

# Cultivating a Civic Mindset: Assessing Public Relations Student Perceptions of Service Learning and Community Involvement Beyond the Course

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## ABSTRACT

Literature in service learning offers examples of professional, social, and civic value to students, faculty, and community. The literature has not fully examined the impact of student participation on their levels of civic involvement among graduates several years removed from the coursework. This study is a case analysis of seven years of graduates with public relations course experience to examine graduates' perceptions of the value of service-learning projects, and how this translates to community engagement.

*Keywords:* community engagement, volunteerism, longitudinal outcomes, leadership

## INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2008, the Department of Communication at Columbus State University made the strategic choice to adopt a service-learning curriculum, including its public relations curriculum. The faculty's choice to adopt a service-learning curriculum was based on the composition of the community, students enrolled in the communication program, and the local economic environment graduates were entering at the time of the 2007-08 Comprehensive Program Review (CPR). The university is a regional comprehensive with an enrollment of over 8,500 students. The university is situated in the third-largest city in the state, and the local chamber of commerce consists of more than 10,000 registered small businesses, of which 6,800 are classified as nonprofit organizations. For communication students, a curriculum focused on the needs of their community that offers opportunities to apply what they were learning would prove essential to student retention, content

reinforcement, and professional development that empowered them to develop a strong portfolio and industry contacts prior to graduation.

Literature indicates that students engaged in service-learning coursework are more likely to sustain community engagement beyond their college education in interdisciplinary literature (Ryan, 2017; Schatterman, 2014), as well as within literature on teaching and learning in public relations education (Farmer, Perry, & Ha, 2016). With a majority of communication program graduates taking coursework in public relations, the researcher is interested in assessing communication graduates' community engagement post-graduation. Communication majors currently engage in more than 10 service-learning projects with nonprofit organizations addressing community problems. The public relations courses in the curriculum use service-learning projects in each course. Thus, it is worth identifying what kind of long-term impact this involvement with addressing the needs of



local organizations and communities has on students participating in public relations service-learning courses. The paper will discuss service learning and its value to students on professional, personal, and community engagement dimensions. Through an analysis of exit assessment records and an open-ended survey of recent alumni, the paper will assess graduates' employment, community engagement, and perceived course-work value.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Service learning is now an accepted approach to public relations education (Bourland-Davis & Fall, 1997; Daugherty, 2003), specifically within capstone courses (Fraustino, Pressgrove, & Colistra, 2019; McCollough, 2018, 2019). The researcher will address the benefits of service learning to students pedagogically and professionally across disciplines, before exploring its potential for impact on students' community engagement and leadership.

### **Value of Service Learning to Students**

Service learning adds real-world relevance that students perceive as missing from curriculum. Foundational research shows service learning can increase student learning outcomes achievement (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Kahn, Westheimer, & Rogers, 2000), and allow students to process course content, apply course concepts to real-life situations, and retain more knowledge of and confidence in the application of theory in practice (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

Recent scholarship shows students also articulate a personal appreciation for project-based learning. Reflection prompts often lead to student responses like, "When working with the community we are able to make a difference and see our work in affect." Students also express personal responsibility

(Cress, Collier, Reitenauer, & Associates, 2013) and report "Feeling great to be at a university that produces professionals who will go out to the world and use their knowledge and skills to help treat people" (Kerns & Shelton, 2014). Ryan (2017) discovered in a comparative analysis of students surveyed that students who adopted a service-learning project over a final essay demonstrated heightened levels in aspects of empathy, social responsibility, and community and personal involvement, while those who completed the essay did not. Students born in the new millennium prefer interactive learning and want the courses they take to provide answers to relevant questions being asked in society (Giroux, 2010, Kuban et al., 2014; Twenge, 2013).

