It's All About the Relationship: Identifying Management Attributes for Quality Nonprofit Partners in Service-Learning

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between a student's experience in a service-learning course and the management attributes of the nonprofit client. We utilize a mixed methods approach to identify and explain the most impactful attribute. We find that the quality of the consulting relationship has the strongest effect on a student's experience. This attribute can be further explained in terms of the client's personal engagement, commitment to collaborative learning, and positive attitude behaviors.

Strategic partnerships between nonprofit organizations and universities utilizing service-learning and internships are a proven means to assist nonprofits and provide meaningful and relevant learning experiences for students (Schaffer, 2012; Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2000). However, a student's experience collaborating with a nonprofit organization as part of a *required* service-learning course can be very different from a student serving as a volunteer or intern. The motivations and purposes differ; volunteer and interns choose the organization they serve whereas a service-learning student is likely assigned to the organization as part of a class assignment. Student volunteers and interns often have a career interest in the nonprofit sector and use the experience to enhance their career development; service-learning students may have no interest in a career in the sector. Consequently, they may need to be managed differently than a volunteer or intern. This can create conflict for both the nonprofit professional and the students and faculty involved. Most worrisome for the nonprofit sector, the service-learning experience could permanently prejudice students against the sector. This paper examines the relationship between a student's experience in a service-learning course and management attributes of the nonprofit client, in particular the person who works directly with the student. We are interested in which management attributes of these individuals influence students' perceptions of their service-learning involvement and the nonprofit sector. We analyzed four years of end-of-course survey data from a service-learning course at a major university. We used Spearman's Rho to measure the strength of the relationships between the student's experience and the management attributes followed by content analysis to discover underlying themes that explain the strongest relationship. The inferences drawn from the analysis provide nonprofits and faculty insight into how best develop and implement service-learning partnerships.

Literature Review

Service-learning is an academic method whose foundation is in experiential education (Furco, 1996) and is widely recognized as a valuable pedagogical tool despite numerous constraints. Regardless of student motivation, research shows student learning benefits of increased skills in problem-solving, critical thinking, writing, speaking and collaborative team work (Elgren & Hensel, 2006; Landrum & Nelson, 2002). Additionally, service-learning prepares students for citizenship as participants develop a deeper understanding of social issues and how values, beliefs, and norms are socially constructed (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich & Corngold, 2007; Checkoway, 2001; Jacoby, 1996; Astin, 1993). It is also considered a high-impact practice because it helps students to develop meaningful relationships with supervisors, faculty, staff, and peers (Kuh, 2008). Many nonprofit professionals who work directly with the students report that they benefit from the service received, access to university resources (and potential graduates) and the collaboration with faculty (Littlepage, Gazley & Bennett, 2012; Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Worrall, 2007). Service-learning should ensure that the service is tied to course learning objectives, includes both formal and informal reflection, allows students multiple interactions in their service experience and receive both feedback and official evaluation tied to their grade from their nonprofit partner (Yorio & Fe, 2012; Schaffer, 2003; Bringle, Games, & Malloy, 1999; Caron, 1999). Furthermore, there are attributes of the nonprofit partner that can strengthen the service-learning dynamic with students including mutual respect and knowledge, trust, collaboration, and shared vision and goals about what is to be achieved and learned through the experience (Worrall, 2007; Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2002; Benson & Harkavy, 2001). This partnership is strengthened when all parties are engaged in every step of the process from identifying the need to designing the service and collaborating on the outcome (Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). Gazley, Bennett and Littlepage (2013) in their study on effective nonprofit partnerships found that frequent and intentional communication is key. They go on to note additional critical factors including intentional partnership with the faculty and students, "active work" to build a quality reciprocal relationship through shared decision-making and planning and constructive feedback (p.575). In another study by the same authors (2012), they discuss the importance of the nonprofit partner identifying a person who is responsible for the "managerial activities" of working with service-learning students rather than cede that responsibility to the university faculty or staff (p.18). This includes motivating the students, modeling professional behavior, and providing leadership to the students (Gazley, et al, 2013; Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006). These studies, while insightful, focus on the perceptions of the nonprofit partners where we focus on the perceptions of the students.

