

Student Professional Competencies as Perceived by Community Service-Learning Partners

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ABSTRACT

Service learning is a high-impact practice that helps students develop professional competencies such as teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and problem solving. This study investigated community partners' perceptions of students' professional competencies and their impact. Findings indicate that professional competencies had a significant impact on partner perceptions of project quality and value, while the overall predictability of the model to examine partners' perceived likelihood to work on future projects with students was low.

Keywords: community partners; high impact practices; essential learning outcomes; competencies; higher education

INTRODUCTION

Employers and recent college graduates agree that certain cross-cutting skills are essential for success in entry-level positions and in today's global economy (Association of American College and Universities, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2013; Hart Research Associates, 2015), yet disagree about the extent to which these outcomes are achieved (Hart Research Associates, 2015). College graduates rank themselves much higher on outcomes such as the ability to communicate effectively in writing and speaking, work in teams, apply knowledge and skills, and work with people from different backgrounds than do employers, indicating a gap that needs to be filled. Employers value these cross-cutting skills over choice of major (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

High-impact practices (HIPs) have been identified as leading to the development of these skills. HIPs, first designated as such in 2007, include community service learning,

learning communities, writing intensive courses, internships, capstone courses, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, collaborative assignments, common intellectual experiences, first-year seminars, and ePortfolio (Kuh, O'Donnell, & Schneider, 2017). At their foundation are specific elements associated with improved learning. These include high performance expectations, a significant investment of effort over time, interactions with faculty and peers, experiences with diversity, constructive feedback, learning through real-world application, public demonstration of competence, and opportunities to reflect on and integrate learning (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013).

A significant amount of research demonstrates the value of community service-learning in terms of student learning outcomes (Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007; Warren, 2012). Although community service learning is founded on the principle of reciprocity, or the idea that the institution, student, and community partner benefit from an exchange of

knowledge and expertise (Jacoby, 1996), studies focusing on community partner benefits are limited, and some evidence suggests that the latter face challenges due to the short-term nature of projects, communication problems with the institution, and the extra work involved (Harrington, 2014).

This study investigated community partner perceptions of the professional competencies demonstrated by students during the service-learning experience. The study contributes to current knowledge by extending the literature on community partners' perspectives, specifically their views of student learning. It also captures employer views of student learning prior to graduation, thereby extending existing research on employer views of the skills of recent college graduates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, we review literature salient to the study. This includes three areas of research: (1) service learning and the development of professional competencies, (2) issues and considerations in campus-community partnerships, and (3) the community and economic impact of service learning.

Professional Competencies

As indicated in the introduction, service learning is a high-impact practice (HIP) designed to result in achievement of the essential learning outcomes valued by employers. This is theorized to be due to the teaching and learning elements of practice at the foundation of HIPs (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). Evidence for the impact of HIPs is based on student self-reported gains in deep learning, general learning, practical skills, and personal/social growth as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh et al., 2017).

Deep learning is comprised of understanding underlying meaning, reflecting on relationships between concepts, integrating previous learning, and applying knowledge to

real-life situations (Finlay & McNair, 2013). General learning gains reflect written and oral communication and critical thinking. Practical competence focuses on work-related knowledge and skills; the ability to work well with others; and technological, quantitative, and problem-solving skills (Finlay & McNair, 2013). Finally, personal and social development gains include values and ethics, self-understanding, understanding of diverse others, civic engagement, independent learning, contributing to the welfare of the community, and a sense of spirituality (Finlay & McNair, 2013).

In addition to research supporting the impact of HIPs on learning, service-learning studies provide extensive evidence of similar types of gains, supporting the validity of student self-report data on the NSSE. These outcomes have been documented and categorized by Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray (2001) as personal (personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, moral development, ability to work well with others, leadership skills, communication skills); social (reducing stereotypes, increased cultural and racial understanding, social responsibility and citizenship, commitment to service); learning (application of learning to real-life context, critical thinking, problem solving, cognitive development, complex understanding); and career development in general. Service-learning participants also continue to engage with the community by making charitable donations, volunteering, voting, serving on boards, and joining community groups (Farber, 2011; Olberding, 2012). Community partners' views of student learning are not well represented in the literature, but one study reported high community partner ratings on the overall quality, writing, organization, substance, strategies, and creativity of students' work (Olberding & Hacker, 2016).

Establishing Successful Community Partnerships

Reciprocity is a key component of community service learning (Workman & Berry, 2010). It refers to collaboration among students, faculty, and community partners to the benefit—ideally the equal benefit—of all. The faculty member and community partner teach and contribute knowledge and skills to benefit the student; students may also act as teachers in the sense that they apply theories and concepts from their coursework to create new solutions to issues in workplace. As such, service learning can be characterized as a co-learning environment (Konwerski & Nashman, 2008).

