

10-31-2016

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Recommended Citation

Goertzen, B. J., Greenleaf, J., & Dougherty, D. (2016). Exploring the Community Impact of Service-Learning Project Teams. *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement*, 7(2), 37–50.

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Exploring the community impact of service-learning project teams

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The purpose of this project was to study community partners' perceptions of the impact of service-learning projects, by studying the ways in which "service-learning project teams" (SLPT) impacted the communities and organizations where they worked. Researchers purposefully selected 16 community partners (CP) who had direct experience working with and supervising service-learning project teams to take part in semi-structured interviews regarding their experiences. Analysis of the transcribed interviews resulted in 15 themes that were divided into two categories. These findings are intended to be a starting point for further research regarding the community impact of service-learning.

A local university currently incorporates service-learning in more than 50 courses across multiple disciplines on campus. One academic department offering courses in leadership delivers a three-course certificate program that begins with two classes on the theories, concepts and behaviors of leadership, and concludes with a course dedicated entirely to service-learning. The Field Work in Leadership Studies course requires students to identify a community issue and practice leadership by developing and implementing a community project. Community leaders from Hays and surrounding areas "pitch" project ideas to the class at the beginning of each semester, and students select which project most interests them. Typically, four or five students are assigned to one community partner (CP) and are responsible for a semester-long project.

Many organizations have collaborated with the academic department and project teams enrolled in the course since it was first offered more than 20 years ago, and the benefits of these projects have reached more than just the students and faculty. In a rural community, the impacts of service-learning through the university are visible and powerful. It became clear early on that there should be a way to understand these impacts; however, few studies exist detailing service-learning from the CP perspective.

The purpose of this study was to explore CPs' perceptions of the impact of service-learning projects. The central research question was: "How have 'service-learning project teams' (SLPT) impacted your organization and community?" Participants were comprised of community leaders who supervised and worked with student SLPTs during these courses, many individuals having worked with several teams over the course of the years. Ideally, through the completion of this study, further evidence to encourage campus and community partnerships

will be better documented for future service-learning studies.

Literature Review

Service-learning is commonly conceived as "the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study that each strengthens the other" (Ehrlich, 1996, p. xi). Service-learning as pedagogy fulfills some of the earliest purposes of higher education, encouraging civic responsibility by integrating community involvement with academic learning (Boyer, 1990); and has been widely embraced not only because it is a mechanism for community engagement, but also because it is a high impact pedagogy (Felten & Clayton, 2011). It is a form of civic engagement that has become increasingly popular as it offers a symbiotic, "win-win-win situation for the university, students and the community" (Bushouse, 2005, p. 32).

Extensive research has been conducted examining the impact on students in terms of personal, social and cognitive student outcomes (Yorio & Ye, 2012), as well as citizenship outcomes (Conway, Amel, & Gerwein, 2009). Moreover, research explored service-learning from faculty perspectives and motivation of service-learning pedagogy (Cooper, 2014; Darby & Newman, 2014). However, comparatively little is known about the impact of service-learning from the community agency perspective (Cruz & Giles, 2000). Nearly a decade later, others asserted there are claims of the positive impact of service-learning on communities, but there is still limited research to support those claims (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

Several studies are beginning to "give voice" to CPs' perspective of service-learning experiences. Hidayat, Pratsch and Stoecker (2009) reported three critical elements of CPs' perspectives of successful campus-community partnerships through service-learning experiences: commitment, communication and compatibility. Another study reported six

qualities of effective campus-community partnership as perceived by CPs: (a) be attentive to the community partner's mission and vision; (b) understand the human dimension of the community partner's work; (c) be mindful of the community partner's resources; (d) accept and share the responsibility for inefficiencies; (e) consider the legacy of the partnership; and (f) regard process as important (Tinkler, Tinkler, Hausman & Tufo-Strouse, 2014). Overall, these studies focus on the quality of the partnership between campus-community organizations rather than the impact of the service-learning experiences.

Other studies, though still primarily aimed at examining aspects of sustainable campus-community partnerships, are integrating aspects of impact from service-learning experiences. Bushouse (2005) reported impact from service-learning experiences in terms of "utility of the project," citing that community partners preferred transactional service-learning experiences that result in direct, tangible results whereby cost-benefits are clearly calculated in their favor. Miron and Moely (2006) developed a survey instrument which included a dimension of agency benefit. They distilled into a single metric differing phenomena such as the preparedness of the students; the match between the needs of the agency and their responsibilities; the economic benefit; and the "other" benefits. Employing a qualitative method, Worrall (2007) interviewed CPs who described benefits from service-learning experiences in terms of access to labor and a pool of volunteers; role models for their clientele; expanded reach; and economic benefit.

Scholars recently developed a survey instrument measuring the benefits and costs of campus-community partnerships as perceived by CPs (Srinivas, Meenan, Drogin, & DePrince, 2015). The Community Impact Scale yielded an attitudinal dimension of the overall experience; several dimensions that relate to personal benefit of the CP (knowledge; skills and competencies; motivations and commitments; personal growth and self-concept); and several agency level dimensions (social capital, organizational operations, and organizational resources). The study primarily reported the development of the Community Impact Scale; this emerging stream of research perhaps holds promise to further understand the potential impact of SLPTs on the community as it examines more dimensions of impact. Still a more nuanced perspective is needed to identify/understand the complexities of community impact from service-learning projects.

