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Benefits of Participating in Service-Learning, Business-related Classes: Assessing the Impact on the Community Partners

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BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN SERVICE-LEARNING, BUSINESS-RELATED CLASSES: ASSESSING THE IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY PARTNERS

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Abstract

Problem: Many universities offer service-learning classes that provide opportunities for students and community partners to work together on semester-long projects. Researchers have been especially interested in the benefits students receive in service-learning classes, and those benefits have been well recognized (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). However, the benefits to community partners have been assumed but seldom explored empirically (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Dorado & Giles, 2004). **Research Questions:** How beneficial were the service-learning projects to the community partners? What were the community partners' experiences working with the students? **Research Methods:** A cross-sectional descriptive design was used to investigate the uses and benefits of 30 community partners from five different business-related, project-based, cooperative, service-learning university classes. **Results:** The results indicated that community partners used and benefited from working with students in such classes. More than 95% of the community partners implemented at least some of what the students created or recommended, and 39% of the community partners said that what the students provided was completely new information, insights, or strategies that they had not yet considered or done. Another key finding was that 80% of the community partners stated that the projects made a "pretty big" to an "extremely large" impact on their organization. These results suggest that working with the business-related, project-based, cooperative, service-learning university classes had an overall positive impact on the community partners.

Keywords: service-learning, community partners, business classes

Introduction

University classrooms have changed over the last century with more instructors implementing high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008). Teaching and learning practices such as service-learning, undergraduate research, and collaborative projects, have consistently shown benefits for university students. The use of such high-impact practices, especially when combined, can increase rates of student engagement and retention (Kuh, 2008).

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Service-learning is defined as a course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009, p. 38).

As effectively stated by Dallimore & Souza (2002), “The interface between experience, community service, and subject matter prepares students to become concerned, considerate, and connected members of society” (p. 94). Students can acquire new skills and knowledge about course material through participation in service-learning classes while providing community partners with a much needed service. During the service-learning experience, “students become profoundly and actively involved in their own learning . . . discover for themselves rather than accept verbal and written pronouncements or directions” (Krupar, 1994, p. 105).

Additional benefits of service-learning found in the literature show that service-learning classes increase students’ perceptions of what they learned (Souza, 1999), positively impact students’ “intellectual and social/psychological development” (Conrad & Hedin, 1991, p. 745), as well as increase awareness and acceptance of cultural diversity (Hones, 1997). Not surprisingly, service-learning has also been shown to more actively involve the learner (Krupar, 1994). Other positive benefits of service-learning classes include “heightened student consciousness of ability, self-confidence in selected careers, the urge to study the subject, and better performance on course tasks” (Rose, Rose, & Norman, 2005, p. 145).

The utilization of project-based, service-learning classes can benefit students in three broad ways: academically, interpersonally, and personally. “The academic dimension of student learning includes domain-specific and general academic knowledge and skills. The interpersonal dimension of student learning encompasses communication, collaboration and leadership skills, and the personal dimension consists of self-knowledge and personal efficacy” (Preiser-Houy & Navarrete, 2006, p. 273). For example, after participating in a project-based, service-learning class that gave students the opportunity to create communication documents about the key elements of a nonprofit’s mission to help nonprofits, students enhanced their skills in writing and increased their understanding of nonprofits (Crews & Stitt-Gohdes, 2012).

Service-learning projects where students work with community partners by providing a specific service or product can be especially useful in helping students understand the complexity of organizations, their needs, and their future roles in them. These classes sharpen students’ professional skills and increase their understanding of current challenges faced in organizations. Gallagher (2007) suggests that “service learning in business courses can better prepare students to be socially responsible managers” (p. 1).

Some service-learning projects involve cooperative learning, another high-impact practice. When students work together to create a meaningful project,

they are given a chance to solve problems with classmates and “sharpen their understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others” (Kuh, 2008, p. 10). Cooperative learning is a form of group learning involving student-to-student positive interdependence, individual accountability, and group processing (Millis, 2009). Over time the effectiveness of cooperative learning “has been confirmed by both theoretical and demonstrative research” (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, p. 8).

