Memorable Events Experienced by Community Partners in University Collaborations

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the memorable events community partners experience when working with college students in a university/community collaboration. Twenty community members employed by nonprofit agencies, who have partnered with the university for varying lengths of time, participated in telephone interviews. Participants identified memorable events related to students' motivation to work with clients and complete tasks. They cited long-term gain for both students and nonprofit organizations as also creating lasting memories, leading to emotions of pride and joy and feelings of being pleased and rewarded. Identifying memorable events provides a window into what motivates community partners to continue collaborating with the university.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities highlights service-learning as a high-impact practice (Brownell & Swaner, 2010). Effective service-learning is grounded in the needs of the local community, and specifically of the nonprofit agencies with whom the university partners. The purpose of this study is to examine community partners' memorable experiences with college students who are engaged in service-learning. The value of this study resides in the need for community partners to continue collaborating. Therefore, it is important to understand the kinds of events that are memorable for community partners and that consequently help to make continuing the service-learning partnership worthwhile.

Effective service-learning collaborations require the sharing of responsibility between faculty and community partners, and ensuring that community partners have a voice is beneficial for both the community and the university (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Hammersley, 2012; Janke, 2013; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2000) found that universities often adopt a top-down approach in which they do "for" rather than "with" the community. Author et al. (in press) highlight the need for reciprocal relationships, defined as an exchange of ideas or resources, between universities and community partners. Treating community partners as equals and interacting on a level playing field yields positive outcomes (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Research by Author et al. (in press)

highlights the importance of giving and receiving as well as open communication in these collaborations.

To ensure the continuation of such collaborations, community members must be motivated to maintain their partnership with the university. Previous research has found that community partners are motivated more by fulfilling cognized goals and achieving expected outcomes than by external incentives (Author et al., 2013). By reflecting on memorable experiences during and after they occur, community partners can find the motivation to continue to collaborate (Author et al., 2013).

Emotions lie at the heart of any memorable experience, yet the community engagement literature has not yet examined community partners' emotions. Thus, I will draw on the scholarship on teachers' emotions to provide guidance for this study. The study of teachers' emotions provides a glimpse into how emotions impact teachers' job satisfaction and retention.

When students improve their skills, faculty feel proud and excited about their achievements (Author, 2008). Hargreaves (1998a, 1998b) found that giving teachers freedom to choose their instructional approach and shape the classroom climate resulted in positive emotions. Conversely, when teachers did not see gains in student learning outcomes and positive classroom climate, they experienced negative emotions, specifically anxiety, anger, guilt, and shame. In another study, teachers experienced positive emotions when they had opportunities for professional development (van Veen & Van de Ven, 2005). Student growth left teachers ecstatic, and their pride and excitement in the students' achievements and their own success made any the challenges seem worthwhile (Author, 2008). The culmination of student learning outcomes and faculty professional development left the teachers proud and excited.

The extensive research surrounding teachers' emotions provides evidence that teachers experience both positive and negative emotions in the classroom and these emotions affect teacher satisfaction and retention. Connecting this literature to the research on community engagement can help us to understand memorable events in the context of service-learning. When memorable events occur, they impact motivation, which plays a key role in individuals' thought processes and their willingness to remain with a task. A greater understanding of community partners' motivation to engage in service-learning is particularly needed given the lack of previous research on this topic, the perpetual understaffing issues faced by community organizations, and the importance of retaining community partners in university/community collaborations.

Methods

The participants in this study were community partners who collaborated with a midsized liberal arts institution in the southeastern United States. The community that was the site of this study includes over 174,055 residents in nine municipalities. The area is mostly rural, with an 18.5% poverty rate. The community partners in this study are employed at nonprofit organizations that focus on issues of education, health, and economics.

Upon receiving IRB approval, the researchers contacted community partners who had worked with members of the university. This purposeful sampling allowed us to randomly select 27 organizations from a sample of 74 which was taken from a

departmental database. An email was sent to one employee from each organization with 20 choosing to participate, resulting in a 74% response rate.

