PROFESSIONAL VALUES AND MARKETABLE SKILLS DEVELOPED THROUGH SERVICE-LEARNING: AN ANALYSIS OF BUSINESS STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Since at least the late-1990s, business professors and professionals have been promoting the incorporation of service-learning into the business curriculum (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008). Service-learning describes projects and curricula that aim to provide students an opportunity to work with a community partner, such as a business or organization, on a project that involves the application of course concepts to address an issue for the partner. Researchers argue that service-learning helps business students apply course concepts while gaining practical experience (Clark & Stewart, 2012), strengthen their business ethics (Flosi et al., 2019), and develop a broader understanding of how business disciplines work together in "real world" scenarios (McCord et al., 2015). Students who complete service-learning projects also report an improved understanding of course concepts and the ability to apply more quickly than learning in their jobs (Marques, 2016; McCord et al., 2015). Students also indicate that potential employers often ask about their prior service-learning experiences in job interviews, suggesting employers place a high value on such educational experiences (Littlefield, 2006). Moreover, community partners often report positive impressions and useful outcomes from service-learning projects (Vizenor et al., 2017).

While the use of service-learning projects in business courses is well supported, this project investigates how such projects shape students' professional values related to community engagement and develop valuable professional skills. The service-learning project featured in this study required students in a junior-level business communication course to work within and across teams within their section to create a proposal for a research-supported recreational retreat for U.S. military veterans. A fine-grain, multi-round thematic analysis of students' post-project written reflections (n=44) was conducted to identify trends in students' beliefs about the value of community engagement for business professionals, the skills students felt they developed, and how students believed the service-learning project would improve their employability.

The analysis showed that students believe community engagement is important for business professionals. However, the most frequently identified benefits of professionals' community engagement are related to business growth. Regarding skill development, students reported strong growth in their written, interpersonal, and team communication skills. Correspondingly, they planned to use the service-learning project as a strong example of their teamwork and professional communication skills, and students reported that the project provided them more "real" work experience. These findings support earlier research supporting the use of service-learning in business courses while raising some questions. Students' emphasis on the

business benefits of community engagement raises concerns about whether such projects effectively strengthen students' business ethics and professional values. Still, this study reinforces earlier findings that service-learning strengthens highly desired professional skills," including written and interpersonal communication and teamwork skills, and students may benefit from more explicit coaching regarding how to discuss their service-learning experiences as they seek employment. While the sample size of students of small, this study provides business educators in all disciplines a deeper understanding of the value of service-learning projects for faculty, future employers, and students.

INTRODUCTION

Since at least the late-1990s, business professors and professionals have been promoting the incorporation of service-learning into the business curriculum (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008). Service-learning describes projects and curricula that aim to provide students an opportunity to work with a community partner, such as a business or organization, on a project that involves the application of course concepts to address an issue for the partner. Service-learning is also sometimes referred to as *community engagement*, *community service, academic-community engagement,* and other similar terms (Wakefield & Sissom, 2013; Wozniak, Bellah, & Riley, 2016). Service-learning projects are often lauded for their ability to engage students in applying theoretical concepts, as well as their "realistic" nature (Zlotkowski, 1996; Littlefield, 2006; Cyphert, 2006; Govekar & Rishi, 2007; Godfrey et al., 2005; Wakefield & Sissom, 2013; Blewitt et al., 2018; Flosi et al., 2019).

Through effective service-learning partnerships and projects, students can learn about and then apply business education concepts. Successfully completing these projects requires students to comprehend, apply, and synthesize what they are learning in their courses. To deliver the useful products that service-learning projects require, students also must evaluate their process and product in relation to their community partner and the partner's needs. As a result, service-learning projects meet the highest levels of learning identified in Bloom's Taxonomy (Wakefield & Sissom, 2013). These objectives are achievable through successful service-learning projects because such projects engage students in each element of Kolb's Learning Cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Wozniak et al., 2016). In addition, when clearly articulated, service-learning projects can help students internalize desired attitudes and values regarding business culture as well as community and service (Steiner & Watson, 2006). Essentially, service-learning engages students in the most effective learning practices and helps them fully comprehend and make use of the business curricula content.

Service-learning projects also provide benefits to the community partner. Surveys, focus groups, and interviews with community partners in multiple studies show that they generally have positive perceptions of working with students on service-learning projects and are often able to use all or part of the students' delivered products (Akpabio, 2012; Flosi et al., 2019; Rinaldo et al., 2015; Vizenor et al., 2017). Further, in Vizenor et al.'s (2017) study, partners reported they also used students' deliverables for strategic planning and improving daily

practices. Thus, while community partners sometimes report concerns with semester-based timelines, the development of authentic reciprocal relationships, and other aspects (e.g., Petri, 2015), community partners tend to report positive tangible and intangible outcomes from service-learning projects.

