

An Evaluation Study of PHENND: Participant Perceptions of a Regional Service Learning Network

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CHAPTER ONE: Overview

This evaluation report explores the perceptions and values of PHENND - the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Developments - as a regional service learning network. There is growing interest in the potential of regional linkages among service learning organizations, but little consensus about what the structure or purposes of such linkages might be. This evaluation report has several goals. First, it is designed to inform PHENND's work with Learn and Serve (a federal program to build and sustain university capacity for implementing service-learning). Second, it is designed to provide information for PHENND's overall strategic planning processes. It is also hoped that this final document can also be part of a broader discussion about the purposes and directions of regional service learning networks.

PHENND is a network of institutions of higher education (IHEs), non-profit agencies, community organizations, and individuals in the Delaware Valley with the shared goal of working together to strengthen the region's service and service learning activities. PHENND's activities such as conferences, email newsletters, and technical assistance attract and serve a broad array of individuals and organizations from the IHE, service learning, community service, and non-profit communities throughout the region. See Figure I (Appendix) for a graphical representation of the relationship between the PHENND's network, PHENND's activities, and PHENND's impacts.

The evaluation suggests that participants in PHENND see it as a multi-dimensional network with varied activities and in which participation falls along a continuum. At one end of the continuum are participants who describe PHENND primarily as a source of information and inspiration. At the other end are participants who report that PHENND and partnerships developed through PHENND have had a large impact on their programs. Many people, wherever they may fall along the participation continuum, indicate that PHENND has created linkages - whether loose or tight, virtual or face-to-face - between people and programs in the Philadelphia region.

This report addresses three major questions:

- Who participates in PHENND?
- How do participants perceive PHENND's activities and impacts?
- What recommendations are made by PHENND participants?

Chapter Two of this report addresses these questions using qualitative data collected from participants in PHENND's major regional initiatives during the fall of 2007. Chapter Three addresses the same questions drawing on an on-line survey of 81 recipients of PHENND's on-line newsletter during the winter of 2008. Chapter Four consists of brief concluding comments. The appendix includes additional details about the on-line survey.

The evaluation was designed and implemented by Dr. Sukey Blanc, with input and advice from PHENND's Executive Director Hillary Aisenstein. Data were collected between October 2007 and February 2008 and consisted of two primary sets of activities: a) qualitative fieldwork including interviews, focus groups, and observations with service learning coordinators and community partners and b) an on-line survey of 81 PHENND participants.

CHAPTER TWO : Perceptions of PHENND - Participants in major regional initiatives

In this chapter, we report on qualitative fieldwork that was primarily conducted from October through December 2007. Interviews and observations focused on participants who were involved in face-to-face regional PHENND activities. This data set included staff from colleges receiving Learn and Serve grants, participants in a regional gathering of service learning coordinators, and regional community partners. By regional community partners we are referring to partnerships that are supported by the network staff and the network as a whole, rather than partnerships between individual universities and community groups. Figure II in the Appendix provides an overview of the qualitative fieldwork.

Who participates in PHENND?

The university-based participants (8 women, 2 men) represented in the qualitative data all play roles related to coordinating or directing service or service learning at their schools. At least three were also faculty members. Their institutions included 5 colleges and universities associated with Catholic orders and 5 non-denominational colleges and universities. Participating institutions represent a range of selectivity (from a community college to highly selective undergraduate and graduate institutions) and a range of sizes (from small colleges to large universities). This set of data included 7 sub-grantees of Learn and Serve, a federal grant designed to support and institutionalize service learning on college campuses. The Learn and Serve sub-grantees are equally divided among institutions new to service learning, institutions with some experience, and institutions where service learning is more mature, and all of these were represented in the qualitative data.

The community partners represented in the qualitative data consisted of the three programs with which PHENND is involved on a regional level. PHENND has a longstanding collaboration with two of these programs. Both longstanding collaborations involve targeted initiatives to ensure that low-income residents of the Delaware Valley have access to federal programs and funding to which they are legally entitled. The third regional partnership focuses on supporting an initiative related to enhancing the education of high school students in Philadelphia. This partnership was still in its early stages during the period of this evaluation.

How do participants describe PHENND activities and impacts?

Interviewees engage with a large range of PHENND resources including the email newsletter, conferences and other face-to-face meetings, and technical assistance from the PHENND staff. According to many university participants, PHENND has been especially helpful in introducing service learning to their campuses, as well as providing resources and information about service and service learning. According to the community partners, PHENND has helped start-up some initiatives, as well as recruiting volunteers and publicizing the partners' activities.

