

Building Bridges: Strengthening University–School Relationships Through Service–Learning

Dissertation Overview

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Abstract

This qualitative dissertation aimed to understand if an after-school kinesiology service-learning program changed the relationship between a large Research I institution and a local public school. Eight 7th- and 8th-grade students, three classroom teachers, and one administrator participated. Data collection methods included semistructured individual interviews, observational field notes, and reflective memos. Findings suggested that school staff perceived a positive relationship between the university and the school district but a complicated one between the university and the city. Participating teachers and school leaders believed the service-learning program positively impacted their students and helped strengthen the relationship between the university and the school. The study also highlighted the importance of effective communication in university–school partnerships and uncovered challenges in communication concerning the service-learning program. The middle school students perceived benefits from receiving academic support, and school participants felt that the relationships formed between the university and middle school students were impactful.

Keywords: university–school partnerships, service-learning, town and gown relationships



Universities and colleges are institutions of higher learning nestled in larger community contexts with diverse needs. When universities and communities establish long-term partnerships, the benefits for both parties are numerous. Innovative teaching and learning, increased community awareness, career enhancement, and greater opportunities for university student employment after graduation are more likely to occur when universities effectively engage with their communities (Buys & Bursnall, 2007).

Communities benefit from university partnerships, as students often fill needed volunteer roles to enhance operations within organizations (Edwards et al., 2001; Miron & Moely, 2006). In addition, community leaders value the ideas, perspectives, and skills

that university students bring to their organizations (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Despite these benefits, implementing and sustaining mutually beneficial community partnerships has proven challenging for universities (Martin et al., 2005; Mayfield, 2001).

There are many ways universities can become more involved in their communities. Bringle and Hatcher (2002) suggested that service-learning is one of the most meaningful ways to develop mutually beneficial relationships.

Service-learning is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain

further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112)

Service-learning differs from volunteering and community service because it is curriculum-based and combines classroom instruction with practical applications and hands-on service activities. This formalized service includes an organized curriculum and measurable learning objectives, addresses genuine community needs, and allows students to reflect critically on the service activities (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000).

Service-learning is becoming an increasingly popular pedagogy universities use to help improve community relations (Bamber & Hankin, 2011; Karasik, 2019). Although significant research evidence supports the claim that university students experience positive outcomes when participating in service-learning projects (Bamber & Hankin, 2011; Bushouse, 2005; Iverson & James, 2013; Jones & Abes, 2004; Wilson, 2011), less has been studied regarding the impact on the populations they claim to serve (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Geller et al., 2016). Therefore, this study focused on the recipients' perspectives on university service-learning and how it influenced the relationship between one large Research I university and one public middle school.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this qualitative action research study:

1. How does a service-learning partnership influence the relationship between a large Research I institution and a school and school district sharing the same city?
2. What was the perceived impact of the service-learning program in the experience of the middle school students, teachers, and leaders?

Literature Review

University–School Relations

Partnerships between universities and K-12 schools have existed for over a century and are increasing (Greene & Tichenor, 1999); the push for public school reform and increased accountability for K-12 student achievement has sparked additional uni-

versity–school collaborations. Christensen et al. (1996) noted that educators live in an era where K-12 schools are experiencing increasing violence, high dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and high teacher turnover. Schools are being asked to do more with fewer and fewer resources.

Partnerships with higher education institutions can help K-12 schools in their improvement efforts (Burton & Greher, 2007). When K-12 schools partner with universities, it can increase instructional capacity, better prepare aspiring teachers, recruit more volunteers and tutors, and provide more resources and opportunities for student learning. At the same time, such collaborations allow universities to offer meaningful, real-world experiences for college students and provide valuable opportunities for university faculty members to conduct and publish research (Dallavis & Johnstone, 2009; Smith & Trexler, 2006).

