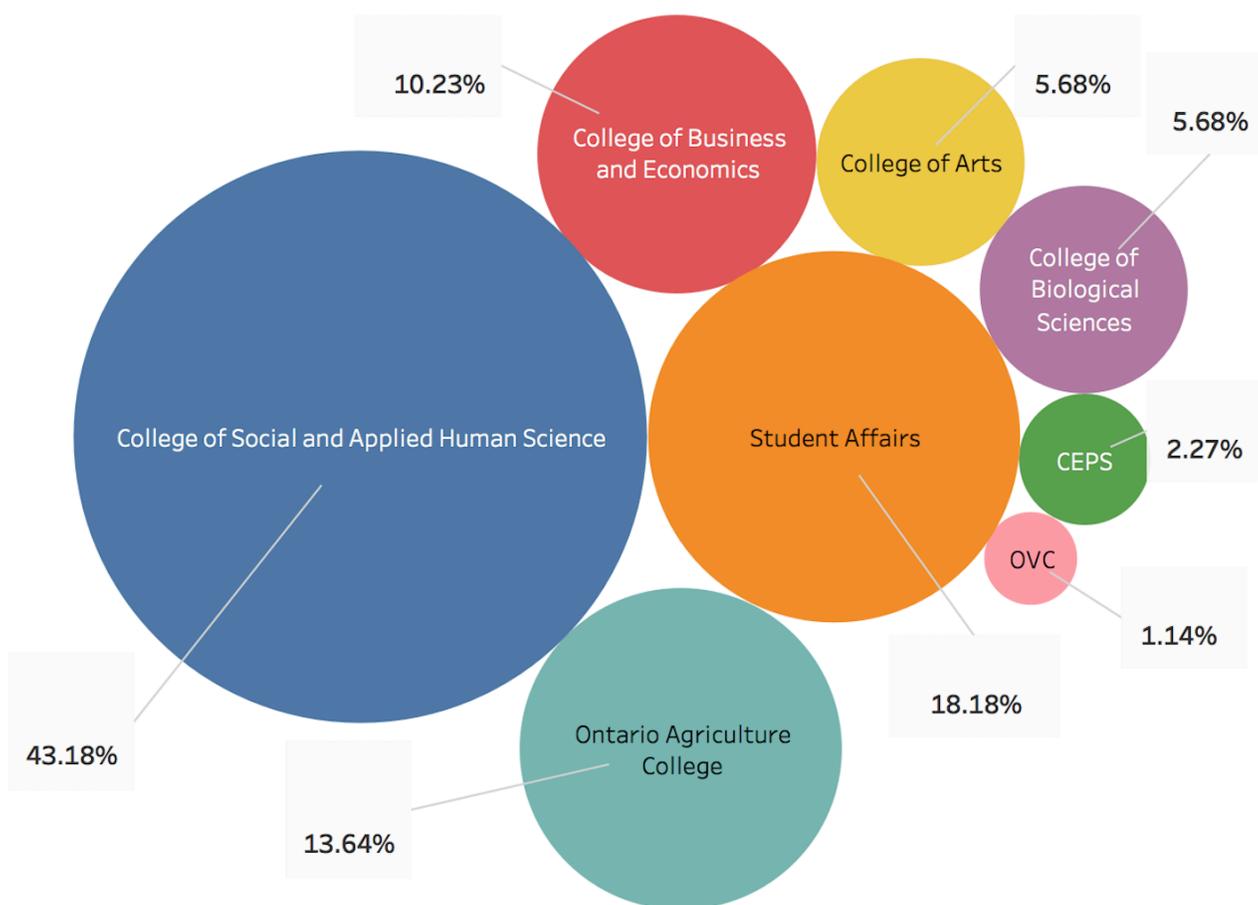
Figure 4. Sector of community organization (N=84)



Current community partners

Figures 5-8 depict information about the community organizations who are currently working with or who have previously partnered with the University of Guelph. The College of Social and Applied Human Sciences (CSAHS) (43%) and Student Affairs (18%) were the largest on campus colleges to partner with the community organizations (see Figure 5). Within CSAHS, the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute, and the Family Relations and Applied Nutrition Department were most likely compared to the other departments to be cited as the location of the experiential learning partnership. In Student Affairs, Student Life was most commonly stated as the location for the experiential learning partnership (see Figure 6).