Sometimes faculty engage their students in multiple high-impact educational practices during one particular class. For example, students might work in teams with a community partner in a service capacity and research the community partner’s needs before providing a service or a product, thus integrating service learning, undergraduate research, and collaborative projects. In such classes, students work with community partners throughout the semester, often resulting in a large, final deliverable at the end of the class. These classes give students hands-on experiences that allow them to apply what they learn in the classroom in a true working/real-world situation. This is particularly important in business-related classes since students should be prepared to apply their business knowledge once employed.

Unlike traditional classes that use case studies (fictional or historical scenarios), project-based, service-learning classes help students analyze and understand the complexities of actual community partners and organizations while providing a needed service (Kreth, 2005). The effectiveness of hands-on classes for students is well established (Waldner & Hunter, 2008), especially when students are involved in service learning in particular (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). However, is the service students are providing useful to community partners? This is an area of research that has received far less attention.

Little research has focused on the benefits of cooperative, project-based, service-learning classes to the community partners themselves. “The positive impact of service-learning on community partners is often assumed and, as such, overlooked” (Souza, 2007, p. 201). It is likely then, that by participating in project-based, service-learning classes, community partners may be able to access valuable resources, such as faculty members, students, and academic information. The projects may also help the communities where the community partners reside by improving economic development, health and education, and the “cultural life of the community” (Bingle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 221). Further, Preiser-Houy and Navarrette (2006) described the obvious benefit of a free service to the organization. Yet, little is known about the quality of such service. Souza (2007) explored the impact of service-learning on a community partnership that involved a group of middle school students and found that the service provided a positive impact on the students when assessed immediately following the service.

The most commonly cited comprehensive research showing benefits to community partners was conducted at Portland State University. Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, and Kerrigan (1996) used a case-study approach to investigate the impact of four service-learning classes on their community partners, students, faculty, and

the university. Using pre- and post-tests and qualitative and quantitative methods in a graphics design class, they found that community partners benefited socially and economically; and the community partners were satisfied working with the students.

A more recent study was completed where 14 community partners were interviewed to assess their perceptions of students at the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse (McReynolds, 2014). McReynolds found that community partners and students both benefited (although community partners found some challenges in working with the university) and that communication is very important for successful projects. McReynolds further discovered that there were benefits and drawbacks in requiring students to spend a certain amount of time at a community partner organization. He noted that there were specific things universities could do to facilitate the relationship with the community partner, such as host events.

Given the scant research in general on the benefits of project-based, service-learning courses to the community partners, there is an even greater dearth of research on business-focused classes (Klink & Athaide, 2004; Barr & Stockton, 2010). One qualitative study of 13 community partners found that slightly more than 50% of community partners were willing to use the advertising and public relations campaigns students created in their marketing class (Akpabio, 2012).

Community partners have seldom been the center of cooperative, project-based, service-learning research; and there is very limited information on whether the community partners use and benefit from the projects. The focus of this research was on areas that have not been well researched on project-based, business-related, service-learning classes. Specifically, how much of what was provided to the community partners was actually used, how much of an impact was made, and how much of what the students provided was new to the organization?

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this research was to understand business-related, project-based, service-learning classes from the perspective of the community partner. Answers were sought for the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How beneficial were the service-learning projects to the community partners?

Research Question 2: What were the community partners' experiences working with the students?

Methodology

This study utilized a cross-sectional descriptive design to investigate the impact of five business-related, project-based, service-learning courses. The sample frame was compiled using a two-part strategy.

Research Design and Instrument

First, the researchers contacted professors who were known to teach or had taught project-based, service-learning, business-related courses at a public comprehensive university in the western United States. Second, to avoid missing any faculty or classes, recruitment announcements were posted in three weekly emails sent to all faculty at the institution. From these two recruitment strategies, five project-based classes were identified and included in this research.

