The impact of a short duration service-learning project on student learning outcomes.

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning has been empirically shown to impact student learning outcomes in multiple disciplines in several countries. Prior studies have shown that students are often involved in service-learning projects that last many weeks. This study reports on student learning outcomes after business students were exposed to an intensive daylong service-learning project at a major nonprofit organization. Using the SELEB Scale, the researchers examine how students perceive the improvements to their practical skills, citizenship, personal responsibility, and interpersonal skills, that accrued from the service project. The results indicate that although females' scores were higher, they were not significantly different from males. In addition, differences in academic major subjects caused no significant differences in the results. The results of this study demonstrate that students can benefit from service-learning projects that can be completed in a shorter time span.

Educational institutions are highly invested in their students' success. Therefore, universities create programs that are oriented toward providing students with the skills necessary for success after graduation; course contents are delivered using a combination of lectures, cases studies, projects, and assignments. Many researchers have questioned whether these traditional pedagogical methods are truly beneficial to the educational development of students (e.g., Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; McCord et al., 2015).

Guyton (2000) suggests that traditional pedagogical methods turn students into passive underachievers. McCoskey and Warren (2003) state that while case studies and role-play exercises provide valuable real-world simulations, they only approximate reality. Morton and Troppe (1996) characterized the current learning approach as an information assimilation model that transmits large amounts of information to students who do not retain it for later application. Because of these innate problems, service-learning is being promoted as a means to improve the educational process and promote community engagement.

Numerous research studies provide evidence of the educational benefits of service-

learning courses across many disciplines. Most research on the benefits of service-learning are based on projects embedded in semester-long courses (Anderson et al., 2016; Toncar et al., 2006). There is little research that examines the impact of day-long service-learning projects that are interdisciplinary in business schools. However, this study examines students' perceptions of the effects of service-learning on learning outcomes based on a day-long service-learning project. The Service-learning Benefit (SELEB) scale developed by Toncar et al. (2006) is used.

Constructivist Pedagogy

Experiential learning is the core of service-learning and is defined as the process of learning through experience; it is a reflection of the constructive pedagogy style. The notion that experience is the catalyst for learning may be traced back to 1938 when John Dewey's pioneering programs addressed adult student learning. Dewey (1938) states that individuals learn best through hands-on experience. The teacher's role is to organize the learning environment such that students truly gain knowledge, as opposed to simply being able to regurgitate information. This model is consistent with Kolb's (1984) emphasis on experiential learning as a basis for knowledge creation. Kolb conceptualizes learning as evolving through four phases beginning with concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Most universities offer service-learning courses as elective or required courses in different disciplines. Bringle and Hatcher (2009) define service-learning courses as competency-based, credit-bearing educational courses in which students participate in organized service activities that meet community needs, impact their grasp of curriculum knowledge, enable them to develop a larger appreciation of the discipline, enrich personal values, and promote civic responsibility.

Fundamentals of Service-learning

Although many schools offer internships and co-op programs for students to gain professional experience, these differ from service-learning as they do not foster community engagement. Service-learning differs from volunteering in that it is academic work that is intentionally designed around social learning objectives. Because students are placed in mostly nonprofit, community-based settings to interact and share knowledge, they also gain an understanding of the relationship between education and civic responsibility. This description stresses the fact that well-designed service-learning courses are constructed through a collaborative process with the community.

Service-learning provides a unique opportunity to create knowledge because the participants are placed in concrete situations and then asked to reflect upon their experiences; this helps them internalize the situation and thereby alter their psychological constructs. Encouraging students to reflect on their service-learning experience is an important component of this process because it not only increases academic knowledge but also develops self-monitoring skills and a better understanding of the learning process and facilitates the discovery of personal values and beliefs. When students internalize their experiences, their attitudinal structures comprising beliefs and affective and connate components are stimulated (Holzman et al., 2008).

Service-learning creates opportunities for students in an environment that allows real-world experiences that are pragmatic in nature and encourages deep reflection as articulated by Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984), respectively. Reflection is a critical component of students' learning; critical reflection sets thought patterns into motion and creates links between service and learning by connecting action with the development of attitudes and emotions. The literature documents that service-learning courses can be developed to promote specific but related learning outcomes in multiple disciplines (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Sax, 2004). The beneficial outcomes reported are stronger awareness of civic responsibility, increased academic knowledge and skills, and the development of interpersonal skills (Bootsma et al., 2021; Chiang, 2008; Sabat et al., 2015; Toncar et al., 2006).