Figure 5. Community partnerships by college at the University of Guelph (N=68)



The majority of our current or past community partners had less than 6 contacts (85%) at the University of Guelph (see Figure 6). Current or past community partners were most likely to have 1-3 undergraduate and/or graduate students working in their organizations. Interestingly at the Undergraduate level 16% of the partner organizations stated they accommodate 20-100 students per year (see Figure 7).

Figure 6. Number of contacts at the University of Guelph (N=68)

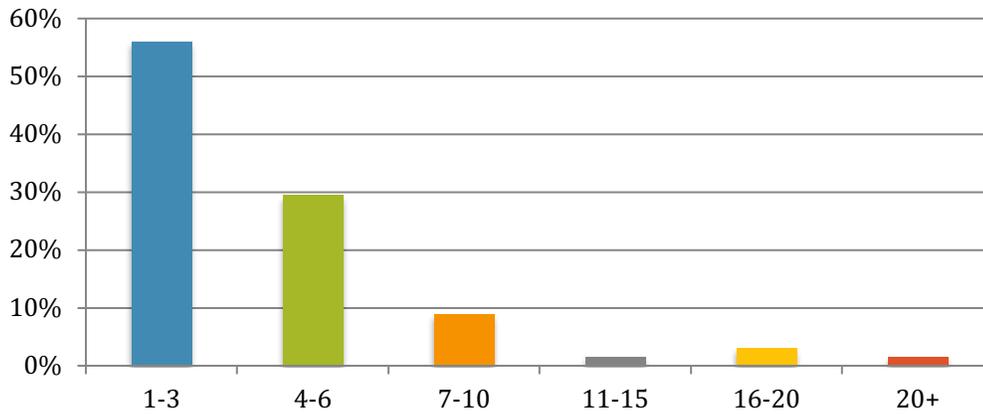
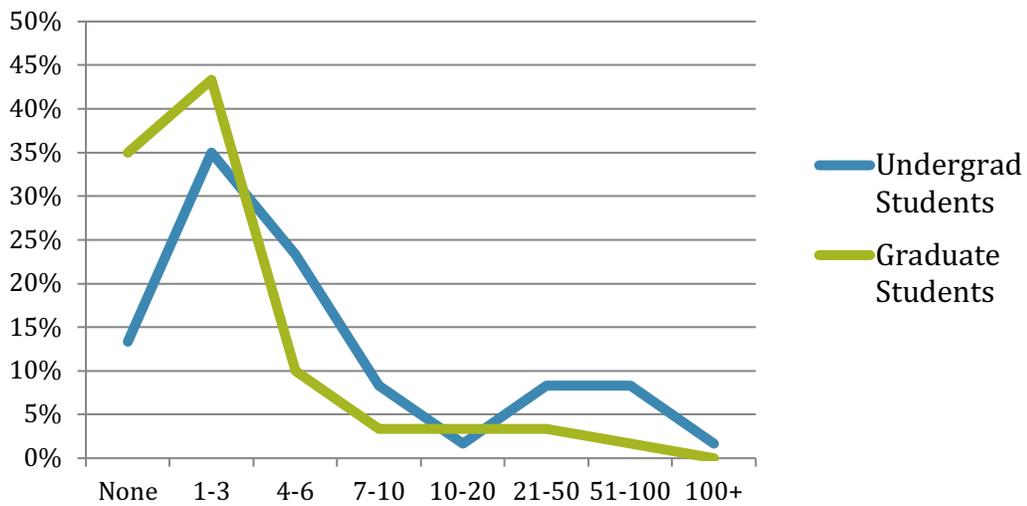