Faculty for each of the five courses provided contact information for the 57 community partners. Institutional Review Board Human Subjects approval was granted by the participating university prior to contacting the sample. All community partners were sent an email describing why they were being contacted. A brief description of the class in which they were involved and the year they participated in the class was included along with a link to a self-administered questionnaire on SurveyMonkey (see Table 1). Nine close-ended items (4-point Likert scale) and six open-ended items were used to address the two research questions. If a participant did not respond within the first week of the initial email invitation, a follow-up email was sent. If the email address was rejected or that individual no longer worked for the specific organization, a phone call was made to that organization. The call consisted of an explanation for the call, a brief description of the course in which they participated, and information on how to complete the survey. Of the 57 participants who were sent the survey, 30 community partners returned the survey resulting in a response rate of 53%.

The five courses (see Table 2) were from four unique business-related disciplines: business (two classes), journalism (one class), communication consulting (one class), and engineering (one class). The classes were considered to be “business-related” given their primary course purpose (marketing research, business consulting, public relations, communication training, or product design). Each of the five courses had several teams of three to seven students who were engaged in project-based, service-learning efforts with different community partners. The community partners were small to medium-sized organizations and businesses in fairly rural communities. Teams were responsible for fully understanding and identifying the needs of their community partners and translating those needs into final deliverables. These final deliverables included marketing research reports, strategic plans, advertising campaigns, employee training sessions, and physical products. Instructors who taught the five service-learning classes were experienced project-based, service-learning instructors, each having at least two years of experience teaching such classes.

Along with these similarities came differences. The instructors designed their courses independently; thus, they lacked consistency regarding process and program management. Unlike Driscoll et al. (1996) who conducted pre- and post-tests, this research was conducted from one to eight years after the classes worked with the community partners, consequently relying on participants’ memories.

Table 1
Quantitative and Qualitative Survey Questions

Research Questions	Quantitative Survey Questions	Qualitative Survey Questions
<p>How beneficial were the service-learning projects to the community partners?</p>	<p>Q1: Thinking back to the project-based course with which you were partnered, how much of the information, insights, or strategies provided by students to you was new? <i>No new information, Very little new information, Some new information, Lots of new information</i></p> <p>Q2: Overall, how much of an impact did the project-based project make on your organization? <i>No impact at all, Not much of an impact, A pretty big impact, Extremely large impact</i></p> <p>Q3: After the completion of the project-based project, did you or someone else in your organization implement or use the suggestions, products or tools the students provided? <i>Not at all, A small amount, A moderate amount, A large amount</i></p>	<p>Q4: Please think back and describe how the suggestions, products or tools were used.</p> <p>Q5: It would help us if you would describe how your company or organization benefited, if at all, from the client-based project.</p>
<p>What were the community partners' experiences working with the students?</p>	<p>Q6: How was the process of working with the students? <i>Not enjoyable at all, Somewhat enjoyable, Enjoyable, Very enjoyable</i></p> <p>Q10: How likely would you recommend to another organization that they should participate in a client-based project at HSU? <i>Definitely not, Probably not, Probably, Definitely</i></p> <p>Q11: How likely would your organization participate in another client-based project with HSU? <i>Definitely not, Probably not, Probably, Definitely</i></p> <p>Q12: How satisfied were you with the overall process of the client-based project? <i>Extremely dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Satisfied, Extremely satisfied</i></p> <p>Q13: How satisfied were you with the final deliverable of the client-based project? <i>Extremely dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Satisfied, Extremely satisfied</i></p> <p>Q14: How satisfied were you with the students' abilities to meet your organization's needs? <i>Extremely dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Satisfied, Extremely satisfied</i></p>	<p>Q7: Please let us know what were the challenges, if any, working with the students.</p> <p>Q8: Please share what you liked about working with the students.</p> <p>Q9: What advice could you provide for improving future client-based projects?</p> <p>Q15: Please share any other thoughts, feelings, or experiences about the client-based project.</p>