Despite the potential benefits of university–school collaborations, such partnerships often fail. Many K-12 teachers and administrators do not trust university faculty and researchers (Bullough & Kauchak, 1997; Shkedi, 1998). At the same time, university faculty and researchers often perceive K-12 administrators and teachers as uncooperative with their programs and interventions (Clayton et al., 2013). Holen and Yunk (2014) identified student teaching internships and opportunities to publish research on youth as motivational factors for universities seeking partnerships with K-12 schools. When K-12 stakeholders perceive partnerships as transactional and not as true partners, they are less likely to want to participate (Henry & Breyfogle, 2006; Zetlin & Macleod, 1995). Lewison and Holliday (1997) found that K-12 teachers perceive university faculty members as “users and abusers” of their time and students (pp. 109–110). Bracey (1990) suggested that some K-12 school stakeholders do not believe that university faculty understand what it means to be in a classroom and perceive the work of universities as “irrelevant” (p. 65). Yet K-12 teachers are often forced to participate in university–school partnerships without having any say or voice in the planning and facilitation of the intervention (Barnett et al., 2010; Fisler & Firestone, 2006).

Even when successful university–school partnerships are established, they are often short-lived due to a lack of funding and resources (Armstrong & Cairnduff,

2012; Walsh & Backe, 2013). After analyzing 57 university–school partnerships, Kirschenbaum and Reagan (2001) identified the characteristics of failed partnerships as poor organization, ineffective communication, minimal rapport, and a lack of shared decision-making in programs.

Interpersonal Trust as a Theoretical Framework

Trust is a central tenet for successful university–school partnerships but is not easily formed among university and K–12 school stakeholders (Borthwick et al., 2003; Essex, 2001); lack of trust and reciprocity in university–school partnerships have been identified as contributing factors to the dissolution of such partnerships (Carlone & Webb, 2006; Peel et al., 2002).

McAllister's (1995) theory of interpersonal trust (Figure 1) was used as a theoretical framework to help understand the development of trusting relationships between the university and middle school stakeholders involved in this study. McAllister suggested that interpersonal trust consists of cognitive and affective domains. The cognitive domain

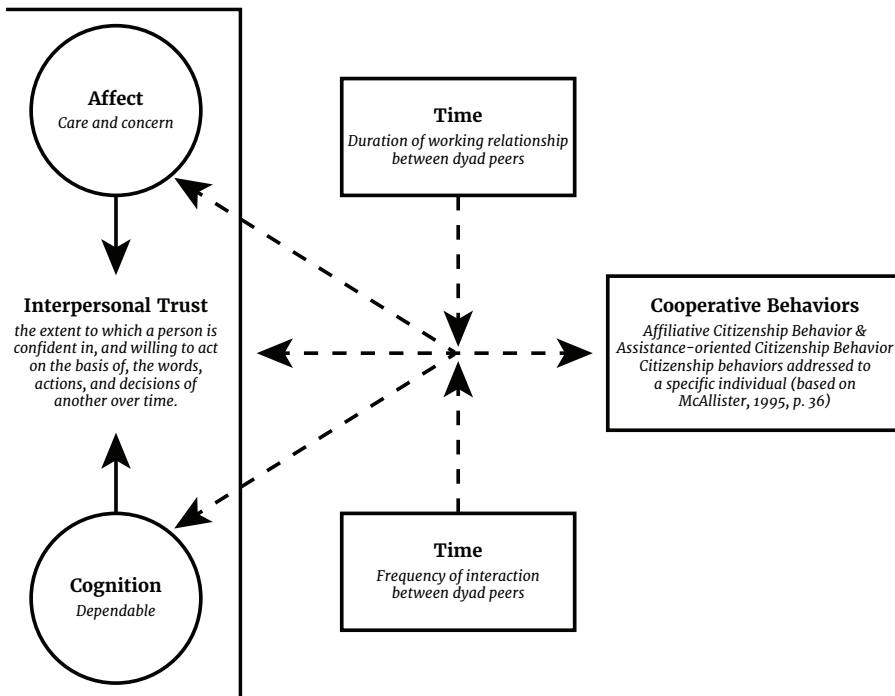
of interpersonal trust seeks to find the rational bases and evidence for determining why individuals trust one another.