Figure 7. Number of students working with the community organization per year (N=60)



Student support roles

When students are working for community organizations they are most likely to assist with primary research, general support, program delivery, creation of program materials, program evaluation, and/or secondary research (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. How **do** University of Guelph students support the mandate of the community organization? (N=68)

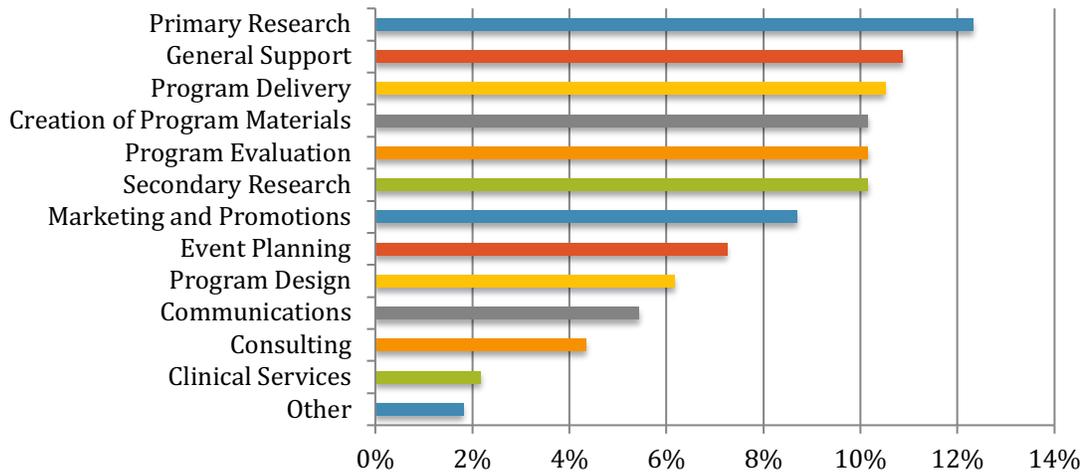
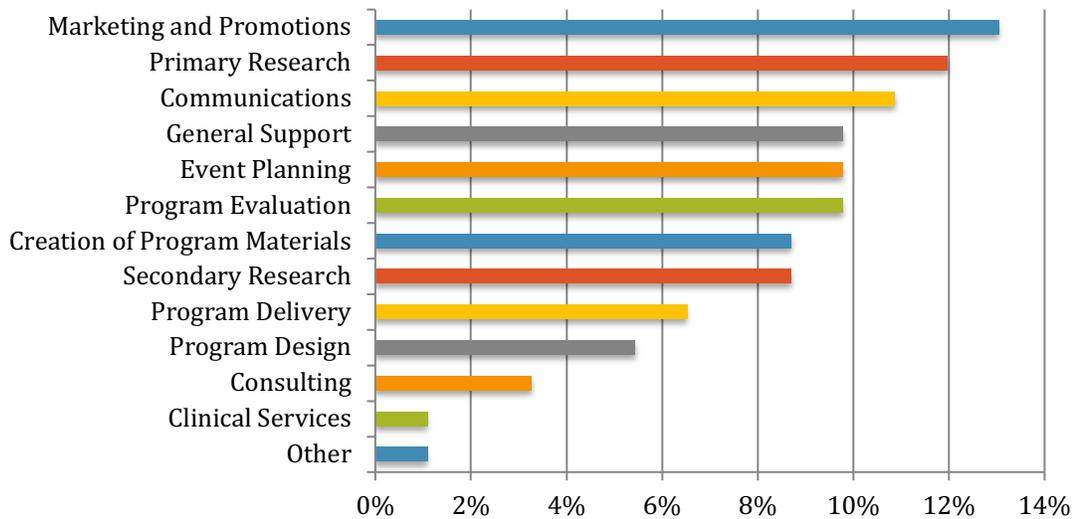


Figure 9 depicts information about the community organizations who have not previously partnered with the University of Guelph. Potential community partners see a benefit in getting students to help them with marketing and promotion materials, primary research, and communications (Figure 9).