Selective Service-learning Studies and Outcomes by Business Discipline

When reviewing the most current business studies based on service-learning projects that are empirically tested for learning outcomes, we find that the major learning outcomes are related to academic skill development, communications, personal growth, and civic engagement. Table 1 provides a summary of these studies by the major business disciplines. Regardless of the discipline, students' perception of the learning outcomes was significant. Overall, accounting studies reported significant improvement of accounting and academic knowledge (see Chiang, 2008; Edmond & Driskill, 2019; Strupeck & Whitten, 2004).

Several researchers (Blanthorne & Westin, 2016; Bootsma et al., 2021; Strupeck & Whitten, 2004) reported that students involved in accounting service-learning programs such as the VITA program, which provides tax assistance to low-income households, experienced improvements in their understanding of accounting concepts and interpersonal skills. When business students taught personal financial management concepts to low-income students, they reported improvements in analytical thinking, interpersonal, and team building skills (McCord et al., 2015). Reiss et al. (2019) surveyed students in the finance discipline who participated in service-learning projects and found significantly positive attitudes regarding service, the value of future service work and the need to continue involvement in the community. In separate finance-related courses, students experienced positive dimensions with regard to leadership, social justice issues (Sabbaghi et al., 2013), improvement in academic and critical thinking, and social responsibility vision (Dahlquist, 1998).

Service-learning studies in management courses reported significant learning outcomes related to cultural diversity and deeper connections to the community (Bhattacharya & Scherage, 2015; Wozhiak et al., 2006). Several others show that service-learning projects improved students' perceptions of academic skills, personal responsibility, and leadership skills (Gallagher & McGorry, 2015, Madsen & Turnbull, 2006; Sabat et al., 2015). When Megley (2020) incorporated a service-learning project in a senior capstone course, students developed grant writing skills and expressed a stronger commitment to volunteer after the semester ended.

Popovich and Brooks-Hurst (2019) found that students' satisfaction from a marketing service-learning project was significantly related to their perception of the course content and their critical thinking skills. In this scenario, the students derived satisfaction from the ability to apply the skills learned from academic settings to practical

business problems. Crutchfield (2017) reported that students perceived that they acquired an in depth understanding of marketing concepts, improvement in team building, relationship skills, and a more positive attitude toward social responsibility. Wang and Calvano's (2018) field experiments in two different undergraduate marketing courses reported that all stages of the Kolb (1984) learning experience cycle were significantly correlated with service-learning outcomes. Students directly involved in service-learning show significantly higher correlation scores than non-service-learning students.

When developing the SELEB scale to measure student learning outcomes, Toncar et al. (2006) demonstrated the convergent validity of the scales when they measured students' outcomes in two separate classes that had different "fun factor" levels. Burns (2011) surveyed a diverse group of marketing students from several different universities using the SELEB instrument and reported significant relationships among the service-learning scale item skills assessed, which were as follows: (a) critical thinking and application skills, (b) communication and interpersonal (team building skills), (c) social responsibility, (d) citizenship, (e) trustworthiness, and (f) sensitivity to the needs of others. They also reported the six different personal motivations that impact a student's willingness to volunteer (career, esteem, social, protective, understanding, and value). Hagenbuch (2006) also noted that students reported significant improvement in most learning outcomes and more positive attitudes toward personal selling after participating in a service-learning project in a sales class.

Fewer studies are reported in general business courses, but those conducted show that students gain more sensitivity to social responsibility and global issues (Schneider, 2018). In a business communication class, Blewitt et al. (2018) found that a service-learning project not only developed stronger communication skills but also improved students' perceptions of teamwork skills and their global and social awareness. As emphasized by numerous researchers, the majority of service-learning studies report a positive impact on students' learning outcomes. These studies are based on projects that are embedded in academic courses or programs and are often attached to academic units such as the VITA program.

Multiple-Week Projects

One major similarity between these studies is that the participants are usually involved in the service-learning project for multiple weeks. Garger et al. (2020) found that project duration affects student satisfaction. Their research shows that projects requiring more than 45 hours per semester had a negative impact on student satisfaction. Many academic programs sponsor class projects in which students commit to performing community service projects over a shorter period. These projects are usually a major component of the course grading process. Little extant research has investigated the impact of service-learning programs with projects of a shorter duration (i.e., one or two days). Therefore, this raises the question of whether service-learning projects with a shorter duration could influence student learning outcomes.

Study Hypotheses

All of the service-learning studies reviewed were on business classes and conducted within the time frame of five to ten weeks. These studies focused on the

development of specific academic skills such as accounting, finance, and marketing. However, many service projects do not emphasize specific academic skill development such as accounting or marketing. The research participants are students from different academic disciplines. Regardless of the class hosting the service-learning assignment, students tended to respond positively to questions about their general skill development, such as their communication ability and commitment to social responsibility.