The assessment of processes and impacts of

service-learning partnerships are needed (Gelmon, 2003). The present study explored the impact of SLPTs as perceived by community partners.

Case Study Context: Fieldwork in Leadership Studies

The Field Work in Leadership Studies course is a required service-learning course for students earning a certificate in leadership studies at the local university. The Field Work course is the capstone course of the three-course sequence for the certificate program. The certificate is foundational for students also earning either a minor in leadership studies or a bachelor's degree in organizational leadership. The purpose of the course is to increase students' knowledge and skills through the context of the community-based service-learning project. All assignments and course activities are intentionally designed to help students be successful in their projects or to challenge them to reflect upon their experiences.

The local university offers the Fieldwork in Leadership Studies course via three modalities: (a) on-campus, face-to-face; (b) online; and (c) to the partner institutions in China. While each modality presents unique challenges and opportunities in facilitating service-learning experiences, the present study focuses on the on-campus, face-to-face environment.

CPs are invited to present project ideas during the first week of class and students select projects based on personal preferences. Comprised of four to five students, SLPTs begin interacting with their CP during the second week of class and develop a strategic plan for the project initiative by the fifth week. They spend the remainder of the semester implementing the plan, dedicating five to eight hours per week for 15 weeks toward their community project.

Original versions of the Field Work in Leadership Studies course were initially offered during the Fall 1995 semester, and since that time there have been approximately 290 SLPTs. Changes were made to the course during the Fall 2001 semester to integrate intentional reflection opportunities, therefore conforming to service-learning pedagogy.

The academic department offering the fieldwork course has developed a reputation among non-profit and civic-based organizations in the region as an access point to student assistance, often to create or sustain new initiatives. Community leaders commonly inquire of department faculty to present to Field Work classes each semester in hopes of acquiring SLPTs. Examples of community-based projects include: generating community support to provide comprehensive services for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault; creating

recruitment drives for mentors for the local Big Brothers/Big Sisters chapter; educating the community regarding the housing needs for families in poverty with the area Habitat for Humanity organization; raising funds for a regional no-kill animal shelter; and creating a leadership conference for the regional Girl Scout troops.

Method

This descriptive qualitative study seeks to explain the CPs' perceptions of impact from SLPTs. Descriptive qualitative research seeks to understand how people make meaning of their lives and experiences (Merriam, 2014). Moreover, these types of studies "offer a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336).

Sample

The population under investigation was community agencies who sponsored SLPTs from a field work in leadership course. SLPTs were typically comprised of four to five students who worked with a community agency for the duration of a 16-week semester. Each community agency designated an individual who supervises the SLPT.

Prior to entering into the field initially, the researchers made purposeful sampling decisions to select participants that had direct experience supervising SLPTs from the field work in leadership course. In order to ensure maximum variation within the sample (Creswell, 2013), 12 community leaders who supervised a SLPT within the previous three academic years, along with four who supervised SLPTs more than five years ago, were selected to participate in the study.

Participants were recruited initially by a letter which described the purpose of the project and expectations of them as participants in the study. Seven days after mailing the recruitment letter, the researchers followed up with phone calls determining the participants' interest and involvement in the study. At that time, the researchers arranged an appropriate setting to conduct the in-person interview. Participants possessed a wide range of experience in working with SLPTs. Several participants had only worked with one SLPT from a recent academic semester whereas one participant had supervised as many as 18 SLPTs over the previous six academic years.

Data Collection

The interview protocol was designed to help the researchers determine the impact of SLPTs in organizations and communities. The instrument was designed around a central question, with issue and procedural sub-questions (Creswell, 2013). The central question was designed to establish a broad

understanding of the impact of the service-learning teams while the issue and procedural sub-questions were designed to provide more specific examples of impact. The issue/procedural sub-questions were developed using the community capital framework (Emery & Flora, 2006). The community capitals include categories of community resources such as natural environment, physical environment, social and human capital, political capital, and financial and built capital. An exemption was secured from the departmental Institutional Review Board committee and no identifying information is available in the manuscript.

Data were collected over a two-year period. The 16 semi-structured interviews ranged between 35 and 45 minutes in length and were audio recorded and transcribed. The researchers "masked" the transcripts by removing any proper names or organizations that were inadvertently spoken during the interviews, thus protecting anonymity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in multiple stages that included both a first- and second-cycle coding process (Saldana, 2013). In order to retain the participants' language, the researchers applied in vivo and descriptive coding which aided in the inventorying of topics during the initial coding process (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014) for the first-cycle coding stage. After initially coding the transcripts from the first nine interviews, the authors engaged in the second-cycle coding process whereby three general categories and 10 themes began to emerge.

Aimed at enhancing the reliability of the data analysis process, the authors employed an intercoder agreement process detailed by Creswell (2013). After independently coding the first nine transcripts, the research team met to discuss codes, their names and text segments. Based on this discussion, the research team developed a codebook of codes with corresponding definitions and text segment examples.

Based on the preliminary findings the authors re-entered the field to interview seven additional participants. Again all interviews were transcribed and independently coded by each author. The second-cycle coding process provided additional information that led the researchers to combine the three categories into two. These two categories then represented 15 themes.