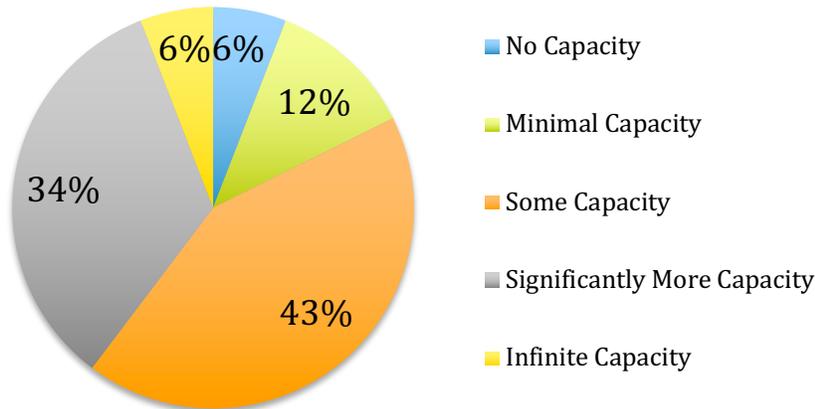
Figure 9. How **could** student roles support the mandate of community organizations? (N=16)



Capacity

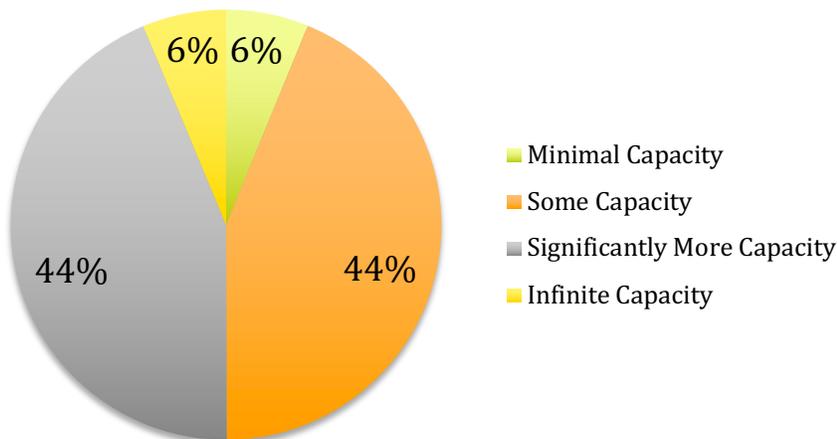
The majority of organizations (83%), previously or currently partnered with the University of Guelph have the capacity to grow the number of students volunteering (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Capacity of current and previous community partners (N=68)



Potential partners were also likely to state that they had either “some” or “significantly more” capacity to offer experiential learning opportunities to students (see Figure 11).