The affective domain of interpersonal trust relates to the emotional bonds between individuals. McAllister (1995) suggested that when individuals interact with one another, emotional investments in trust are made. These trusting relationships can lead individuals to care for one another and can be of significant intrinsic value. The amount of time individuals spend together and the frequency of their interactions can help strengthen trust. Interpersonal trust and cooperation are achieved when both parties have opportunities to witness repeated acts of care, honesty, concern, dependability, and openness toward one another. Specifically, this action research study utilized the affect and time components of McAllister's theory of interpersonal trust. (See Edwards, 2023 for more in-depth reviews of these concepts.)

Developing the Service–Learning Action Research Project

In summer 2020, a task force at a large,

Figure 1. Theory of Interpersonal Trust



Note. Adapted from "Affect- and Cognition-Based Trust as Foundations for Interpersonal Cooperation in Organizations," by D. J. McAllister, 1995, *The Academy of Management Journal*, 38(1), p. 24–59 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/256727>). Copyright 1995 by the Academy of Management.

research-intensive public university in the Southeast United States began exploring ways to expand its diversity efforts through its curriculum, service, and outreach opportunities. The university believed that a partnership with the local public school district could provide an opportunity for university students to engage with diverse populations while positively impacting the community.

The school district serves nearly 14,000 students in PreK–12th grade. A plurality of students (48%) in the district identify as African American, 25% identify as Hispanic or Latinx, 21% as White, 4.6% as multiracial, and 1.3% as Asian/Pacific Islander (Clarke County School District, 2021). The school district has Title I status and receives federal funds to provide additional support, given the high rate of students living in poverty.

After conversations within the university, the researcher initiated a meeting with the school district's director of partnerships and presented the idea of an after-school physical activity program that incorporated academic work with services provided by university students enrolled in a service-learning course. The director identified recent concerns about 9th grade student-athletes falling behind academically and suggested the program be designed for middle school student-athletes. The researcher agreed and then was introduced to stakeholders at the partnering middle school (one of four in the district).

Glanz (2014) defined action research as a form of applied research that is usually qualitative and conducted by practitioners to improve educational settings. Action research is team-oriented; the primary investigator assembles an action research team (ART) to help identify and address problems within organizations with individuals closest to it. The team consisted of the primary researcher, the middle school athletic director, and a science teacher who also served as the head track coach. Incorporating stakeholders from the middle school brought a critical perspective to the study, as they understood the context of the community and were aware of the support the middle school students needed. The ART met monthly to discuss the format, logistics, and design of the service-learning study. McKay and Marshall (2001) suggested that action research is more than just a problem-solving approach; the researcher takes organized action within a conceptual framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The plan, do, check, and act (PDCA)

model served as a conceptual framework for this research study; see the full dissertation for more details (Edwards, 2023).

Plan

The ART was assembled during the “plan” phase. The team met and reflected on previous partnerships between the university and the school. Identifying the features of previous unsuccessful partnerships was paramount for designing this service-learning program. The administration and operations of this program were intended to be designed on best practices in university-school partnerships, such as developing a shared mission, establishing roles, open communication, joint decision-making, and reciprocity (Smith & Trexler, 2006; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1996; White et al., 1997).

Do

The “do” phase consisted of the 15-week service-learning experience. The university service-learning course occurred in two settings, first in an academic classroom on the university's campus and then at the middle school. The researcher designed and taught the course the first semester it was offered. After the researcher accepted a different position at the university, another faculty member assumed the teaching responsibilities and administration of the program. During the first 7 weeks of the course, the university students learned about diversity, equity, and inclusion issues that affect the cognitive and physical development of marginalized youth and strategies to help support their academic and athletic skills. The service-learning portion of the course consisted of the university students applying and reflecting on the tutoring, mentoring, and athletic coaching skills they learned to help support middle school students in the community for the final 8 weeks of the course.