Findings

The results of the data analysis provided several insights into the nature of the impact that SLPTs had on the community. These findings revealed two general categories:

collaborative processes and outcomes. Each of these categories represented several emergent themes.

Collaborative Processes

One major category that emerged from the discussions with participants was the idea of the collaborative process. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that the work being done by the SLPTs was not something that was being done alone. The efforts of these teams were being supported and supplemented in a variety of ways through a complex and interconnected system of resources. The themes that were developed around this category provide a closer look at this complexity and include political influence, partnership building, tangible resources, strategies for awareness, agency support, and team features. Taken individually, these themes provide insight into the process of collaboration that made SLPTs successful or unsuccessful and combined, provide an overview of the collaborative processes.

Partnership building. A theme that contributed to the understanding of the collaborative processes was partnership building. While somewhat similar to political influence, partnership building focused less on leveraging resources and more on creating and sustaining new connections between the community and other organizations. Participants often described how working with the SLPTs opened the door to new network connections they would not have otherwise been able to access. These connections varied in purpose, but were focused on building new relationships. One participant described how the SLPT worked with a for-profit organization to expand the number of participants taking part in an event the CP was sponsoring:

We started intentionally identifying a contact person for the top twenty largest employers in [the county]. The team prepared some information about employee health and employee wellness and started marketing this [event] as a cost effective employee wellness activities...It was time consuming and I'm not sure I would have been able to do that in that kind of depth, but they opened some new doors and we got a nice response and new participants that we hadn't involved in the past.

Another participant described how SLPTs helped to penetrate tight knit groups:

Once, if you can break into that tight knit little group and you can kind of work with parts of their group, it might not be the whole thing, but it may be different people in different

organizations within that group, it gets much easier.

Other examples of partnership building focused on fostering and building relationships with non-profit and for-profit organizations, community members, and government organizations to create a stronger network of connections within the community. These efforts provided a number of impacts on the CPs. These new partnerships allowed the CPs to recruit new volunteers, bring new and diverse perspectives, increase contacts, and facilitate stronger collaborative networks among other community organizations. In some instances, the resulting partnerships strengthened existing connections and, in other instances, created new connections.

Tangible resources. Tangible resources played an important part in understanding the collaborative efforts of the SLPTs. In their work with CPs, many of the teams attempted to make use of material assets for the benefit of the CP or their cause. These resources included, but were not limited to, money and donated items of value. One participant described how the SLPT team connected their organization with new sources of money within the community:

The team went out...and they had money. If I had gone around and asked for it, it probably wouldn't have happened that way. Because they brought new and completely different people to the table...Money showed up on my desk and I was flabbergasted.

This was a common goal among many of the participants. Whether it was fundraising for a specific event or trying to acquire funds to sustain the organization, SLPTs often played a role in securing monetary donations. However, the tangible resources acquired by the SLPTs were not always monetary in nature. Other examples of tangible resources included items of physical value such as office materials and other items the CP could use. One participant described how students in a SLPT found creative ways to get material for a trail they were building in the community:

They brought a lot of stuff in from [the local community], 2 or 3 of them found a guy that wanted his fence down; they offered to tear his fence down as long as they could keep the wood. That fence ended up here as part of our forming material. They worked their tails off on that trail.

Tangible resources had several impacts on the CPs. For some, the impact was related to long-term sustainability. This included securing grant funding opportunities and sponsorships that the organization desired, but didn't have

the time or resources to pursue. For most, the impact was more episodic. The tangible resources that were secured provided opportunities to host new events or to incentivize participation in current organizational events through the contribution of gifts or prizes. Additionally, some of the tangible resources that were raised went directly back into the general operating funds of the organization.

Strategies for awareness. Another theme that added to the understanding of the collaborative processes was strategies for awareness. This is best understood as the team's effort in developing and executing a plan to generate awareness of the CP and their purpose. Participants described a number of different ways in which SLPTs approached the idea of awareness raising. The strategies used by the teams were often situationally and contextually based, and the team's ability to adapt to those contexts was often a predictor of success in raising awareness. Some efforts were more traditional in nature, such as the development of informational brochures, press releases, and word-of-mouth campaigns. For example, one participant described a SLPT's marketing efforts saying:

We only have an office of 5 staff members in the (community) office. So [the team] knew their key role was going to be doing the marketing and so they did. They got out there and they found spots on TV and radio, made flyers and put flyers everywhere, they contacted businesses...

Along with traditional efforts, SLPTs also developed and implemented awareness strategies that were more creative in nature. Participants often described promotional events that were specific and focused on the work of the CP. One example offered by the participants was the implementation of a dinner called the "Wise Bucks Buffet" designed to educate clients about the consequences of their food choices. The participant described the event in the following way:

It was the "Wise Bucks Buffet," and it was a taco bar meal. Every part of the meal had a price tag on it which was a number of points or bucks the cost went up as things were higher in fat, higher in sodium, higher in added sugar...part of the learning experience was when, you know, when there's full disclosure of the sugar, sodium, fat content of the items we know we're not supposed to be eating, it was kind of a learning experience.