The overall pedagogical value of service-learning is well-supported in a wide collection of academic disciplines, including the business disciplines. This study analyzes post-project written reflections to investigate specifically the influence of a service-learning project on participating students' attitudes toward the importance of community engagement for business professionals and students' perceptions about how the project improves their skills and competitiveness when seeking employment. The analysis results add to existing research on students' perceptions of service-learning projects and provide faculty useful insights that can help them evaluate the appropriateness of service-learning projects for their courses and consider how to frame and present the value of such projects to students.

The following sections offer, first, a review of the scholarship on the benefits of service-learning in the business curriculum and then describe the service-learning project assigned to the participating students. Descriptions of the data collection and analysis methods are included, followed by a discussion of the results and implications for future research.

THE VALUE OF SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

As noted previously, service-learning projects have been shown to provide value and useful deliverables to the community partner (Akpabio, 2021; Rinaldo et al., 2015; Vizenor et al., 2017). Further, these projects support the inclusion of impactful pedagogical practices, including incorporating work that meets the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and adheres to Kolb's Learning Cycle (e.g., Wakefield & Sissom, 2013; Wozniak et al., 2016). While providing quality education is a goal of schools and colleges of business, service-learning is also encouraged as a strategy for addressing two key widespread critiques of business education.

One of these critiques is that business education focuses on teaching functional knowledge and skills and promotes the prioritization of financial "bottom lines" over moral and ethical decision-making (Godfrey et al., 2005; Ocampo-Gómez & Ortega-Guerrero, 2013; Blewitt et al., 2018). This critique was partially in response to several high-profile lapses in judgment by business leaders, such as the Enron scandal (Godfrey et al., 2005), around the turn of the 21st century. The resulting concern about business professionals' ethics persists to this day. During what Michael Maslansky (2010) terms the Post-Trust Era, the period following the 2008 economic recession, the American public's trust in many institutions, including business, has been consistently low. Respondents to the 2020 Edelman Trust Survey evaluate businesses as being competent but unethical (Edelman, 2020).

To address this concern and respond to public expectations, schools and colleges of business began to emphasize ethics in individual courses and/or require courses focused entirely on business ethics. Due to its reliance on developing ethical relationships with the community partners, service-learning offers an opportunity to improve students' understanding of acceptable business ethics and social responsibility in courses across the business disciplines (Flosi et al.,

2019). Many students who participate in service-learning projects report that they plan to be more committed to community engagement in the future (Boss, 1994; Bush-Bacelis, 1998; Wittmer, 2004). In addition, some students have reported an increased sense of connection to their local communities (West & Simmons, 2012; Wozniak et al., 2016; Blewitt et al., 2018). Students participating in service-learning projects have also reported an improved understanding of community needs as well as their ability to make a difference, even as an individual (Boss, 1994; Vega & McHugh, 2003; Marques, 2016). Boss (1994) also found that students' scores on moral decision-making improved after completing a service-learning project in a business ethics course, compared to students who only discussed moral issues without completing a service-learning project.

Service-learning is also promoted as a strategy for addressing the second critique that business education curricula often "silo" courses and/or content with little emphasis on cross-disciplinary knowledge and skills (Godfrey et al., 2005; Kenworthy-U'ren, 2008; McCord et al., 2015; Zlotkowski, 1996). The lack of emphasis on cross-disciplinary education may be explained by the organization of schools and courses by academic discipline (McCord et al., 2015) and/or by the frequent emphasis within business curriculum and courses on technical skills within specific disciplines (Godfrey et al., 2005; McCord et al., 2015). Those who critique the narrow focuses within business curricula propose that service-learning encourages students to apply course concepts in practical, authentic, and cross-disciplinary contexts that better reflect the kinds of business problems graduates will be facing in their careers (Godfrey et al., 2005; McCord et al, 2015; Zlotkowski, 1996). Service-learning projects can provide a context for students' work that is not bound by the specific discipline of the course, and therefore the projects require students to use a broader knowledge and skill base to effectively complete the project (Bush-Bacelis, 1998; Tucker et al., 1998; Godfrey et al., 2005; Steiner & Watson, 2006; McCord et al., 2015). In addition, students often complete service-learning projects in teams with members who may have different majors, allowing students to understand how their area of developing expertise interacts with other areas.

Students who have completed service-learning projects report the development of a wide range of business knowledge and skills. Generally, students report an increase in their understanding and application of course concepts and theories (Govekar & Rishi, 2007; Marques, 2016; Flosi et al., 2019). In addition, students in Govekar and Rishi's (2007) study claimed they were more effective in going beyond the textbook to find answers, and some of Clark and Stewart's (2012) students were more effective at adapting course theories to practical situations. In a survey of alumni who participated in a multi-course service-learning project, McCord et al. (2015) found that students who participated in the project felt that they were able to apply their learning more quickly in their jobs. The research also shows that service-learning projects improve students' communication skills (Bush-Bacelis, 1998; Govekar & Rishi, 2007), including their abilities to articulate and address a business need (Littlefield, 2006), their managerial skills (Flosi et al., 2019), and their emotional intelligence (Marques, 2016). Accordingly, results from Vizenor, Souza, and Ertmer's 2017 survey of community partners in service-learning projects support students' perceptions that they are effectively learning and applying business knowledge and skills as almost all the partners claimed the students' projects

would be used, at least in part, by the partner. Moreover, some students report that they were often asked during employment interviews to elaborate on and discuss their service-learning projects, suggesting that businesses do see value in this kind of experience (Littlefield, 2006).

