Non-Profit and Civic Engagement Center (NPACE): Service Learning That Enhances Civic and Community Health

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ABSTRACT

American philosopher and educator John Dewey called for direct experience in the field to provide an education that cultivates well-rounded citizens. Service learning enhances community problem solving and builds stronger town-gown relationships. This paper is a report on one university's application of the service-learning model in the development of a community outreach center, and a preliminary report on its contributions to the students', university's, and community's civic health, respectively.

Keywords: Service Learning, Civic Engagement, Community Outreach, Community Impact, Assessment, Town-Gown Relationships

INTRODUCTION

This study was performed at Columbus State University, a regional comprehensive university located in the Chattahoochee Valley region of west-central Georgia. In the spring of 2013, the university's Department of Communication launched its Non-Profit and Civic Engagement (NPACE) Center to a live radio broadcast and a press conference. In the four years since its launch, NPACE is seeing growth in notoriety in the region for the work of its faculty and students to enhance the quality of civic life in the region. Partnerships with local non-profit organizations routinely include a dozen organizations each semester. In total, NPACE now enjoys over 100 different local non-profit organization partnerships. These non-profit organizations make use of NPACE to improve communication, develop content, or to launch strategic communication campaigns.

NPACE functions as an engine that cultivates these non-profit partnerships to support a growing service-learning curriculum that constitutes the core of the Communication curriculum across its Communication Studies, Integrated Media, and Public Relations concentrations. This experience not only puts them on a competitive level with graduates from other programs, but also helps raise the salience of local issues their community is facing and requires them to personally invest in addressing the local issues.

The faculty's choice to adopt a service-learning curriculum is based on the composition of the community, the student body, and the local economic environment the students 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. It is situated in the third-largest city in the state, and the local chamber of commerce consists of more than 6,000 registered small businesses, of which 4,800 are classified as non-profit organizations. The department has an enrollment of over 400 students. Per the 2015-16 CPR, the student enrollment is predominantly female (69%),

African-American (49.6%), and the department has a strong base of first-generation college students (30%).

The economic downturn of 2008 prompted the faculty to consider how to effectively assist students in finding degree-relevant employment. At the time, the community was flooded with unemployed professionals with five to 10 years of professional experience. The faculty knew students would need a strong portfolio to compete and earn opportunities not often afforded to students emerging from degree programs with little exposure to internships or class projects that yielded portfolio-grade work. The choice to provide multiple service-learning projects offered students the ability to cultivate portfolios consisting of multiple pieces of professional-grade work. Another motivation for expanding service-learning offerings was the opportunity for students to engage in direct networking with many local employers commonly engaged with non-profit organizations.

This paper discusses how the faculty and staff launched NPACE, how it works as an engine for developing productive service -learning partnerships, and how recent and ongoing student projects embody the best principles of service learning. In the process, the authors will explain how NPACE helps its university achieve its mission to serve the needs of its community and region, as well as the professional approach and civic-mindedness of the students. The paper begins with a review of pertinent literature on service learning and its relationship with civic engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educators and the institutions they represent are faced with the challenge to take students who enter universities, train them with appropriate course content, and within a four-year framework, help place graduates into successful and self-sufficient employment so they can assume a role as a contributing member of society. Often, this challenge to educate and quickly matriculate generates more challenges such as workplace skills (e.g., effective listening, conflict resolution, working in teams, problem solving), commonly desired in all organizational settings if individuals had not had opportunities to practice them while in higher education. Added to this challenge is the fight to demonstrate the relevance of course material to the students. Educators seek students engaged in the learning process, and students seek a way to make sense of and practice course content as a way to see whether or not the course is relevant. Often, the answers to these challenging questions comes through using a service-learning pedagogy that will allow the student a venue to practice those course concepts while working to meet real-time needs in the community. Additionally, service learning provides universities with opportunities to meet university missions in practice.

Service Learning Defined

Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define service learning 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 the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (p. 112). Often, service learning is identified as a process of development or for creating knowledge where students are given opportunities to transform the information they receive from their experience and make sense of it within the theoretical framework of their academic course material (Kuban, O'Malley, & Florea, 2014).