Check

The “check” phase consisted of the data collection process. The researcher used semi-structured interviews, observational field notes, and reflective memos to measure the service-learning program's impact from the perspectives of the middle school students, their teachers, and school administrators.

Act

The “act” phase involved analyzing the data

collected throughout the action research cycles. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the researchers conducted coding and thematic analysis to analyze the data to determine what the middle school students gained from participating and if the program impacted the relationship between the university and middle school. The researcher shared the results with the ART to member-check the findings and allow the team to use the study for further program modification and improvement.

Data Collection Methods

To understand how the service-learning program impacted the middle school students being served and the relationship between the university and middle school, the researcher collected data from the following sources: (a) semistructured interviews, (b) observational field notes, and (c) reflective memos.

The study consisted of two participant groups. The middle school teachers and administrators participated in semistructured interviews to understand their perceptions of the relationship between the middle school and the university. Additionally, the interviews captured their beliefs on how the service-learning program impacted their students. The second participant group consisted of the middle school students participating in the program. They also engaged in semistructured interviews, which provided insight into how recipients of service-learning perceived the experience. Nine rounds of observational field notes complemented the interviews. These field notes captured the dynamics and interactions between the middle school and university students. They also helped determine whether the program adhered to best practices in university–school partnerships, as identified in the scholarly literature.

Reflective memos were written after each data collection session. Twenty-one data collection memos were written after the 12 semistructured interviews and nine observations of the service-learning program. These memos allowed the researcher to reflect on what was learned during each data collection session and what still needed to be understood. All responses were transcribed verbatim and were coded, producing six overarching themes that served as rubrics to organize findings. See the full dissertation for additional details on the methodology (Edwards, 2023).

Findings

The first research question sought to understand how a service-learning partnership influenced the relationship between a large Research I institution and a middle school sharing the same city. All four middle school teachers and leaders who participated perceived the relationship between the school and the university as “positive.” The teachers and leaders described how they enjoyed being a part of previous university collaborations. They described how the middle school students “loved” working with the university students. All four teacher and leader participants voiced how they hoped that interactions between the university and school would increase as the safety threats of the COVID-19 global pandemic decreased.

However, their responses also revealed historical and ongoing tension between the university and the city (Theme 1: *University: So close, but so far*). The middle school teachers and leaders described the university and city as “separate.” They believed that the city had become oversaturated with student housing, which made it difficult for schools to acquire and retain teachers. Multiple teachers and leaders described how students grew up with the university in their backyards but did not feel connected to it. Some teachers and leaders believed that their students could not see themselves attending the university as college students; as one teacher said,

Depending on who the students are and their economic background, you have a lot of African American students who wouldn’t dream of going to that university, haven’t thought about it. Not attainable to attend that college.

Although not directly related to the original research question, every participating teacher and leader also expressed concerns about student achievement, which led to Theme 2: *Middle school students and teachers face challenges*. This finding helps contextualize the need for, and potential importance of, university–school partnerships, as well as the importance of effectively preparing university service-learning students for the educational and cultural context of the programming. The teachers and leaders spoke at length about how many of their students were below grade level in critical subjects such as reading and math and how

the COVID-19 pandemic only led to further complications. A language arts teacher said,

We have a lot of gaps. Before Covid, it was the same way . . . most of my kids were about two to three levels below grade level. I don't have many students that are at grade level, maybe like 10%. But after Covid, it's been 100% of my kids are below. Even students in my advanced class are maybe fifth, or fourth-grade reading level. It's sad.

Another teacher said,

Motivation is so low right now. It's so low . . . they don't want to do anything. It's probably because half of them can't access the texts that we're asking them to read at sixth grade, because they are below grade level . . . it's just learned helplessness, just where they think they can't do it so they just shut down and won't do it . . . this has probably been the worst year for that . . . we're just struggling trying to get them to want to try to do anything. And it's been hard.