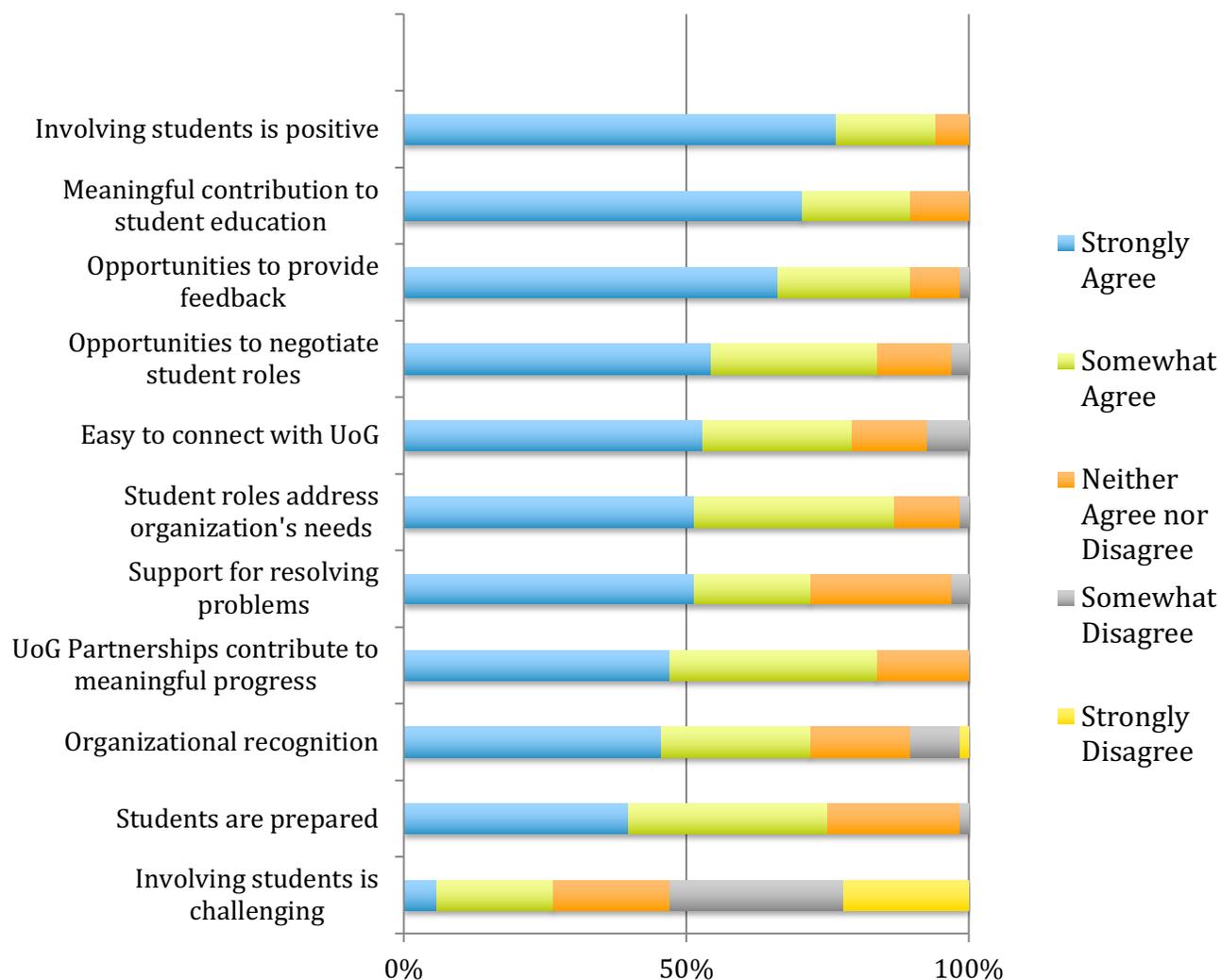
Figure 11. Capacity of potential community partners (N=16)



Overall perceptions

Overwhelmingly, community partners have positive perceptions regarding their experiential learning partnerships at the University of Guelph. According to Figure 13, most organizations agreed that involving students was positive (94%), they could provide a meaningful contribution to the student education (90% agree), and there were lots of opportunities to provide feedback (89% agree). Approximately, 7% felt it was difficult to connect with the correct person at the University of Guelph and 11% of respondents disagreed when asked if they were provided with recognition for their efforts. Moreover, about 25% stated that they “strongly” or “somewhat” agree that involving students in their organization is challenging.