The sample consisted of five men and 15 women who had worked in their fields for 11-20 years and with their organizations for 6-10 years. Eight participants worked at organizations focused on health, eight at organizations focused on economic stability, and four at organizations focused on education. On average, they have collaborated with the university for 3-4 years and have worked with 21-30 students.

Prospective participants received an email inviting them to participate in the study; if they did not respond to the email after a week they were contacted by phone. Those who agreed to participate were interviewed over the phone, with interviews lasting on average 24 minutes, and all interviews were audio recorded. This research is part of a larger study on community partners' definitions of reciprocity. In this study we inquired into demographics and asked the following interview question: "Tell me about a memorable event in working with the university's college students."

For the purposes of this study, "a memorable event" is defined as "a snapshot in time that invites listeners to experience a particular situation" (Cohen, 2011, p. 3). Learning and emotions are the basis of memorable events (Marmur, 2019). The term "community engagement" will be used to include both service-learning and internships, due to the community's lack of understanding of the difference between the terms.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed for analysis. Once we compiled the participants' responses in Dedoose we conducted open coding, which involved identifying relevant fragments from each excerpt in response to our analysis questions (Boeije, 2010). The following analysis questions guided the coding of each transcript.

- What are the memorable events?
- Were the events positive or negative?

Categories were compiled by looking for patterns in the data. Boeije (2010) defines categories as "a group or cluster used to sort parts of the data" (p. 95). We created a display to help us examine the categories; this allowed us to see how the categories interact, which led to the development of themes.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the participants' descriptions of memorable events with students involved in community engagement. The first theme, motivation to work with clients and complete tasks, was mentioned by 17 of the 20 participants. Fifteen community partners mentioned the second theme, long-term gain. Finally, the third theme, positive emotions, was mentioned by six of the 20 participants.

Motivation to Work with Clients and Complete Tasks

The connections college students make with clients at their community engagement site fuels their work over the time they are engaged in the organization. These relationships help to create memorable experiences for all those involved. In these situations, there is often a beneficial give-and-take relationship between students and community partners. Many of these organizations operate on a shoestring budget and are consistently short-staffed. They therefore welcome additional assistance and

find it helpful when college students can work independently. Many of these students are eager to learn and their persistence and professionalism are noteworthy.

There are many ways that college students and clients can connect, whether through a project or in direct interactions. When one college student was filming a video for a class project, the community partner was impressed with her ability to connect to the clients. Terry, who has been working with the university for seven years, noted,

> [S]he came, and she did interviews on video with some of our participants. And it was an amazing interaction of how she dealt with people that were about as far away from her as you can imagine. She loved what she did here and this whole group just fell in love with her. It was just the coolest interaction I think I've seen. And we've had some great work done at [university]. This was the most memorable, just how they connected with the student.

By fostering meaningful relationships with the clients she interviewed, the student produced both an excellent final product and a meaningful experience for all parties. By showing the motivation to dive deeply into her work, the student deeply impressed the community partner.

In addition to admiring students' motivation, some community partners highlighted the professional demeanor the college students demonstrated in their interactions with both community partners and clients. One college student partnered with an organization that serves the terminally ill. She formed a close relationship with a patient who eventually passed away. Anita, who has worked with the university for five years, reflected on this experience:

> And like I said, even though she was tearful, she was professional and it was just really neat to see a student handle the death of a hospice patient the way she did. Just, she was very kind to the family and offered to do anything she could to help them and just was very empathetic, sympathetic to them. And I'll always remember that.

The community partner was impressed by this student's maturity, control over her emotions, and ability to remain professional when the situation required it. Her demeanor enabled her to connect with the family members and to work with them effectively.

Participants also discussed the eagerness students demonstrated in their work with community organizations. Katherine, who has worked with the university for eight years, recalled how one college student displayed an interest in the work and dove into her partnership. She noted, "was eager to learn and she really showed that she had a passion for the work." The student demonstrated her motivation to engage in the work and learn from her supervisor. This enthusiasm created a memorable experience that made a lasting impact on the community partner.