The teachers and leaders believed that factors outside the school building affected academic achievement and motivation. These challenges included the middle school students being exposed to crime and violence in their neighborhoods, some even being exposed to drugs, weapons, and gang activity. The increased pressure to improve academic performance and the inability to address student trauma caused significant stress for the middle school teachers and leaders.

The participating teachers and leaders articulated how more partnership opportunities with the university thus had the potential to be “life-changing” for students. When asked to define the characteristics of a successful university-school partnership, each teacher and leader described the need for effective communication. Multiple teachers and administrators described how the best university partnerships they had been previously involved with were ones in which they perceived strong communication.

Concerning the service-learning program, however, observational field notes revealed struggles in communication throughout the semester. The university faculty

member teaching the service-learning course voiced frustration with the lack of communication from the middle school officials. Communication issues disrupted the program several times, including on the first day of the program when the university students were sent home after 15 minutes due to a scheduling error. On several occasions, changes in the practice schedule were not communicated to the university stakeholders, which led to confusion in programming. Participant comments and field notes, then, led to Theme 3: *Communication is key to success in university-school partnerships.*

The second research question addressed a gap in the scholarly literature regarding community partner/client perspectives of university service-learning programs. Although the middle school teachers and leaders described numerous challenges their students faced (Theme 2, above), they were adamant that their students could overcome them with a supportive and rigorous education. Theme 4, *Mentoring matters*, emerged from data showing that every teacher and leader participant believed the service-learning program positively impacted the students being served by the program. They described the university students as positive role models who provided encouragement and support. The teachers and leaders believed that relationships with university students made goals like attending college more attainable. For example, a teacher said,

They get to see different faces, and they get a different perception of what they would normally get in their neighborhoods. There's so many benefits of a college kid coming over and mentoring young kids. . . . you get a different perspective when you get a different face, a different color, just a different person telling you about the importance of education. It becomes more believable to kids for some reason.

In addition, the teachers and leaders believed that their students obtained a better understanding of what they needed to do to attend college and learned the importance of performing well in both the classroom and in athletics due to the program. Finally, the teachers and leaders believed that the service-learning program helped strengthen the relationship between the university and the school. When asked what he believed about the service-learning program, an

administrator responded,

I think it's a great program. I commend the University for coming over and pouring into our kids. Depending on who the kid is, and I don't think you can save every kid, but I know you're going to save one kid. I do know that for a fact. It's going to make a difference in one kid's life.

Theme 5, *Academic support makes a difference*, suggests that the middle school students perceived value, particularly in the academic support they received from the university students. Every participating middle school student used the word “help” or “helpful” when describing the university students. Multiple students discussed how the university students were skilled at explaining challenging content. When reflecting on his favorite part of the program, a student said, “What I like the most about it is when they help you with your work, and they can explain it to a level so it can be easier.” Others indicated that their grades and homework completion improved due to the services they received from university students. One middle school student said, “It helps your grades go up high. It helps your grades. It helps your grades go up like a lot. Like I realized, I realized the boost in my, uh, Spanish grade . . . it helps a lot.” Echoing the teachers' perceptions, students agreed that interacting with university students allowed middle school students to better understand college life and culture. The middle school students described how they learned strategies for what they needed to do to attend and maintain success in college, such as organization and time management.

The sixth and final theme, *Relationships are impactful*, captures the value of university service–learning in yielding positive outcomes. In addition to the words “help” or “helpful,” the middle school students used “caring” and “fun” when describing the university students. Every middle school student who participated in this study described how they appreciated the relationships they formed with the university students. Many articulated that the university students did an excellent job of making them feel comfortable. Several middle school students described how having a role model to look up to and talk to was important. Multiple students described how the university students helped encourage them as

they navigated challenging circumstances. One 8th–grade student said,

A lot of people have anxiety and it's like this whole thing where they don't even want to communicate. And I feel like it's big like with this program. Because . . . I feel like y'all trying to build relationships with, with us.