Figure 12. Community organizations’ perceptions about partnering with the University of Guelph (N=68)



Qualitative themes

Positives for community organizations

The most common positive experience was that the organization gained knowledge and perspectives through the experiential learning partnership. Many found the students to be helpful and that students provided additional support to assist with tasks. One respondent stated; “Students have taken on tasks and responsibilities with energy and an extremely positive attitude”. Organizations often gave examples that cited the students’ energy, knowledge, and enthusiasm as positive contributions. One respondent wrote; “Students bring fresh perspectives, youthful energy, and knowledge of current best practices”. Another wrote that the students “bring a ton of passion, knowledge and hard work to their projects”, and another wrote that the students “gave us a lot of cool ideas, some we have implemented and some we plan to implement as we obtain more funding”.

An interesting answer that also fits into this category is the students’ “willingness to try new things and not be afraid of failure”. A few cited the opportunity to network as a positive experience. Others noted that having student support allowed them to complete tasks or projects that they would not have been able to do with their limited staff.

Others noted that students improved their program and were generally quite helpful. An interesting response was; “the students I had have been eager and self-directed”; another noted that students were “knowledgeable, easy to work with and very organized”.

Challenges for community organizations

1. Making connections and matchmaking

Overwhelmingly respondents stated that more support is needed to assist in making the right connections at the University of Guelph. Community organizations need to know, based on their needs, who or what department is best for them to connect with. One respondent noted “More facilitation of partnerships between students and the partner organization is helpful. In some cases, we have possible partner projects but may not be connecting with the right person because we are busy with our heads down into our work”. The second most common answer was for better matching or targeting of the needs of the organization with students’ skills. As one respondent pointed out “If there was an easier way to find students who might want to do research we know we need done that would be great. Right now, I find we are responding to university/student needs as opposed to the other way around”.

Better matching could also assist community organizations with their varied needs around the level of intensity and time of involvement. Some organizations find it more appealing to have a student for a longer time than for what the semester allows; there is not much consistency in student contribution when they are there so briefly. As one respondent wrote; “Every year we work with a different group of students. While this creates opportunity, it would be better to work with each group longer than one semester”. Another wrote; “The main challenge is timing. The semester format passes by very quickly and can be a challenge for our organization to keep up, and/or for the students to get into any level of depth with a topic”. Respondents spoke to a desire to see longer term projects with more seamless integration of students over multiple terms, as well as aligning less intensive projects with shorter engagement activities.

Respondents also spoke of a need for more promotion about the kind of support the University can provide. One respondent wrote; “better understanding of the opportunities available and types of work that could be accomplished. Understanding the annual goals of the organizations and making matches as appropriate for specific projects”.

2. Student readiness

Community partners expressed that their experiences with students varied based on students’ level of motivation, skill, and professionalism. Community organizations struggle when students are unmotivated and lack ownership for the project. Sometimes students require too much supervision and assistance and in general are not independent workers. Overall, major challenges included lack of staff, time, funds, and space to train/supervise students, as some require more supervision than can be provided. At the same time, some organizations thought that the opportunity to mentor, teach and help the students grow was a positive experience.

3. Poor quality outputs/results

The next most common challenge was the poor quality of skills and inconsistency of results. When work produced was of a poor quality, supervisors were required to expend more time and energy than deemed reasonable. Respondents articulated a need for clear expectations between students and organizations, and student accountability for the quality of final products. As one respondent wrote; “Negative experience includes not getting final products that are useful. Lots of meetings/contacts that are time consuming. Students not taking ownership for final product.” When the semester is over, some respondents expressed they did not think students have any interest in fixing or assisting with any errors they may have made in a report or document. This connects to issues of not having clearly defined expectations between the student and the organization regarding professionalism and accountability.

4. Resource Issues

Issues with resources and capacity were all interlinked with the overarching issue of the organization being too small and having too few staff to involve students in the work of their organization through experiential learning partnerships. More specifically, the most common issues with capacity and resources had to do with the inability to supervise or provide the training required by students. In addition to lack of time, lack of funding, lack of space, and lack of staff. Put simply by a respondent, involving students would “take time to plan, design, integrate and staff time is already limited.” Another respondent expressed “Just a matter of staff time for supervision of the student and to develop training plans and make sure it is a meaningful experience.” Others have said that they “have sporadic funding and thus, makes it difficult to commitment to consistent schedule for students.”

