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Claire Karlsson
American University

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Assessment of Career Development in Community-Based Learning: A Case Study among American University Students

Introduction

In recent years, the study of student learning outcomes from service-learning experiences has become a priority on the education research agenda. Many studies have identified a range of benefits for students who have participated in service-learning programs, including the clarification of students' career goals and increased development of professional skills. Yet few studies have attempted to identify the ways in which service-learning programs and community partnerships can facilitate students' career development. Deeper understanding of the ways to enhance students' career development through community based learning holds significant relevance as colleges expand their service-learning programs and extol the various personal and professional benefits of participation to their student bodies. This paper explores the intersection between strong community partnerships, reciprocal relationships and student career development in higher education service-learning programs through preliminary work assessing how service-learning and career development are perceived among undergraduate students. By using a case study among X University undergraduate participants in community based learning, this exploratory study attempts to assess on a small-scale how service-learning programs enhance career development. The study's findings suggest that reciprocal relationships and work of mutual benefit to campus and community partners plays a critical role in enabling the clarification and reinforcement of students' career goals and interests.

Literature Review

Service-learning (SL) and its related pedagogies like community based learning, community based research and participatory action research all embed community engagement within academic disciplines and learning goals (Cress et al., 2005, p. 7). Community based learning (CBL), the SL model utilized in select classes at X University integrates community engagement into course structure as a mechanism for both achieving course objectives and exploring community needs and issues of justice and inequity. SL in university settings often strive to increase students' understanding of the underlying causes for social inequities and community problems while working to create social change (Polanyi & Cockburn, 2003, p. 17).

Claire Karlsson recently graduated from American University. She studied international development and public health. She spent two semesters in China and India respectively. She has accepted a position with the U.S. Agency for International Development in their Office of HIV/AIDS in Washington, DC.

When integrated in university classrooms, students are meant to gain deeper insights into societal issues through reflection upon the ways their community work relates to course material and academic objectives (Cress et al., 2005, p. 8). X University's community based learning and research program aligns with this conception of justice-oriented service-learning.

As university interest and support for community based learning and research has continued to grow, certain general principles have emerged to guide the process of establishing fruitful community partnerships and implementing impactful SL opportunities for undergraduate students. The cornerstone of SL is the building of relationships between university participants and community partners. As opposed to a charity model for community service work that is typically a top-down provision of services, SL partners are meant to have equal influence in determining community needs, learning goals and useful projects (Sumka, Porter & Piacitelli, 2015, p. 38). However university participants and community members may have differing goals and motivations entering into SL partnerships. Effective SL programs allow for the negotiation between potentially contrasting perspectives among partners. A successful partnership maximizes benefits for both partners through the building of genuine, reciprocal relationships among students, faculty and community members.

In their discussion of the fundamental elements to SL in the form of alternative breaks, Sumka, Porter, and Piacitelli describe reciprocity as a critical component to achieving mutually beneficial community partnerships. The researchers describe reciprocity as both participants learning from and sharing with each other, conducting mutually beneficial work and projects that fulfill their respective goals (2015, p. 38). Yet Polanyi and Cockburn stress that there will always be power differentials and differing goals and agendas among academic institutions, university students, faculty and community members (2003, p. 22). Sumka, Porter, and Piacitelli suggest that stumbling blocks to mutual benefit can be minimized when partnerships are initiated and projects are designed through open communication, acknowledgement of respective interests and conscious collaboration based upon shared goals (2015, p. 39). Other key components of effective SL programs include capacity building service work, critical reflection and assessment of learning. Well-designed SL experiences provide relevant preparation before service begins, larger context for service experiences and opportunities for self-reflection at its conclusion. The process of assessing student learning outcomes through critical reflection and evaluation also represents one of the most important ways SL programs determine if the initial learning goals were achieved. This paper attempts on a small-scale to contribute to this assessment.