Table 2
Project-Based, Service-Learning Classes

Class	Number of Community Partners Contacted	Brief Class Description
Marketing Research	32	Provided students complex business situations to analyze and then design, implement, and assess marketing research projects for their community partners.
Advanced Public Relations	7	Provided students with the opportunity to design public relations campaigns for community partners.
Introduction to Design Products	7	Provided students the opportunity to create and implement actual products for their community partners.
Communication Training & Consulting	6	Provided students with a grounding in the theoretical and practical approaches to communication consulting as well as having them work in groups to design, facilitate and evaluate a communication training session with community partners. The service goal was to enhance community partner knowledge of and skill in communication.
Small Business Consulting	5	Provided students with community partners who acted as clients with complex problems and opportunities the students would analyze applying strategic business tools. Students provided comprehensive strategic plans.

Data Analysis

A descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative survey data was completed. A line-by-line approach was used to analyze the qualitative data. Corbin and Strauss (1990) characterized this approach as the most detailed and generative type of analysis. Similar to Souza (1999), responses were segmented into thematic “thought” units and then coded. The “thought” units were main ideas contained in either a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph. Thematic analysis included searching for and developing individual themes, determining theme significance, and grouping themes relative to others, similar to steps used by Peterson et al. (1994).

By noting the *emergent themes and patterns* and through *data clustering*, broad categories were created for responding to the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first rater identified six coded themes (three per research question) from reviewing the data. Next, a second rater coded the data independent

of the first rater. A coefficient of agreement was then computed between the raters. Results showed tremendous between-coder reliability with a Cohen's Kappa inter-coder reliability score of 96.8% based on the independent coding of 100% of the qualitative data.

Results

Results for the two research questions are summarized here.

Research Question 1

How beneficial were the service-learning projects to the community partners?

Generally, the community partners found the service-learning projects beneficial. A sizeable majority (26 community partners, 84%) used *some to a lot* of the information, insights, or strategies suggested by the students. All but one (97%) community partner used at least *some* of the information, insights, or strategies suggested by the students. In addition, the projects made a significant impact on the community partners with 24 (80%) stating that the project-based job made a *pretty big* to an *extremely large* impact on the organization. Nineteen (64%) community partners used the work provided by the students to a *moderate* or *large* degree while another 30% said they used a *small* amount of the student work.

Responses to the quantitative questions were consistent with the qualitative data responses. Three main themes arose when participants were asked about how they used suggestions, products, or tools provided by the students. They used the suggestions for planning and decision making, for improving practice, and for utilizing products.

Thirteen (30%) community partners described the ways they used the service-learning project insights for planning and decision-making. For example, one community partner stated that the project offered insights and that "strategic recommendations such as target areas, using regional and national distributors, were implemented." Another community partner indicated that they are using the student report as part of their strategic planning process. A third asserted that they "formulated an entire marketing campaign" based on the data and recommendations provided by students.

Ten (30%) of the community partners described how the service-learning projects improved their daily practice. They wrote about focusing their advertising reach, updating curriculum, improving recruitment and training practices, and increasing their outreach. One community partner claimed that the project resulted in continued collaboration between two university entrepreneurial programs.

Eight (27%) community partners of the engineering course implemented the products built specifically to fulfill their needs. One wrote, "It was an incredibly productive semester, with a range of projects including a grey water marsh, wind belt energy generator, rainwater catchment design software, and a pedal powered computer. Each item has been used."

When asked specifically about how the community partners' organizations benefitted, if at all, two major themes emerged. Seventeen (57%) respondents suggested that they benefitted from having new information provided by the students. They described how such information provided insights, confirmed hunches, and/or refocused their energy. The organizations appeared to be using the information in their strategic planning processes, creating marketing plans, developing new target markets, and improving their organizations internally. "It was great to have hard data to help us make key marketing decisions for our department," wrote one community partner. Another stated that "new insights and fresh eyes and ideas are always important for a business." A third claimed that the projects "increased perspective of how our organization compares and contrasts to other organizations/businesses which offer some similar services."