Public relations literature offers additional insight into the perceived preference for and perceived benefits of service learning among students. Wandel (2005) found that students reported a strong preference for service-learning courses to traditional lecture learning (84%), and that 90% of those responding believed they had learned more from the service-learning course than a traditional course design. Bollinger (2004) identified increased student understanding and successful application of communication and public speaking acumen. Wilson (2012) found value in service learning for public relations students' critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Rentner (2012) demonstrated the potential for community-oriented service learning to create real-world experience that better prepared students for the job market, which has been supported in subsequent scholarship (McCollough, 2018).

### **Value of Service Learning to Community**

Scholars note the value of service learning to the regional communities and economy around them (Creighton, Sweeney, & Cauley, 2010), particularly when insti-



tutions make it a point of strategic emphasis for the institution in scholarship and pedagogy. Service-learning models help meet real human and resource needs of community agencies (Basinger, 2015; Fletcher, Rousell, Worrell, McLean, & Baydala, 2012); put resources in underserved communities and with underserved populations (Auld, 2004; Basinger, 2015; Hall, Lasby, Ayer, & Gibbons, 2009; Miller, 1991); while building vital, sustainable partnerships between faculty, students, university, and the community (Fletcher et al., 2012). In turn, students leverage experience and professional networking opportunities as they enter the job search, while building student confidence in content and practice (Basinger, 2015; Kahn, Westheimer, & Rogers, 2000).

### **Service Learning's Impact on Community Engagement**

Early literature suggests that service learning can increase awareness of social structures, and strengthen student commitment to work for change (Kahn, Westheimer, & Rogers, 2000), heightened compassion and a commitment to community service (Barber, 1994; Barber, Higgins, Smith, Ballou, Dedrick, & Downing, 1997), and commitment to civic involvement that influences thought and action two years later (Gibboney, 1996). Recent research suggests that, in addition to providing higher learning, academic institutions also are viewed as "institutions of community engagement" (Schatterman, 2014, p. 17). As such, colleges and universities are called upon to educate, graduate, and transition into society self-reflective, informed, and civic-minded citizens who are effective decision-makers (Giroux, 2010; Kuban, O'Malley, & Florea, 2014). There is evidence of cross-institutional embrace of the value of promoting community engagement through high-impact practices, including service learning. Hutson, York, Kim, Fiester,

and Workman (2019) found a pattern of engagement among 48 participating institutions in a southeastern state, suggesting that either institutions have made engagement part of their institution, or administrators recognize the value of it and perceive of its presence at their respective institutions. In short, service learning can be an engine for community engagement for universities and a means of developing a civic mindset among students and alumni.

Lindenfeld (2010) found evidence of a "virtuous cycle of improvement" between universities and communities where students engaged in community improvement when the professor provided a flexible syllabus, strategic classroom management, and strong community partnerships. Other scholars have shown service learning's value in strengthening students' community ties and civic engagement (Bee & Guerrina, 2014) and discipline-specific self-efficacy (Goodell, Cooke, & Ash, 2016). Jacoby (2009) notes that civic engagement is "acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one's communities." Markham (2013) argues that high-impact courses from a critical pedagogical perspective helps promote community engagement and leads to improved civic engagement among graduates.

Public relations education literature also supports this in the context of service learning and capstone courses. Wandel (2005) found that among students surveyed about service learning, 37% indicated an increase in social and civic efficacy. Farmer, Perry, and Ha (2016) provide one of the rare examples of a study that connects public relations curriculum to Werder and Strand's (2011) model of analysis, and found that students indicated a desire to engage in volunteerism to impress employers and an interest in career choices on the basis of potential for community impact.



On the basis of the aforementioned literature on service learning and its civic value to the community and students, the researcher poses the following research questions:

**RQ1: What perceptions of value do students express about their experience in the service-learning curriculum?**

**RQ2: How are graduates of the program actively engaged in nonprofit and civic organizations within their community?**

**RQ3: How many graduates of the program are professionally committed to addressing civic and social issues in their community?**

#### METHOD

This study is a mixed methods case study analysis (Patton, 1980; Yin, 2009) that answered each of the established research questions. In order to assess the perceived value among graduates of the program, the researcher utilized data collected as part of the department's graduate assessment interviews. In order to graduate, each student must compile a portfolio of the work completed in the course of their study, present a 3-minute synopsis of their experience, and be prepared to answer any questions a panel of two to three faculty members have regarding the students' work over a 15-minute period.