While the research supporting service-learning speaks to many benefits of the approach, some reasonable concerns persist. Developing and sustaining service-learning projects, even within one semester, can be time- and resource-draining. These aspects can be mitigated through institutional support (Steiner & Watson, 2006) and/or by involving students in the development of partnerships (Bush-Bacelis, 1998; Wittmer, 2004; Littlefield, 2006). Additionally, effectively incorporating a service-learning project takes practice. First attempts, and even subsequent attempts, can produce unexpected concerns that even a well-prepared instructor did not foresee, including discrepancies between partner practices and textbook theories (Clark & Stewart, 2012). Addressing these potential concerns and the lessons offered by these concerns with students can help mitigate students' uncertainty. Finally, while some students' life-long commitment to engagement is positively developed through service-learning, some research finds that required service-learning can have the opposite effect, reducing the likelihood that students will engage in community service in the future (Dienhart et al., 2016). A positive, detailed, and well-organized presentation of a service-learning project is essential in addressing student resistance (Bush-Bacelis, 1998). The research on service-learning in business courses shows that there can be significant, positive, and useful results on students' understanding of and ability to use course concepts as well as implied positive development of the students' ethical approach.

Overall, the research on service-learning projects has measured students' attitudes toward service-learning at various points, community partners' responses to service-learning projects, and, in some cases, students' learning on specific objective measures. Like previous research, this study focuses on students' perceptions about community engagement and their preparation for the business world after completing a service-learning project. Specifically, given the argument that service-learning improves business students' ethics and community engagement (e.g. Blewitt et al., 2018; Boss, 1994; Flosi et al., 2019), the investigation herein first questions how service-learning projects might influence students' values and beliefs about business professionals and businesses being engaged with their communities.

In addition, the study adds to existing research about the skills that students strengthen or believe that they strengthen when they complete a service-learning project. In previous studies, students have reported strengthening their understanding of course concepts or general skills areas, such as communication, but most of these responses have been either general comments or indicated through survey questions with closed-answer options (e.g., Clark & Stewart, 2012; Marques, 2016). The analysis in this study highlights more specific skills within broad categories, like communication, that students believe that they strengthened and how students believe that the service-learning experience and new skills will help them be more competitive when applying for a job.

This study analyzes students' written reflections using thematic analysis to offer insight into students' beliefs about community engagement for business professionals and how the project prepared them to be strong contributors in their professional roles. These results can help faculty determine the appropriateness of service-learning projects for their courses and/or help

them emphasize the potential benefits for students completing such projects. Before describing the thematic analysis methods in more detail, the next section provides information about the service-learning project.

SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT OVERVIEW: PROPOSAL FOR RETREAT FOR MILITARY VETERANS

With the intent of providing students an enhanced learning experience and a community partner a valuable service, the author incorporated service-learning into a junior-level business communication course required of all business majors. Students submitted a guided written reflection at the end of the course which captured their perceptions regarding the value of business professionals' community engagement practices and the potential value of the project in the students' professional development. The students' perceptions provide insight into the ways that service-learning projects may influence students' beliefs about professionals' community engagement and about the educational and professional development advantages of service-learning projects.

Students enrolled in two sections of the author's junior-level business communication course partnered with the university's administration for a service-learning project. The administration of this large, Southern university was interested in hosting a retreat for local military veterans at the university's recreational camp facility. The author's business communication course included a research-based report assignment that was a good fit for the partner's expectation of an evidence-based proposal for an effective retreat for military veterans. In addition to being evidence-based, the university administration expected a professionally written and designed proposal that included a responsible budget and that included all materials needed to recruit and prepare participants. These parameters made the project a good opportunity for a business course that is required by all business majors because it would require students to accommodate multiple business considerations and work within and across teams comprised of students with various business majors.

Two business communication course sections participated in the service-learning project. The professor and the students worked with the university's director of emergency management as the primary contact for this partnership. The primary contact is a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, so he also provided insight about the potential retreat participants (military veterans).

The professor and the primary representative of the university administration (the director of emergency management) worked with students in previous sections of the course to develop basic framing guidelines for the proposed recreational retreat, including the recommended number of participants, length of the retreat, time of year the retreat would be held, and so on. These framing guidelines were provided to the two sections of the professor's business communications course included in this study. These students worked in teams to develop research-supported recommendations for five different aspects of the retreat. The following list details the five teams and their primary responsibilities:

- Marketing Team – Establish key terms and language used to market the retreat and recruit participants (the name, motto, promotional pamphlets, invitations, and more), as well as the logos for the retreat
- Reception Team – Develop the timeline for recruiting participants and securing resources leading up to the retreat as well as the time allotments for events during the retreat
- Resources Team – Develop a list of all resources that may be used during the retreat and a corresponding budget with recommendations for where and how to secure the resources
- Organized Activities Team – Recommended activities that would support the purpose of the retreat, including any opening and closing ceremonies, evening activities, and alternative "rain out" activities.
- Challenge Course Team – Develop recommendations for each challenge course element available at the university's camp facility and a recommendation for which combination of elements and scenarios would best support the retreat's purpose.