Given the above discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: A general service-learning project with a short time span will impact students' perceptions of three of the four subscale outcomes (citizenship and interpersonal and personal responsibility).

H1b: A general service-learning project with a short time span will not impact students' perceptions of practical skill development.

Researchers have found significant gender differences with respect to interest in volunteering and service-learning projects, but those differences vary (Burns et al., 2008; Burns, 2011; Trudeau & Devlin, 1996; Wilson, 2000; Wymer & Samu, 2002). From a sample of volunteers, Wymer and Samu (2002) found that males are more likely than females to spend more time volunteering, but females are more empathetic toward volunteering. Surveying marketing students, Burns et al. (2008) found significant gender differences in four of the six constructs for motivation to volunteer using the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) scale. Using the SELEB scale, Burns (2012) found significant gender differences in students' perception of the benefits of engaging in service-learning projects. Female respondents perceived greater benefits than male students on all of the specific subcategories of the SELEB scale.

Given the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: There is no significant gender difference as measured by the four subscale outcomes (citizenship, practical, interpersonal, and personal responsibility).

Few studies have examined student perception of the benefits of service-learning by discipline, and there are many reasons for this. Many of the research studies examining student perceptions were generally done within classes that were discipline-specific (Bootsma et al., 2021; Burns, 2011; Burns et al., 2008; Chiang, 2008; McCord et al., 2015; Toncar et al., 2006). Although most service-learning studies in capstone management courses likely had students from multiple majors, the numbers by discipline may not have been large enough to enable a comparison. Importantly, for most disciplines, many studies have shown that students perceived service-learning projects as having improved their academic skills or knowledge. However, if the service-learning project focused more on soft skills, such as interpersonal, citizenship, and personal responsibility, then regardless of their academic discipline, students should perceive roughly the same benefits from the project.

Given the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: There is no significant difference between responses based on academic major.

Methodology
Participants

Students enrolled in the business program at a medium size university in a major city in the southwestern United States are required to take a service-learning course. The course promotes career development, leadership, and interpersonal skills in their junior year. Embedded in the course is a service-learning project that requires students to spend a day at a major food pantry that supplies food and vital information on social services to families and organizations in multiple counties.

Prior to the visit, students were given background information on the purpose and work of the food pantry. The organization provided an introduction and orientation to the work areas when the students arrived. Students were then assigned to a variety of projects in teams. A week after participating in the project, students submitted individual reflective essays. In the critical reflective essay (at least 1000–1200 words or two–three pages), students wrote about the significance of their experience at the service-learning project (relative to communication, teamwork, and networking) and the impact it had on their business worldview. This writing assignment was conducted across all class sections of the course. After the completion of the semester, students were asked to complete the SELEB survey. Data were collected for four semesters prior to the pandemic, which began in Spring 2020. A total of 240 undergraduate business students voluntarily completed the surveys. The majority of the students were female (53%), and more than 40% were Hispanic non-white, while 12.5% were African American, 12% were white non-Hispanic, 15.4% were Asian, and 10.4% belonged to a different group.

Instrument

The SELEB scale, adapted from Toncar et al. (2006) was used because it was designed to measure students' self-reported perceptions of the benefits from participating in service-learning projects. The scale consists of 12 items that test for four underlying benefits of service-learning relating to Practical Skills, Citizenship, Personal Responsibility, and Interpersonal Skills. Each item is rated using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = not at all and 7 = very much so. Through the years, the SELEB scale has been successfully utilized in other studies, including several business studies with reported reliabilities ranging from .70 to .95 (Anderson et al., 2016; Burns, 2011, 2012; Gallagher & McGorry, 2015). Therefore, the instrument and scales were considered acceptable for this study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed with SPSS version 26 using descriptive and inferential statistics. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was calculated to assess scale reliability. For the overall 12-item SELEB scale, Cronbach's alpha was .98. Each of the four sub-

constructs' (interpersonal skills, citizenship, personal responsibility, and practical skills) scores were over .90, which demonstrated strong internal reliability.

Results

Students indicated whether they felt that the service-learning project benefited their growth and development for each scale item on the 7-point Likert scale. To test the first hypothesis, the mean score for each item was calculated. The mean scores were well above the 3.5 middle range on the scale. The mean scores on the individual items ranged from 5.30 to 6.10, and on the subscales, the scores ranged from 5.46 to 5.76, indicating positive perceptions with the respect to how students felt the project impacted their growth and development. Students felt that the project benefited them the most with regard to their practical and interpersonal skills, as shown in Table 1.

