
Community Engagement and Service Learning at Rollins College: Perspectives of Our Partners

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Overview

Developing an effective community service learning program requires matching the attitudes and training of student volunteer to the needs of partner organizations. This study presents the perspectives of community partners that have engaged with students from Rollins College through the Center for Leadership and Community Engagement (CLCE) and makes recommendations for the continued evolution of CLCE's programming.

The data for our study comes from a community-based, participatory impact evaluation method called Ripple Effect Mapping (REM), which captures a community's shared impression of the broad impacts of a program — the “ripples” that represent system-wide impacts beyond the initial focus of a program or intervention. The key output of an REM session is a collaborative mind map created by community stakeholders that summarizes their collective view of the program's impacts and benefits. We conducted two REM sessions in late February and early April of 2024, with two independent sets of community partners. The results of our assessment are based on a thematic analysis of the collaborative mind maps, group discussion, and other artifacts of the mapping process.

During our sessions, participants provided a great deal of feedback on the qualities of successful student volunteers. Their responses reveal four key qualities of successful volunteer-partner relationships:

- **Flexibility is key:** Partners value volunteers that can take on a variety of tasks and respond to the needs of their programs. They primarily see long-term volunteers as a useful source of *general human capital* rather than as providers of specialized skills tied to students' majors or programs.

- **Need for professionalism:** Partners tend to view their long-term volunteers as being functionally similar to employees. They expect volunteers to adhere to norms regarding responsiveness, appearance, and awareness of policies and procedures. Punctuality and reliability are highly valued.
- **Expectation management is essential:** Clear, upfront communication about roles, responsibilities, and policies is critical for long-term volunteer placements. This includes addressing confidentiality concerns and setting realistic expectations for both students and partners. Partners value students that are already engaged and passionate about their missions, but also worry that volunteers may have an inaccurate picture of the day-to-day work of their organizations.
- **The value mutual learning:** Many partners see mentoring their volunteers as an essential component of their work, but also want to learn *from* students. Multiple participants valued the perspective of volunteers for connecting with young people and promoting their programs in the broader community.

Additionally, partners provided insights into their relationships with the CLCE and its staff:

- **CLCE is a respected collaborator:** Partners were unanimous in their praise for CLCE's staff, particularly noting consistent communication, respect, and desire for authentic collaboration as key strengths.
- **Volunteers make contributions:** Partners described a number of ways that volunteers have contributed to their organizations. Many of these involve students taking on leadership roles or developing new content and programs that support the missions of their organizations.
- **Inter-organization connectivity adds value:** Partners appreciate the college's role in facilitating connections between different community organizations.

These insights have implications for CLCE's strategic planning and future programming.

- **Update volunteer pre-training** to emphasize professionalism, transferable soft skills in communication and empathy
- **Balance passion with humility**, giving students time and space to articulate their values and expectations prior to beginning a role, but also emphasizing the value of flexibility as a key component of servant leadership
- **Acknowledge and maintain CLCE's strengths** in communication and collaboration
- **Create opportunities for partners to connect with each other**, leveraging Rollins' role as a respected facilitator

Ripple Effect Mapping

Ripple Effect Mapping is a method of program evaluation which engages stakeholders to reflect and collaboratively map a program's history and impact. REM was originally developed in agricultural extension work to investigate the impacts of interventions on entire communities, particularly second-order qualitative effects that could not be easily captured through direct quantitative measures (Kollock et al., 2012). REM is simple, inexpensive, and capable of capturing complex interactions across distance and time. An REM session is also frequently motivating for the participants, and can be an effective way to reaffirm the values of a program or as a capstone marking the end of an implementation period.

An REM session is organized like an extended think-pair-share discussion activity and typically takes around two hours to complete. In addition to the participants, who represent stakeholders in the program being assessed, there is at least one primary facilitator who manages the event and discussions, and one or two co-facilitators who assist with the group mind mapping portion of the session.