Community Round Table Discussions and Recommendations

On June 6, 2018, the authors of the study assembled 28 community partners to share and discuss the results of the survey, under the facilitation of Rebecca Sutherns of Sage Solutions. The meeting focused on discussing the four core themes of challenges that emerged from the survey findings – **matchmaking**, **student readiness**, **investment required**, and **results** - with a guiding question for each area. Based on the conversations, participants highlighted the following recommendations to address and improve campus-community partnerships moving forward.

Matchmaking: How can we ensure that partnerships connect the right people at the right time so that everyone gets what/who they need?	
Connectors/Brokers of partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear entry points to connect with knowledgeable, well-connected people (with continuity in service): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Point people to talk to who help ‘translate’ both sides; ○ A form to determine needs/asks to find best connection; ○ Events like speed dating and poster presentations of successful partnerships; • Website profiles of who’s who on campus.
Multi-formatted tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online portal for connecting to students, skills, EL opportunities, and objectives that align with organizational goals; • Database or platform to share current community initiatives, research projects, and opportunities; • Infographic to show avenues/points of entry to the university, and what each type of EL activity can look like.
Regular collaborative, networking events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-line and in-person opportunities to network, speed date, and dream up collaborations, as well as share best practices.
Tagging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tag skill development, topics/areas of interests, types of EL activities to help to assist all sides in finding a good match.

Investment Required: How can we ensure that: the resources required for effective campus-community partnerships are sufficient, and the investments of time/other resources are aligned with the value of the results to all parties involved?	
Support Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brokering (matching student capacity and duration); • Support and supervision for both longer-term planning, and carrying forward project ideas (longer than one semester) for more seamless experiences; • Knowledge and deep understanding of community context (through site visits, community involvement); • Training module/orientation for future and current partners.
Reciprocal Two-way Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early community involvement to define goals, work plans, timelines; • Regular communication to understand and respond to community partner experiences; • Access to university resources (library database) for learning.

Student Readiness: What level(s) of preparedness and/or supervision are reasonable to expect, and how can those expectations better be met?	
Partner Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity upfront and commitment and investment required (meetings, level of student supervision and support, administration); • Align learning outcomes to organizational opportunities, skills sought/ to develop; • Policies and procedures (legislation they need to know, police checks, insurance, etc.).
Student Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deeper understanding about organizational context; • Professional communication and behaviour; • Clear understanding of accountabilities, time commitment and how to seek support.
Detailed Work Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work plans that build in community needs and deadlines, with regular check points; • Timelines for deliverables; • Chain of command; • Balance course work with community partner needs.

Results: How can we maximize the likelihood that the intended outcomes for the student, the university and the community partner are consistently achieved?	
Clear and Consistent Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A common, articulated understanding of what can reasonably be accomplished in the EL activity; • Written agreements with tangible goals and timeline; • Templates and tools to help design work plans, expectations and agreements.
Open Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face meetings before, during and after to check in and evaluate progress; • Opportunities for campus-community connections to ensure the 'right fit' of EL activities to meet specific university and community partner objectives.
Student Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-placement course or orientation to provide overview of sector/ non-profit context, workplace professionalism, and culture.
Quality Assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment of time to develop partnerships and agreements that can meet mutually agreed-upon objectives; • Accountability of university to meet promised deliverables beyond term of student project; • Clear understanding and communication about capabilities, knowledge and expertise of specific student populations (undergraduate, graduate, discipline-specific).

The authors would like to sincerely thank all the community organizations and representatives who participated in the survey and the roundtable discussion; we deeply value your time and input. Your responses are an important part of our ongoing consultation with community organizations, industry partners, students, and other stakeholders. This input will help us to identify strategies that are responsive to the ideas, experiences, and feedback received that will, in turn, help to improve, expand, and enhance the quality of experiential learning partnerships and opportunities for all stakeholders.