Practical Value to Faculty, Students, and Community

Service-learning components, when embedded into curriculum, can add the level of relevance that students perceive as missing from curriculum. Research suggests that incorporating service-learning

components into the curriculum increases levels of faculty satisfaction not only with course content, but also with student learning outcomes (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Kahn, Westheimer, & Rogers, 2000). The service-learning model provides faculty a means of going beyond the basic instruction that provides a skeleton concept of the work to be performed with the agency; it also allows faculty and students the opportunity to engage in deeper learning as they explore alternative applications for applying course content outside of the classroom (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

Adopting a service-learning model can help meet real needs of community agencies that include expanded capacities—both human and resource—of local agencies (Basinger, 2015; Fletcher et al., 2012); mitigate the dearth of resources in rural and otherwise underserved populations (Auld, 2004; Basinger, 2015; Hall, Lasby, Ayer, & Gibbons, 2009; Miller, 1991); and build vital sustaining partnerships between faculty, students, university, and the community (Fletcher et al., 2012). Research suggests that the reciprocity is one of the strongest predictors of successful partnerships resulting from service-learning opportunities, where each stakeholder gains from the experience with an equitable exchange of resources (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Jacoby, 1996). Effective service-learning partnerships encourage mutuality, shared resources, and accountabilities, where each service-learning stakeholder contributes resources to help the others (Basinger, 2015; Honadle & Kennealy, 2011). Additional research suggests that service learning helps build levels of confidence in content and practice (Basinger, 2015; Kahn et al., 2000).

One of the many positive outcomes of service learning is that faculty members can incorporate these opportunities to help students see the relevance of course content to meeting community needs (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Faculty can draw upon a growing body of literature that points to increased content knowledge and levels of awareness and engagement resulting from service-learning components (Honadle & Kennealy, 2011; Kahn et al., 2000; Kuban et al., 2014).

Service Learning Pedagogy, Citizenship, and the University Mission

Many American research universities can trace their reason for existence to the need to prepare citizenry to participate in democratic life (Checkoway, 1999; Kahn et al., 2000). For many universities, incorporating service learning into the curriculum not only helps some universities meet their mission, but also has the capacity to help them begin to mitigate the dialectical tensions between research and practice that exist in the academy. In his seminal research, Barber (1995) establishes that service learning can help move universities closer to their original mission of educating citizenry. Recent research suggests that, in addition to providing higher learning, academic institutions also are viewed as "institutions of community engagement" (Schatterman, 2014, p. 17).

Moreover, research suggests that participation in "high-quality service learning leads to the values, knowledge, skills, efficacy, and commitment that underlie effective citizenship" (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 164). Students 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). Extant research suggests that the impact of service-learning experiences assist in these areas by promoting higher levels of (a) student cognition, awareness, and problem-solving skills (Schatterman, 2014); (b) self-esteem and confidence (Jones & Abes, 2004); (c) civic engagement (Schatterman, 2014); and (d) post-graduation awareness of career and employability options (Auld, 2004; Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Hall et al., 2009; Schatterman, 2014). Additional research suggests that not only can the positive effects of the service-learning experience supplement and enhance student

knowledge, but also can continue throughout life (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Jones & Abes, 2004; Kuhn et al., 2000).

Literature suggests that service learning can increase awareness of social structures and can encourage their commitment to work for social change (Westheimer, Kahn, & Rogers, 2000). Additional research connects service-learning experiences of university students to heightened levels of compassion toward the disadvantaged, and a commitment to service in the community (Barber, 1994; Barber et al., 1997). Longitudinal studies indicate that involving students in service learning not only may help in their developing understanding and appreciation of democracy, but it also aids in developing them into individuals committed to civic involvement that influences their thinking and actions two years after the experience (Gibboney, 1996). Having established the potential of service learning to help enhance student learning and produce civic-minded graduates, the paper now moves forward and provides some context on the development NPACE Center.