The session proceeds as follows:

1. The facilitator welcomes the participants, gives an overview of the process, and answers any initial questions. The research process and any uses of the data generated by the session are also discussed at this time; participants are asked to complete consent forms authorizing their participation before the session continues.
2. Participants consider and free-write individual responses to a short prompt. This first activity is intentionally open and is intended to stimulate reflection. There is no required format for the responses and participants can write as much or as little as they wish. (10-15 minutes).
3. Participants group into pairs and engage each other in structured interviews, using question guides provided by the facilitators. The interview questions emphasize collecting specific stories related to the program (often phrased as *Tell me about a time when...*) and an appreciative approach to inquiry, where the focus is on the successes and positive elements of the program (Bellinger and Elliott, 2011). (20-30 minutes).
4. The largest part of the session is the full-group collaborative mind mapping activity, which engages all participants and provides an opportunity to make connections between different program impacts. The facilitator prompts the participants to share the thoughts and experiences that emerged during their reflections and interviews. The discussion can be structured, perhaps working through the interview questions one at a time, or free. The facilitator helps manage the flow of topics and asks follow-up questions when appropriate. As themes emerge from the discussion, the co-facilitators draw out a mind map on a large piece of paper taped to the wall at the

front of the room. This portion of the event can also be recorded and supplemented with the facilitators' notes. (45-75 minutes).

5. The session ends with closing statements and a short discussion regarding how the findings of the study may be obtained by participants.

The final outputs of the session include the written individual reflections and pair interview responses, the collaborative mind map produced by the full group, the audio recording of the complete discussion, and the facilitators' notes and observations. These artifacts can then be used as the starting point for further thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

The Impact Lab team conducted two REM sessions with representatives of community partners that have sustained experience engaging Rollins students in the work of their organizations. Sixteen total partners gathered over two sessions in late February and early April of 2024. These partners had all engaged in sustained, multi-year collaborations with Rollins students.

Results and Key Themes

Collaborative Mind Maps

Figures 1 and 2 show the collaborative mind maps produced during the two REM sessions in February (Figure 1) and April (Figure 2). Both maps were transcribed into electronic form using the XMind software package.

The rest of this section summarizes the key themes of the written responses and discussions, organized into two major categories:

- Attributes of successful student volunteers
- Relationships with the Rollins CLCE staff and the benefits their programs derive from that partnership

Attributes of Successful Volunteers

Summaries of individual responses

An individual REM question asked partners to describe the attributes of a successful volunteer. Table 1 shows a summary of the major themes identified in these responses, along with the number and fraction of the 16 partners that gave responses containing each theme.

The two top-level results make sense: Partners value volunteers that are primed to engage with their missions and are then able to reliably show up and complete tasks that benefit the organization. Although partners did not describe it specifically, their responses point to valuing volunteers that have *intrinsic*