While not a scientific comparison, the study's descriptive means were compared to two previous studies that used the 12-point SELEB scale to measure students' perception of the benefits of service-learning projects. As shown in Table 2, the mean scores of the subscales for this study showed average scores that compared favorably to those reported in similar studies where students spent longer times on the respective service-learning projects. The results taken together mean that the null hypothesis H1a was rejected, and hypothesis H2 was accepted. Therefore, students do perceive benefits from a service-learning project with a shorter duration. Hypothesis 1a was rejected because students appear to feel that their ability to apply practical skills to diverse general assignments was improved.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on the 12-Item SELEB subscales

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error
Practical skills				
1. Applying knowledge to the "real world"	220	6.10	1.21	0.08
2. Workplace skills	220	5.64	1.46	0.10
3. Organization skills	220	5.54	1.60	0.10
Total practical skills	220	5.76	1.42	0.10
Citizenship				
4. Understanding cultural and racial differences	220	5.44	1.67	0.11
5. Social responsibility and citizenship skills	220	5.73	1.46	0.10
6. Ability to make a difference in the community	220	5.52	1.51	0.10
Total citizenship	220	5.56	1.55	0.10
Personal responsibility				
7. Social self-confidence	220	5.45	1.63	0.11
8. Ability to assume personal responsibility	220	5.30	1.75	0.12
9. Gaining the trust of others	220	5.63	1.51	0.10
Total personal responsibility	220	5.46	1.63	0.11
Interpersonal skills				
10. Ability to work with others	220	5.77	1.47	0.10
11. Leadership skills	220	5.46	1.52	0.10
12. Communication skills	220	5.75	1.44	0.10
Total Interpersonal skills	220	5.66	1.48	0.10
Total scale mean	220			

Table 2. Comparison of selective service-learning studies using SELEB scale

	Toncar et al. (2006)		Current study	Anderson et al. (2016)
	Marketing research mean	Public relations mean	General business mean	Criminology mean
Practical skills	4.70	5.61	5.76	4.92
Interpersonal skills	4.12	5.36	5.66	4.69
Citizenship skills	4.14	5.20	5.56	4.85
Personal responsibility	4.22	5.36	5.46	4.41
Overall SELEB	4.36	5.41	5.54	Not reported
Length of project	6 weeks	6 weeks	1 day	15 weeks

To test the second hypothesis, independent sample t-tests were conducted to explore any significant differences between gender on item and scale means. The results in Table 3 indicate no significant gender differences on the subscales or for the overall SELEB scale.

Table 3. Comparison of female and male independent samples T-Test mean SELEB constructs

Constructs	Female	Male	T-statistic	P value
Interpersonal skills	5.6845	5.4789	1.11	.267
Personal responsibility	5.7196	5.4908	1.11	.267
Citizenship	5.6825	5.6126	.393	.695
Practical skills	5.6578	5.4591	1.04	.302
SELEB total mean	5.6337	5.4367	1.07	.286

As displayed in Table 4, both female and male students' perceptions were positive. Although the results were not significant, females consistently reported a higher degree of benefits when compared to male students across all subscales and the total scale. At the individual item level, females perceived that the project significantly impacted their growth and development more than did males for only two scale items (their ability to work with others and gaining their trust).

Table 4. Comparison of female and male independent samples T-Test mean SELEB items

SELEB Item#	Female mean	Male mean	T-statistic	P value (2-tailed)	Cohen's D
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS					
IPS1: Ability to work with others	5.95	5.56	-1.996	0.047*	-0.275
IPS2: Leadership skills	5.59	5.27	-1.534	0.127	-0.211
IPS3: Communication skills	5.86	5.66	-1.021	0.308	-0.141
PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY SKILLS					
PR1: Social self-confidence	5.59	5.26	-1.521	0.13	-0.21
PR2: Ability to assume personal responsibility	5.43	5.16	-1.12	0.264	-0.154
PR3: Gaining trust of others	5.86	5.36	-2.442	0.015*	-0.338
CITIZENSHIP SKILLS					
CS1: Understanding cultural and racial differences	5.59	5.27	-1.41	0.16	-0.194
CS2: Social responsibility and citizenship skills	5.86	5.59	-1.381	0.169	-0.19
CS3: Ability to make a difference in the community	5.56	5.49	-0.341	0.733	-0.047
PRACTICAL SKILLS					
PS1: Applying knowledge to the "real world"	6.22	5.96	-1.629	0.105	-0.224
PS2: Workplace skills	5.8	5.47	-1.664	0.098	-0.229
PS3: Organization skills	5.66	5.41	-1.185	0.237	-0.163
SELEB mean	5.6337	5.4367	-1.07	0.286	-0.147

*Significant at 0.05 level.