While each team focused on a specific aspect of the retreat planning, these teams also worked together because each team required information from the other teams to develop effective recommendations for their focus. At the end of the semester, all teams within each course section worked together to deliver a unified presentation for the entire retreat proposal. For each section, the students' final presentation was attended by the director of emergency management, local veterans, and other leaders of the business college and university administration. Because there were two course sections involved in this project, two proposals were ultimately delivered to the university administration.

Although the proposed retreat was designed to benefit local veterans, the primary partner for the service-learning project was the university administration who had expressed interest in hosting the retreat. To support the development of the proposal, the director of emergency management attended a class session early in the project to motivate students, answer questions, and offer feedback on the students' initial ideas for the retreat. In addition, some students met with him in small groups later in the semester to further discuss the options their teams were considering for the retreat. Representatives from each team also participated in a site visit at the university's recreational camp facility, where they consulted with the camp's director about options for the retreat and potential accommodations that they planned to include in their proposals depending on the abilities of the retreat participants. Fortunately, each course section also included multiple students who were either veterans or otherwise military-connected and thus provided additional insight into the potential retreat participants.

Based on the students' proposals, the university administration worked to identify a campus organization or local veteran-support organization that would support and assist in funding the proposed retreat. The proposed retreat is currently in limbo after some university personnel turn-over, budget concerns, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the university administration and students worked together in earnest through the proposal project's completion, and the students' final reflections about the project offer insight into their perceptions of business professionals' community engagement and their professional development. The following section describes the participating students and the process used to analyze their reflections.

METHODOLOGY

As noted previously, service-learning projects in business courses can improve students' professional ethics (Boss, 1994; Flosi et al., 2019) and long-term commitment to community engagement (Wittmer, 2004). Following this line of consideration, this study's first research question asked, "What is the value of a business professional engaging with their community, in the students' perception?" This question aims to better understand the value business students might place on business-community relationships and how they might imagine their future roles as business professionals.

While the first research question asks broadly about students' perceptions of professional ethics and values, the other two research questions focus more specifically on the skills and advantages that business students believe that they develop through service-learning projects. Specifically, the following pair of research questions guided this study.

- In students' perception, which business skills are strengthened through service-learning projects?
- In students' perception, how might service-learning projects make the students more competitive when they are seeking employment?

To answer these questions, a thematic analysis was conducted on the students' written reflections that were submitted at the end of the service-learning project. Of the 57 students enrolled in the two participating sections, 44 submitted a final reflection. The study and data collection process were IRB approved.

Student Participants

There were 57 students enrolled in the two sections of the participating junior-level business communication course. Of these students, 32 were female and 25 were male. These students represent 18 academic disciplines. Forty-three of the students held majors within the institution's business college, distributed as shown in Figure 1. The other 14 students held the following majors: Healthcare Administration (6), Communication (2), Construction Management (2), and one each of Criminal Justice, Plant and Soil Science, Psychology, and Public Health.

Figure 1
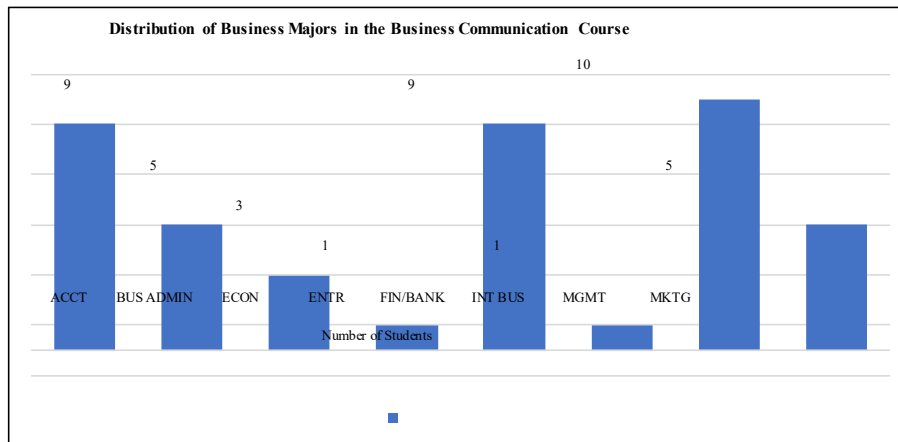
Thirty-eight of the 57 students enrolled in the course were classified as seniors, 18 were in their junior year, and one was a graduate student. The student's average age is approximately 24 years. For the students enrolled in the course, the average grade point average (GPA) is 3.00; when analyzed by major, GPAs ranged from 2.41 (Construction Management) to 3.77 (Criminal Justice).