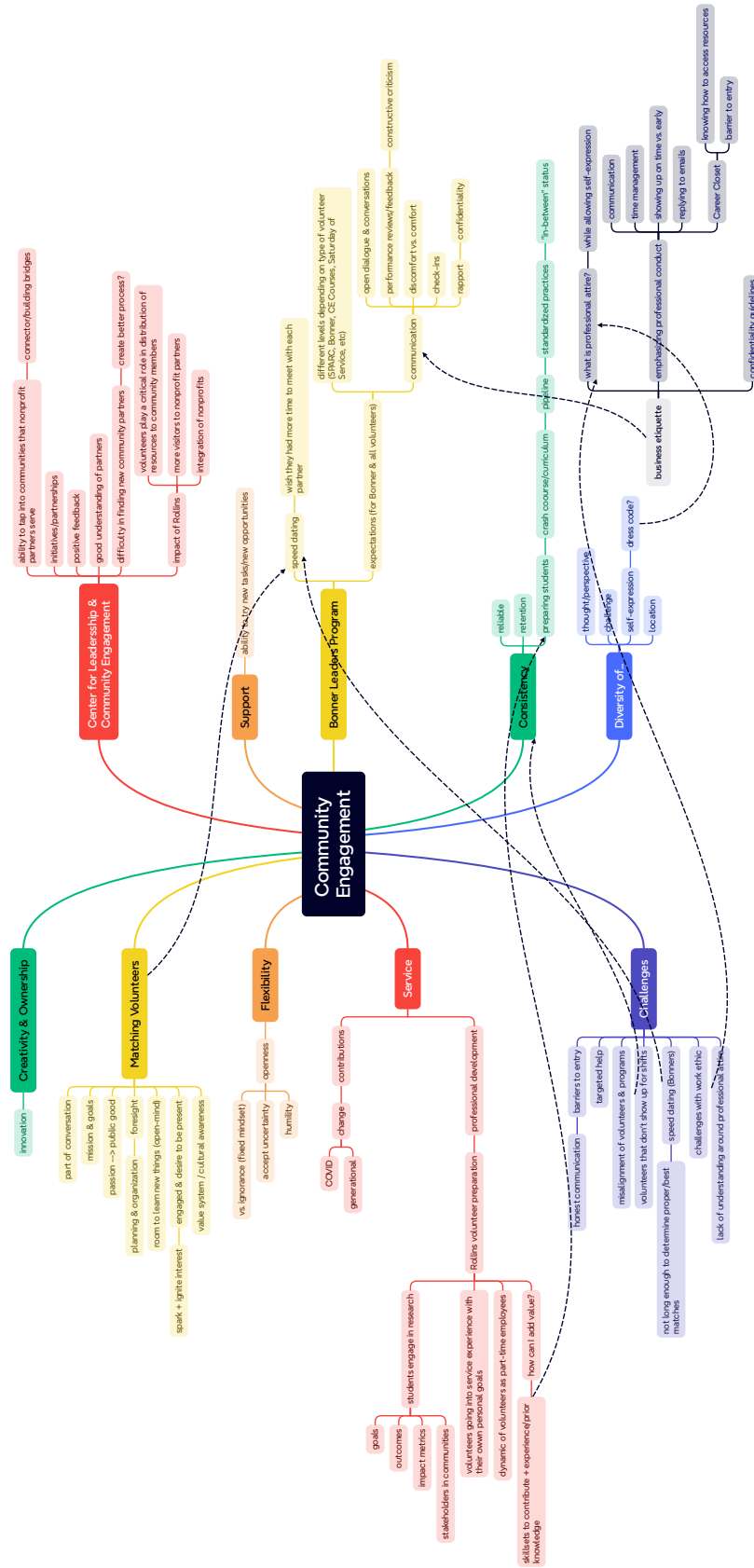


Figure 1: Collaborative ripple effect mind map produced by participants of the February session

Characteristic	Count	Fraction of observation
Reliable/committed/invested	11	.6875
Interest in mission	10	.625
Passionate/enthusiastic	6	.375
Flexible	6	.375
Curious/open-minded/willing to learn	6	.375
Compassionate	5	.3125
Takes initiative	3	.1875
Communication	3	.1875
Knowledge/creativity	2	.125
Specific skills (e.g., social media)	2	.125

Table 1: *Characteristics of successful student volunteers*

motivation to support their organizations, as opposed to volunteers that are primarily engaged only for the sake of classwork or resume building.

Partners also value “passionate” volunteers, but see that as less important than having an interest in the mission that can be nurtured through deeper exposure. As we’ll discuss in more detail below, there is some concern that students with the most passion for a mission may have expectations that are difficult to manage.

The other responses indicate a preference for general, *transferable* skills, in particular “soft” skills and emotional intelligence. Partners value volunteers that are able to engage with people different from them (indicated by “Compassion” as a high-scoring value) and take initiative in completing tasks. Interestingly, partners didn’t express much of a need for volunteers with specific professional or academic skills: two organizations mentioned having volunteers do social media work.

Flexibility

Partners value volunteers that can take on a range of tasks, particularly less visible roles that are nonetheless beneficial to the organization. In the words of one participant,

So we talked a lot about the importance of flexibility. I think in directly and indirectly, but I think just in terms of, at the individual level, both

in terms of the partner or the Rollins student, Rollins faculty involved in something just being willing to be flexible as things shift and change.

The importance of managing through changes was mentioned by a second participant, who emphasized that organizations need to respond to “crises” and unanticipated situations:

But also I think in within a changing world, responding to crises that come up, situations that were not anticipated, and, just kinda going with it because we have to and a willingness and sort of embracing of that flexibility.

A third partner mentioned, “eagerness to be flexible and to help with whatever is needed” as a desirable quality. Note that these quotes imply that student volunteers should not just be *capable* of responding to unusual situations, but that this is, in fact, a normal and expected part of their roles.