Rigorous analysis of student learning outcomes helps universities understand the extent

to which their SL initiatives contribute to their institutional mission and bring concrete and quantifiable benefits to student learning (Lichtenstein et al., 2011, p. 8). Educators similarly benefit from understanding how program structures impact student learning and how they can be designed in future years for achieving specific learning goals. Despite the importance of critical assessment in developing more effective SL programs, only recently has there been concerted effort among researchers and universities to assess student learning outcomes from SL programs (Bettencourt, 2015, p. 474). Recent proliferation in scholarship has attempted to elucidate the impact of SL upon a range of potential student learning outcomes such as civic engagement, social responsibility, language ability and critical thinking skills. Complicating the assessment process of SL is its varying forms in higher education. The extent to which it is integrated into course curriculum, the requirement of a final project and levels of student reflection can vary greatly across institutions and courses. This makes it challenging to define components of SL and establish generalizations about its benefits to students (Lichtenstein et al., 2011, p. 9). Therefore there remain major gaps in the critical evaluation of SL programs and their impact upon different types of student learning outcomes. The need to systematically evaluate the outcomes of the SL pedagogy represents a critical gap in the existing literature on the interactions between higher education, service and social justice. I strive to add to the existing scholarship on the SL model's impact upon student learning outcomes by focusing on the intersection between community based learning (CBL) and career development through the case of students in two CBL courses at X University.

Some of the foundational research studies that have critically evaluated student benefits from SL have identified career development outcomes as one of the major benefits to student participants. Artale and Blieszner conducted a study among 214 undergraduate students in a gerontology class, 117 of which participated in a SL component to the course. The results of a pre- and post-course questionnaire and open-ended questions found that the students who participated in SL had a better understanding of course concepts, fewer misconceptions about aging, and career choices that were reinforced by the experience (2001). Thirteen percent of the study's student respondents indicated that their SL experience increased their awareness of career choices and helped them develop professional experience (p. 83). Many of the students in Artale and Blieszner's study who reported that their SL work was not beneficial to their career development stated that it lacked relevance to their existing career goals. This finding suggests that the subject matter of the SL work is an important determinant of its influence upon career goal development. The impact of SL upon student career development and professional plans was also identified by Eyler and Gyles who found in their comprehensive study of 1,500 students from 20 colleges and universities, that 45% of the 1,100 SL participants had a greater appreciation and value for service careers after their experience (1999). Astin et al. found in their

assessment of various outcomes from SL experiences among 22,236 undergraduates over a four year period that those that participated in service gained a range of benefits, the largest being the impact upon their decision to pursue service careers (2000). Similar to Artale and Blieszner's findings, the researchers determined that the most important indicator that the SL experience was positive for students was if students were interested in the subject matter of the service.

A more recent study also supports the assertion that SL can contribute to career development for student participants. Lichtenstein et al. interviewed undergraduate service participants in a comprehensive assessment of student learning outcomes and found that CBL experiences can enhance students' interest in their major and their career path (2011, p. 13). Students consistently mentioned how CBL activities allowed them to develop professional skills like resolving conflicts, delegating, listening to others and working as a team (p. 14). In Lichtenstein et al.'s development of a national CBL assessment survey, they found that student development of professional skills greatly impacted their overall satisfaction with their CBL experience. The researchers identified several components of the CBL experience that are most important to students' overall impression. These components included students' perception of the usefulness of their work to the community partner, perceived positivity of interactions with community members, the degree service work was integrated into course content and extent of control students felt they had over CBL activities (p. 20). Lichtenstein et al.'s study results reinforce prior scholarship on the impact of SL experiences upon student career development, as well as suggests some of the aspects of CBL structure, partnerships and activities that are particularly impactful upon the degree of career development that results.