Reciprocity can be further understood by considering the terms *partner* and *partnership*, which typically refer to a specific person or organization; however, further delineation is needed to determine which aspects of community are involved, which constituencies represented, and the types of interactions reflected (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009). Partnerships reflect relationships constituting “closeness, equity, and integrity” (Bringle et al., 2009, p. 3), exhibited through interactions among students, organizations, faculty, administrators, and residents (the SOFAR model), all of whom have different perspectives, goals, backgrounds, roles, and resources. Analyzing these relationships and interactions encourages a more complete understanding of outcomes and the degree to which they are transactional or transformational.

Principles of good practice for service learning and community engagement indicate that a balance of power must be established between community and educational partners (Kendall, 1990). The goal of the partnership has been referred to as *transformative reciprocity*, or a deep collaboration aimed at the transformation of those involved (Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2010), yet the community side of the partnership has traditionally been devalued (Stanlick & Sell, 2016). To address this, the community partner must have a full voice in decision-making, and the campus partner must be careful to not overstep bounds

or unintentionally create problems (Stanlick & Sell, 2016).

While it is a noble desire to want to “help,” we must examine our own motivations when entering into a partnership with the community, especially one in which the power dynamic has traditionally been skewed to one side (Stanlick & Sell, 2016, p. 83).

One way to address inequalities in the campus-community partner relationship is to adopt a democratic approach involving informal discussions about what is needed rather than creating projects around specific courses or faculty research interests (Hicks, Seymour, & Puppo, 2015; Whitney, Harrison, Clayton, Muse, & Edwards, 2016). Students should be involved as co-leaders in these discussions (Hicks et al., 2015). This is particularly critical when service learning is aimed at social justice outcomes (Kliwer, 2013; Meens, 2014; Mitchell, 2008; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). Contributors must be “empowered to be an originator or a follower, a teacher or a student, on any given idea or collaboration” (Hicks et al., 2015, p. 108). Indeed, community partners believe that a balance should exist in terms of which of the involved parties contribute ideas for projects (Harrington, 2014).

Community and Economic Impact

A number of advantages of service learning for community partners have been identified. These include saving staff time, getting help with research, finding solutions to current problems, receiving free consulting, and becoming acquainted with future graduates (Kupka, Westover, Workman, & Barker, 2014). However, to recognize these benefits, community impact must be aligned with the objectives of both institutional and community partners (Morton & Bergbauer, 2015) “to ensure that the campus is serving the community and not the other way around” (Morton & Bergbauer, 2015, p. 19). Communities typically benefit from the “information,

knowledge, skills, technology, leadership, and networks” that universities can provide (Olberding & Hacker, 2016).

Communities recognize impacts such as intercultural exchange (where cultural and linguistic differences exist), economic benefits (particularly in cases where students move to a community and contribute money through cost of living expenses, grant money, or by providing services at no cost), productivity (ability to complete jobs faster), and transfer of knowledge (idea sharing, innovation, skill sets) (Budhai 2013; Geller, Zuckerman, & Seidel, 2014; Harrington, 2014; Olberding & Hacker, 2016; Worrall, 2007). Service learning also increases awareness of the organization and expands its networks (Geller et al., 2014). Students doing service learning abroad may impact the community culturally with their habits and lifestyles (Harrington, 2014).

While some community partners indicate that the time needed to manage student projects is offset by the value received (Edwards, Mooney, & Heald, 2001), in other cases, partners have commented that their involvement entailed more work than would have been needed if they had done the project themselves (Harrington, 2014). Another concern raised by community partners is that projects tend to be semester-based and short-term, and as such, may not address real needs (Hicks et al., 2015; Harrington, 2014), or that students’ schedules may be overly busy, contributing to communication difficulties (Budhai, 2013). A lack of continuity can also be a problem with students coming and going, resulting in incomplete projects or projects that never get started, and a lack of communication between previous student participants and new participants. Additionally, the results of studies are sometimes not shared (Harrington, 2014).

Community partners have identified practical positive impacts of projects, such as the production of information items, tools, and ideas, which increases organizational capacity, and also satisfaction with their campus

partnership over time (Olberding & Hacker, 2016). Long-term benefits also include economic impact. This is typically calculated at the institutional level. For example, the University of Delaware determined that its faculty and students contribute \$6.7 million annually in the contribution of goods and services and over \$1.4 million in free labor (Rangan, 2011). The University of Georgia found that students who participated in service learning earned \$4,600 more in their first full-time job and received their first raise two-and-a-half months sooner than non-service-learning participants (James, 2016). The program has a \$19.2 million economic impact annually at the state level. On average, starting salaries for those participating in service learning are estimated to be between \$5,000-8,000 more than for non-participants (Rangan, 2011).