The primary impact of these awareness strategies on the CPs was related to increased exposure to both current and potential stakeholders through enhanced media campaigns. Some of the strategies followed more traditional methods, but were coordinated by the SLPT. This freed the CP staff to focus on other organizational needs. Other strategies developed by SLPTs were unique and creative ways that the CP staff had never before considered, giving them new tools/ideas for future awareness raising efforts.

Agency support. One aspect of the process that became clear through the interviews was the ways the CPs supported the teams. This theme, agency support, referred to efforts made by the CP to assist the SLPT and their work. Although the amount of involvement by the CP varied, participants often described supporting the SLPT by providing resources, offering feedback, helping make connections, and acting as a sounding board. One participant described their role as being a "connector" to people and resources, and commented, "[I'm a] community leader working with them on the project...a coordinator, who could help them if they don't have direct connections..." Successful SLPTs often had a CP such as this one who helped the team members identify key individuals in the community with whom to partner.

From an impact perspective, the idea of agency support was an example of a resource that the CP had to give rather than receive. Whereas other impacts focused on the benefits gained from working with the SLPT, this theme refers to the inputs the CP was expected to contribute. While each CP interacted differently with their SLPT, each set aside resources (e.g., time) to guide and support the SLPT.

Team features. Another theme that provided insight into the collaborative processes of the SLPTs related to the features of the team. Team features refers to the characteristics of the members and team dynamics that facilitate project effectiveness. Participants often described how the traits and individual differences of the team members affected the process. This discussion revealed insights from CPs on a number of different levels.

These discussions went beyond overall effectiveness of the team, and focused on individual members. Participants described some students as "go-getters" and others as followers. Several participants described how students who were passionate about the issue or cause were often more engaged and found more meaning and connection to the project. Teams that lacked this were described as simply going through the motions or just trying to get it done. When students shared a personal connection to

the project, they were more likely to work enthusiastically and have success. One participant was quoted as saying:

The teams that I get, they pick these because they have a personal connection to the project whether it's the type of community or the type of project. I think you get a better product that way and that has been noticeable in the last sets of teams that I've had because one of my teams I felt like this was more of a class project than a personal project. And that's very noticeable so that aspect of service learning, and I don't know how you get that to come across, but you can notice it.

They discussed not only passion for the cause but how team diversity can be another important factor related to effectiveness and impact. One participant commented:

I think that this team was extremely diverse. They came from various educational and career interest standpoints where they had different majors, they were just very diverse. I think that sometimes if you have a team that is very similar it can be helpful in some ways, but I think that having a team that is diverse can help because they have different groups that they can network with; they have different skill sets that they can collaborate with together.

Other important features of SLPTs include demographic factors, which appear to have an impact on the CPs, as well as the clientele they served. For instance, several participants described a sense of excitement at the idea of engaging with traditional, college-aged students. One participant described it the following way:

I remember [the SLPT] was getting nervous about not knowing who should be on the panel and I actually suggested it should be them or other college students because one thing that we hear a lot from the girls, and we surveyed the middle school age and high school age, was they like to hear from college students because they are close to their age.

The participants shared that not all experiences with SLPTs were beneficial for their organization, and one described:

I've had generally good experiences. I would say that depending on the group, the individuals within the group, and the general group outlook itself.... I've had groups that had a net negative impact because I put time and resources

into them and they didn't really get used and I see that as a negative. But then I also have teams that are an extreme positive that I do not have to meet with them frequently and the meeting that we do have are very efficient and effective, and they're able to take that and be able to produce something good.

The impact of team features on the CP were challenging to analyze due to the complexity of the team dynamics in relation to the CP. Despite the complexity, it was apparent that the features of the team did have impact on the interaction with the CP. CPs that worked with high-functioning teams described full engagement with teams that were autonomous and produced strong results for the benefit of the organization. Other positive impacts included being able to benefit from new ideas and diverse backgrounds of the SLPT members. However, not all teams were able to produce strong results. For teams that struggled, the impact on the CP was closer to neutral and, in a few cases, a "net negative" with respect to the benefits for the organization to the amount of time put in by the CP.

Political influence. Political influence was operationally defined as the team's ability to leverage community stakeholders (e.g., citizens) to bring about change based on shared values. While this process took on different forms, there were several examples that emerged. In one interview, a participant described how the work of SLPTs in the community both generally, through work in the community, and specifically, through work with animals, led to a large gift being given to establish a fund to support the work the organization was doing:

I assume you've heard of [Community Member] donating toward the (SLPTs), kind of setting up a fund for students in general. I think with the (SLPTs) I've worked with together, and probably all of the (SLPTs) that have existed, they have shown what they can do within the community which has led to [Community Member] being more interested in that. And with his already strong interest in animal welfare and well-being, those two things were kind of married and allowed him to sort of set up this fund which was quite a bit of money, and it can have a really huge impact on our organization. And without working with the (SLPTs) before that, I don't see many ways that that could have transpired...

Other examples related to political influence focused on connections that team members had or created within their communities. Participants in the study discussed how

students used previous connections they had established with campus and community entities to further the efforts of the SLPT projects. As one participant stated:

When you talk about leveraging relationships and connections that some of the students might have made working with those organizations, it really helps further your cause. I think I saw effective teamwork as being able to use those connections and those relationships that they established with those outside entities to further their (SLPT) project.