Optimistic outcomes are many, yet challenges exist with both service-learning and perceptions of the nonprofit sector. Stoecker and Tryon (2009) in their book, *Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*, address concerns about the negative outcomes of service-learning in the community. They state that the service or charity model of service-learning may reinforce negative impressions of nonprofits and the communities they serve. A 2010 study by Chupp and Joseph found that “some service-learning experiences may actually reinforce negative or counterproductive attitudes among students” (p. 192). Deeley (2015) in his critique of the pedagogy states that many service-learning placements are “ill-structured” and diminish the learning outcomes for the students (p.30). Furthermore, Schwartz (2015) also finds that service-learning that involves multiple placement sites within interdisciplinary majors are “open to many pitfalls” especially when poorly coordinated (p.54). While the value and role of the nonprofit sector cannot be understated, some negative opinions of the sector exist. Rhode and Packel (2009) discuss the lack of public confidence in the nonprofit sector and its organizational culture in particular. Salamon, Hems, and Chennock (2000) found that nonprofit organizations are vulnerable to “excessive amateurism” or controlling behavior and Paul Light (1998) notes that despite the sector’s growth it suffers from an impression that it is less efficient and effective than the for-profit world. These perceptions were reinforced in a Bridgespan study that found that nonprofit staff consistently rated their organizations much higher on leadership skills, such as developing a shared vision, than on management capabilities, such as decision-making and setting priorities. This led the researchers to conclude that quite a few nonprofits are “strongly led, but under-managed” (Stid & Bradach, 2009, pg. 35). Indeed, the sector has been criticized for not giving priority to training their own staff to manage their colleagues and volunteers (Rehnborg, S.J., Bailey, W.L., Moore, M., & Sinatra, C., 2009; Hager & Brudney, 2004). These critiques, while not representative of service-learning or the nonprofit sector overall, are valid concerns that should be considered in facilitating university and nonprofit partnerships.

Service-Learning Capstone and Study

The context of this study is a private college with a majority of traditional students. We define service-learning as: “a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222). The course is a required capstone course for business, accounting and nonprofit undergraduate students that they complete in their senior year. The overt learning objectives are focused on the development of servant leadership (as coined by Robert Greenleaf, 1970) and include the following themes: displaying leadership skills through problem solving, communicating effectively, managing stress, gaining trust of nonprofit client and team members, mutual-respect, creativity, time management and collaboration. The covert learning objectives include students developing a greater understanding of and appreciation for the nonprofit sector, demonstrating an increased desire to serve, volunteer and work in the nonprofit sector, and a stronger sense of responsibility to use their knowledge to address societal needs. We approach these covert learning objectives through the course reading assignments, the students’ engagement with their nonprofit client, and both oral and written reflection.

The students are placed on teams and assigned to consult with a nonprofit partner, referred to as the client, to address a business challenge within the organization. The nonprofit partner applies to be part of the program before the semester, at which time they identify their need (business challenge) and once accepted attends a required orientation. The project is designed for a majority of the work to be completed remotely but the team meets face-to-face with the client three times throughout the semester in addition to weekly check-in conversations. At the conclusion of the 12-week consultancy, the students complete an evaluation of their nonprofit client and conversely the client completes an evaluation of the student team and overall program. The survey used by the students is based upon twenty-years of experience teaching this course, the literature previously discussed on effective service-learning practice, and the course learning objectives. In addition, we focused on attributes recognized in the management literature in terms of task behavior and relationship behavior (Osula & Ng, 2014; Hess & Bacigalupo, 2013; Greenleaf, 1970). Our study, which comes from this survey, specifically focuses on eleven management attributes from the literature that determine the overall experience of a student in a service-learning course. These attributes include (the three character designation used for each follows in parentheses): accessibility to the client (ACC); level of oral and written communication between student and client (OCM and WCM); extent to which the client provides feedback on the team's work (FDB); professionalism of the client (PRO); frequency at which the clients follows through on requested items (FLW); quality of the consulting relationship (QLT); initiative shown by the client (INT); responsibility shown by the client (RES); leadership shown by the client (LDR) and level of motivation to help the students (MOT). We hypothesize that the eleven management attributes are each positively correlated with the student's overall experience. We also hypothesize that that the practical significance of the eleven are not the same, i.e. some attributes play a greater role in a student's experience than others. We seek to identify and understand those attributes that have the greatest impact.