University-based participants: From the perspective of many of the university-based participants, the newsletter, technical assistance from the Executive Director, and the network itself are all important resources. One participant focused especially on the newsletter,

I use the newsletter a lot. A lot of the students get it because they are working with Scholars in Service to Pennsylvania [a service grant

coordinated through PHENND]. I also go through it and send it out if I know that students are interested in particular issues. I would get a lot of notices separately, but in the PHENND newsletter they come altogether. It's one of the best things with our relationship with PHENND.

Others focused on the role that the PHENND staff and other network members, along with the newsletter, play in providing supports for faculty professional development and the creation of service learning courses. One of the experienced Learn and Serve sub-grantees reported,

You get on the list serve and then you get information every week or so. At [my institution], Hillary came in and did a session for the faculty. It was a way to get started. She brought in faculty from other institutions who were doing service learning.

There are not only human resources. There's networking for financial purposes, like Learn and Serve gives us financial assistance. On the email there's a chapter with job opportunities. I pass that on to countless students.

That weekly newsletter is constantly fresh with PD. The local aspect is especially useful. We're all on list serves that address things on the national level. This networking lets us know what everyone else is doing in the region.

I've called Hillary so many times and said 'I'm thinking about such and such. Do you know anyone who's doing it and can talk to us?' And she inevitably knows a few people.

A Learn and Serve grantee newer to service learning also described how the PHENND network helped initiate service learning at her institution.

Last May, we had faculty development day. 80% of it was directed to service learning. Someone from PHENND and a crew from [another college] came here, and they led it. Hillary opened the day, and then the faculty from the other school did discipline specific workshops for interested faculty.

In addition to kicking off service learning at their institutions, participants report that PHENND and the PHENND network provide ongoing resources for service learning curricula, provide resources for assessing and improving service learning courses, provide information that can be shared with community partners, is a conduit of funding for students involved with service, provide information about potential placements for students, support a network of service-learning coordinators, and help participants

develop stronger community partnerships. The value of PHENND as a regional network threads through all of these comments. As one of the more experienced PHENND participants put it,

My participation has allowed me to meet my colleagues and to interact with them readily. They are right here. It's nice to quickly grab a cup of coffee and find out how they are dealing with things. It's great to have a network of very local folks.

In spite of their enthusiasm for PHENND many university-based participants also identified challenges in developing service learning on their campuses. Approximately ¾ of the interviewees described ongoing involvement with PHENND as an important part of moving service learning forward at their institutions. A smaller number were less confident about the potential of increasing the level of interest in service learning on their campuses. The challenges that were mentioned varied from campus to campus, but generally reflected an actual or perceived disconnection between service learning and the academic or research priorities of their institutions. In several cases, service learning coordinators identified discontinuities between interest in service learning in offices such as admissions and lack of interest in service learning by faculty members. In other cases, service learning was described as playing an important role in institutions' academic plans. Participant goals for expanding involvement by faculty members and university leaders are also identified below in our analysis of the on-line survey.

Community Partners: From the perspective of the two community partners interviewed for this study, PHENND also plays important roles, with slight variations across the two partners. Representatives from one partner describe themselves as part of PHENND's network and consider educating college students as part of their mission. Representatives from the other community partner that was interviewed respect the work of PHENND, but focused more on the role of PHENND's Executive Director as a support to the organization's initiatives.

Like university-based staff, all community partners value PHENND's newsletter. Both partners identified the important role played by PHENND in initiating and/or sustaining their organizations' initiatives. For both partners, PHENND fills an important need by connecting local college students as volunteers in federal initiatives designed to provide additional resources to low-income families and individuals.

One partner described PHENND's role in initiating and providing ongoing support to a new anti-poverty initiative and as providing a variety of other connections.

PHENND and a faculty member from one of the universities called me. Together we put together a grant to do outreach for [the federal program]. When we got the grant, we hired two volunteer coordinators.

The student coordinator was based at PHENND, and Hillary supported her. The Coalition, the university, PHENND, and PHENND's network all worked together. It wouldn't have happened without PHENND. The funding stopped, but the volunteer outreach program continued, and I stayed in touch with Hillary.