With respect to the CPs, the biggest impact of political influence facilitated by the SLPTs was the cultivation of new political connections. For some CPs this meant taking advantage of the personal networks of the SLPT students. For others, this same impact came through the work of the SLPT in cultivating new relationships with community stakeholders, including elected officials and others who possessed strategic political influence and access to resources needed by the CP.

Outcomes

Each service-learning project varied based on the needs of the CPs. As a result of working with the SLPTs, there were outcomes related directly to the CPs' agency, the community at large, and to the team members themselves. These outcomes were organized into nine themes; awareness, engagement, agency impact, sustainability, reputation, partnerships, kids and family, team benefits and physical environment.

Awareness. Awareness was an outcome frequently referenced by participants, coded in 12 of the 16 interviews. Awareness can be understood as an increase in the overall knowledge and understanding of the CP and their purpose in the community. Participants described awareness as an intentional outcome for the service-learning project, as in cases of raising awareness on issues like prostate cancer or water conservation. Many CPs described the value of raising awareness both on-campus and in the community. For example, one project sought to educate college students on the importance of private donations and the role the university foundation plays in securing these resources. Another team with the primary goal of fundraising also helped "boost the knowledge" of an initiative on campus of which few people in the surrounding community were aware. CPs highlighted how certain SLPTs created more "community awareness," helped "spread our mission," and "make the community more aware of what [the CP] has to offer." One CP who has worked with SLPTs several times expressed how

he continues to partner because of the "positive publicity" the students bring to his organization.

These efforts for increased awareness directly impacted the CP in several ways. First, the awareness efforts of the SLPTs increased the visibility and the exposure of the CP in the community and among their target audiences. Additionally, these efforts aided in spreading awareness of the CPs mission and provided positive publicity for their organizations. In some instances, these efforts focused on helping combat stigmas that were associated with the CP.

Engagement. Another one of the most frequently discussed themes that emerged in the outcomes category was engagement. Engagement refers to the process of motivation or mobilization of community stakeholders to action. This theme was mentioned by all but three participants. Engagement of community stakeholders was displayed in both direct and indirect examples. Sometimes engagement was specifically at targeted college students. For instance, one CP said "I've received a lot of volunteers from the university" as a result of publicity created through the work of the SLPT. Other organizations were able to engage college students more effectively despite this being a difficult population to reach. Moreover, other stories of engagement reflected shifts in the attitudes of the community culture:

Teams I've worked with where I saw the positive impact was the downtown business centers getting excited. The overall mentality working with business owners, they have been doing it for a long time, they are burned out...And a lot of the times, the teams who brought the excitement in implementing a parade or block party that brought to the downtown area, it gets them excited again.

Another way engagement was observed was in the form of increased civic involvement by others within the communities in which the service-learning teams worked. One CP spoke about the widespread impact she felt after working with SLPTs:

I think this had a tandem affect in our public school system...We have had several little kids come in and say "just like that clean up team," we're out here picking stuff up and I think it's having an impact on the younger ones. They're realizing that service is part of being a citizen, it's not just something you do to get a grade; it's something that you do to be a grown, productive citizen.

Perhaps the clearest example of engagement came from the assistance of a SLPT in the

creation of a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) program at the regional hospital. This effort by multiple community stakeholders finally had a breakthrough with the help of a SLPT. The CP who led this group reported the direct impacts from the team:

One of the things I had told my staff years ago was the only way there was going to be a SANE program was when the community demanded it...they weren't ready to hear from our program; they weren't ready to hear from law enforcement. The community just wasn't ready yet...So you've got to wait for the community to be ready with that. The (SLPTs) made the community ready...

From the perspective of engagement, the biggest impact of SLPTs on CPs was related to their ability to capitalize on positive momentum. This took many forms from SLPTs becoming personally involved with the CP organization to cultivating new volunteers for the CP organization. The SLPTs fostered initiatives that yielded these positive changes often because the CPs were either unable to create or simply lacked the necessary human resources needs to develop these initiatives.

Agency impact. Agency impact describes any changes in the knowledge, skills and abilities of the CP organization. While some CPs talked very little about changes within their own group or organization, others spoke at length about internal changes that occurred as a result of working with SLPTs. Some of these internal impacts were specific to the project, such as innovations to initiatives that had existed before without the SLPTs:

I wanted to avoid becoming stale with that event...so their questions about what is this and who are you trying to reach and our collective discussions about that really did help me stand back and take a look at what we've done with [event name], what we're trying to do, and look at it with fresh eyes.

Many CPs work in small organizations that are understaffed and are responsible for addressing significant civic and social issues. With the help from SLPTs, ideas for new programs was also a major advantage to many CPs:

Once I got acquainted with the students and they warmed up to me and figured out what it was I wanted them to help me work on, then I didn't know if I would have enough time to keep up with the ideas that they kept having.

CPs often described how working with students "changed their way of thinking," helped with the technology gap and social media, or

simply helped by bringing in extra hands and "manpower."