Justifying NPACE Through Service-Learning Impact

The birth of the Department of Communication's Non-Profit and Civic Engagement (NPACE) Center did not begin with a center at all, but rather with an idea that communication principles are best learned and most appreciated when students have opportunities to take theoretical concepts taught in the classroom and apply them in the community where that knowledge and those skills are most needed. As such, the growth of the NPACE Center from an idea to a physical center can be seen as a chronological progression that began in 2001 with the Department of Communication offering two courses—Political Communication and Group Communication—both of which contained service-learning components. By 2003, those two courses were always at full enrollment and always had lengthy wait lists. During this time, students applied their communication skills to assist with political campaigns and local non-profit agencies (e.g., United Way, homeless shelters, agencies that assisted at-risk populations, Boys and Girls Clubs, etc.). Additionally, during senior year capstone presentations to faculty, students repeatedly identified these two courses as their most popular and yet most helpful courses that provided them real-life experience working with clients and offered them employment opportunities after graduation. At each capstone presentation, the faculty panel asked students to suggest future areas of growth they felt the department needed to consider, and the overwhelming response was a call for more courses that had service-learning components.

In 2003, the Department of Communication was one of 13 departments housed in the College of Arts and Sciences. The department had 150 majors with an annual operational budget of $2,500. Housed in a building that offered little external appeal, the department had no recruiting budget, received little to no recognition within the college, and had no external support for development. The department was challenged to become creative in the face of very real constraints. A significant challenge was how to raise the department profile in a way that would allow it to set itself apart as a department that prepared its students for employment or graduate school while it provided students hands-on experiences in real-life work environments.

The answer to this challenge came, in part, while the department was undergoing its Comprehensive Program Review (CPR) in 2007. The 2007-08 CPR confirmed that the department was under-recognized in almost all areas. Most importantly, it revealed a valuable area the faculty had overlooked: No student graduated from the program without having at least one service-learning experience. Further, most of these experiences came from working with local non-profit agencies that also were beginning to take note of and promote the work the students were doing. With this

discovery in 2007, the department began leveraging service learning as something that set the department apart from any other unit in the college and as a way to recruit students and gain recognition in the community.

During the 2007-08 academic year, the department began to implement a narrative that established the value of service learning to students, faculty, and the university. During the senior capstone presentations, students began to speak of the value of their service-learning experiences in the following ways: (1) real-life workplace experiences, that (2) offered connections with local non-profit agency leaders for employment opportunities, and (3) professional networking opportunities that could assist them with graduate school or professional recommendations. Faculty began producing manuscripts and conference presentations on the value of service-learning pedagogy, a practice that continues due to the wealth of research data each semester provides the faculty. The university benefitted from the attention drawn to the department's majors, whose work was praised in the local media and by leaders in the community, and their thousands of hours of service-learning hours helped them achieve the prestigious Presidential Community Service Achievement of Excellence status. During the 2016-17 academic year, for example, the students compiled more than 14,000 service-learning hours in community partnerships.

By the 2010-11 academic year, the department increased its service-learning course offerings and began to draw even more attention in the community. The Department of Communication had grown in its service-learning reach to where not only did it lead the university in service-learning initiatives, but also its students were expanding their reach of services into other areas of the community that included local government agencies. Going beyond the citywide numbers mentioned in the introduction, of the 10,000 small businesses in the Chattahoochee Valley Workforce Region where the university is situated, 6,000 of those businesses are non-profits. Fortunately for the department, an increasing number of those non-profits were vying for the attention of the department, asking that they be considered for the next round of communication service-learning projects or internships. In addition, at this time the department left the College of Arts and Sciences and became one of four units that made up the newly created College of the Arts. Part of this transition included a physical move to a new campus, a new building, and opened the door for new opportunities.

By the 2011-12 academic year, service learning raised the profile of the program and the department was beginning to notice an uptick in enrollment numbers as students wanted to be part of the hands-on engagement that allowed them to make a difference in the community as they built impressive resumes and portfolios during their course of study. Students were not the only ones requesting more courses that contained service-learning opportunities. Given the community's high concentration of non-profit agencies, the department never was at a loss to offer enriching service-learning opportunities for their majors. Additionally, students began to demonstrate a desire to apply course concepts to make a difference in the community.