METHODS

The community partner survey for this study reflects the essential learning outcomes identified by employers (Hart Research Associates, 2015) as well as program and course objectives. In addition to seeking employer views of students’ professional competencies, the survey also invited feedback regarding the value of the students’ work to the organization and suggestions for improving the structure of assignments (see Appendix).

Institutional Context and Sample

The site for the study was a large, regional, public university in the Intermountain West. The institution has elective Carnegie classification for community engagement. As such, service learning is a key strategy. The university has a robust service-learning program that provides students with opportunities to participate in designated service-learning courses. Students partner with a community organization to complete projects requiring application of the academic knowledge and skills they are learning in their coursework.

Community partners benefit by receiving additional employees to conduct research, offer fresh insights, experiment with new ideas and approaches, and contribute to a variety of partner-identified goals.

At the end of the semester, representatives from 183 out of 227 community organizations connected with class projects (for an 80.62% response rate) completed an assessment of students' projects (some for group projects, some for individual projects). The participating organizations represented a wide range of community partner organizations, including local government agencies, local K-12 schools, local nonprofits (education, environmental, health, etc.), hospitals, local small businesses connected with the local Small Business Development Center, and other for-profit local businesses involved in the public good. The projects were connected to 16 service-learning designated course sections¹, including introduction to business, business presentations, statistics, organizational behavior, marketing, student leadership and success, writing, and psychology. The courses, with a total enrollment of 565 students, were taught by 12 faculty members in six departments and three colleges and schools. The faculty members (and corresponding classes involved in this study) had all completed the same six-week Service-Learning Faculty Fellowship consisting of weekly one-hour workshops accompanied by online modules and assignments. As the culminating project, they redesigned a course to meet service-learning criteria under the mentorship of an experienced service-learning faculty member.

Operationalization of Study Variables

As seen in Table 1 below, to measure the perceived student professional competen-

cies, the assessment incorporated 13 competency items, each rated on a 6-point Likert scale, as well as two project-value-related evaluation items on the same 6-point Likert scale.

Table 1

Student Competencies and Project Value

Understanding of the specific problem/question your company posed
Attitudes
Self-motivation
Project planning
Organizational skills
Communications skills
Leadership skills
Sense of responsibility
Emotional maturity
Time management
Teamwork
Task completion
Professional approach/professionalism

¹ For a course to be a service-learning designated course, the instructor has to get approval from the campus service-learning committee, after submitting a syllabus outlining the SL-related course learning objectives, the service-learning class project/experience

(a minimum of 20 community-engagement hours are required for a designated course), and describing the student learning reflection.

Quality of final project
Value of this project for your firm

RESULTS

Additionally, the assessment included one question asking how likely the organization would be to work with the university students again in the future, on a 7-point Likert scale. Finally, five open-ended questions were asked regarding the various aspects of the community partner experience with the student(s), including elements of the experience that could help the organization to develop/grow, intent to implement recommendations from the project performed, ways the project could be improved, overall experience interactions with the student(s), and potential for future collaborative projects (see Appendix for survey instrument). Due to space limitations, the qualitative data collected will not be addressed in this paper.

Statistical Methodology

First, we performed a descriptive statistical analysis of community partner assessment data on student professional competencies and over project quality and value. These bivariate and multivariate analyses include correlations, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) procedures, and cross-tabulations. Second, we utilized Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to test three models examining the impact of student professional competencies: (1) on the community partner’s perceived quality of the project, (2) on the community partner’s perceived value of the student project, and (3) on the community partner’s perceived likelihood to work on future projects with students.

Descriptive Results

In the community partner survey, community organizations were asked to rate 13 different professional competencies, along with the overall quality of the project, the overall value of the project, and the perceived likelihood that the organization would work on future projects with students (in addition to five other open-ended questions about the nature of the project and the economic impact on the organization). As can be seen in Table 2 below, University College (which includes the student success, developmental math and English courses, and other preparatory programs) generally had the highest competency ratings and project quality and value, followed closely by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, with the School of Business coming in with the lowest average ratings (though it is important to note that both University College and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences had considerably smaller sample sizes than the School of Business). In University College, the highest rated competencies were “sense of responsibility” and “emotional maturity.” In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, both “sense of responsibility” and “emotional maturity” were rated highly, as well as “attitudes,” “teamwork,” and “professional approach.” In the School of Business, “leadership skills,” “sense of responsibility,” “emotional maturity,” “task completion,” and “professional approach” were the most highly rated competencies.