Another student's ability to persevere in the face of challenges made a lasting impression on a community partner. This student worked on a project that required managing 30 years of data. John, who has collaborated with the university for four years, was pleased by the student's progress. He reported,

And I think that that student came into the city and worked hard for four days a week for a month before they could get the data to do anything. And I think most people in a situation like that would have just thrown up their hands and gone home. But you could see the sheer enjoyment [and] pride in the student when they figured out what the one formula would be, that would make all the data be mappable.

This student's determination to stick with the project long enough to make meaningful progress allowed him to persist in a challenging situation. The student's dedication and the resulting enjoyment and pride he experienced made this a memorable experience for the community partner.

Many community organizations are short-staffed and therefore welcome assistance from college students who can work independently. When working in a short-staffed organization, Annie, who had collaborated with the university for five years, noted,

But [they] were great at working independently, which is kind of crucial here. There are only two of us, two staff and so [we] needed them desperately, but we also needed desperately for them to kind of take a project and go and do it and then communicate back afterwards.

These staff members wanted students to take initiative and communicate the results of their efforts back to them. Students who demonstrate the motivation to work on a project without requiring constant supervision from the community partners increase the organization's productivity and foster a memorable experience for the community partner.

Community partners identified the reciprocal aspects of working with college students, resulting in a give-and-take relationship that allows all parties to thrive. Sharon, a community partner who had collaborated with the university for five years, reported,

[College student] was amazing. He actually helped me. I'm relatively old. So he helped me with social media, kind of getting me over that kind of fear hub. So he was very helpful that way. And in return, I also helped him understand that sometimes you have to do the piddly stuff before they give you the big stuff. So it was a great give and take. Really appreciated that.

In this example, each party has strengths that enhance the relationship. Both individuals were able to instruct each other in their respective areas of expertise, creating a memorable experience. When college students are willing to work hard and bring their own knowledge base as well as learning from the partnership, both individuals can benefit.

College students' motivation to assist clients through projects and direct interactions ignites their work. Demonstrating eagerness, persistence, and independence fosters positive emotions and outcomes for both students and community partners. In this context, college students need to be professional and connect with both

the organizations and the clients they serve. These relationships are reciprocal and can have long-lasting impacts. Through students' hard work and determination, memorable moments are achieved.

Long-term Gain

Some memorable events centered on long-term gain for the college students and the community partners. Projects that were particularly valuable to the organization and its clients often stood out in participants' minds. Community partners also remembered occasions in which they were able to have an impact on college students' career paths or goals. Such collaborations allowed college students to gain knowledge about the field, the organization, and the clients.

Resources of time and money are often severely limited in nonprofit organizations. Therefore, college students who make useful contributions to the organization can produce long-term gain for community organizations. One college student was working with a public health organization on a project related to e-cigarettes and vaping. Sandra, a community partner who had worked with the university for 1-2 years, highlighted the value of this project, noting,

> *She was able to do a poster presentation and kind of communicate some of her findings with some of our coalition members and community members. It really reinforced the issue and need for us paying attention to that public health crisis.*

When direct service or a project-based collaboration is particularly valuable and useful to the organization, it can generate a memorable event.

Community partners also identified memorable events that were based on helping college students clarify their career goals. When a student who is majoring in a field unrelated to their community engagement forms a strong connection with an organization's clients and staff, it can prompt the student to reassess whether they are on the right career path. Jennifer, a community partner who has collaborated with the university for 12 years, shared,

> *She called me when she graduated from [the university] and she said, "I changed my mind." And I said, "What do you mean?" She says, "Well, I'm a business major. And I graduated as a business major." She said, "But I really, really want to help people and I want to go into nursing." And so for me, that was really a shift for her because her family was all business. That's all they did. That's all she knew. And then the experiences that she had with us kind of led her down a different path.*

This student's experience of collaborating with a community organization led her to change her mind about what she wanted to do after graduation. The revision of career goals impacted the college student's long-term trajectory and had a lasting effect on the community partner, resulting in a significant and memorable event.