The second, less common theme, was the benefit of product use. Six (20%) of the community partners described how their organization benefitted from using the products the students produced. One community partner noted that "these were projects that we really needed for our organization and we ended up utilizing or showcasing most of them." Another stressed that, "We benefitted by having permanent structures built for very low cost and classroom apparatuses built to the criteria of the project. Both are very durable and exceeded our expectations."

Other noteworthy comments were made although not mentioned explicitly more than once. One community partner described how the project aligned well with their organization's mission. Another stated how "the organization benefitted from a cost savings." A third described the relational benefits of collaborating with the students. Only one respondent was not sure if there were any benefits to the organization.

Research Question 2

What were the community partners' experiences working with the students?

Overall, the community partners had favorable experiences working with students in the project-based, service-learning classes. Nearly all (93%) of the community partners were *satisfied* with their overall experience with the project. Over half (57%) of the community partners indicated they were *extremely satisfied*. When asked more specifically about their satisfaction level with the final deliverable, the same number (57%) of community partners said they were *extremely satisfied*.

The researchers wanted to know the extent to which community partners thought the students met their organization's needs. Fourteen (47%) asserted that they were *extremely satisfied* with the students' ability to meet their organization's needs, and an additional fourteen (47%) said they were *satisfied*. When asked how the process of working with the students functioned, 28 (19%) said *enjoyable* and 71% said *very enjoyable*. This translated to 24 (80%) of the community partners saying they would definitely recommend client-based projects to others in the

community. Similarly, 21 (68%) would definitely want to participate in another service-learning project.

The qualitative data provided greater insight into the community partners' experiences working with the students. When asked the four questions regarding the community partners' experiences, three major themes emerged: (a) communication and scheduling were challenging, (b) students did not have a breadth of industry knowledge, and (c) community partners appreciated the energy students brought.

Nine (30%) community partners mentioned communication or scheduling issues. Some mentioned both. For example, one community partner answered by stating, "Scheduling, as is with the case in any large group project, can be a challenge. It was also sometimes unclear as to the different roles that each student played." When asked for recommendations to improve future project-based courses, eight (27%) community partners mentioned communication and planning improvements. Recommendations for communication were to initiate more meetings and to provide clearer expectations. Community partners also recommended planning further in advance and creating milestones to keep students on track.

A less common theme was related to lack of industry experience. Five (17%) community partners found that students lacked industry knowledge. One community partner explained that "Students require teaching, and projects require management. Student projects therefore require both, and it meant every Friday I had three hours of meetings and numerous emails. It was work, but worth it." While these community partners viewed lack of industry knowledge as a negative for working with the students, nine (30%) others viewed it as refreshing. The community partners thought the students were not yet biased and thus offered fresh perspectives and creativity. One community partner adequately represented this sentiment by responding that, "The students were innovative and often worked out of the box; because they were not working within the industry daily, they came from a fresh point of view and offered many insights and valuable strategic recommendations." Another added that "I appreciate their innovative and fresh ideas." These community partners believed the creativity the students brought to their organizations helped them a lot and was very valuable.

A third theme revealed that 12 (40%) of the community partners overwhelmingly enjoyed the students' energy. A community partner wrote, "I loved their enthusiasm and commitment to the project! It felt like they sincerely approached the project as a business and not just something they needed to do to get through class." One community member remarked that "They were excited about it . . . gave us new energy" while another shared the same sentiment, "Oh, they're smart and optimistic, and it's heartwarming to be around that energy." A fourth partner emphasized that "They were committed and enthusiastic about the project and presentation."

