

SOURCE Champion of the Month  
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**Lisa Townsend**

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*“Rather than focusing on seeing an immediate impact,  
I recommend focusing on how you serve the community”*

**What do you do as your community engagement activity?**

Teach a service-learning practicum.

**How much time do you spend on service per week/month?**

Ranges between 1-3 on average.

**How did you begin to work with your community-based organization (CBO)?**

I learned about SOURCE through a colleague at the University of Maryland, Debbie Gioia, who had participated in SOURCE previously.

**What do you enjoy about or gain through community service?**

My own understanding of the mental health needs of people living in Baltimore is augmented through an ongoing relationship with community partners. This connection also enhances my classroom teaching because I am more “in the know” about real-time needs in our community. I also love being part of the SOURCE faculty and community partners group because I am able to connect with community leaders whose agencies are serving Baltimore residents. Through interacting with leaders at multiple community agencies, I gain a better view of what is happening in Baltimore and can communicate this to my students.

**How do you find time for service in your busy schedule?**

This is a time commitment, but it is one that gives back 100-fold. When I became involved with SOURCE, I simply committed to spending some time each week on community engagement activities. Rather than feeling stressed by the time commitment, I have felt energized, inspired,

and motivated. For those faculty members who may fear the time commitment, I can say honestly that the commitment is a small price to pay for the inspiration you gain from engaging with the community.

**Besides finding the time, what barriers related to your service have you had to overcome?**

One of the biggest barriers I encountered was student cultural competence. I come from a clinical background in which deconstructing one's biases and developing cultural competence were daily exercises. These daily reflections became habitual and serve as a framework for any of my interactions with clients and the community. These exercises are done much less frequently in public health and some students may never address these issues at all. I found I had to re-think and re-structure some of the reflection activities for my course to help students begin to engage in the practice of uncovering their own viewpoints and assessing how these perspectives affect their interactions with the Baltimore community. The other barrier I found is that agencies are literally swamped with the monumental task of serving families with profound needs. I would have loved to spend more time in conversation with my community partner, but quickly recognized that this might not be feasible due to agency time constraints.

**How has your training in Hopkins influenced the way you approach service?**

The training I received from SOURCE has been one of the most valuable and enjoyable personal and professional development activities I have experienced since coming to Hopkins. Meeting regularly with a group of faculty members and community partners who are unfailingly dedicated to the Baltimore community and to preparing Hopkins students to serve it (or other communities) well has energized my teaching and enhanced my desire to make a difference. I think this renewed enthusiasm came through in my teaching, not only in my practicum, but also in the didactic part of the course. I feel I have an invaluable resource that not many other faculty members have.

**How does your service shape your development as a health care professional?**

The most significant change in my thinking came from my realization that academia loses out if it is not actively partnering with the community. We spend most of our time meticulously constructing interventions and programs to enhance the lives of people in the community. We largely do that based on what the empirical literature tells us. In relying solely on published literature, we may miss problems that are happening in real time; thus, our interventions can miss the mark and we spend millions of dollars on something that doesn't quite meet the needs of the community. For example, we were tasked with finding an evidence-based substance abuse prevention program for very young children – ages 5-7. Our review of the literature indicated that the majority of substance abuse prevention programs target adolescents. Our community partner lamented that intervening during adolescence or middle school is "too late." We were able to find some evidence-based interventions aimed at very young children, but these programs represented only a small fraction of the substance abuse prevention programs out there. If we talked more with the community, we would have a better sense of when to intervene; most often, the answer will be "much earlier."

**What advice do you have for prospective students who are interested in community service?**

Do not pass up an opportunity to engage in service-learning. It is life-changing. I say this from my own training, but I am also reflecting the comments of my practicum students. It is an opportunity not to be missed.

**What would you say to someone who is unsure of the impact his/her service would have on a community?**

I would say this: it is virtually impossible to see the real extent of your impact when you involve yourself in serving others. Your involvement may change the life of someone else and you may never know it. Many times as a therapist, I have felt discouraged at the seemingly intractable problems people with mental disorders face, only to receive a letter months or years later about how a client's life was changed by the time they spent with me. Rather than focusing on seeing an immediate impact, I recommend focusing on how you serve the community. Are you bringing an open mind? Are you willing to acknowledge gaps in your knowledge that may be filled by the knowledge of those you serve? Are you working toward building bridges between Hopkins and the community that are solid and long-lasting? If so, then it is virtually guaranteed that you are having a positive impact, even if you can't see it now.

**What is the community service accomplishment that has affected you and/or your community the most?**

This is a story shared with me by one of my practicum students. He was a physician from Ghana; my practicum involved working with at-risk youth attending an after school program at The Club at Collington Square. At times, my students wondered if the students were attentive and questioned whether they were taking in the information being provided to them. My students noticed that the kids were fascinated that they knew someone from Ghana – they originally thought that Ghana was a city in Texas! This prompted a brief geography lesson about the African continent. When the kids discovered that my student spoke six languages, they became hooked on what he had to say. One day, a young boy told the after-school class that he had read a book about a spider in school that morning. He said that he proudly told his schoolmates that he knew the Ghanaian word for “spider” and told his teacher and friends about knowing a man from Ghana. My student was touched that the young boy remembered this short conversation the two of them had had during their conversation about Africa. This funny, meaningful connection between a Ghanaian doctor and a boy from Baltimore highlights the impact that community connections can have for everyone involved.

**Final Comments:**

I would love to involve more students in my service-learning practicum. Here are the details: The primary objective of this service-learning course is to help students contextualize leading social, psychological, and developmental theories of mental/behavioral disorders in real world experience and apply their public health practice skills in community settings. Students will work with The Club at Collington Square to engage with children and youth from an array of diverse economic and cultural backgrounds. Students will provide tutoring in basic English, math, or arts skills for youth one afternoon per week in addition to delivering a substance abuse education curriculum. Weekly seminars will be held with the faculty preceptor (Dr. Lisa Townsend) to engage in reflection and dialogue that connects community-based experiences to academic coursework and to students' future careers as public health professionals. The time commitment for this course spans 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> terms and will fulfill the practicum requirement of the MPH program. Co-registration with the didactic component of “Social, Psychological, and

Developmental Processes in the Etiology of Mental Disorders” is required. If you have questions, please feel free to email Dr. Townsend at [ltownse8@jhu.edu](mailto:ltownse8@jhu.edu).



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