The researcher pulled data compiled from 2010 to 2016. In total, this included a sample of 260 exit assessment interviews. The researcher stopped at 2016 in order to permit for two years of separation from the program in order to determine if values centered on civic and community improvement and engagement still resonated after students entered the workforce. From the data collected, the researcher adopted qualitative content analysis (Patton, 1980) of the portfolios to identify any key themes that

emerged from the student perceptions offered in the assessment, and to establish a greater depth of understanding of their educational experience and the impact of the coursework.

In order to assess the second and third research question, the researcher distributed anonymous open-ended electronic surveys to graduates from the total sample to investigate current employment, as well as community engagement in the region. To assess community engagement, alumni were asked about (1) participation in organizations and (2) leadership in those organizations. The decision to use an open-ended survey was a desire for a richer data set from which the researcher could collect motivations for engagement for future quantitative and qualitative analyses, which could be collected and analyzed efficiently. To analyze the survey responses, the researcher began with a simple count of those who confirmed active community engagement beyond coursework to get a sense of the net impact of the curriculum on communities. The research again adopted a qualitative content analysis (Patton, 1980) to develop depth of understanding behind graduates' motivations for and the types of engagement.

To build a sample, the researcher first attempted to gather contact information for students who completed public relations coursework among the 260 graduating seniors assessed from the university's alumni association ( $n = 200$ ). After limited success with the university's alumni association, the researcher then performed snowball sampling of alumni interviewed in order to connect with additional alumni ( $n = 92$ ). The researcher analyzed student survey answers for (1) absence or presence of involvement with community organizations. As a recurrent theme around community organization leadership emerged, the researcher explored (2) alumni choice to embrace a leadership role within the community organizations.



## FINDINGS

### **Student Perceptions of the Value of Service-Learning Curriculum**

In the researcher's review of the seven years of data, three large themes stand out among the program's graduates in discussing the value of service-learning coursework: (1) Community, (2) professional development, and (3) employment. Within each theme, we see elements of personal, professional, and civic engagement come through as points of emphasis and value to the products of the program and its philosophy.

Graduates' discussion of community was a consistent point of conversation on many of the graduation interview responses reviewed in analysis. The most commonly referenced is the curriculum's ability to help cultivate a sense of community for students and the department within the community. There was a clear discussion of the concept of building community and an appreciation for philanthropy in students in the program.

This discussion took the form of two sub-themes discussing community development (1) in the public and (2) within the program. Graduates defined the community connection around the value of the coursework in going beyond reinforcement of theory and principles. For many of those who responded, they characterized the coursework as (1) a means of community education, helping students to see and understand existing community problems, to (2) then understand that communication principles and practice can provide solutions for those problems, and (3) the applied approach of working with client partners then empowered them to act within the class and independently to help solve community problems post-graduation. As one student commented in her remarks, "The emphasis on community engagement helps us connect with the content, network in

the community, and to engage in professional development before our first job."

An interesting sub-theme that consistently grew beyond the first couple of years of assessments among graduates was that the curriculum not only helped students build a connection with the community, it also permitted them to build a sense of community within the department. Several students commented on feeling as if they were a part of a community of students, and that the curriculum created stronger opportunities for students and faculty to engage with each other in ways that other departments did not provide. In short, the service-learning courses were cultivating opportunities for students to build classroom community in addition to engaging with the surrounding community. One student suggested a strength of the program was its "family culture among students" where they routinely spend time together both inside and out of class. She added in her remarks, "what begins with long hours working together in the labs or in class sessions turns into time spent together at events on the weekend or personal get togethers. You are never alone as a part of this program."