Many universities also cite professional development as one of the major reasons they implement SL programs on their campuses. A small sample of universities' SL online materials reference various aspects of career development including SL's ability to help students identify career opportunities post-graduation, develop professional contacts, increase confidence in choice of major and career path and develop professional skills. For example, Vanderbilt University, one of the pioneering schools to use experiential learning models like alternative breaks, takes a broad view of SL's impact upon career development. The university cites the increased academic learning, leadership skills and personal efficacy stemming from SL as leading toward greater career opportunity (Bandy, 2015). Mt. Holyoke College describes the benefits of their CBL program in terms of its ability to increase student self-awareness of their advocacy interests and career ambitions ("CBL Program Principles of Practice"). X University describes how students within the university's CBL programs and courses "bridge theory and practice, and contribute to clarification of their own personal values, career goals, and sense of social responsibility" ("Definition & Criteria"). Colleges vary slightly in how they define and

reference career development outcomes from their SL programs, but consistently career development benefits are included in their informational materials.

Missing from the existing scholarship, however is specific assessment of how SL experiences shape students' career goals and professional development. There is a lack of targeted study on the components of community based learning which can best facilitate career development. Lichtenstein et al.'s evaluation of some of the major elements of the community based learning model comes closest to dissecting how SL experiences can influence career development. Drawing upon students who participated in community based learning components of courses at X University, I hypothesize that greater reciprocity in community partnerships facilitates student career development benefits from the experience.

Methodology

In order to explore the intersection between community based learning, professional development and community partnerships, I developed a five-question survey which was administered to X University students in two classes with CBL components (see Appendix). The survey asked three questions that probed different components of career development. Students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (low) through 5 (high) how strongly they agreed with each statement:

1. I am likely to talk about my community based learning experience in a job interview setting.
2. Working with the community partner organization helped me understand the professional challenges of working in the not-for-profit sector.
3. Employment with the community partner, or an organization like it, is one way of applying my academic major(s) in the workforce.

I considered strong agreement to these statements to be expressed through a rating of 4 or 5, weak agreement or a neutral response through a 3, and disagreement through a 1 or 2. As each of these statements referenced a different way the community based learning experience can expose students to professional options, interests or skills, I interpreted generally high or low agreement to these statements as reflecting the degree to which that aspect of the student's career development was influenced by the CBL experience.

The survey then posed two open-ended questions, directly asking respondents to comment on how, if at all, they felt that their community based learning experience clarified their career goals, and how much they believed their community based learning activities

addressed a need of the community partner. These questions elicit students' reflection on their own learning experience and their perception of the utility of their activities to the partner organization. I used student responses from the open-ended questions to assist in the interpretation of the rated statements and to assess how students defined and understood career development in the context of their CBL experience. The second open-ended question about addressing a need of the organization allows me to draw connections between career development and student sense of reciprocity in their community partnerships. Because community members' perceptions of their partnership with the X University students is not also solicited, this survey does not provide a complete understanding of reciprocity in the partnerships. Yet from this information gathered, I evaluate whether student perceptions of their work's value to the community partner's needs influences the degree to which the experience shapes career development. The survey also generates understanding on how other aspects of the CBL structure and community partnerships shapes career development.

The survey was administered through Google Forms software and sent through email as a link to all students in two X University courses with community based learning components. One of the classes partnered with a single community based organization working in Washington, D.C. Some but not all worked in groups on different projects with the community organization. The other class partnered with five different organizations in the area, each student in the class assigned to work with one organization as part of a group. In both classes, CBL activities throughout the semester culminated in a final project that was meant to relate to the partner organization's work. Both classes were made up upperclassmen and primarily seniors. The survey was sent toward the end of the term and after about two months of CBL activities in each class.

Results

Out of 43 students in the two community based learning courses, 22 completed the survey. A substantial portion of respondents (40.9%) reported that they would be likely to discuss their CBL opportunity in an interview setting, indicating that their CBL activities developed skills they may be able to reference to a potential employer. The findings may also suggest that the content of the work students conducted with the partner organization may have some relevance to the jobs they see themselves applying to in the future. More than two-thirds of respondents (63.7%) indicated strong agreement that working with their community partner or a similar organization represented one way of applying their academic major in the workforce. Clear support for this measure of career development indicates students felt that the community organization is approaching issues their academic work pertains to. The result suggests that students gained exposure to some of the different paths they can take after graduation to apply

their degree in the workforce. A great majority of respondents (72.8%) indicated that they gained insight into the not-for-profit sector of employment and have a greater awareness of the potential professional challenges within this field. Strong agreement with this statement indicates students' work with their partner organization exposed them to some of the problems professional staff face.