During the 2011-12 academic year, the faculty expanded beyond a traditional Communication Studies curriculum that better met the needs of its students and employers. In addition to the original Communication Studies concentration, the faculty also added professional tracks in Public Relations and Integrated Media. The Integrated Media track reflected a contemporary shift in the discipline away from traditional Journalism or Mass Communication toward a cross-disciplinary skill set in shooting, writing, and editing that makes students employable in a wider sphere of media production. The Public Relations track is a blend of the certified curriculum promoted by the Public Relations Society of America and Integrated Media coursework essential for practitioners entering the modern firm

or working independently on a for-contract basis. This approach to entrepreneurial media production for creative or strategic communication is particularly useful for the students interested in working in resource-light non-profit or public sector environments.

University and community leaders alike commented on the civic engagement of the students. Students saw their course work as relevant because they were practicing their coursework principles and seeing those principles successfully meet real needs in community agencies. As such, it became obvious that with a massive number of student service-learning hours and the positive thumbprint the students' service-learning hours were making on the community, the time was right to claim a physical space that could encapsulate the departmental philosophy and practice under a single name. This is how the practice of service learning birthed the concept that became known as NPACE.

The center is modeled after the Small Business Development Centers operated by the U.S. Small Business Administration. Given the increasing financial and operational pressures to operate more like businesses, community non-profit (501c3) organizations are in critical need of similar services afforded small business start-ups through SBA programs. The center was created to serve as a bridge that could connect resources to meet the operational needs of community non-profits and the training needs of communication students.

The center's initial outreach targeted agencies serving at-risk (e.g., adult, student, homeless) populations. NPACE began to offer professional development workshops for staff working in non-profit agencies. Because of the department's track record in building effective partnerships, increased student engagement, and high volume of service-learning hours, the university gave the department a storefront space that opened up with the move to the new campus. The physical space provided the initial resource to help cultivate opportunities to expand service-learning opportunities.

METHOD

Launching and Sustaining NPACE

Aside from the new facility space, the initial funding for NPACE was obtained through departmental resources and grant writing that provided initial equipment and staffing to launch the center with the university. The initial launch of the Integrated Media degree concentration yielded additional funding for purchasing minimal media production equipment ($27,000) and for the development of a recording studio ($20,000). The department also earned a $10,000 grant for additional technological needs related to the center.

The center serves as an academic and applied think-tank environment, consisting of a staffed facility that serves as an initial storefront point of entry where non-profit agencies or their constituents can physically enter and find assistance. From strategic planning to interactive digital media resources, these collaborations with a variety of partners create more effective non-profit organizations by enhancing their operational practices.

Since its launch in the 2012-13 academic year, service-learning initiatives organized through the department's NPACE Center have helped enhance student communication, critical thinking, production, and adaptability skills with experiential learning through interaction with the non-profits, and has expanded capacities of hundreds of local non-profit agencies. NPACE now serves as a conduit through which student service-learning hours can be channeled to deserving local non-profit agencies in ways that encourage student and faculty collaboration with the agencies to design and implement communication campaigns; to provide training programs to assist with strategic planning, budgeting and finance; to assist with staff professional development; to bolster grant development and fundraising; and to aid in negotiating legal issues facing non-profits.

Additionally, students have opportunities to participate in initiatives that can

impact public policy through various forms of civic engagement. Building upon the service delivery component of the center, faculty and student teams continue to conduct applied research projects related to the non-profit organizations designed to create an exchange of intellectual capital for the benefit of other non-profit entities. Mentioned earlier, many of these projects continue to yield publications and conference presentations that help elevate program visibility. For example, the two authors of this piece now have better than 30 publications and conference presentations at the state, regional, and national level.