Discussion

As with Driscoll et al. (1996), the results of this research showed that the community partners were *satisfied* working with the students; and paralleling McReynolds (2014), the community partners *benefitted* from working with the students. The results were very favorable for the community partners. They appreciated the energy, creativity, and enthusiasm that students brought to their organizations. For the most part, they used the products, services, and skills that the students provided. Akpabio (2012) found that slightly over half of the community partners were willing to use the students' work while this research showed that 97% of the community partners used at least *some* of the information, insights, or strategies with 14 of 30 (47%) using a *moderate* amount and 5 (17%) using a *large* amount.

Perhaps more importantly for this study, students' work impacted the community partners. Although students may wonder if their work makes a difference, this study revealed that the student work did indeed make a positive impact with 24 (80%) community partners indicating that the work made a *moderate* to *large* impact. This research suggests that much of what is provided is at least somewhat new with 26 (84%) of the participants noting that *some* to *lots* of what the students provided was completely new to them.

Information realized from this research is important for community partners, universities, instructors, and students to understand. Instructors who teach project-based, service-learning classes, and those who are considering teaching them, now have answers to the questions of whether the organizations use the work the students do in these classes and whether the overall process is helpful to organizations. The results provide useful information for encouraging university administrators to approve and support these classes and to encourage community partners to participate. Students also appreciate knowing that their efforts are meaningful, impactful, and truly appreciated by the community partners.

The products, services, and skills provided by students created value for the participating organizations in different ways. Many organizations used the information to develop strategies, create marketing plans, and improve internal operations, while others used the information as a reference or support for their previous thoughts.

As instructors consider developing or modifying courses to include cooperative, project-based, service-learning activities, communication and timeline management are two areas on which to focus to ensure a quality partnership. Instructors can require mandatory community partner meetings, provide clear expectations to all community partners and students, use project-tracking tools, and implement milestones throughout the semester. In addition, instructors may want to consider providing more industry training before students begin their work with the community partners since this was a common challenge for community partners. Even with the challenges of lack of industry experience,

timeline, and communication, the community partners provided overwhelmingly positive feedback regarding their experiences working with these project-based, service-learning classes.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this research should be considered together with the contributions. Even though the response rate was notable, the sample was small and drawn from only one university community using small- to medium-sized businesses and organizations in fairly rural communities. Future research might replicate this study at multiple institutions and broaden the nature of the courses. This study dealt primarily with what worked with community partners who worked with one educational institution; however, the nature of the projects, the courses, the disciplines, the class structure, and the instructors varied. More diverse types and sizes of businesses and organizations in communities of different makeups should be considered for future research.

Another limitation was that this study was conducted at one point in time and was fresh in the memory of some community partners but not for others since some projects had been completed between one and eight years prior. A benefit of the time span after completion of the project was the ability to see the impact over time. The time duration presented a challenge because of the high turnover rate in some organizations and the loss of employees involved in the projects. Future research should investigate the same community partners over time at certain intervals (e.g., immediately following or six months, one year, or three years later) to determine the lasting effects of the service-learning projects and how the impact changed over time.

This study was based on community partners' self-reported data in response to a survey. Open-ended responses were brief and unelaborated for the most part. Follow-up interviews would have inevitably enriched the nature of their open-ended responses in both quality and quantity.

Some important questions remain unanswered by this research. What are the ethical considerations of such brief encounters with the community partners with no commitment to them beyond the semester? How will the partnership impact community partners' willingness to hire graduating students?

Final Thoughts

The stated limitations notwithstanding, this research has several implications for practice. For instructors deliberating whether to use project-based, service-learning in a class, knowing that community partners benefit from working with the students, especially because of their fresh perspectives and creativity, will be important. Instructors can feel largely confident that community partners actually use the deliverables that students provide, what is provided is new to the

community partners, and the deliverables impact the community partners. When instructors choose to involve their students in cooperative, project-based, service-learning projects, they need to prepare both students and community partners well so that expectations are managed. If projects are managed well, ensuring excellent communication and planning, community partners participating in the projects will have an overall positive experience; and ultimately the organization will benefit from the experience.

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