Hillary has got a great network of local universities. It's such a strong network. They reach out for our events every year. They contact us if they have a VISTA position. PHENND also gets volunteers for our programs.

I get calls from students or sometimes from faculty who like to work with us. It provides the students with an organized, structured experience. Our staff takes time to train the students and to get feedback from them. It's a good experience for everyone.

Representatives of the other longtime community partner (which also recruits volunteers to enroll participants in a federal initiative) portray PHENND as even more central to their initiative. In this initiative, the PHENND Executive Director helps connect the initiative to local universities and also acts as convener of the local coalition working on the issue.

Initially [my organization] ran the whole thing. In 2001, our business model changed so that we would partner with organizations that had these clients. We would act as the consultants and provide the resources.

Hillary was the convener of [a local group working on the issue]. I know that [she] was interested in educating students about poverty and helping students understand how it plays out for people if they are living in poverty. She convened this group because she was also interested in working with groups in [this geographic area].

Part of Hillary's job in PHENND is to go around to the colleges and university and talk to the service learning departments. As part of that she tells them about my program. If they're interested, she matches them up. I've gone to a couple of universities and talked about the program at service learning events. Hillary spreads the word about our organization's initiatives.

What recommendations for improvement are made by PHENND participants?

Interviewees were asked if they had any recommendations for PHENND. The major recommendations made by participants in this part of the study reflect the value that interviewees place on the range and the quality of the work that PHENND is already

doing. Recommendations focused on a desire for stable funding, institutionalization, and increased staffing levels for PHENND. As one service learning coordinator pointed out, “It would be great if there was a stable funding source...we wish Hillary could clone herself.” According to someone involved in one of the community initiatives, “I’m very grateful that Hillary exists and that she gives us a lot of attention. If Hillary moved on we would be sorely troubled.”

Summary of Chapter II

Interviews and observations suggest that participants who are highly involved in PHENND activities value the resources that are provided directly through PHENND such as grant funds, information about other programs and resources, and professional development. Most interviewees also described themselves as being part of the PHENND network and identified the value of connecting with other members of the network. Interviews and observations also indicate that the types of connections described and the types of resources used are quite varied. Not surprisingly, university-based staff are more likely to describe PHENND as a network that fosters peer learning, while regional level community partners are somewhat more likely to focus on the role that PHENND plays in directly supporting their initiatives. When asked about recommendations for PHENND, the majority of interviewees, whether university-based or community-based, focused on the importance of building PHENND’s capacity to continue and even expand its work.

CHAPTER THREE: Perceptions of PHENND - Readers of the e-newsletter

An email survey was conducted in February, 2008 using an instrument that was previously administered by the program staff. The survey was sent to the entire mailing list of PHENND’s email newsletter (over 2000 people). It yielded 81 anonymous responses. These responses represent those readers who take the time to open and read the e-newsletter and include at least some of the 12 participants who also participated in face-to-face interviews. Nevertheless, the on-line survey provides data from a much wider group than the qualitative sample and the survey responses indicate a wide variety of participation patterns.

The survey questions complement and overlap with instruments used for qualitative data collection, but are not identical to them. The survey was designed with assistance from Randy Stoecker of the University of Wisconsin with the goal of identifying participants’ perceptions of the value and impact of PHENND’s activities. It includes traditional closed-ended survey questions and spaces for comments and explanations.

Who participates in PHENND?

About 2/3 of respondents to PHENND's 2008 on-line survey are university faculty, staff, or students. Survey respondents are equally likely to be involved for less than five years or to be involved for five years or more (see Appendix, Figure III for more details).

Among survey respondents, participants are primarily drawn from universities and non-profit organizations. Staff at nonprofit agencies with a focus that is city-wide or larger form the largest single group (27). University faculty (16), community service or service learning coordinators (14), and other higher education staff (administrators, grant-coordinators, etc.) (14) are also well-represented. Smaller numbers of K-12 staff (6), graduate students (5), undergraduates (3), and people in other jobs (5) also responded to the survey.¹

Survey respondents are fairly evenly divided between those who have been involved with PHENND for a few years or less and those who have been involved with PHENND for 5 years or more.

How do participants describe PHENND activities and impacts?

Among on-line survey respondents:

- 100% rate the email newsletter as very important or important.
- 80% rate conferences and workshops as very important or important.
- 68% rate the knowledge of the PHENND staff as very important or important.
- 62% rate the PHENND website as very important or important.
- 48% rate technical assistance or grants as very important or important.