In the fall of 2013, the initiation of an advisory board helped bring in more resources to support NPACE. The steady flow of major contributions demonstrates the value of the center to the community, and also enhances the departmental profile. The following gifts identified have enhanced the services and learning experiences the center and department can provide; they are also giving rise to additional marketable fields of study for the students. The first major contribution to the program came in the form of an initial gift of a radio production board to facilitate the initial student-run radio broadcasts with a community partner, PMB Broadcasting. This ultimately led to the gift of a dedicated radio frequency band, 88.5 WCUG FM, and current radio station equipment, facilitating a perpetual on-site broadcast outlet for an entirely student-run radio station. The $350,000 gift is by far the largest contribution derived from the formation of NPACE, and prompted the university to provide an annual budget of $42,000 to maintain licensing and facilities, as well as a student activity fund allocation of $9,000 to facilitate the part-time employment of critical student workers maintaining student operations. The result is a student organization focused on non-profit live broadcasting that provides both entertainment and public services.

The second major contribution came in the form of a healthy body of two to six available internships each semester with one of the local television stations, WTVM 9, which grew into an ongoing partnership with their parent ownership company, Raycom Media. The partnership continues to facilitate the same internship pool, but has also led to the employment of six of the graduates since the 2012-13 academic year in the Raycom family. The WTVM partnership ultimately led to a partnership with the other two local television stations, one of which, WLTZ 54, now routinely brings in one to two interns and has hired one of the graduates since 2012-13.

WRBL 3 is the latest, and one of the strongest, contributors. During the 2015-16 academic year, their station director joined the advisory board and proceeded to offer a similar package of available internships to the students. Shortly after making an initial offer and learning about the department's approach to teaching and philosophical approach to integrated media and public relations, he gifted the station's recently removed HD-TV studio set, worth $60,000, to the university for the express purpose of the department's use in courses. This latest gift prompted additional budget allocations from the university to facilitate the renovation of existing large lecture space into a flexible learning space that can facilitate studio production, media editing, and writing for broadcast and film, in addition to instructional space for up to 45 students. The department is currently working on an agreement to expand upon the gift that would spawn an on-site news bureau, two additional internships, and the guarantee of an annual hire of one of the graduates. It is also propelling a conversation about adding courses in newsgathering, reporting, and interviewing to the curriculum. By the 2015-16 academic year, NPACE became a conduit for long-term community partnerships that began to produce valuable revenue streams that include long-term support through named internships and contract project coordination such as a student digital media bureau with Nexstar Media Group, the radio station, and ongoing video production and editing contracts.

As the department begins its next strategic plan, the focus now lies on the next stages of NPACE's growth around the skill sets of current and next-hire faculty. While NPACE continues to evolve into an innovation center, the department has seen many of the desired outcomes come to fruition. As institutions of higher education find themselves living in a state of economic instability, NPACE offers income opportunities, can attract donors through its philanthropic and civic outreach, and has increased student enrollment and engagement.

Client Relations: Cultivating and Sustaining Faculty-Organizational Relationships

When developing the NPACE Center, the faculty adopted a model akin to many public relations firms, marketing agencies, or economic development centers. The non-profit organization interested in partnership will reach out to the center's director, who will coordinate a meeting with faculty members and sit down with the organization. The purpose of the initial meeting is to assess the broad needs of each organization. Understanding that the community partner is limited on resources means that the level of work produced will be of use to the community partner, and represents something of value for both the students working on the project and the partner in need of assistance.

Once the needs of the non-profit are clarified, the department faculty review the courses offered over the coming academic year that present opportunities for partnership. Many non-profit organizations require multiple areas of support, which the faculty can identify and then work with the organization to pair in multiple courses. In several cases, community partners work incrementally over several semesters with faculty in order to effectively meet needs. In many cases, community partners have a diverse set of needs, or needs that span a calendar year and are best met in a different semester than the initial meeting.

Relationship maintenance requires a healthy dialogue between the community partner and the faculty members engaged. Once partnered with a course, the community partner will maintain consistent communication with each faculty member they work with. This ensures that the needs of the client are effectively managed and are within the realistic scope of the course learning objectives. It also provides faculty members with a mechanism for assessment of student professionalism in applied upper division courses like the department's public relations campaigns, media writing, or media production courses. Making effective use of communication for student assessment works well to promote successful student engagement with a client, and as a means for successfully managing client expectations of amateurs engaging in professional work for the first time.