Thematic Content Analysis Procedures

The students' 44 submitted written reflections were analyzed using grounded thematic analysis, through which trends are identified based on careful, systematic review and analysis of qualitative data (Creswell, 2008; Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Nowell et al., 2017; Tie et al., 2019). Thematic analysis is a useful method when the researcher is seeking to understand the perspective, thoughts, and responses of the participants (Nowell et al., 2017). The research questions in this study aim to develop a better understanding of student participants' perspectives following the completion of a service-learning project, so the use of thematic analysis on students' post-project written reflections offers methodological coherence and sample appropriateness that supports the study's methodological validity and congruence because the research questions, analysis method, and data samples align (Morse et al., 2002).

When using the thematic analysis method reliably, the researcher should use an iterative process to engage with the data while being responsive to emerging information throughout the data collection and analysis process and having theoretical sensitivity to identify relevant information and phrases (Morse et al. 20002; Tie at al., 2019). Following methodological recommendations (Nowell et al., 2017; Tie et al., 2019), the researcher first immersed herself with the reflection data by reading the reflections multiple times without any attempts at coding. By reading the reflection samples without any coding attempts, the researcher was able to

familiarize herself with the data while remaining responsive to the possible trends in the reflections (Morse et al., 2002). Further, the first immersion reading round allowed the researcher to notice course-specific language and phrasing that the students were using in their reflections, such as "receiver-centric" which is a term used in the course to refer to the skill of adapting to the audience's expectations and preferences. The researcher's awareness of the course-specific phrases and the course structure improved the researcher's responsiveness and theoretical sensitivity when identifying relevant content for answering the research questions (Morse et al., 2002; Tie et al., 2019).

Further, through the initial round of immersion in the data, the researcher noticed that only three of the reflection assignment prompts related to the study's research questions. Therefore, the sample set appropriateness was improved by narrowing the focus on the students' responses to the prompts relevant to the study (Tie et al., 2019; Morse et al., 2002; Nowell et al., 2017). The narrowed prompts are provided in the following list; Appendix A provides the full reflection assignment sheet and prompts.

- Why do you believe it is important (or not important) for business professionals to be engaged citizens? Offer at least two (2) concrete, supported reasons.
- Name three (3) concepts covered in this course that you feel you improved through this project? Offer concrete details of how you improved in each area. "Concepts" include communication topics and skills covered in class and in the textbook, such as organization, design, routine message composition, and so on.
- Describe at least one way that you believe your work on this project has made you more marketable as a prospective employee.

From the students' responses to these prompts, the researcher identified units of meaning, referred to herein as comment units (Creswell, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017; Tie et al., 2019; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). A comment unit was defined as a phrase that provided a direct response to the reflection prompt and any additional related explanation provided by the student. Thus, the length of comment units ranged from a phrase to a few sentences. For example, in response to a prompt about why it is important or not important for a business professional to be engaged in their community, a student may have provided a list of reasons within one sentence, such as, "It is important for business professionals to be engaged in their community because they can get more ideas from more people, meet new people and customers, and feel good about themselves." In this sample, each item in the list would be coded as a separate comment unit because each item provides a different direct response to the prompt. In contrast, some students would write responses like, "Being involved in community engagement can give a business professional a better understanding of what their community is going through and where their perspective is. With this knowledge, they can drive their business in the direction that pleases the community." These two sentences present and then explain the direct response that being engaged helps businesses understand the community, and therefore, both sentences were coded as one comment unit. The researcher's sensitivity and responsiveness to varying lengths of comment units helped ensure that all data relevant to the research questions were selected for analysis (Nowell et al., 2017; Tie et al., 2019).

The comment units were then decontextualized by excerpting them into a Microsoft Excel file with separate sheets for each of the three reflection prompts so that themes within the comment units could be identified without interference from irrelevant surrounding phrasing (Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Nowell et al., 2017; Tie et al., 2019). The researcher reviewed the comment units and labeled each comment with a theme that reflected the primary idea communicated in the comment. Not surprisingly, many students incorporated language from the course when discussing the skills that they developed through the project. For example, "receiver-centric" is the term used in the course to refer to the idea of considering and accommodating the audience, or receiver, of one's message. The researcher's familiarity with the course vocabulary improved the researcher's theoretical sensitivity and responsiveness which enabled more reliable development of initial code labels (Morse et al., 2002; Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Tie et al., 2019).