Methods and Results

We utilized a sequential explanatory design that received IRB approval from our university. This is a mixed methods approach where the quantitative data is collected first, followed by the qualitative data. The purpose of such a design is to use the qualitative analysis to further explain and interpret the quantitative results. In our case, we used the quantitative data to identify which attributes are most practically significant, and then used the qualitative data to explain the most impactful attribute(s).

The data came from 663 evaluations completed by students enrolled in the Service Leadership course in 32 classes over eight semesters (Fall 2010 through Spring 2014). The students had just completed their service-learning consultancy project for their nonprofit client. The survey consists of 21 questions and asks the student to assess their client across the eleven attributes. The students were asked to score their client in each attribute using a five category Likert scale ranging from poor (1) to outstanding (5). The students were then asked to score their own Overall Experience (OVR) with the nonprofit, using the same five-category Likert scale. Figure 1 shows combined box (in the style of Tukey) and jitter plots for all eleven management attributes against the student's overall experience. All eleven plots suggest positive, monotonic associations. Quality of consulting relationship appears to have the strongest association.

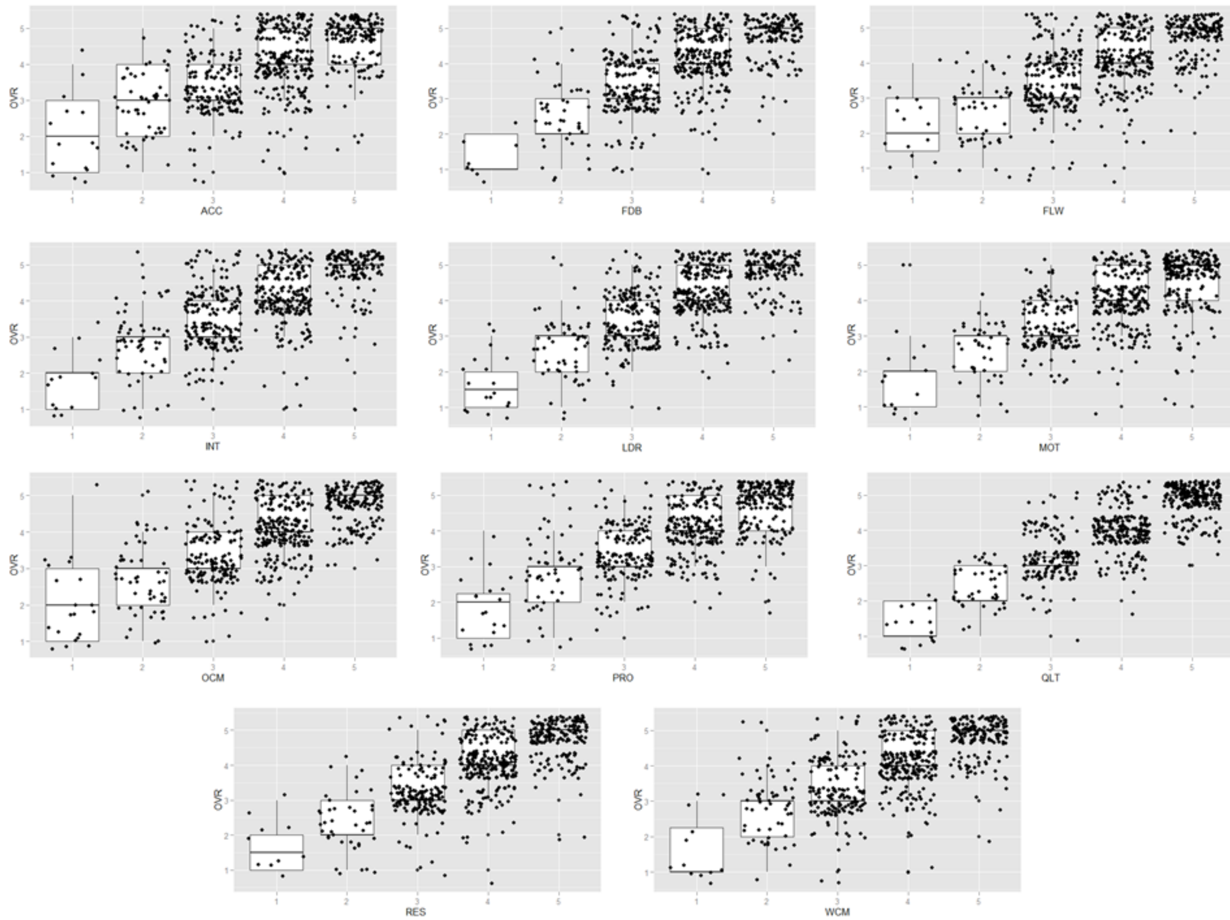

Figure 1*.* Combined box and jitter plots for each management attribute and a student's overall experience.

The assessment also asked for students to "provide comments regarding your assessment" for each of the eleven attributes. Here the students explained why they gave the scores that they did for each of the attributes.

The quantitative data obtained from the survey is ordinal in scale, which limits the statistical methods available for use to nonparametric ones. We calculated Spearman's rho (also known as Spearman's rank correlation coefficient) for the pairwise correlations between the eleven attributes and the student's overall experience. Spearman's rho is a nonparametric measure of rank correlation. It measures the strength of the monotonic relationship between paired data. We also tested the hypotheses that each of these correlations were significantly different from zero (i.e. no relationship). Table 1 contains this correlation matrix.