At the end of each class, it is common for faculty to host the community partner in a class presentation to demonstrate the work of the students and to solicit feedback from the partner on the students' work. In the process, faculty members are able to perform both an assessment of student course work and an evaluation of the relationship with community partners. Successful partnerships will often lead to additional collaboration in future courses. In situations where the partnership proved problematic, the faculty member is able to assess areas of concern and provide feedback to colleagues in determining the viability of future partnerships. While the goal of the department and the NPACE Center is to sustain partnerships, open invitation does mean that some partnerships prove to be a poor fit.

RESULTS

Examples of NPACE at Work

The Muscogee County Ferst Foundation for Early Childhood Literacy approached the faculty through NPACE in the fall of 2012 after its initial launch the previous summer. At the time, the organization

needed to understand the region it was seeking donor support from, promotional literature, and public service announcements to promote their new program. Appropriately, faculty assigned that fall's video production, public relations campaigns, and integrated media design courses to address the needs of the Ferst Foundation.

At this point, the partnership moved from the NPACE Center into each corresponding course, and the non-profit partner began meeting with the faculty member teaching the course that was addressing their needs. It is up to each faculty member to maintain the desired level of communication and contact with the respective clients throughout the semester. At a minimum, this tends to come in the form of quarterly or end-of-semester email updates on team efforts on the organization's behalf. On occasion, organization contacts will maintain contact following each interaction with students as a way of keeping the professor a part of the conversation. The choice in approach is often a blend of faculty and client prerogative.

The aim of the model is to establish enduring partnerships that promote a stronger quality of civic life, rather than one-time projects. Going back to the previous discussion about the Muscogee County Ferst Foundation, the faculty and partner provide a strong example of how an enduring partnership allows for continued success, that reflection is an essential service-learning tool in cultivating professional development in applying course principles, and how service learning is a means of providing better resources in the community problem-solving process.

The public relations campaigns class ultimately became a three-year process of strategically supporting the organization. The goals of the campaign shifted as students refined their understanding of the problems the Ferst Foundation was facing through reflection on past class campaigns. During the third year, the student group researched the previous efforts of past teams, as documented in the campaign report texts submitted at the end of the semester. These reports are a blend of evaluation of the campaign using data collected and personal reflection of the student team members, the clients' perspectives on their efforts, and faculty evaluation of their effectiveness in practice. Reflection on the past groups' efforts helped the team in the fall of 2014 identify logistical errors; of note is the critical omission that the Ferst Foundation needed to raise its profile in the community before it could generate fundraising support from citizens. Combining this reflective experience with direct communication with the client permitted the third student group to put the strategic focus on developing a comprehensive Facebook strategy for the Ferst Foundation, as well as a permanent communication intern the department continues to maintain with the organization.

Other projects enable students to engage in independent research that builds their own knowledge about community issues, promoting engagement in civic dialogue and community problem solving. In the fall of 2014, the qualitative research class researched the issue of community poverty, specifically its causes, the stigmas associated with it, and how poverty impacts traditional relationships. The project came through a new partnership faculty formed through NPACE with an organization called Enrichment Services Program (ESP). ESP provides counseling, temporary employment, job retraining, and access to shelter and food for the unemployed and underemployed in the region. ESP specifically asked the students to produce materials that would help them redefine poverty and its effects for members of the community and throughout the region. In response, students in the qualitative research methods class combined efforts with students in the introduction to public relations courses and developed a video series and a model for a social media campaign dedicated to redefining poverty.

As was the case with the Ferst Foundation, the partnership with ESP endured in subsequent academic terms, and

students in the fall of 2016 completed a social media campaign aimed at helping ESP raise more than $15,000 in community small donor support on a state-wide annual day of giving. The project also generated a set of strategic recommendations for promoting key programs in education and job training that ESP simply does not discuss that have a strong impact on the counties in two states that ESP currently serves.