Observational field notes revealed an initial resistance from the middle school students when the program started. On the first day of the program, half of the boys pulled their homework out and began working with the university students without being redirected. The other half resisted when asked to engage in academic work. During the 4th week of the program, a shift in attitude was observed, and the boys were more willing to cooperate. One university student worked with a middle school student who refused to do any homework during the first week. A month later, the same student entered the classroom, enthusiastically greeted his mentor, and began working without being instructed. By the final week of the program, the body language and conversations between the middle school and university students vastly differed from their initial apprehension in Week 1. High-fives, smiles, encouragement, and friendly camaraderie were exchanged between the groups during a basketball game.

Two of the middle school students were in their second semester of program participation at the time of the study. When they were asked to describe the university students, one said,

I like the relationships that y'all make between us . . . like on the first day, we had so many connections, and we didn't even never met each other before. So I feel like that was cool. And that was like a really good way to get the other girls comfortable and trust. I feel like y'all are trustworthy, and it is a big thing.

The other said,

They're kind of like older siblings basically . . . usually most people they think they're just so above you just because they're older than you or whatever. But I feel like they're really cool people, and they can

really connect and we talk to them because they don't . . . they don't judge basically. They just laugh with us, and that's fun. It's like a good bonding type thing.

Words like “bonding,” “trust,” and “older siblings” suggest a more intimate relationship than describing the UGA students as “fun” or “fun to be around,” which was used by all eight of the middle school student participants.

Discussion and Significance of the Study

McAllister's (1995) theory of interpersonal trust suggests that trusting relationships are formed when individuals demonstrate repeated acts of care and concern over time. The findings of this study support McAllister's theory. Relationships and trust take time and intentionality. The bond between the middle school and university students grew stronger as they spent more time together. The middle school teachers and leaders noted that the program gave their students relatable role models who helped encourage positive academic, social-emotional, and well-being habits, helping address some of the perceived challenges experienced by the middle school students and teachers. In addition, the teachers and leaders believed that having mentoring relationships with university students made future goals like college seem more attainable for their students. The middle school students who participated valued the academic support received and the relationships they formed with the university students.

Athletics have been considered an effective way for adults to build relationships with youth (Choi et al., 2015; Quarmby et al., 2018). It is noteworthy that the middle school students made little mention of the athletic portion of the program during the semistructured interviews and focused more

on the mentorship and academic support. This study's findings also demonstrate that service-learning community partners do perceive benefits from their participation in university service-learning programs. Although this service-learning program had some identified challenges related to communication, the continued engagement over time and stakeholder willingness to overcome obstacles reflected the ongoing development of trust (McAllister, 1995).

Lastly, the study demonstrates the capability of a service-learning program to improve the connection between the university and local stakeholders. The program was perceived as positive by the middle school students and was appreciated by their teachers and leaders. It provided a publicly successful counterpoint to some of the perceptions of negative relations between the university and the community. In an interview about the service-learning program with a local news source, one middle school teacher said, “This partnership between [the school and the university] is a perfect collaboration” (Linthicum, 2022, para. 8). Consequently, early signs of success and positive feedback from the middle school led the president of this university to commit university resources to help the program expand; a second section of the service-learning course was offered, expanding to serve 75 children on the school's basketball and track teams. This study supports the idea that university service-learning courses and programs can create new pathways of relationship and understanding with benefits for both university students and recipients involved in service-learning. At a time when large public universities are being asked to be more accountable for funding used to support programs that provide public service and outreach, findings from this action research study make a compelling case for why these service-learning endeavors are worthwhile. Both sides win.



About the Author

Jason P. Edwards is a public service faculty member at the J. W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development at the University of Georgia. His research interests focus on university–community engagement, specifically the impact of leadership development programs on individuals, communities, and organizations. He received his EdD in educational leadership from the University of Georgia.

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