Table 1. Spearman’s rank correlations between a student’s overall experience and management attributes.

	ACC	FDB	FLW	INT	LDR	MOT	OCM	PRO	QLT	RES	WCM
FDB	0.62										
FLW	0.64	0.58									
INT	0.63	0.62	0.69								
LDR	0.56	0.62	0.60	0.72							
MOT	0.51	0.58	0.51	0.66	0.70						
OCM	0.61	0.59	0.57	0.63	0.68	0.63					
PRO	0.50	0.56	0.48	0.56	0.63	0.54	0.63				
QLT	0.59	0.64	0.61	0.64	0.69	0.64	0.67	0.68			
RES	0.64	0.62	0.66	0.69	0.70	0.65	0.66	0.68	0.75		
WCM	0.64	0.59	0.64	0.60	0.63	0.52	0.66	0.59	0.67	0.69	
OVR	0.62	0.67	0.64	0.66	0.70	0.66	0.69	0.68	0.83	0.73	0.70

Notes. All correlations between the management attributes and a student’s overall experience are significant at the $\alpha = 0.01$ level.

As hypothesized, all eleven of the attributes are statistically significant ($\alpha = 0.01$) with positive correlations. An increase in any of these scores would likely yield an increase in the student’s overall experience score, assuming a causal relationship between the two. There is moderate, but not strong correlation between the attributes, suggesting little multicollinearity. The eleven attributes each contribute to the student’s overall experience. Only one of the attributes, quality of consulting relationship, has a Spearman’s rho greater than 0.80. Three of the attributes: leadership, responsibility, and written communication have correlations greater than 0.70.

We then looked at the students’ open-ended comments to understand what influenced a student to rate their quality of consulting relationship with their nonprofit client as “superior/outstanding” or “very good” as opposed to “below average” or “poor”. We completed a content analysis whereby a group of five research assistants analyzed and coded the comments to identify patterns of desireable behaviors in the client. These patterns were identified by reading the comments, coding the data based upon recurring phrases and descriptions, and reaching consensus among the researchers as to which overarching ideas were most prevalent (Creswell, 1998; Tesch, 1990). Three behaviors emerged that influenced students’ perceptions of the quality of the relationship: personal engagement, commitment to collaborative learning, and attitude.