In contrast to the analysis of interview data which suggested some differences among university involvement and community partner involvement, survey responses do not contain many patterns that distinguish university-based participants from non-university-based participants.

Like interviewees, many survey respondents highlight the value of the newsletter. They write about the range of information available in the newsletter: professional development opportunities for staff, funding opportunities, service opportunities, potential partners for service learning activities, jobs, and much more. They also note that the newsletter is a way for them to communicate with others about their own programs' activities. Many respondents also mention that they pass on information from the newsletter to students, colleagues, and friends.

¹ The total here (86) is slightly higher than the total number of survey respondents (81) because five people listed themselves in two different job categories.

As one person wrote about the email newsletter in an open-ended comment,

It gives me quick access to most recent publications on policies and strategies in my research field (educational partnerships between schools and higher education institutions). And I trust the quality of the pubs listed as I have found them to be of high integrity and quality.

Like interviewees, survey respondents also often write about the value of the staff and other members of the network. For example, one survey respondent commented,

The workshop that we did to get started with service learning began with Hillary. She gave [someone at another school] the contact name for a speaker. [That person] gave that contact to me. I would never have made these contacts if it was not for the regional meeting, the networking time. The resources that it provides make a big difference for what I can give to my faculty.

The value of conferences and networking events are also highlighted. For example, one participant wrote that a connection made at a PHENND conference led to new groups participating in the university's programs for children. Another participant wrote that meeting someone at a PHENND event led to important contributions to a new strategic plan.

As with the interviewees, survey responses often highlighted the contributions of the Executive Director in helping them access the resources of the larger PHENND network. According to one participant who identified the knowledge of the PHENND staff as an important resource, "It is Hillary I mean when I say the PHENND staff." Overall, 68% of participants rated the knowledge of the PHENND staff as an important or very important resource.

Survey data also provide the following findings about the perceived impacts of PHENND.

- Involvement with PHENND increases all participants' knowledge.
- Involvement with PHENND increases approximately 2/3 of participants' ability to network.
- Involvement with PHENND increases the resources, regional connections, and overall effectiveness for the programs of more than half the participants.

Each of these types of impact (knowledge, networking, and program improvement) is discussed below. Figures IV and V in the Appendix include additional details about the reported impacts in knowledge, networking, and participants' programs.

Increase in participants' knowledge: Every respondent identified at least one area in which involvement with PHENND had increased his or her knowledge. 96% of survey respondents report an impact on their knowledge about the region, 87% report an impact on their knowledge about service learning, and 95% report an impact on their knowledge about other things.

19 respondents (approximately 25%) describe increases in their own knowledge, but do not report changes in their networks or their partnerships. One survey respondent who falls into this group vividly describes the value of being part of PHENND,

Largely I have used Hillary as a resource when others talk about the issues PHENND cares about and need help of getting connected to a larger entity. My own feeling is that it is key for the person in this position to be committed to these issues and to serve as the information sharer and the linker of multiple entities. Hillary has been great at this and the newsletter is a great example of a resource that everyone can use even if they use none of the other services.

Increases in participants' ability to network: 67% of survey respondents (53) reported that involvement with PHENND had been important or very important in increasing their ability to network. Of these, some participants reported expanding their own networks, while others reported expanding the networks or the connections for their programs.

As one person who explained the expansion of his or her own network explained it,

[PHENND] shows me the many ways there are to help make the world a better place and provides a place to meet with like-minded people.

Increase resources, connections, effectiveness, and activities for participants' programs:

In addition to the impact that PHENND has on participants' individual networks, the survey also shows that involvement with PHENND increases the capacity of many of their programs. 58% of survey respondents report that involvement with PHENND increases the resources of their programs, 56% report that it increases the connections of their programs, and 53% report that it increases the overall effectiveness of their programs.

Like interviews, survey comments illustrate how the PHENND network, its resources, and the Executive Director all help to initiate programs and to continue to support them as they evolve.

I've been connected by Hillary to many a speaker to lead workshops and events I have organized. I have also recruited many participants for events by advertising them in the e-newsletter.

New connections made via the service-learning directors' meetings. Participated in the Project SCORE evaluation and assessment training workshop series at Temple as a result of the PHENND newsletter--learned a lot that I use at work and made valuable connections with other participants.