About 60% of respondents stated in the first open-ended question that their career goals had not been shaped by their CBL experience. Many went on to discuss why they believed the experience had not been impactful for their career development. The majority of these respondents stated that the partner organization's work was not of interest to them. Others stated that they had a clear understanding of their desired career path and the organization's work did not align with this professional direction. However, a substantial portion of respondents who stated that the CBL experience did not clarify their career goals, qualified their statements by discussing the ways the organization's approach to its work affirmed their desire to work in the not-for-profit sector or pursue a career that allows them to work in a similar style to the partner organization. Others mentioned the inspirational work of the community members and how the CBL activities have spurred a greater desire to volunteer. 40% of respondents stated that their CBL experience was influential for their career goals, similarly mentioning that the organization's staff did inspirational and impactful work and that the organization's approach to its service was a mode of working they identified with. Others stated that the experience was impactful in their career development because it illustrated the various challenges to working in the not-for-profit sector and clarified to some students that they did not want to pursue a career path in that field.

Respondents were almost equally divided over whether they had addressed a need of their community partner through their CBL activities. About 36% of respondents stated in response to the second open-ended survey question that they had contributed to the community partner's needs. The vast majority of these respondents explained that the project they completed for the organization fulfills a need that the organization had communicated to them. Many referenced that the project created a tangible benefit for the organization and also served as a final assignment in their academic course. A few referenced their project's ability to assist the organization over the long term. Some qualified their positive assertions with confusion over whether the project would ultimately be used by the organization and felt therefore that their contribution's overall impact on the organization was small. Some expressed that they could have made a greater contribution to the community partner's needs if they had more time to devote to the work.

An additional third of survey respondents (31.8%) believed that their CBL work did not contribute to the community partner's needs. Every student who expressed a negative response to the question referenced inadequate communication between themselves and the community partners. Many linked the lack of communication with community members with a shared misunderstanding of each other's needs and goals from the partnership. Many students felt that the organization assisted them more than they assisted the community partner, and others felt that their emails, questions and activities at the organization were more burdensome to the organization than helpful. A few felt that their work was menial or irrelevant to the community partner's mission. A substantial portion of the survey respondents (~ 23%) were unsure whether their work contributed to the organization's goals. Some felt that their work allowed them to engage with a meaningful or important community issue and aligned with the organization's goals but remained unsure if it addressed the partner's needs or was going to be used by the organization. Other unsure respondents echoed the respondents who asserted that they did not address a community need, as many stated that they felt that poor communication with the community partner left both the student and organization unclear of each other's expectations.

Discussion: Communication in the Community Partnership

The student survey responses bring up important themes and connections between the nature of their community partnership and their career goal development. Students who reported that they did not believe they clarified their career goals or contributed to the community partner's needs through their CBL experience consistently referenced communication challenges in their community partnerships. One student described their sense of being a burden to the community partner and the resulting miscommunication: "After emailing back and forth with one of the employees, I felt like I was more of a hassle than a help. When I was there, I filmed part of their workshop sessions...The woman asked for a copy of the footage so that they could review how they interacted with their clients. If I knew that she needed that, I would've brought an extra camera to film the entire session". The utility of the student's work in addressing the community partner's needs was constrained because the student's communication with the community partner had not clarified what they each wanted from the partnership. Other respondents also linked the lack of communication with the quality and usefulness of their CBL activities. One student states, "I wish there had been a way for my community partner and I to sit down and have explicit goals I could have achieved during my semester." Miscommunication and a lack of communication within SL partnerships appears to increase the chance that CBL activities are of limited relevance to both the student's personal objectives and the community partner's needs.

When community based learning activities and projects are limited in applicability and

substantive work, students' ability to draw upon their CBL experience in job interviews or reference it on a resume may be limited. Open, regular and meaningful communication between campus and community partners on their respective expectations and goals can be a key way of facilitating work that will contribute to student career development and be applicable to students' future employment. This supports Sumka, Porter and Piacitelli's discussion on the ways consistent communication with the community partner enables a depth of understanding of their motivations and needs that greatly increases the mutual benefits from the student's CBL work (2015, p. 62).