Although the initial code labeling avoided collapsing or condensing the number of codes (Tie et al., 2019), the identified codes were sorted into sets based on which reflection prompt the comment unit was responding to. Following the order of the previously bulleted reflection prompts, the theme sets were labeled "Importance of Engagement," "Developed Skills," and "Employability Value." With the initial code categories labeled and organized into prompt-based theme sets, the researcher then reviewed the code categories and their descriptions to identify those high levels of similarity and collapse categories where relevant (Nowell et al., 2017). In most cases, themes were combined when the described concepts within the themes were related to a certain course concept as well. Namely, in the "Importance of Engagement" and "Employability Value" theme sets, there were multiple themes that related to professionalism. Within the course, some of the core concepts related to professionalism include credibility, character, care, trust, and ethics. In some reflections, when offering comments related to their professionalism aspects, students specifically connected these concepts and supported the connection with references to their descriptions in the course textbook, Peter Cardon's (2017) *Business Communication: Developing Leaders for a Networked World.* Therefore, the researcher combined these themes into one category related to professionalism. In the Developed Skills theme set, some initial themes were combined into categories based on the type of communication or broader skill set to which they belonged. For example, the Written Communication theme category includes a variety of skills needed to write effective professional messages. Overall, the researcher aimed for interpretive validity by retaining distinct theme categories unless the themes were closely connected in the students' descriptions and/or the course content (Hayashi et al., 2019; Nowell et al., 2017; Starks and Trinidad, 2007; Tie et al., 2019).

Resulting Theme Categories

The thematic analysis revealed the breadth of the students' perspectives and learning through the academic-community engagement project. The initial identification of comment units identified 82 units about why business professionals should (or should not) be engaged citizens. There were 111 comment units about the skills students felt that they strengthened

through the service-learning project and 67 comment units about how the project would make them a more marketable candidate when applying to future positions. Through the code labeling and theme category development, 10 distinct theme categories were identified from the students' responses to the Importance of Community Engagement and Developed Skills prompts, and 11 distinct categories were identified from the students' responses to the Employability Value prompt.

Tables 1-3 provide the final theme categories, with brief category descriptions, that were identified through thematic analysis of students' responses to each reflection prompt. Categories labeled with asterisks (*) combine multiple themes from the initial thematic analysis. To support methodological transparency, Appendix B shows the first-round themes that were merged into the final theme.

Table 1	
"IMPORTANCE OF ENGAGEMENT" THEME CATEGORIES	
Theme Categories	*Description*
Awareness Development	Improves professionals' understanding of others' perspectives, backgrounds, etc.
Business Idea Development	Improves professionals' and businesses' ability to develop and market their products and services
Community Improvement	Improves the community in some way, such as building unity, "giving back," creating safer places, and more.
Customer Growth	Improves businesses' and professionals' reputation in a manner that fosters a strong and growing customer base
Employee Performance	Improves employee performance across various measures, e.g. engagement, morale, productivity, skill development, etc.
Example Setting	Provides an opportunity for professionals and businesses to be a role model
Information Sharing	Provides an opportunity for information sharing about projects and opportunities
Networking*	Expands and strengthens professionals' and businesses' networks of potential clients, employees, and employers. Expands options for future professional opportunities, e.g. contracts, sales, partnerships, etc. *Combined category includes Networking and Employability themes.*
Personal Accomplishment	Provides professionals with some sense of personal, intangible reward (pride, accomplishment, etc.).
Professional Credibility*	Strengthens professionals' and businesses' reputation and community members' perceptions of professionals and businesses. *Combined category includes Demonstration of Care, Moral Obligation, and Trust Building themes.*

Table 2 "DEVELOPED SKILLS" THEME CATEGORIES	
Theme Categories	*Description*
General Communication	General improvement in one's communication skills, both written and oral
Interpersonal Communication*	Approaches, processes, and skills related to communicating with others, particularly team members and other "co-workers" (members of other teams), e. g. relationship management, active listening, patience, time accommodation, delivery and reception of feedback, group problem solving, team communication, etc. *Combined category includes Interpersonal Communication and Listening themes.*
Leadership	Establish, maintain, and implement a structure and plan; provide an example for others' work and behavior
Message Planning	Assess goals, receivers' needs, necessary content, and format options as part of message development
Persuasion	Ability to convince others through written and oral communication
Productivity Skills*	Skills related to completing tasks and creating products. *Combined category includes Personal Organization and Time Management themes.*
Receiver-centric Approach	Consideration and accommodation of the receivers' needs and expectations when communicating (written and oral)
Research	Evaluate and select sources to address a research objective
Teamwork Skills	Approaches, processes, and skills related to completing tasks as a team (e. g. coordination, task distribution, deadline setting, etc., excluding communication)
Written Communication*	Various skills related to writing effective professional communication. *Combined category includes Editing, Format & Design, Organization, Routine Messages, and Writing Features themes.*

Table 3 **"EMPLOYABILITY VALUE" THEME CATEGORIES**	
Theme Categories	*Description*
Community Service	Addition of community service to resume improves employability and competitiveness on the job market
Diversity Awareness	Improved awareness of a specific population
Interpersonal Communication	Experience working and communicating with a variety of people
Leadership	Experience in a leadership role
Problem Solving	Experience in developing ideas and potential solutions to address a challenge
Professional Communication	Improved communication skills, generally and in written and oral delivery modes
Professionalism*	Experience with presenting a professional demeanor and interacting professionally. *Combined category includes Character, Credibility, Networking Skills, and Professionalism themes.*
Research	Stronger skills in finding relevant, credible sources
Teamwork	Experience working with team members and other teams to complete tasks (including a variety of teamwork skills)
Work Ethic	Improved experience working consistently and persistently work on tasks and projects
Work Experience	General acquisition of "hands on" experience

RESULTS

After determining the theme categories, the researcher assessed the quantity and proportion of each category's comments within the responses to each prompt.