Table 2

Professional Competency, Project Quality, and Project Value Means

	UC	SB	CHSS	All
Understanding of the specific problem/question your company posed	5.33	4.54	5.33	4.68
Attitudes	5.33	4.75	5.53	4.89
Self-motivation	5.33	4.72	5.37	4.84
Project planning	5.33	4.62	5.10	4.71
Organizational skills	5.33	4.67	5.10	4.75
Communications skills	5.33	4.73	5.37	4.84
Leadership skills	5.33	4.89	5.37	4.98
Sense of responsibility	5.67	4.83	5.53	4.96
Emotional maturity	5.67	4.81	5.43	4.93
Time management	5.33	4.62	5.17	4.72
Teamwork	5.33	4.70	5.47	4.84
Task completion	5.33	4.87	5.33	4.96
Professional approach/professionalism	5.33	4.81	5.53	4.94
Quality of final project	5.33	4.84	5.33	4.93
Value of this project for your firm	5.33	4.63	5.27	4.75

OLS Regression Results

All

professional competency variables were initially included in the OLS regression models looking at the impact of competency ratings on perceived project quality ratings, perceived project value ratings, and overall perceived likelihood of the organization working on future projects with the students. As seen in Table 3, only a handful of the professional competencies were statistically significant in the three different models (which included all three colleges and schools),

including “understanding of the specific problem,” “attitudes,” “sense of responsibility,” “teamwork,” and “professional approach.” Despite only a handful of the variables in the initial models proving to be statistically significant, the adjusted r-squared for each model demonstrates that even in the unrefined models, professional competency ratings predict 65% of the variation in perceived project quality, 66% of the variation in perceived project value, and only 6% of perceived likelihood to work on future projects with the students.

Table 3

Regression Models Summary

Model Dependent Variables

Professional Competency Independent Variables	Perceived Quality of Project	Perceived Value of Project for the Firm	Perceived Likelihood to Work on Future Projects with Students
Understanding of the specific problem/question your company posed	0.176**	0.327****	-0.555****
Attitudes	0.067	0.078	0.367*
Self-motivation	-0.085	-0.025	-0.137
Project planning	-0.052	-0.035	0.087
Organizational skills	0.086	-0.068	0.099
Communications skills	0.063	-0.106	0.180
Leadership skills	0.032	0.034	0.181
Sense of responsibility	-0.009	0.277***	-0.154
Emotional maturity	-0.113	-0.129	-0.069
Time management	0.054	-0.008	-0.013
Teamwork	0.072	0.195**	-0.069
Task completion	0.077	0.072	-0.109
Professional approach/professionalism	0.541****	0.306***	0.035
<i>N</i>	183	183	183
ADJ. R-SQUARED	0.651	0.664	0.059
<i>F</i>	27.15****	28.67****	1.74**

Beta Values; Level of significance: * = p < .10, ** = p < .05; *** = p < .01; **** = p < .001

After further testing of the parameters of the independent variables included in the initial models, refined models were run, with results shown in Table 4 below. All professional competencies included in these refined three models were statistically significant (with “NA” in the table below indicating that variable was not included in that particular model).

Here we see that while the refined model for perceived quality of project didn’t significantly change the adjusted r-squared for that model, reducing the noise from the insignificant variables improved the overall predictability in the other two models (increasing adjusted r-squared values to 0.671 and 0.099 respectively).

Table 4

Refined Regression Models Summary

Model Dependent Variables

Professional Competency Independent Variables	Perceived Quality of Project	Perceived Value of Project for the Firm	Perceived Likelihood to Work on Future Projects with Students
Understanding of the specific problem/question your company posed	0.206****	0.344****	-0.544****
Attitudes	NA	-0.123*	0.392***
Communications skills	NA	0.209**	NA
Sense of responsibility	NA	0.194***	NA
Teamwork	NA	NA	NA
Professional approach/professionalism	0.665****	0.305****	NA
<i>N</i>	183	183	183
ADJ. R-SQUARED	0.651	0.671	0.099
<i>F</i>	27.15****	75.16****	9.46****

Beta Values; Level of significance: * = $p < .10$, ** = $p < .05$; *** = $p < .01$; **** = $p < .001$

Limitations

There are three main limitations to this current study. First, only community partners connected to class projects in the 16 pre-determined service-learning designated courses (where each faculty member had completed the Service-Learning Faculty Fellowship training) were included in this analysis. Second, the sample size is relatively small for conducting OLS analysis. As has been demonstrated, despite the sample size, we have still been able to find significant impacts of student professional competencies on project quality, value, and likelihood for conducting future projects. However, the small sample size does not allow for running and comparing discipline-specific OLS models (by college/school, by program, or by course), to see variations in the significance and variable strength of various professional competencies across programs at the university. Third, the assessment was administered only at the end of one specific semester, after only one service-learning experience. Ideally, the community partner assessment instrument would be administered repeatedly, at various stages of an academic program, and track with student progression in

the program to see how professional competencies may change over time.