Other observed agency impacts were personal impacts felt by individuals from the CP organizations who directly facilitated the SLPTs. One CP was thankful for the opportunity to practice delegation skills: "It's me learning to let go of something and let someone else create it." Participants also spoke about the way interacting with SLPTs impacted their leadership abilities: "You can learn different types of management and leadership, because individuals are different and every team is dynamically different. They teach me something every time about how to handle people in situations." One CP who has worked with more than a dozen SLPTs was especially conscious of how she felt working with the service-learning teams had benefitted her:

My daughters have told me that I should get outside my box every day and I think the (SLPTs) do that, no matter how in touch you try to stay you are still a part of a generation, and by bridging to another generation, they bring their ideas and their methods to you and you can't help but absorb some of that and pick up on that.

This theme represents impact related to individuals who work within the CP organization. What became apparent was that through work with the SLPTs, the staff of the CP was learning new concepts and innovative organizational practices, as well as being personally energized and inspired. This led to less staff turnover, as well as new ways of thinking about old problems.

Sustainability. Stories that spoke of lasting impacts for the CP beyond the duration of the service-learning project were coded as an outcome of sustainability. Many SLPTs had the opportunity to work on projects that were brand new, allowing the students to help CPs "build new traditions." Sustainable outcomes for some CPs included the creation of events like yearly community festivals or reoccurring fundraisers, as well as the establishment of lasting initiatives such as the SANE program and a downtown farmer's market. Many CPs chose to work with SLPTs because of the additional challenges related to creating something new: "The first (SLPT) did the legwork for the project and got it going." Another CP told a similar story: "We had memorial donations, yet we didn't have the manpower to implement an outdoor mentoring program. That was totally done by leadership teams...talk about sustainability."

The impact of sustainability on the CPs was best demonstrated through the development of new traditions established through work with

the SLPTs. While these new traditions varied between organizations, they often took the form of a signature event or fundraiser. In some cases, the SLPT helped the organization integrate new programs into their structure, while in other cases, multiple teams worked through consecutive semesters to sustain a new program. In both cases, these new traditions were continued for multiple years and became something that the CP was known for in the community.

Reputation. This outcome encompasses the newfound awareness in the community of the role that SLPTs have in facilitating change. In the 20 years since the inception of the service-learning course, the surrounding communities have developed a recognition of these teams and the work they have accomplished. In multiple interviews, participants conveyed how the term “SLPT,” in reference to the service-learning project course, is now widely recognized as students from the college who are here to help:

The first few teams that we had back in the beginning, [community members] were kind of like what are these college kids doing? And nobody really paid attention. Now the beginning of every semester there are some in the community that are waiting to see what these guys are going to do.

Many times the impact of the SLPTs was referenced as an improvement in the reputation of college students in general:

I think non-profits in general sometimes don't tap into the college student potential. I think there is a barrier there with time commitment and stuff because college students are busy, but there also is a potential there that I think sometimes is overlooked. Older generations underestimate what college students are capable of helping with or doing.

Some CPs even told specific stories of community members sharing how impressed they were that college kids were putting on programs or “giving up their time freely to work with the young students.” A unique CP related to downtown development remembered how her board even took notice of the project: “Board members would say ‘How great this is for getting young people involved with issues that matter about what communities will look like in 15 years from now.’”

Reputation represents an indirect impact upon CPs’ organizations. Over time, the SLPTs’ work built a sense of trust and respect that has developed between the SLPTs and the CPs. This relationship has impacted both the general awareness of college students as a resource as

well as changed the perceptions the CPs had about college students in a positive way.

Partnerships. Discussion of new partnerships between CPs and other organizations came up in many interviews. The partnerships outcome refers to any social or political connections that emerged as a direct or indirect result of the work by the SLPT. Put simply by one CP, “(SLPTs) have definitely been in contact with some businesses or individuals in the community that I might not otherwise have contacted.” Certain examples of partnerships came from the SLPT members bringing in their personal connections or their ability to “tap into” groups of individuals the community agency was previously unable to access. References to partnerships captured by this code lasted beyond the involvement with the SLPT. One participant expressed, “We’ve been able to create some lasting relationships where some of the partners have turned into regular program partners with us.” Another CP spoke about their ability to sustain partnerships that were created solely by the work of a SLPT project:

So yes, all of our partnerships within the [program name] are because of [SLPTs]... Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, Wild Turkey Federation. We could never get them on board and we were going to do a wild turkey hunt in April and it just blew me away because they just always backed off from it. So yes, all of our partnerships within the [program name] are because of leadership teams...We’re on their radar now.

These new partnerships represented a significant impact from working with the SLPTs. The CPs described increased opportunities to establish lasting connections with other organizations. These new partnerships included both connections within the local community as well as partnerships with organizations that existed at the state or national level.

Kids/Family. Many SLPTs had outcomes associated with parents and children who were the clientele of the CP. Multiple teams focused on this specific demographic and relevant responses were coded as “kids/family.” Past teams have worked to teach girls leadership and team building skills, put on soccer campus for elementary children and assisted schools with educational projects. One CP described how one team was especially beneficial:

They created their own really cool program and some of the kids that do not do well...they thrived on that program. Actually one of their kids that

has the most trouble in school, won their writing contest.

Many of the projects relevant to this outcome were impactful simply because kids were given an opportunity to interact with the college students:

The biggest impact I think was just having the girls being able to see the college students...Just being able to see the young people putting on the event for them, I think it made their experience better.

The kids/family theme was especially impactful for CPs who specifically served the needs of these audiences. For these types of CP organizations, the ability to have college age students who were willing to work with their programs created opportunities for engagement above and beyond what had previously been established. Through the use of the SLPTs, many of the CP programs experienced greater buy-in and acceptance from their current and prospective clientele.