Table 4 shows the quantity and proportion of comments in the theme categories regarding students' perceptions about the importance of business professionals engaging with the community. Students' responses to the connected reflection prompt showcase the reasons that business professionals should be engaged in their communities. Although the reflection prompt explicitly included the option for students to explain why such engagement is *not* important, all the responding students agreed that professionals should be engaged in their communities.

| Table 4 | | |
| IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONALS' ENGAGEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY (N=82) | | |
Theme Category	*Comment Quantity*	*Comment Proportion*
Networking	17	20.7%
Community Improvement	11	13.4%
Business Idea Development	11	13.4%
Professional Credibility	10	12.2%
Awareness Development	9	11.0%
Employee Performance	7	8.5%
Personal Accomplishment	6	7.3%
Customer Growth	5	6.1%
Example Setting	5	6.1%
Information Sharing	1	1.2%

Some service-learning advocates note that community engagement projects in business courses can assist in mitigating the critique that businesses and business professionals care only about the financial "bottom line" because these projects encourage stronger ethics and consideration for people (Godfrey et al., 2005; Ocampo-Gómez & Ortega-Guerrero, 2013; McCord et al., 2015). Thus, a second analysis was conducted to identify the primary beneficiary that was signaled in each comment unit responding to the Importance of Community Engagement prompt. Each comment unit was coded to indicate whether the beneficiary was the individual professional, the business, or the community. In one comment, regarding Information Sharing, the comment did not clearly identify a beneficiary, and therefore, this comment was excluded from the analysis. Comments were coded rather than categories because the comments in a single category may have identified different beneficiaries. For example, the Networking category includes comments the emphasize the benefit to the individual professional while other comments emphasize the benefit to the professional's employer (business).

This analysis showed that students' reasons for engaging with the community typically focused on the benefit to the business (See Figure 2).

Figure 2
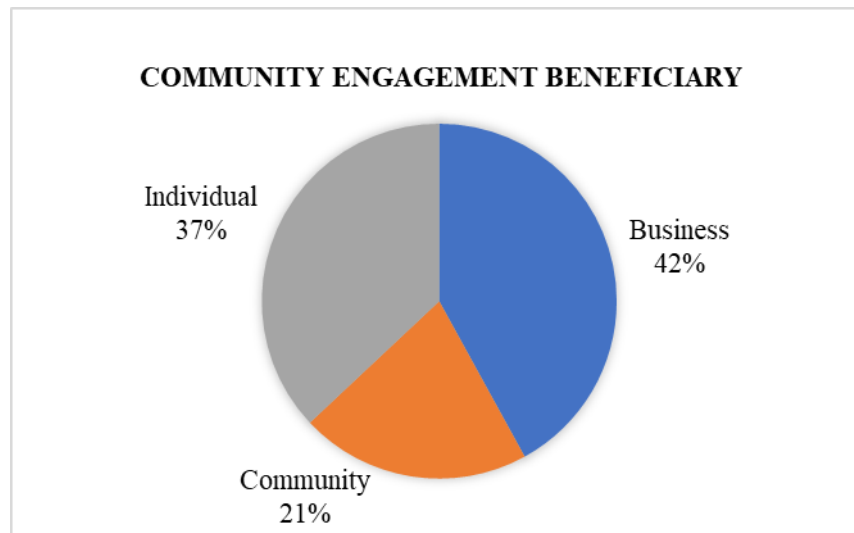**Proportion of Community Engagement Beneficiary Indentified in Comments (n=81)**

Table 5 shows the quantity and proportion of comments identified in students' reflections about the skills that they strengthened. Overwhelmingly, students' comments identified skills related to written communication, with interpersonal communication and teamwork skills as the second and third commonly identified skill areas.

Table 5
SKILLS DEVELOPED THROUGH THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT (N=111)

Theme Category	Comment Quantity	Comment Proportion
Written Communication	43	38.7%
Interpersonal Communication	21	18.9%
Teamwork Skills	17	15.3%
Message Planning	9	8.1%
Receiver-centric Approach	7	6.3%
Productivity Skills	5	4.5%
Research	3	2.7%
General Communication	2	1.8%
Leadership	2	1.8%
Persuasion	2	1.8%

Finally, Table 6 shows the quantity and proportion of comments in each theme category regarding the students' perceptions of how they might discuss the service-learning project in an employment interview. The connected reflection prompt encouraged students to consider how

their experience with the service-learning project might be discussed to showcase their skills, learning, or other valuable aspects to a potential employer.