Student service-learning projects also provide a tremendous means for students to identify problems on their own within the community and cultivate professional skills sets in the process. Students enrolled in a Group Communication class that had a service-learning component where students were to form a small group from among the members of the class, were to identify an agency with which they would like to partner to meet that agency's communication needs during the semester-long service learning project.

The nine-member group experienced group phase interaction theory, taught in class, as they identified National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) as the non-profit agency with whom they wished to work during the semester. NAMI is the largest grassroots non-profit mental health organization in America and its NAMI on Campus division specifically addresses the many forms of mental illness (e.g., ADHD, anxiety, depression) to which college students are most vulnerable. The NAMI on Campus initiative has formed university chapters across the country; however, these students learned that the state had only one private institution chapter and no chapters at public universities. The students made their organizational goal to work with NAMI on Campus to launch the first campus chapter at a public university in the state. Two academic years after the semester, students in the department remain active members and lead NAMI on Campus at the university.

Measuring Value to Students

The benefit of NPACE to students becomes clear when considering the benefits to students in adopting a service-learning approach. First, most majors experience two service learning courses per semester that include multiple facets of professional-grade production on behalf of non-profit clients. This translates to a student portfolio that often includes at least 10 projects that students may show to prospective employers upon graduation. Another benefit of employing the NPACE model pertains to retention, progression, and graduation of students. In a university with an average retention of approximately 50%, the department currently enjoys a 70.9% five-year average for retention, well above the university average.

Another area of benefit to students is the value of a service-learning curriculum to the graduation rate. Prior to the incorporation of service learning, the 2000-01 departmental Comprehensive Program Review (CPR) demonstrated a graduation rate of 43.5%. As the program incrementally adopted a service-learning approach after 2001, the 2007-08 CPR demonstrated an increase in graduation rate to 47.4%. In the most recent CPR report, including the period of NPACE's launch and a strong service-learning adoption in many of the courses, the graduation rate now sits at 53.8% among communication majors. While this is by no means the destination, it is a positive trend for a regional comprehensive university encountering strong pressure from its state legislature and board of regents to enhance graduation rates.

In addition to degree-relevant work experience, the students are able to cultivate stronger professional social networks. Communication majors are able to better cultivate broad, diverse networks of acquaintances that open doors for better degree-relevant employment opportunities. One such example is the local hospital. Two recent graduates began networking with their employer through class assignments and

through student groups like Public Relations Student Society of America. Mentioned earlier, another example comes from the local television stations, who currently employ several communication majors part-time, have more than a dozen internship slots open for majors, and have hired graduates to entry-level reporter jobs in recent years.

The department's model translates to broader employment than news media. Since 2009, a review of the department's student assessment reports of graduates offer compelling evidence about the model's ability to enhance student employability. Seventy-six of the authors' advisees graduating with communication degrees maintain employment in degree-relevant positions in the region and locally. A review of Comprehensive Program Review data illustrated that the department is producing strong degree-relevant employment (73%) among communication majors. A strong cross-section of communication graduates also either began their careers with a local non-profit organization, or currently serve on the board of a local non-profit outside of their work. While these findings will require continued observation and study, it does present another important consideration of the potential benefits of not only service learning, but also maintaining a system for facilitating high-quality service learning partnerships, akin to NPACE.

DISCUSSION

Service learning is a form of high-impact learning through which students work with external organizations by putting theory and principles into practice and enhancing that practice through reflection. The literature indicates potential benefits to students' professional development, as well as civic knowledge and participation. It is these benefits outlined in research that were the foundation for the university's Non-Profit and Civic Engagement (NPACE) Center.