Team benefits. While the primary focus of this research was to analyze the impacts of service-learning from the CP's perspective, the individuals interviewed brought up key benefits they saw emerge in the students through their partnerships. This theme denotes any changes in the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the project members themselves. Benefits mentioned by CPs included working with limited funds, the development of communication and collaboration skills, interpersonal skills, networking, and interdependence. The complex system of connections in a community was something discussed by several CPs: "They see that [collaboration] but then they also see how the health of the campus community is reliant on a lot of different components coming together. By impacting one, you can directly have an impact on another area."

With respect to community impact, the theme of team benefits may be best understood by looking to the future. Through the collaboration between the SLPTs and the CPs, students developed knowledge, skills, and abilities related to being actively engaged in community. The CPs who worked with the SLPTs may not directly benefit from the lessons that the SLPTs learned. However, they remain confident that the knowledge, skills, and abilities developed through these experiences of the students will be put into practice and have lasting impact in the communities where the SLPT students reside after graduation.

Physical environment. The final theme related to outcomes were physical changes to the community and surrounding environment, which were referenced by five CPs. While other

projects may have focused on awareness or fundraising, some teams were tasked with improving some part of the environment within the community. These types of projects included downtown clean-ups, the planning and construction of a walking trail, and water conservation efforts. In a small community dealing with drought issues, the work of multiple SLPTs in ongoing semesters has had tangible results:

We took the annual report totals at the end of the year and compared water produced and water consumed and they were both down. Last year being the worst of the five years of the drought so far so I think that's showing impact, there's definitely conservation going on.

SLPT teams who worked with the community's physical environment had two different types of impact. The most logical impact was related to physical improvements within the community. The SLPTs that worked to improve the physical environment made impacts on the aesthetics, usability, and sustainability of features within the community. A second impact upon the physical environment was related to changes in attitudes of the community members. As the SLPTs worked to improve the physical environment, community members noticed and began to either directly help the SLPTs or adjust their own behaviors to positively impact the physical environment of their community.

Discussion

This study extends prior research seeking to "give voice" (Miron & Moely, 2006) to community-based organizations. Previous studies reported community partner perspectives regarding benefits from service-learning experiences typically in terms of gaining access to resources to expand the reach of their programs, a calculated economic benefit, or to connect their organizations to larger networks of resources (Srinivas, et. al., 2015; Worrall, 2007). The present study explored a nuanced perspective of the breadth and types of impact. While the initial focus of the study was to examine the impact of SLPTs, participants commonly described the processes by which teams facilitated the outcomes. Therefore, the authors made the conscious choice to incorporate the processes that produce the impact. Community impact cannot be investigated in isolation; we must also understand the processes that produce the impact.

Collaborative Processes

Whereas prior research conceived of the economic benefit as a product of service-learning experiences (Worrall, 2007), the current study

reveals that these tangible resources are not necessarily an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. Granted, the purpose of several service-learning project teams was to raise funds for the community partner organization; however, participants also reported project teams were able to secure not only monetary donations, but also products and services that were instrumental toward achieving project aims.

Strategies for awareness were viewed as instrumental activities engaged by service-learning project teams to achieve desirable outcomes. Strategies included activities such as brochures, newspaper articles, informative events and other “guerilla marketing” related activities. Many of these items are tangible artifacts documenting project team accomplishments that represent techniques to achieve greater community awareness or to develop partnerships with individuals and organizations.

Partnership building and political influence both refer to collaborative processes that similarly represent means to other ends. Partnership building refers to the activities employed by service-learning project teams to help community partners develop relationships with individuals and organizations within the community. Students drew upon their personal social networks such as family or friends, and others also had key contacts with individuals or organizations who may have access or control over important resources beneficial to the community partners’ aims. Political influence was exercised through service-learning project teams involving strategic and critical stakeholders who then influenced other entities in the attainment of desirable outcomes. The collaborative process of political influence and partnership building differ in that political influence was exercised via a “one-and-done” event, whereas partnership building is conceived as a process that leads to a sustainable, long-term relationship.

Several other critical facilitators of the collaborative process were described as agency support and team features. Community partners observed important qualities of how the project team members cooperated between each other. CPs expressed observations similar to Ferrari and Worrall’s (2000) findings on key factors such as work relationship, respectfulness, attitude, and dependability. Perhaps an interactive effect exists between both the agency support and team features that synergistically contribute to the service project effectiveness.

Outcomes

Findings of the current study also revealed a set of themes regarding the outcomes of the

service-learning project teams that can be thought of in terms of “whom” and “what” are the beneficiaries of the project. For instance, respondents described how the student project team members themselves benefited through the development of knowledge and skills learned through the experience. It has been well documented that service-learning positively impacts student learning outcomes (Warren, 2012). The present study affirms previous research regarding student benefits from service-learning. Moreover, participants described greater community awareness of the academic department offering the field work in leadership course and a reputation for fostering civic engagement within students. This reputation has been paying positive dividends as additional community leaders request access to SLPTs each semester. Furthermore, other departments, as well as the university, benefit as instructors of the course help network community leaders with other university members and related resources.