The second common theme identified among graduating seniors' comments was that students felt that they were able to engage in substantive professional development that other learning styles do not permit. One common sub-theme addressed was the opportunity to gain real-world experience. Another common sub-theme was an appreciation of the opportunity to cultivate a solid portfolio for the job search upon graduation. An interesting sub-theme was a discussion among graduating seniors about the value of cultivating professional adaptability, and how that strengthened individuals' client relations acumen. While not specific to all three-degree concentrations, this does offer great value to aspiring public relations practitioners. One student captured these



elements in their remarks when they said, “the ability to practice client relations and produce actual work in service-learning courses that required adaptation and flexibility are exceptional experience builders that make me feel prepared for the industry.”

The third common theme among graduating seniors was the potential for the program to serve as an engine for employment opportunities among graduates by developing networks with potential employers. The departmental comprehensive data reporting supports these final two themes. From 2012 – 2015, graduating seniors attained degree-relevant employment 73% of the time. Among the 27% who do not go directly into the work force, 65% have gone on to degree-relevant graduate coursework. One student commented that they see students involved with community partners in junior- and senior-level courses now working for those partners after graduation.

### **Civic and Community Engagement Among Alumni**

The data on alumni engagement in civic organizations and nonprofit organizations in the community reflects the literature asserting the potential of service learning to promote civic and community engagement among students. Over the seven-year tally of 260 graduates of the program, the researcher identified 64 alumni (24.6%) currently involved with a local nonprofit organization in some capacity. Looking at the years individually, the weakest years for engagement among graduates are 2014 at five of 33 students involved (15.2%) and 2016 at 10 of 65 graduates (15.4%). The strongest year yielding engagement was 2013 with 14 of 34 students engaged in local nonprofits, volunteering, or civic employment (41.2%). Otherwise, 2010 (27.6%), 2011 (29.6%), 2012 (24%), and 2015 (27.7%) are consistent with the average graduate engagement.

An emergent theme from the analysis is a consideration of whether or not alumni currently hold leadership roles in community service organizations; the researcher discovered limited returns among recent graduates. Assessing leadership in terms of nonprofit board members, establishing nonprofits, or directing a nonprofit organization, the researcher found that only 21 of 260 graduates (8.1%) had taken civic engagement to a leadership role. The strongest year for establishing leadership was 2010, where five of 29 graduates (17.2%) have established leadership roles. The weakest years thus far are 2014 (1 of 33; 3%) and 2016 (3 of 65; 4.6%) to date. In this regard, it is possible and not surprising that there may be a higher emergence of leadership roles among alumni with the benefit of time as graduates better establish themselves within the community. This suggests value in further longitudinal study of alumni.

The interviews did, however, provide some remarkable examples of leadership in community problem-solving of note. One graduate quickly moved from private sector work and graduate study to founding her own nonprofit that provides counseling and professional development training to aid victims of human trafficking in leaving the sex work industry and reintegrating with society.

Another example of a self-starter in nonprofit management and messaging is a 2013 graduate who found a way to marry his personal passion for accessibility advocacy with his work. For this graduate, managing disabilities was personal when in the fall of 2009, he was struck by a drunk driver in a crosswalk and had to rehabilitate from both physical injuries and a traumatic brain injury. He serves as the executive director of the community’s disability resource center where he manages the center, coordinates programs for youth and citizens coping with disabilities, and provides a strong media relations,



lobbying, and promotional role in advancing the center's mission.

One final example of a former student making the most of their skills in the nonprofit sector is a 2016 graduate of our program who now leads an initiative from coursework to earn grant funding to open a training facility in Charleston, South Carolina, where they now help transition veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from treatment to gainful employment.

Other examples demonstrate the potential for successful young professionals to bridge the gap between corporate public relations work and community relations work. A 2012 graduate works as the public relations specialist for a management company responsible for over 40 privately owned and operated restaurants and service-sector businesses in the region. In addition to traditional public relations work for the holding company and its individual units, the graduate also provides a strong community relations presence for their employer. The graduate sits on 15 separate nonprofit boards in the region, including personal passion projects with the local American Cancer Society Leadership Council, Junior League, and Chamber of Commerce's Young Professionals.