Collaborations between universities and community organizations need to have value for both the college student and the community partner. For students, growth often occurs when they obtain knowledge both about a potential field of interest and

about themselves. Additionally, such engagement in the community can help students recognize the role of privilege and better understand the world.

Chloe, who has partnered with the university for 11 years, recalled a memorable experience from her own days as a college student. She was considering applying for a coordinator position that facilitated the relationship between the community organization and the university. She had the opportunity to observe and interact with the previous coordinator, which allowed her to understand the intricacies of the job as well as the importance of passing on knowledge when working with college students. She stated,

> So to be able to talk with her and learn about what she did as the . . . coordinator and kind of to see also that she did more than just that volunteer coordinator. She would stay and hang out with the kids, obviously making sure that her job was done. But I think to be able to really listen to what her experience was like prompted me and influenced me to take on that [coordinator] position once she graduated.

Learning about the coordinator position from her predecessor had a long-term influence on the way Chloe does her own job today and constituted a particularly memorable experience.

Just as college students and community partners can learn from each other, opportunities for college students and clients to learn from one another can produce long-term gains that also produce memorable events. Alyssa, who has partnered with the university for 14-15 years, emphasized how students can serve as role models for clients in a way that benefits both parties. She reported,

> All I could think about was, wow, this is really nice for our children to get this experience. To know that all men aren't bad or certain stereotypes that they may have of them, where a lot of our children's fathers are incarcerated, you know? And the boys talked to the kids about going to school, going to college, when they told them that they played football and that they were in school, when they had to listen, because sometimes we have behavior problems and a lot of times when they would see the guys, they would kind of get back in line. So that was rewarding in and of itself. And then just to see these big, tall burly guys interact with three- and four-year-olds.

The college students' ability to provide positive male role models for children who might never have encountered similar role models created a particularly memorable event for this community partner.

Community partners remember events that result in long-term gain for themselves, their clients, and the college students. This gain could take the form of a project or direct interactions with clients. It is critical for the project to provide value for one or more parties. When students obtained knowledge, such as learning about the client population being served, this often served as the basis for memorable events identified by community partners. Some students had life-changing experiences as a result of direct service experiences that reframed their career goals. During college and

after graduation, college students reconnected with community partners and reported their new career goals.

Positive Emotions

When interactions with college students elicit positive emotions for community partners, this can produce memorable events. Community partners report emotions of enjoyment and pride as well as feeling pleased and rewarded as a result of working with college students. Isabelle, a community partner who has worked with the university for 7-8 years, recalled an occasion in which a college student completed a project exceptionally well. She reported,

> They did a video project for me over the summer, which ended up saving the city a lot of money because we didn't have to hire an external group, and it ended up winning a statewide award . . . I was proud of her.

Community organizations often operate on a shoestring budget, leaving them with significant needs. When college students are successful in their work and able to meet these needs, community partners feel a sense of pride. This connection between the community partner and the student can foster positive emotions and memorable events.

Community partners also reported feeling pleased as a result of students' engagement with their organizations, especially when the college students impress them. Sandra, a community partner who has collaborated with the university for 1-2 years, reported, "This young woman was very prepared and professional and a pleasure to work with. We were very pleased with her." The college student's preparation and professionalism contributed to an enjoyable and effective workplace for Sandra and her colleagues, forming the basis of a memorable experience.

Some community partners report valuing and remembering rewarding experiences. Watching situations play out that may not happen often can inspire them. As noted above, Alyssa, who has partnered with the university for 14-15 years, described observing "these big, tall burly guys interact with three- and four-year-olds" as "rewarding in itself." Watching positive interactions and connections occur between people who are so vastly different from one another proved rewarding for this community partner.

Memorable events are made up of emotions. This study found that community partners reported positive emotions such as enjoyment and pride as well as feeling pleased and rewarded when they discussed their memorable experiences. Such positive emotions can be a key to producing the kinds of memorable events for community partners that motivate them to continue their partnership with the university.