As a result of participation in PHENND, we have been able to implement a Scholars in Service to Pennsylvania program on our campus, have secured an AmeriCorps Vista, and have had professional development.

I now have access to service-learning faculty nationwide and have downloaded valuable service learning lesson plans from the website.

What recommendations for change are made by PHENND participants?

Survey respondents were asked to identify priorities among 8 possible areas of concentration for the network. Overall, university and non-university based participants identified the same 4 areas of greatest priority: helping campuses and community-based organizations find appropriate partners; helping faculty members learn about and implement service learning; helping community organizations understand service learning, and increasing the awareness of service learning among university leaders. However, within these 4 areas, non-university-based participants had a clear preference for focusing on finding appropriate partners and helping community organizations understand service learning, while university-based participants placed greater emphasis on helping faculty members and university leaders learn about and implement service learning (see Appendix, figure VI).

Summary: Perceptions of PHENND among on-line survey respondents

Analysis of 81 on-line survey responses suggests that perceptions of PHENND among engaged readers of PHENND's on-line newsletter are both similar and different from the perceptions of participants who were interviewed and observed because of their active involvement in PHENND regional activities. Virtually all survey respondents report that they value the email newsletter. Majorities report that involvement with PHENND has increased their capacity to network and that they perceive meetings and conferences, knowledge of the PHENND staff, and the PHENND website as very important or important resources. While face-to-face interviews suggest some differences in the ways that university-based participants and community partners perceive PHENND, analysis of survey data indicates few differences between university-based participants and non-university-based participants with the exception of the relative weight placed on priority

areas for PHENND's focus. On the other hand, the survey does surface a group of "PHENNDies" who value PHENND as a source of information and connection with service learning and community service in the Philadelphia region even though their connection with PHENND may be limited to reading the newsletter or does not explicitly relate to their current activities.

CHAPTER FOUR: Concluding Comments

This evaluation indicates that PHENND is a vibrant network whose members have a varied and layered set of ties with each other and with the PHENND staff. This is evident from interviews and observations of participants in regional activities. Participants value PHENND's ability to provide information about what is happening in the region. They also value the direct support for service learning and for regional initiatives provided by the staff (especially the Executive Director) and by other members of the network. Similarly, survey respondents universally report that they value the information provided by PHENND. A large number also report the value of support from the PHENND staff as well as the value of the connections that they and their programs are able to make through PHENND.

The current study was not designed as a full examination of all the needs, gaps, or impacts of PHENND and its members. However, the study does clearly indicate that participants in PHENND perceive it as a network that creatively supports and connects a variety of issues and constituencies and that it creates synergy and shared knowledge among people and programs in the Philadelphia region. Furthermore, PHENND has gone beyond supporting existing programs to bring together members of its network to support regional initiatives that combine public policy with community service and service learning.

This study suggests that next steps for PHENND might include the development of a stable infrastructure and funding base (including expanding the staff) which will allow it to continue supporting the varied priorities of its members. While a higher degree of institutionalization is likely to be a part of PHENND's growth, this exploration of the value and perceptions of PHENND as a regional network suggests that institutionalization should not come at the cost of flexibility, fluidity, and openness which have fostered rich and diverse types of involvement and passion that many participants describe as vital parts of the network.