Future Research

While the results presented herein suggest many possible avenues for future research, of particular note from the OLS regression results is the weak predictability of the perceived likelihood to work on future projects model; even in the refined version, the model only predicts about 10% of the variation in the dependent variable. Future research needs to explore other factors, beyond perceived student professional competencies, that influence a community partner’s perceived likelihood to work on future projects with the students. Additionally, future research needs to explore the direct social and economic impact of these service-learning projects on community partner organizations. Finally, increasing the sample size of the community partner project assessment would allow for an analysis of both descriptive statistics and OLS model variations across colleges/schools and across specific programs and disciplines.

DISCUSSION

This study provides evidence of the impact of professional competencies on service-learning outcomes, specifically project quality and value, as perceived by community partners. Findings suggest that the more competent students appear to community partners, the more likely the latter are to value their work. Implications, then, are that faculty members must prepare students accordingly and structure assignments in ways that help students develop professional skills. These competencies should likely be introduced to students in the curriculum prior to the service-learning experience and also reinforced in subsequent courses to help students fully achieve the ELOs valued by employers (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

Differences in professional competency ratings were found across colleges/schools, likely due to student variables, the nature of the projects, and the variety of community partners. University College, which had the highest ratings, hosts first-year students taking pre-college work to strengthen their literacy, quantitative, and learning skills. First-year coursework emphasizes the development of skills such as being responsible and emotionally mature, which were the two highest rated competencies. These skills were also highly ranked for students in the other colleges/schools with the addition of competencies such as teamwork and professional approach.

As the study did not explore project descriptions or targeted academic objectives, which might account for differences, the main conclusion from the findings is that community partners associate specific competencies (e.g., sense of responsibility, emotional maturity, professional approach) with project quality and value. Although the study was not based directly on the ELOs discussed in the literature review, the survey items represented the same or similar outcomes (e.g., teamwork and problem solving, inquiry and analysis, communications). The findings showed the short-term impact of these competencies on

project outcomes, based on the perceptions of community partners.

The fact that professional competencies only weakly predicted the likelihood of community partners engaging with students on future projects suggests that other factors may have more importance. Based on the literature, these might be practical issues such as the amount of time involved, lack of project continuity and longevity, projects not being focused on real needs, communication difficulties (Budhai, 2013, Hicks et al., 2015; Harrington, 2014), or even reciprocity issues with lack of voice in project identification or overall benefit (Konwerski & Nashman, 2008; Stanlick & Sell, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the impact of professional competencies on community partner perceptions of project quality and value, and the likelihood of future collaborations. Study findings extend knowledge about the community partner side of service learning, demonstrate that ELOs/professional competencies impact perceptions of project quality, and identify which competencies have the most impact. Implications of the study are that faculty members must be aware of the need for students to learn about, develop, and apply these competencies.

The study also captures employer views of student learning prior to graduation rather than post-graduation, thus providing employer insights into professional competencies while they are being developed. This may help address the gap noted earlier that employers do not feel that recent college graduates have the requisite cross-cutting competencies for entry-level positions. Timely feedback from employers (service-learning partners) about these competencies can help educators make needed curricular and pedagogical adjustments.

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APPENDIX

Service and Engaged Learning Community Client Evaluation

Please respond to the following statements as objectively as you can as they relate to your involvement with this project during the semester.

The ratings for the scale are:

- 0 = very unsatisfying
- 1 = unsatisfying
- 2 = somewhat unsatisfying
- 3 = somewhat satisfying
- 4 = satisfying
- 5 = very satisfying

Students’:	0	1	2	3	4	5
understanding of the specific problem/question your company posed						
attitudes						
self-motivation						
project planning						
organizational skills						
communications skills						
leadership skills						
sense of responsibility						
emotional maturity						
time management						
teamwork						
task completion						
professional approach/professionalism (incl. attire for meetings of all kinds)						
quality of final project						
value of this project for your firm						