A 2013 graduate professionally positioned themselves between the public and private sector solving local economic development issues. They are the former Vice President of the local chapter of Young Professionals, where they worked to help local employees and citizens seeking employment to refine skills, acquire resources, and better themselves to strengthen their opportunities and the local economy. They took that work with Young Professionals to a role working on public relations work on behalf of the local Chamber of Commerce, as well as a role as a social media marketing position with a public relations firm in town.

One final example of a graduate demonstrating strong civic and community engagement is a 2014 graduate who began their career as a public relations writer with the local hospital system. After six months, they were given the opportunity to move from a private organization to managing social media and media relations functions for the local community foundation, an organization committed to supporting local nonprofit and civic organizations in enhancing the quality of life in the region. They moved from a technician's role to a comprehensive management role that now encompasses all messaging, event programming, and liaison work with the local government and community organizations throughout the region. While the examples of strong leadership are not on par with the net demonstration of community engagement among graduates, it is clear that early examples offer encouraging examples of the potential of the curriculum to help develop aspiring community leaders.

## DISCUSSION

The data presented above provides some interesting points of support and consideration about the relative value of using a service-learning curriculum in public relations and in a broader sense across an entire communication curriculum. It is clear that assessing leadership in civic, community, and nonprofit organizations well within 10 years of graduation might not provide a fair assessment of the depth of involvement or commitment of graduates to civic engagement and community problem-solving. It will be worth revisiting these graduates and other graduates in the future to see if leadership levels increase among our graduates with the benefit of time and involvement. Further, the researcher is unable to gauge student or alumni



involvement with volunteering or civic engagement levels going into the program of study, which could inform the literature on the efficacy of individuals who gravitate towards service-learning programs. Finally, while this qualitative analysis is not generalizable to a broader set of contexts, it does offer a deeper understanding of the level of community engagement among the communication program alumni taking public relations coursework, as well as alumni perspectives on the value of a service-learning curriculum to their personal and professional development, as well as to the community of which they are now a part. It also offers a foundational perspective for further qualitative and quantitative analysis of service-learning coursework on post-graduation community engagement. On the basis of these findings, this researcher sees the findings as justification for further adoption of service learning in contemporary public relations programs.

Within this study's scope, the researcher sees clear evidence of the value of a service-learning curriculum to students on professional and personal fronts, as well as a means to cultivate engaged citizens and community members. Student perceptions of the professional value of the service-learning curriculum reify past service-learning scholarship on its value to aspiring professionals (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Schatterman, 2014), as well as scholarship in public relations education identifying the same trends (Bollinger, 2004; McCollough, 2018, 2019; Rentner, 2012; Wandel, 2005; Wilson, 2012). Student perceptions of the value of service-learning in connecting them with the community is also well documented in the literature (Barber et. al, 1997; Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Cress et al., 2013; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Giroux, 2010; Kerns & Shelton, 2014; Kuban, O'Malley, & Florea, 2014), but a hidden item worth further exploration is the

discussion around the ability of service-learning courses and projects to be engines for community development among students and faculty. With a growing emphasis on retention of students and cultivating learning communities, this data point offers another area for additional inquiry in time.

The solid presence of students participating in civic, community, and non-profit organizations after graduation is encouraging, and has precedent in the literature (Farmer, Perry, & Ha, 2016; Gibboney, 1996; Werder & Strand, 2011). With further exploration and a more exhaustive examination of the sample, it will be interesting to see if the numbers improve on total yield of those involved in civic and community entities. As mentioned above, the recency of the shift to a service-learning curriculum and need for additional time involved in civic and community organizations may yield a stronger return on leadership roles in civic organizations.

Another avenue worth considering is recent scholarship on leadership training in public relations courses (Meng, 2015) and its value in developing leaders in both private and public sectors. With existing emphasis on leadership development in some public relations programs, additional studies should explore the student and community value in a discipline-wide adoption of leadership development in public relations programs.

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