APPENDIX

FIGURE I: Picturing PHENND

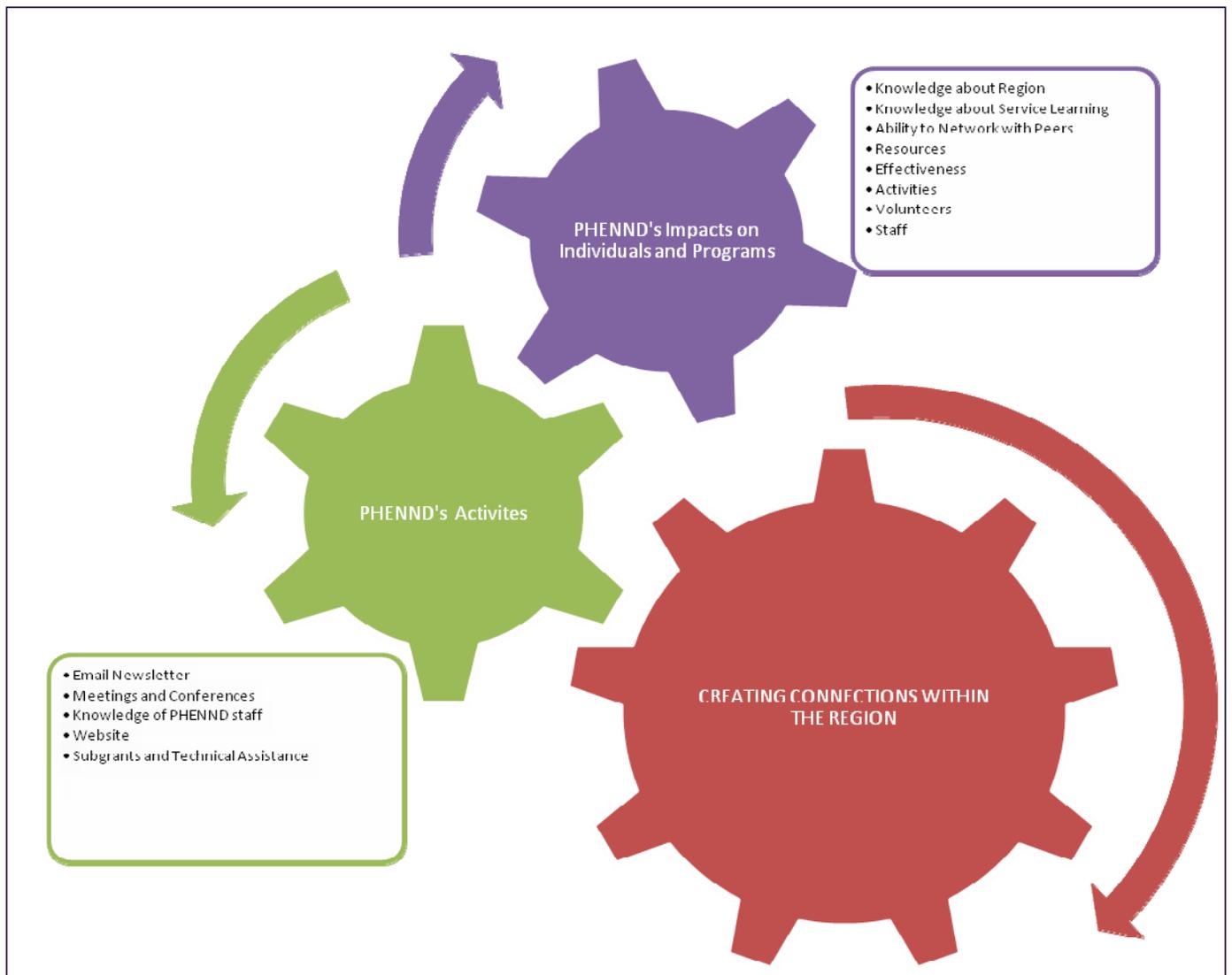


Figure II: Qualitative Data Collection Activities

Organizations and institutions represented in the qualitative data	# of participants in individual or group interviews	Events observed
10 colleges and universities participating in PHENND activities	8 service learning and service coordinators ²	Learn and Serve Sub-grantee meeting Service Learning Coordinator networking meeting
3 community partners	4 staff members or long-term participants	Coalition meeting to plan and organize outreach effort by regional partner Conference presentation by a partner
Total 13	12	4

² 2 service learning coordinators participated in a coordinator meeting, but not in an interview.

Figure III: Responses to Question: *How long have you been involved with PHENND or aware of PHENND?* (On-line survey, February 2008) (n=80)

Within the past year	15% (12)
About a year ago	10% (8)
A few years ago	30% (24)
About 5 years ago	17.5% (14)
Between 5 and 10 years	26.3% (21)
More than 10 years	1.3% (1)