The first behavior, personal engagement, addresses the amount and type of effort made by the client towards the team. Personal engagement begins with the first meeting between the client and the students and continues throughout the duration of the service-learning project. Students positively cited clients that took the time to learn about each student before jumping into the project. Clients also received positive reports on personal engagement if they acknowledged each student's role and commented on the collective effort at the end of the project. Students negatively cited clients that remained aloof and disenaged. They seek more than purely transactional relationships, they want to develop interpersonal relationships during the project.

The second behavior, commitment to collaborative learning, addresses the client's interest in the students' individual devopment and their willingness to work with the students. Students positively cited clients that treated them as colleagues, not as interns. These clients valued their ideas, engaged the students in discussion, and provided valuable feedback. Students negatively cited clients that didn't read the students' progress reports, utilized a top down management style, failed to actively participate in the project, and provided little to no feedback. Students desire a mutually respectful relationship where both sides contribute and learn from one another.

The third behavior, positive attitude, addresses the client's outlook towards the team, the project, and even their own organization. Students postively cited clients that expressed optimism about the project, displayed resilience and remained calm during difficult moments,

Students negatively cited clients that complained about their nonprofit, expressed infifference to the project, and viewed the project as a burden and not an opportunity. Positive attitude can also have a reinforcing effect on the other behaviors. A positive attitude diminshes damage to the students' experience caused by poor personal engagement or a lack of commitment to collaborative learning.

Discussion

Our research confirms that relationships matter. Indeed, for students engaged in service-learning it is the quality of the relationship with their nonprofit client that most influences their perceptions of the experience and the sector. The quantitative analysis identified, as expected, that all eleven attributes have positive, monotonic relationships with a student's experience. Increasing a client's level in any of these eleven attributes would likely improve the student's experience. Also, as expected, the strength of these eleven relationships are not the same. The quality of the consulting relationship has the strongest, positively monotonic relationship of the eleven. Educators seeking nonprofit partners to participate in a service-learning program should start their search with this attribute in mind. Yet quality of the consulting relationship is a rather vague term. What behaviors should service-learning practitioners look for in potential clients? How does one identify these behaviors? Here we turn to our experience and the qualitative analysis, which identified the three behaviors that students desire in a quality consulting relationship: personal engagement, commitment to collaborative learning, and positive attitude.

We recommend that faculty begin to look for these behaviors during the recruitment process. Our university recruits twice a year for service-learning nonprofit partners. Applicants must submit a project proposal and attend a ninety-minute orientation. The orientation includes project overviews, learning objectives, review of past survey results, a discussion of the incoming students' generation, and a Q&A panel of former clients. Client personal engagement behaviors are often apparent during the orientation. Determination requires face-to-face interaction, as both verbal and nonverbal cues appear most clearly in person. Ideal clients will display friendliness, curiosity, and a willingness to interact with others. One may also discern future level of personal engagement from the client's vernacular. Clients that refer to the students as "kids" or "interns" often score lower on personal engagement, while those that refer to them as "colleagues" score much higher. Clients committed to collaborative learning will arrive to the orientation with a well-developed plan. Those that have invested a considerable amount of time and thought into the proposal tend to stayed committed through the entire project, while those that have spent little time on their proposal rarely grow in commitment. The leadership style of the client also matters. Autocratic, bureaucratic, and laissez-faire leaders tend to place little value on collaboration with the students. Lastly, we recommend dropping clients that fail to attend the orientation or in other ways show a low level of commitment to the project. We have found genuinely positive attitude behaviors are the most difficult to identify in potential clients. Ideal clients will possess a level of excitement for both their project and nonprofit. Negative clients are easier to identify and should be avoided.

We further recommend that any search to identify nonprofit partners consider these three behaviors as essential. Clients that match these three will likely prove to be excellent partners, producing a project that not only helps the nonprofit but also helps the students to develop. After identifying good partners, we recommend returning to them from time to time for future service-learning projects. Service-learning has the potential to create meaningful partnerships between universities and the nonprofit sector, but it comes with challenges. Fortunately, the benefits that your students receive from quality nonprofit clients vastly exceeds the costs of finding them.

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