Contribution to Professional Partner

Communication challenges were not universal for students and a substantial portion of respondents felt that their CBL activities addressed a community need. One student placed their work within the context of the organization's overall goals when they wrote, "I hope my activities bring more awareness and funding to the organization and provides them with marketing materials they can use to promote their mission". Several student respondents appeared to have successfully aligned their work with their community partner's needs and interests. Their experience applying their skills and knowledge to a professional organization's work can represent the kind of experience that could be highlighted during a job interview and impactful for their thinking on future employment.

However there remained a substantial portion of student respondents who expressed positivity that their work addressed meaningful and important issues but still remained unclear whether their work would be used by the organization or how their project aligned with the organization's larger mission. It appears that a substantial portion of student respondents lacked professional context for their CBL work. It may be challenging for these students to effectively draw upon their CBL activities in professional settings and make connections between the community-based learning component of their academic course and their post-graduation work when they are unsure how the skills they exercised and the final product they produced contributes to the professional organization's mission. This lack of clarity can stem from superficial, brief or one-sided communication within the community partnership. A community partnership that is based upon reciprocal relationships can encourage community members to share with campus partners how a CBL project may fit within its organizational goals and larger community issues. Consistent and open communication can also allow students to shape their CBL experiences so they can exercise or develop the skills and knowledge they would like to within the parameters of the partner's needs. The development of open and authentic relationships between students and community members may additionally be the most effective way for students to gain lasting professional contacts through the experience. Critical reflection and effective integration of CBL

activities with course material can also assist students in placing their experience within a professional context. If students can link their project or work with the larger goals of the organization or situate their work within the context of societal issues and systems, these findings suggest a SL program can be designed so as to have greater impact upon student career development.

Power and Unequal Benefits

Survey results also brought up the impact of power differentials within SL partnerships and its impact upon the degree to which CBL work contributes to clarification of student career goals. Some students mentioned that their interactions with the community partner felt like “stepping on their toes” and that the partnership benefited the students’ course requirements more than the organization’s needs. This was a common thread throughout student’s explanations for why their community-based learning activities did not address the organization’s needs or contribute to clarifying their career goals. One student writes, “It was hard to figure out what their needs even were because of the lack of communication, and then to weave that need into a project that we could submit and get graded on felt sort of exploitative”. The student’s sense that the partnership contained a power imbalance and unequal distribution of benefits connects with Polanyi and Cockburn’s observation that the negotiation of power between academic and community participants presents significant challenges to producing mutually beneficial work (2003, p. 24). Sumka, Porter and Piacitelli suggest that the risk of campus partners entering into community partnerships that feel exploitative can be minimized by consciously developing reciprocal relationships that gives space for both academic and community input to design projects (2015, p. 57). Students’ perceptions that their activities with their community partners disproportionately fulfill their academic course requirements and ignore possible shared interests and mutually beneficial projects can undermine the partnership’s ability to expose students to community needs. Without exposure to the priorities and interests of the community partner, students may not have the opportunity to apply their skills and expand their perspectives in ways that lead to career development.

Career Path Clarification

The vast majority of student respondents reported that their CBL work helped them understand better the professional challenges of working in the non-for-profit sector. A great majority of respondents also reported that their academic major could be applied post-graduation by working with an organization similar to their community partner. Together these results indicate that the majority of student respondents gained through their CBL activities greater understanding of the not-for-profit employment sector and first-hand experience working in a field they could apply their academic major post-graduation. Many respondents, even those who reported that the CBL

experience had not clarified their career goals, wrote about their greater awareness of the challenges within the not-for-profit sector and their increased exposure to the approaches these organizations use to address community needs. One student reported that the experience “made me realize that I wouldn't work well in a severely underfunded organization even if its mission was noble”. Other students wrote that their experience “solidified my desire to work directly with people and see the impact of my work” and “reiterated my desire to work with non-profit organizations, doing public service work”. Another student wrote that “I would appreciate working with an organization that has a similar model of attacking an issue”. From these responses, students’ career ambitions did not appear to shift drastically from their CBL experience, but instead their exposure to working with their community partner clarified personal values, affirmed existing beliefs about nonprofit work, and exposed them to different modes of working. This supports Artale and Blieszner and Eyler and Gyles’ previous scholarship on career goal development in SL.