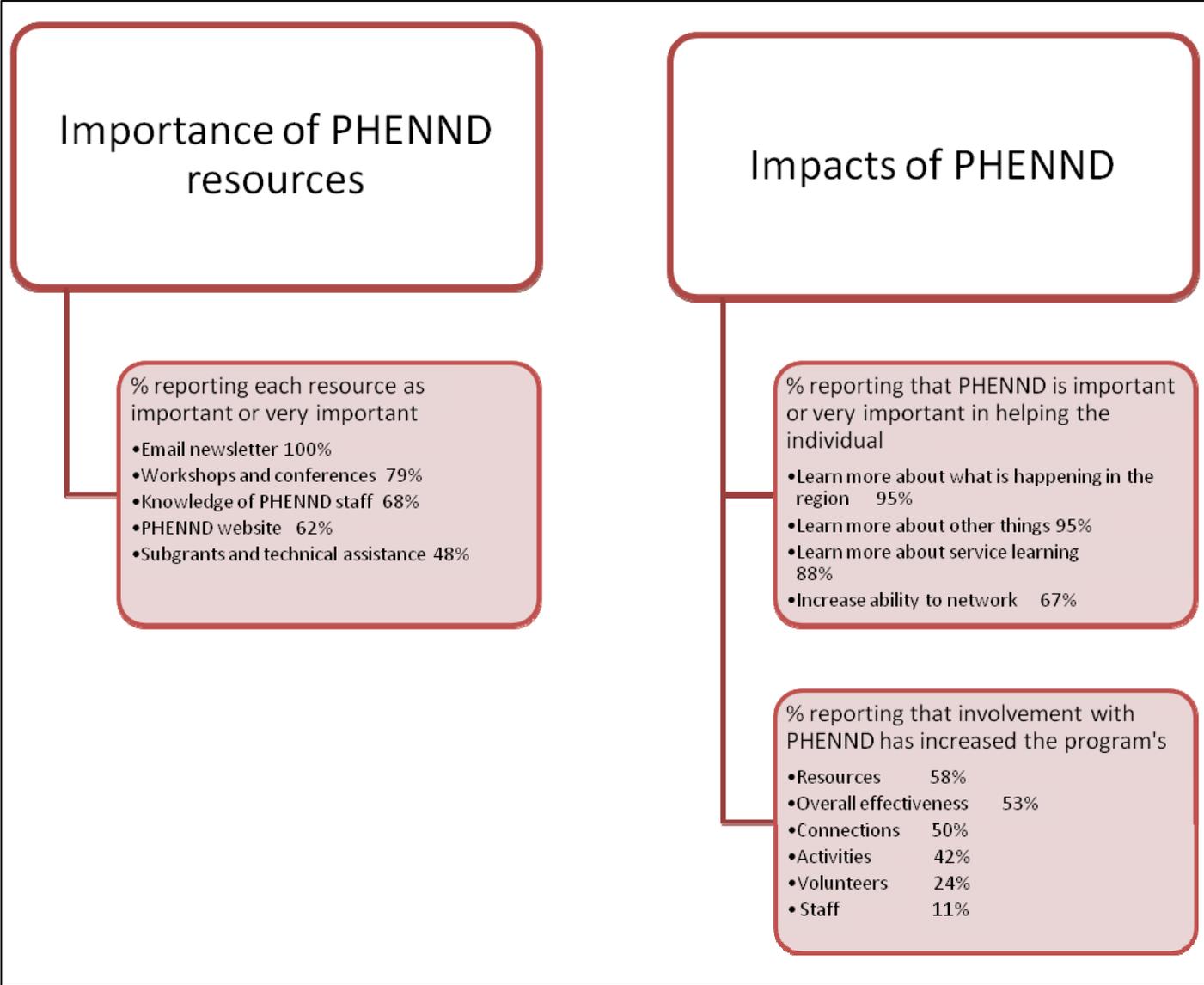


FIGURE IV: Reported Value of PHENND Resources, Reported Impacts on Individuals, and Reported Impacts on Programs

Note: The total number of survey responses is 81. Percentages for importance of resources and individual impacts are based on the total number of respondents. 74 people responded to questions about the impact of PHEND involvement on their programs. Percentages for program impacts are based on the number of respondents for this set of questions.