Perhaps the most important beneficiary of the service-learning project teams are the community agencies themselves. The benefits they receive are multiple and complex. Participants often describe that project teams are instrumental in generating not only greater awareness in the community of their services, but that they achieve greater engagement by community members and other tangible resources.

The finding regarding greater community engagement in the form of increased volunteerism is not surprising. However, a related phenomenon emerged involving new partnerships with area businesses and civic organizations. While the service-learning project teams often created an event that brought together the area businesses and civic organizations with the community agency for a “one-and-done” event, members of the community agency built lasting relationships with these entities to leverage both human and financial resources to more effectively meet their clients’ needs. These findings corroborate Sandy and Holland (2006) on increasing community capacity by strengthening the social capital among community partner agencies.

Furthermore, several participants reported the clientele of the community agencies were directly impacted by service-learning project teams often through the form of events created and executed by the project teams, such as the youth leadership conference created and facilitated by the project team. This supports other studies indicating that college-aged students are valued as role models and in

impacting client outcomes (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007).

Participants also described the impact upon the community members from the SLPTs. Community members recognize the shared responsibility to address the needs within the community and come to recognize “we all need to give back a little bit. We’re all family.” Participants cited the impact on community members in terms of “greater awareness” resulting in “increased engagement” manifested in forms of volunteer hours and other tangible resources.

People are not the only beneficiaries of the impact from the service-learning project teams. Several project teams diligently worked to directly impact the physical environment of the community. A few project teams worked with community leaders to plan and construct a walking trail with the aim of helping the community encourage healthy and active lifestyles. However, other teams have worked with city officials to promote water conservation efforts with the design of creating sustainable futures.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of the present study, we have identified several important strategies to improve the SLPT experience. Most importantly, the academic department will be conducting training sessions with current and prospective CPs, not only detailing the nature of service-learning and our expectations of both students and SLPT supervisors, but also instructing them on the role of agency support regarding best practices. Additionally, the findings may stimulate creativity and innovation regarding project ideas. Whereas the “default position” for many CPs is to simply have teams conduct a fundraising event, the findings here suggest SLPTs can achieve various forms of impact.

These findings will help the course instructors to more effectively communicate the long-term impact students’ efforts can have upon the CP and community. Whereas the outcomes can stimulate creativity of CPs in designing unique initiatives for SLPTs, the findings associated with the collaborative processes can stimulate creative pathways for SLPTs to pursue in achieving desired outcomes. For instance, if a team encountered particularly difficult challenges in generating tangible resources, perhaps they could seek to develop political influence through key individuals who could, in turn, leverage others to provide important resources. Additionally, instructors will more effectively prepare students to enter the field work experience and collaborate together as an interdependent project team. In the area of partnership building, participants

reported that students created and nurtured vital links by bringing individuals and organizations to the CP. As such, students must develop a greater appreciation for “wearing multiple hats” as they not only represent themselves, but also the university and the community partner.

Moreover, the academic department hosting the Field Work in Leadership course has also reaped important benefits. Not only has the department’s reputation within the community been enhanced as a result of SLPTs, it has also experienced an increase in external giving to the department through the university foundation. Results of the present study will be used to intentionally leverage resources for scholarships and monetary support towards future SLPTs.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of the current study. Common to qualitative inquiry the sample size prevents us from drawing generalizable conclusions. The interpretations of the present data may provide insights into this particular context, as well as entry points into further investigation into community impact from service-learning experiences. Another limitation was that several CPs had supervised multiple SLPTs over several years. For example, one CP had coordinated eight SLPTs over five academic semesters. While in general, each of the project teams under their supervision had similar aims, the project activities for each SLPT were at times very different which made it difficult to explore the nuances of the impact achieved for each of the SLPTs. Moreover, a limitation was the time that passed between the SLPT experience and the interview. In many cases, CPs were interviewed shortly after the completion of the academic semester, while others were interviewed a semester or more since their SLPT experience. This time lapse appeared to impact the depth of their recollection of experiences.

The present study sought to describe factors associated with processes and outcomes associated with community impact of service-learning project teams. However, it did not seek to explain “how” the processes actually produce the outcomes associated with the impact of service-learning project teams. Further investigation is required to explore these relationships. Hopefully, this descriptive qualitative study serves as an entry point (Sandelowski, 2000) for additional research applying grounded theory methods in order to explain the interconnections between processes and products. We urge other scholars to conduct similar assessments with their institution’s service-learning programs and the community partners they work with in order to improve both

their programs and the community partner's experience.

Future research should incorporate different types of service-learning experiences. The service-learning course investigated within the present study is unique. Whereas other courses incorporate a service-learning initiative into a larger academic experience, the course examined in this study brings the academic experience into the service-learning project. This is a subtle but significant distinction. Many instructors that incorporate service-learning in their courses retain substantial control over the project from idea generation, planning and design of the service-learning project. The project then supplements the course content by offering real-world practical application on the course content. However, the course examined within the present study is designed as the capstone of a three-course sequence whereby students deploy the knowledge and skills from previous courses. Moreover, students in this course possess significant control and ownership in selecting the project and working collaboratively with the CP in developing a strategic plan and then executing the project. As such, future research ought to examine modes by which service-learning projects are facilitated and how those impact both students, but also community partners.

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