Professionalism

Multiple partners spoke about the need for volunteers to meet professional standards for dress and behavior. In particular, reliability and communication skills seen as essential:

- “So I think, another thing that would be helpful is preparing students because many times they haven’t had a job or they haven’t had a professional experience, and this is their first time in that arena. So making sure they understand the importance of consistency, reliability, communication, talking to everybody.”
- “And this year, we, input, in their full day training, a section on business etiquette, things that all of us completely take, take or not take advantage of that. We if we’ve been dealing with this our whole lives, and it’s something that they may not have thought of. And the importance of replying to emails is number 1 on my list.”

Partners also discussed the fact that current students may not yet be socialized into norms of professional dress or phone usage:

- “Like, we cannot make the assumption that this 18 year old kid is going to magically come in with all of this pre knowledge. This is their first exposure to the professional world. And there’s certain level of grace that is extended. But also, you know, have I had to have conversations of, you know, at the minimum, please wear jeans, not booty shorts. That sort of thing. Have I had to have that conversation more than once? Absolutely.”
- “...they don’t have that experience. You know, they don’t they they think they got this this placement and they’re good and they’re just gonna show up. We still make them interview. They still have to go through a complete onboarding process. They need that that opportunity to practice and to learn professional standards.”

- “We have, like, a volunteer trifold that they take home with them that says, this is what you wear, this is how you show up, that sort of thing. And that’s helped, you know, but, you know, it’s it’s very much getting kids up to speed.”

One partner discussed a tendency to view long-term student volunteers as *de facto* part-time employees, while also recognizing that many students haven’t yet had the chance to acquire experience typically associated with early-career professionals:

And it’s sort of this weird gap of this is a consistent person who’s here, who for all intents and purposes, functions as a part time employee, quote unquote. Right? And so what are the expectations of this person who is not quite just a volunteer for the sake of volunteering sake? They’re being mandated to a certain extent of 8 to 10 hours of volunteer service per week. But then also, this is also someone who has just graduated high school. So what did, you know, your average kid, if they’re working at a frozen yogurt shop, for example, maybe they get a little bit of that acumen. These kids may not have gotten the acumen.

Another aspect of professionalization is training volunteers to work with confidential or sensitive information. Because of the pseudo-employee nature of their engagement, long-term volunteers who may have access to sensitive information about clients or organizational operations. One partner said,

...those committed volunteers who are with you for a whole semester, but they’re not staff. Right? So we’ve had to develop some very definite guidelines about who’s in those circle of knowing about clients, about children, and who is who is not.

The same partner stressed the importance of teaching volunteers about the “need to know” principle, noting, “And to be careful that to understand that volunteers are not staff, and and that there’s a kind of a need to know.” Another partner shared a specific example of confidentiality breaches, saying,

... you have two volunteers standing in the lobby chatting about one of the clients, and there’s another client parent in the lobby. No professional would do this, but I think the other people have to be explicitly taught what the confidentiality of [clients’] rights are.

Setting expectations

As the previous two sections have described, partners value volunteers that function as flexible, professional pseudo-employees. Therefore, partners are invested in making sure that students’ interests align with the mission of the organization, with the goal of capturing students’ enthusiasm and creating buy-in.

There is a balance, though, in connecting with volunteers' passion while still preparing them for the day-to-day work of the organization:

I think, one of the things we talked about was trying...really hard to match students' passion to where they can do the most good. And sometimes that's a match and sometimes it's, you know, maybe a little bit off, but, I feel like the students who end up participating...tend to be very passionate about specific things, and it's just nice to be able to give them opportunities to...find how they can use that passion for good in the future.

Another partner discussed finding “shared interest” with students that “ignites them, excites them”, and how that leads to “quality work and quality collaboration”.

A participant discussed the challenge of keeping students engaged in less glamorous activities that may not align with their initial interest in the organization:

...the peppy person that's like, I wanna be in the front and or I wanna be with the kids...if you don't give them any inkling that they will ever do anything besides stack boxes in the back room, they're not going to want to come back, which is unfortunate because there are more things than just playing with children.

A response brought a different perspective, noting that sometimes students initial assumptions are not well-informed, but learning about the reality of the field can be a path to further growth:

I think that ignorance is also important because I think that sometimes the more you don't know when you go into a real world setting, sometimes it helps you just in general. So it's necessary sometimes to be a little bit ignorant about a topic, that opens the door to, hey. Well, maybe you don't come in through this door. You come around the corner and you're still able to help in the way you want to.