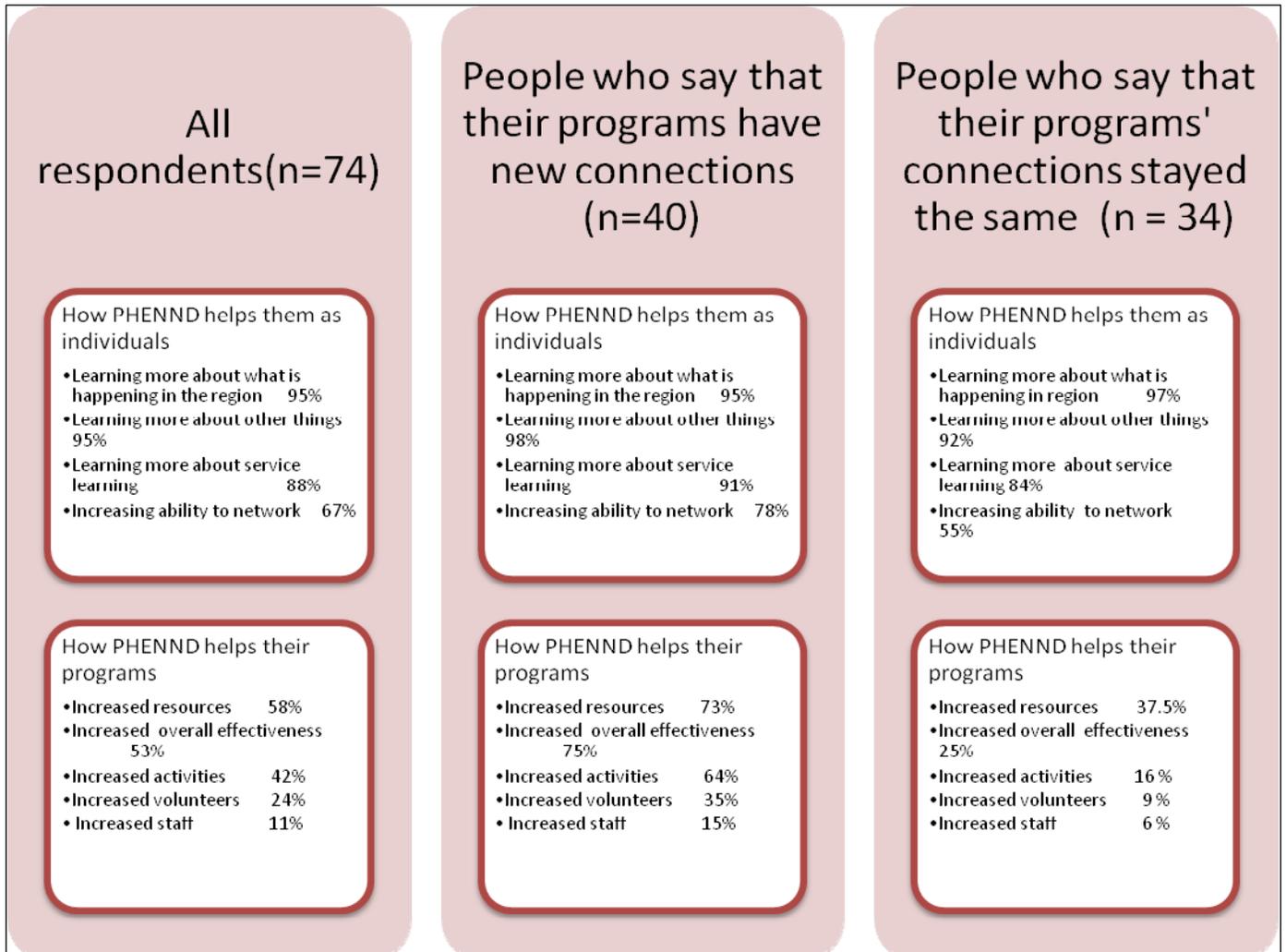


FIGURE V: Reported Impacts on Individuals and Program (Distinguishing between people who do and don't report new program connections)

Note: This analysis includes only respondents who answered questions about the impact on their programs

Figure VI: Top Priorities for PHENND Focus Identified in Survey Responses

	All participants identifying this as a priority for PHENND (n=81)	University-based participants identifying this as a priority for PHENND (n=46)	Non university-based participants identifying this as a priority for PHENND (n=27)
Helping campuses and/or community organizations find appropriate partners	39%	29%	58%
Helping faculty members understand service-learning and how to implement it	33%	33%	33%
Helping community based organizations understand service-learning and how to implement it.	32%	21%	52%
Working with college/university leadership to increase their awareness of SL.	32%	38%	24%

Other areas which received slightly less interest overall were the following:

- Documenting existing campus-community partnerships in the regions. (26%)
- Managing multi-university projects and initiatives. (25%)
- Helping campus-community partnerships evaluate their effectiveness. (21%)
- Supporting community-service and service-learning at member campuses. (20%)

Notes: These numbers are suggestive of a pattern, but the only difference that is statistically significant at a level of .05 is the difference in priorities for helping campuses and CBOs find appropriate partners

University-based participants excludes anyone who also listed a non-university role and non-university based participants excludes anyone who also listed a university role.