NPACE also created opportunities of a similar value for students. In terms of the learning environment, students are able to gain a much stronger grasp of principles and practice of communication through service learning. In addition, the opportunity to connect with prominent local non-profits empowers students with a strong sense of personal investment in their community and in public affairs, reinforcing literature on the value of service learning to cultivating stronger citizens, at least at the participatory citizen level, if not the social reformer level (Auld, 2004; Basinger, 2015; Fletcher et al., 2012; Westheimer & Kahn, 2000). Finally, the work that students complete on the behalf of non-profit organizations is providing them with invaluable professional experience that is directly translating to degree-relevant employment. While scholarship remains uncertain about the direct value of service learning to civic engagement and democratic participation (Cowan, 1997), it is very clear that service learning is a strong reflection of Dewey's (1933; 1938) call for learning from doing. NPACE exists as a vehicle to promote service learning, and it exists to support the program, students, faculty, and community that support it.

While the scope of NPACE capacity is only beginning to be realized, it is important to note that while the opportunities grow, the building in which the center is housed remains less than impressive. The outreach done through the NPACE Center, however, has invigorated an academic program and its community. In fact, the building could go away and the work of NPACE could continue; as students enroll and the academic program has grown, so too have the resources. The contributions of private partners and subsequent support of the university provide evidence for this claim.

The authors have no doubt that NPACE is a viable model that can be replicated by any university that embraces a service-learning pedagogy and offers courses where meaningful opportunities are available for students to learn the course content while they use those course concepts for

positive impact on clients. Just as with the evolving story of NPACE, the authors provide strong evidence that those programs also will notice an increase in civic awareness where students desire to engage in their communities and make a difference, and in time, a growth in retention of students, progression of students through the program of study, and graduation into degree-relevant employment.

While the authors are confident that the NPACE success can be achieved elsewhere, and in other disciplines than communication, we recognize certain limitations of the present study. First, we must acknowledge the positive impact the location may have had on the success of NPACE. The university is located in an urban area where philanthropy is valued. Additionally, the city is home to three Fortunate 500 Companies, all of which value servant leadership and community service. Finally, we recognize the value of NPACE being located in an area rich in non-profit agencies that are eager to partner with the program, and that are open to offering student service-learning projects and internships to students enrolled in the Public Relations, Integrated Media, or Communication Studies concentrations. Without this sustainable community environment, centers like NPACE may experience limited opportunities. In spite of these limitations, however, we believe that with university, department, and faculty commitment of resources and time to the process, civic engagement centers can become a reality with very little financial investment.

As the civic reach of NPACE expands, so do the opportunities to engage in new areas of research. One obvious area of analysis is to explore the diverse areas in which class projects work to meet community needs, in line with existing scholarship of service learning. While not necessarily a new form of research, the center does offer an opportunity to serve as an incubator for such forms of research on types of work, its impact on the community, and the impact of the project work on student learning about specific fields of work and community needs.

Although the physical storefront facility for NPACE has existed only since 2012, preliminary graduate data seems to lend support to the long-term positive impact of service learning suggested in extant service-learning literature. The faculty are finding increased numbers of students who are able to connect course content to the service-learning context and to respond to clients in the moment, and are able to articulate and apply content knowledge as they adapt to the context. Additionally, as research suggests, preliminary data gathered post-graduation suggest student civic engagement continues past semester's end. Graduates from the program continue to value their NPACE experiences both in word and in practice as they remain civically engaged after they leave the program. Although the data is limited, it does suggest that higher-than-normal percentages graduate from the program and go on to careers in the non-profit area, or seek out civic opportunities to serve in the community as volunteers or leaders on non-profit advisory boards.

Future studies could collect data and stories of the role the NPACE Center played in this area. The next focus of study is the cultural impact of NPACE and the service-learning model on the civic-mindedness of students and their ability to identify and resolve community problems. More specifically, a grounded theory approach could aide researchers in developing a basis for understanding the phenomenon through allowing informants' understandings to emerge from their accounts (Gibson & Webb, 2015). Grounded theory, long recognized for its theory-building methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), could provide preliminary themes and concepts that emerge from the data, to discover emerging models on the path to developing a theory of the Civically Engaged Communicator. Going further, research should examine the likelihood of majors, recent graduates (0-2 years), and extended alumni (2-14 years)

who experienced the service-learning model to continue to engage in community problem solving, to participate in civic institutions, and participate in the democratic process.

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