Partners valued the “speed dating” event, where volunteers could meet and match with prospective partners, but one wished it could be longer:

I wish that we had a little bit longer to engage with students...we have such a variety of programs and such a variety of ways that students can be helpful. And by the time I've sat and explained that we have three different programs with three different needs, the time is up and I haven't maybe gotten enough out of the student to say, you would be a good fit for x or y or z.

Mutual learning

Community partners expressed appreciation for perspectives and ideas that student volunteers bring to their organizations, and also value the opportunity to mentor volunteers and help them develop their interests.

One partner stated, “I think the creativity that we get in the students... that sense of freshness, and a new look, new eyes, is something we always welcome.” Another discussed how young volunteers provide input on the future direction of the organization:

One of the things, has been that they become a part of the conversation, to our needs as far as what is important to the mission and the goals of our organization, And their input from a, a younger generation is very important to where we’re going, in the future.

Previous sections discussed how partners want volunteers that are flexible and committed to the mission of their organizations, but partners also value the opportunity to contribute to students’ growth. For example,

- “But we have to have someone that’s committed to growth. Because they come in with this skill set, but they are coming into a real world setting, and they need to walk away with as much growth as they give to the organization.”
- “But one element that I feel that is added is I wanna make this a meaningful experience for you. What are some of the things that are important to you that we hit?”

In their individual responses, partners discussed their strategies for training volunteers. Most used some form of orientation and a tour of their location, supplemented by a handbook or manual. Multiple partners discussed volunteer training in developmental terms, with the explicit goal of gradually development volunteers into independent leaders. Seven of the 16 partners described training processes that included some type of structured coaching or mentoring beyond normal work supervision.

Partnership with the Rollins CLCE

Interactions with Rollins staff

Participants were unanimous in praising their relationship with the Rollins CLCE and its staff. Representative transcript quotes and written responses include:

- “They’re awesome”
- “Wonderful collaborations and endless partnership possibilities”
- “Particularly good with communication”
- “Always felt valued as a community member”

- “Always looking for new ways to connect and engage”
- “Care about the community partners and seek their feedback”

During the appreciative interview phase, participants were asked to describe their relationships with the CLCE. Half of respondents specifically mentioned communication and availability as being key strengths of CLCE. Other major themes of those responses included:

- Collaborative, mutually beneficial relationships and feeling supported (7 of 16 responses)
- Seeking the best interests of both students and the community, which includes seeking new ways of engaging and matching passions to needs (5 of 16 responses)

Partners also described CLCE as organized, friendly, and motivated.

During the discussion, one participant described a situation where CLCE provided resources to another group:

Being a really good resource partner, I know we had a situation it was a good situation where one of our partners needed, a space. And so being able to reach out to, CLCE and them being able to provide one of our partners space. That that was a huge deal for them to do, some very important work, community work. I think it's the ability to be able to really tap into the communities that they that we serve, that they also have access to as well.

Another discussed CLCE taking a proactive role in matching students to volunteer opportunities:

I just feel like CLCE reaches out to us and says, hey, we have a student that really wants to do this. Can you find a place for them? And is there something they can do? And so I feel like I mean, you guys know the community, the partners that you work with well and and match students well to not just the student's interest, but also perhaps things in the future that they might see themselves doing.

Contributions of student volunteers

Partners also discussed specific ways that Rollins student volunteers have contributed to their organizations. Specific examples include:

- Developing and delivering a “Philosophy for Kids” curriculum to discuss big ideas with young children
- Streamlining a provider list for a care coordination team
- Leading tours and promoting the Hannibal Square Heritage Center
- Researching and developing resources for a program to help children cope with grief

- Helping the organization with financial planning and structure
- Leading voter registration events
- SPARC Day project to remove invasive plants, install a new butterfly garden
- Providing core labor: managing stock, moving items, front-desk interactions

During the discussion, one partner gave a detailed description of how having additional volunteer labor benefits the organization by freeing leaders to focus on their core mission:

So while some of the processes and procedures might not be sexy, it's a huge, huge part of getting our patients the resources that they need in our community, and it frees up our physicians and other clinicians to spend that quality time with our patients. So it's a very, very important role in that whole process of taking care of the whole patient...it's also a great learning tool for somebody who's thinking about going into the premedical field because they get an opportunity to see kind of the continuum of care and how it all works behind the scenes.