To determine if differences were significant among academic majors, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used. As shown in Table 5, there was no significant difference in student perceptions based on academic majors at the $p<.05$ level for the five conditions tested: interpersonal skills [$F_{(3, 234)} = 1.22$, $p = 0.304$],; citizenship skills [$F_{(3, 236)} = 1.45$, $p = 0.230$], practical skills [$F_{(3, 236)} = 1.22$, $p = 0.304$], personal responsibility skills [$F_{(3, 236)} = 1.05$, $p = 0.372$], and SELEB performance [$F_{(3, 236)} = 1.37$, $p = 0.253$]. The results indicate acceptance of the null hypothesis.

Table 5. One-way analyses of variance for SELEB factors based on academic major

ANOVA

		Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
PerformanceIS1	Between groups	14.623	3	4.874	1.217	0.304
	Within groups	937.273	234	4.005		
	Total	951.896	237			
PerformanceCS1	Between groups	16.991	3	5.664	1.447	0.23
	Within groups	923.652	236	3.914		
	Total	940.643	239			
PerformancePS1	Between groups	14.979	3	4.993	1.218	0.304
	Within groups	967.574	236	4.1		
	Total	982.553	239			
PerformancePR1	Between groups	13.851	3	4.617	1.048	0.372
	Within groups	1039.897	236	4.406		
	Total	1053.748	239			
PerformanceSELEB1	Between groups	16.152	3	5.384	1.369	0.253
	Within groups	928.265	236	3.933		
	Total	944.417	239			

Discussion and Implications

This study suggests that the length of the service-learning project may not matter for students to perceive positive benefits. Service-learning is a viable pedagogical practice that positively engages students in skill development while serving the needs of the community regardless of gender or academic major. Therefore, schools should be encouraged to develop more courses with day-long service-learning projects because of the potential positive impact on students and the community. This has the potential to connect more diverse community-based programs with universities.

The research studies conducted on the topic of service-learning thus far have not included one-day projects. Moreover, this study can assist with the design and delivery of service-learning projects with similar community service organizations that can be completed in one day or one week. This junior-level general business course included majors from all departments in the college. Working together, students were able to successfully apply their business and interpersonal relationship skills in a manner that they perceived helped to improve their overall knowledge, skills, and abilities.

The results are similar to those reported by Burns (2012) and Burns et al. (2008), who investigated the role of gender when measuring student motivation to volunteer. In Burns' (2012) study, females reported significantly higher (P ≤.05) mean responses than males for all of the subscales as well as the overall scale.

Although nothing was hypothesized regarding students' prior experience with service-learning projects, the study found that a significant number of students (58%) had participated in volunteer activities prior to the service-learning project at the Food Bank. Importantly, over 78% of the students indicated that they were very likely or likely to volunteer again for similar service experiences in the future. This seems to corroborate Burns' (2011) assessment that when students perceived positive benefits of service-learning, it may promote a willingness to increase volunteering in the future. Chang et al. (2019) reported that students' previous involvement in community service projects did not impact self-reported social, intellectual, or personal development scores, but they did report a higher score for civic development.

The study also suggests that the length of the service-learning project may not matter for students to perceive positive benefits. Service-learning is a viable pedagogical practice that positively engages students in skill development while serving the needs of the community. Service-learning provides benefits for all organizations and most individuals involved (Shaw, 2018; Waldner et al., 2012). Furthermore, the college and institution is also able to further demonstrate their commitment to community engagement through service-learning practices. This high-impact practice is tailored in alignment with the needs of the academic community through socially responsible leadership practices that reinforce reality-based teaching and learning. This also helps better prepare students for other courses that may require a service-learning component, as such components are included in many capstone courses. Service-learning is validated and evidenced to have a profound positive impact on students' engagement in multiple ways. These types of community-based partnerships should be purposefully designed in consideration of the school program and community partners' strategic plans and organizational missions.

Limitations and Future Research

As this survey was conducted after the students had completed the project, future studies should include a pretest at the start of the class and a posttest after completion of the project. A possible confounding factor could be that a large percentage of the students had participated in volunteer activities prior to the class. This study was conducted using students from one mid-size Hispanic-serving institution. It should be expanded to more diverse schools and to other types of service-learning projects to improve the generalizability of the results.

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