Discussion

Community partners focused exclusively on positive events when reporting memorable events; none of the memorable events they reported reflected negative experiences or emotions. The events they cited elicit reflected students' motivation to work with clients and complete projects, resulted in long-term gain, and elicited positive emotions. Students demonstrated their motivation through their eagerness, persistence,

independence, professionalism, and ability to connect with clients. Long-term gain for the students and the organizations resulted from students completing useful projects, gaining knowledge of the organization and its clients, learning from community partners and teaching them new skills, and reassessing their career goals as a result of their interactions with the community organization. Community partners' positive emotions included pride, enjoyment, and feelings of being pleased and rewarded.

Reinforcing the findings of previous research, this study demonstrated the importance of giving community partners a voice (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Hammersley, 2012; Janke, 2013; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Assisting community partners in sharing their voice facilitated the creation of memories. Additionally, past research has found that memorable events often occur in reciprocal relationships (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Author et al., in press). This study further highlighted how giving and receiving in relationships between college students and community partners can lay the foundation for creating memorable events.

Maintaining community partners' motivation is critical for sustaining long-term collaborations between universities and community organizations. When college students help community partners and organizations meet their goals and achieve desired outcomes, memorable experiences often occur (Author et al., 2013). As in Author's (2013) research, this study found that shared goals can serve as a catalyst to increase motivation. These goals combined with positive outcomes sustain community partners in their work. The outcomes identified in this study included contributing to the organization's projects and advancing its goals; developing one's career path; creating long-term partnerships; acquiring knowledge; establishing connections with and providing role models for clients; demonstrating professionalism, eagerness, persistence, and independence; and engaging in a give-and-take relationship.

Similar to the literature on teachers' emotions, this study found that community partners experience positive emotions such as enjoyment when they see college students grow as a result of their community engagement (Author, 2008; Hargreaves, 1998a, 1998b). In both that literature and the present study, seeing students take ownership of their experience and education led the teachers and community partners to feel pride. Positive emotions also resulted from seeing college students work independently; this provided much-needed assistance to the organization, which is similar to Hargreaves' (1998a, 1998b) findings.

Unlike previous research, this study sheds light on community partners' perspectives on memorable experiences in the hope of identifying emotional factors that help foster and sustain university/community collaboration. The participants in this study reported only positive experiences and emotions; this is different from the findings of the teachers' emotions literature, in which negative emotions are often reported (Author, 2008; Hargreaves, 1998a, 1998b). Also unlike the teachers' emotions literature, community partners did not discuss their own professional development (van Veen et al., 2005). Instead, their emotional responses hinged on recalling memorable events that resulted in college students' contributing valuable skills and resources to the organization and experiencing personal and professional growth.

Limitations of this study include the fact that all participants are from one community and worked with students from a single institution, and the overall sample size is small. Additionally, the sample was largely female. Finally, due to the COVID-19

pandemic we conducted the interviews by phone instead of in person, which may have impacted the results.

Because this study uncovered only positive events and emotions, future research should focus on eliciting memorable experiences that involved challenging events or negative emotions. Such research should explore how community partners dealt with those experiences and what impact such events had on their willingness to continue collaborating. Investigating the differences in memorable experiences and emotions between various demographic groups based on community partners' gender, race, and length of time collaborating with the university, as well as the type of student engagement (i.e., project-based vs. direct client service) and other factors, could also yield valuable information. Finally, future researchers might interview community partners who have discontinued previous collaborations with universities to identify the factors that led to this choice.

The implications of this study are that students' contributions and growth elicit positive emotions on the part of the community partner, leading to memorable events. To retain community partners, it is important to identify the factors that motivate them. Giving community partners a voice allowing open communication between the university and community is critical. College students' contributions allow community partners to complete additional tasks and help their organizations function more efficiently, while the students experience personal and career growth in addition to receiving college credit. These benefits form the foundation of a genuinely reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the value community partners place on their relationship with college students. Because community organizations tend to have limited staff and funding, college students' contributions can help them to meet organizational and client needs, complete necessary tasks, and achieve desired outcomes and goals, providing the basis for memorable moments. Memorable events can serve as a catalyst to motivate community partners to continue collaborating with the university. The maintenance of these relationships is critical to successful community engagements.

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