Impactful Interaction

Increased career path clarification and expanded understanding of professional opportunities seen among survey respondents is most likely facilitated by meaningful and intentional student and community member interactions. Learning about the challenges and rewards of working within the not-for-profit sector appears to have been shaped by students’ email correspondence with organization staff, conversations with community-members and observations of the community partner’s work. One student reported that their thinking on potential careers in the not-for-profit sector was shaped by seeing “how much the workers truly enjoyed their jobs”. Another student who felt that they did not want to work at a nonprofit organization reported that, “It was great to look into a very large non-profit organization and the difference people are truly making on mostly a one on one ratio”. While this student’s CBL experience may not alter their disinclination to working in a not-for-profit organization, the student gained positive exposure to the employment field and greater awareness of their career preferences by interacting meaningfully with community members. Another student reflects upon the importance of open and collaborative relationships in making their final project mutually beneficial: “I was accepted into the organization and was helped substantially by being connected swiftly to members...I did something that I think is beneficial to all involved and I really enjoyed the process”. This kind of respectful and intentional communication between students and community partners is possible over the course of a semester-long course as long as partners make a commitment of time and dedication to mutual learning. The result is most likely a more impactful experience for students that has a greater ability to shape their career development. SL projects can facilitate this kind of learning by providing time for impactful interactions that can lead to genuine and lasting

professional connections, exposure to a depth of challenges professionals face in grappling with social justice issues and student projects with clear relevance to academic training and real world concerns.

The Role of Student Leadership

Student survey responses suggest that the degree to which students' exercised leadership in SL can influence the development of professional skills. Through student-led coordination with the community partners, it appears students surveyed at X University gained a variety of professional skills that were also identified by Lichtenstein et al. By working in groups, many students developed collaboration and delegation skills. The significant challenges many respondents reported in communicating with community members suggest the development of negotiation and problem-solving skills as well as self-advocacy. The development of these skills stems from the degree of responsibility and control students had upon all aspects of their CBL experiences, from communicating with community members to self-organizing and designing projects.

Student Interests

My findings also support Artale and Blieszner's suggestion that SL is most beneficial to career goal development when the subject matter of the CBL work aligns with students' intellectual interests. I found that one of the major reasons students reported that the CBL experience did not clarify their career goals was because the organization's work was not interesting to them or compatible with their existing career goals. As the majority of the respondents are undergraduate seniors, it is unsurprising that many would have well-defined intellectual interests and career paths in mind. It may be expected that those with an existing inclination toward or against community based work in the not-for-profit sector may not report drastic shifts in their career ambitions after CBL experiences. However similar CBL courses with younger undergraduate students may result in greater career goal shifts.

Conclusion

This study attempts to go beyond identification and measurement of career goal development among student SL participants by exploring how reciprocal relationships and CBL work of mutual benefit to campus and community partners facilitates the clarification and reinforcement of career goals and interests. The study among two classes of X University undergraduate students who participated in a CBL component of their courses produced preliminary evidence that reciprocal relationships between campus and community partners represents a major mechanism through which student career goals are influenced in the CBL experience. Other components of the CBL experience such as opportunities for student-led work and the alignment

of the community partner with the student's existing interests also play an important role in career development. This study's identification of elements of SL that enable career development allows for more informed design of SL programs and specific modifications to existing programs to enhance student benefit. This work also raises questions about the varying purposes of SL. Not all SL programs will lead to clarified professional goals. This study helps describe how SL programs at X University and in other university settings can use collaborative community partnerships to enhance overall learning outcomes and career development benefits.

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