Making connections between organizations

Finally, partners value the opportunity to connect with each other, and appreciate the role CLCE plays in facilitating community contacts. One partner highlighted this benefit, stating,

So I feel like just having this, like, this this time to resolve the beat and, like, actually us learn about each other's organizations and find ways that we could partner more in those businesses. It was really valuable.

Another partner emphasized the role of the college in facilitating these connections, noting,

We've also talked about how this collaboration, the volunteer work of Rollins students, can keep the community informed of the services available to them...We are providing great programs, including resources and services to our community, but not everybody in the community, especially the ones who really need those services are aware of that.

In a written response, one partner stated that work with CLCE had helped position them as a “thought leader”. Another discussed how, after working with Rollins students, they are now taking what they’ve learned about volunteer management and expanding to recruit more volunteers from UCF. Overall, partners value the opportunity to meet and connect with others engaged in community work, and see Rollins’ spaces and events as an effective way to build and maintain relationships.

Recommendations

A central tension in the participants' responses is the balance between viewing student volunteers as *de facto* employees – who are expected to take on a variety of roles and be engaged in the operations of the organizations – and as *trainees*, who are still learning about the realities of nonprofit operations and developing their skills and professional identities.

Based on the key themes identified by the partners, the Rollins CLCE should consider the following ideas for future programming.

- **Enhance pre-placement training for Bonner students and other long-term volunteers**
 - Partners value transferable soft skills in communication and empathy
 - Orient students, particularly those in the first year, to professional norms for dress, punctuality, and phone usage
 - Emphasize the importance of flexibility as a component of servant leadership, with a willingness to take on a variety of tasks to support the mission
 - Include specific training on confidentiality, which is important for volunteers working with medical patients, children, the bereaved, and other vulnerable populations
- **Continue to leverage SPARC Day**
 - Partners praised CLCE's success in coordinating large-scale volunteer activities
 - SPARC Day is ideal for taking on large, labor-intensive projects, particularly those that involve building, repair, and environmental work
- **In-depth matching process**
 - Extend the “speed dating” event to allow partners more time to interact with prospective volunteers
 - Provide guided training for Bonner students and other volunteers on articulating their passions and values, then discuss how to map those interests into real-world nonprofit work
- **Support mutual learning**
 - Allow students regular time and space to reflect on their volunteer experiences
 - Incorporate training on “intrapreneurship” – applying entrepreneurial thinking from within an existing organization
 - Consider a structured process for partners and volunteers to debrief and share ideas together
- **Maintain CLCE staff's existing strengths**

- Partners were consistent in their praise of CLCE’s communication, responsiveness, and coordination
- Partners also praised CLCE staff’s willingness to try new things and pursue new opportunities for collaboration – recognize that these attempts are valued
- **Create connections among community partners**
 - Build on CLCE’s status as a trusted partner to community groups
 - Consider hosting events, roundtables, and other sessions focused on face-to-face interactions among partners
 - This could also include training events for partners, such as detailed information on the GivePulse platform

Many of these recommendations relate to the training and development given to Bonner students and other long-term volunteers before and while they are engaged with community partners. To summarize, feedback from the participants suggests the following areas of emphasis in volunteer training:

- Socialization into professional norms: dress, punctuality, phone usage, etc.
- Developing transferable soft skills, including communication, empathy, and listening
- Dedicated training on confidentiality and the importance of “need to know” in managing clients’ information
- Honoring students’ passions and interests, while also acknowledging that flexibility and humility are key components of servant leadership
- Training in “intrapreneurship” principles to support students in taking initiative at their organizations
- Reflection on the volunteer experience

Conclusion

The nonprofit ecosystem in a community grows stronger when it draws upon a diverse body of leaders who are connected to the needs of their communities. Drawing upon the perspectives of our community partners, this study has shown that Rollins is effective in developing and deploying student volunteers that then contribute to the missions of their organizations. Our results provide further insight into the attributes of successful volunteers – including flexibility, professionalism, communication, and empathy – which has implications for the volunteer development and placement process. Continuing dialogue with partners can focus on the development process of long-term volunteers, and on Rollins’ role as a hub for connection in the Central Florida community.

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