Table 6 EMPLOYABILITY VALUE STRENGTHENED THROUGH THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT (N=67)		
Theme Category	*Comment Quantity*	*Comment Proportion*
Teamwork	22	32.8%
Professional Communication	13	19.4%
Work Experience	9	13.4%
Professionalism	4	6.0%
Leadership	4	6.0%
Work Ethic	4	6.0%
Interpersonal Communication	3	4.5%
Research	3	4.5%
Community Service	2	3.0%
Problem Solving	2	3.0%
Diversity Awareness	1	1.5%

The previous tables showcase high-level trends in the students' perceptions and growth through the service-learning project. The following discussion section offers more insight into the nuance and specific skills within the top three theme categories for each reflection response.

DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis identified a range of theme categories within each response set. The breadth of categories suggests that service-learning projects provide value to students in many ways. The following sections discuss the students' most commonly identified theme categories for each analyzed prompt and some considerations based on the frequency of the identified categories.

Students' Perceptions of the Importance of Professionals' Engagement in Their Communities

Some previous studies have shown that students are more committed to future community service after completing service-learning projects (Marques, 2016; Wozniak et al., 2016; Blewitt et al., 2018). Although, Dienhart et al. (2016) found that required service-learning sometimes reduces students' interest in future community service. In the written reflections analyzed in this study, the results offer insight into students' perceptions of *why* such community engagement might be important for business professionals and businesses.

Students were prompted to provide two reasons why being engaged in the community is important (or not). In their 44 written reflections, students unanimously agreed that community

service was valuable and that business professionals should be engaged in their communities. All students provided at least one reason, while some provided two or more reasons.

The students' most frequently mentioned reason for engaging in community service, at 20.7% of the 82 provided reasons, was that such service provides networking opportunities for the professional and their employer. The next two commonly cited reasons each accounted for 13.4% of the provided reasons: first, that the community is improved, and second, that familiarity with the community might improve business idea development. Of these top three theme categories, two categories emphasize the benefit to the business or professional.

This pattern mirrors the results of the beneficiary analysis, in which comment units were coded based on whether the identified reason was a benefit to the community, the individual professional, or the business. This analysis showed that 79% of the comment units indicated that business professionals should be engaged in their community to improve the success of their individual or organizational business interests.

The first research question in this study asks, "What is the value of a business professional engaging with their community, in the students' perception?" The students' reflections in this study suggest that a professional's community service is primarily of value to the professional and/or their employer. Thus, the trends in these responses raise questions about how effectively service-learning addresses the previously raised concern that business education prioritizes "bottom-line" thinking and functional knowledge and skills (Godfrey et al., 2005; Ocampo-Gómez & Ortega-Guerrero, 2013; McCord et al., 2015).

Students' Perceptions of Their Skill Development through Service-Learning Projects

Previous research on service-learning in business courses shows that students often agree that these projects improve their ability to apply course concepts (Govekar & Rishi, 2007; Marques, 2016). The course objectives for this course focus on strengthening students' ability to assess a communication situation and communicate professionally and effectively in that situation. Also, the service-learning project included oral progress reports, a final team-written report, and a cross-team oral presentation. Given this, it is unsurprising that the top three skill areas that students claimed to have strengthened through the project were written communication (38.7%), interpersonal communication (18.9%), and teamwork skills (15.3%). Within these top theme categories, students identified some specific skills that they were able to improve. These more detailed skills offer insight into the specific communication skills that students may develop through service-learning projects.

Students most often mentioned that they improved their written communication skills, with 43 of 111 comments addressing this skill area. Within this category, three comments claimed to have generally improved their writing skills, without noting a specific skill or approach. There were six specific skill areas identified in the other comments in this category: format and design (14), organization (8), grammar (5), routine messages (5), content curation (4), and editing (4). The frequency of comments about format and design may be the result of the students' unfamiliarity with formal report writing. Many students noted that they had not previously written a formal report, or even a long paper, and that they were unfamiliar with the

formatting conventions. They noted their improved use of headings, bullets, page formatting, and other aspects that would make their messages "easy to understand, organized, and visually attractive." Many of the comments about formatting and design noted that these aspects help the reader easily understand the message, which suggests that students improved their awareness of the purpose of formatting approaches rather than just the functions.

The three sub-categories of Organization, Content Curation, and Routine Messages are all related to the ideas included in the written message. Organization comments typically discussed the order of ideas and the approach of including the main idea at the beginning of the message and paragraphs, while Content Curation typically discussed the ability to select the most relevant information and the appropriate amount of detail. The five Routine Messages comments tended to focus on the students' increased familiarity with sending concise and clear messages to their teammates and the professor, especially via email and messaging apps.

The Grammar and Editing sub-categories showed that students felt as though they improved their ability to compose and critique their writing at the sentence level. Grammar comments tended to focus on specific errors that the students were better able to avoid, such as verb tense errors. The Editing comments noted the students' improved willingness and ability to review and edit their writing. Service-learning projects may improve students' willingness to attend to their writing correctness because they know that someone beyond their professor will view and potentially use their work.

While students most often noted their improvement of written communication skills, the second and third most frequent areas noted for improvement were Interpersonal Communication (18.9%) and Teamwork Skills (15.3%). These two categories are closely related since teamwork requires effective interpersonal communication. Comments were coded as Teamwork Skills if the comment focused on a skill needed to complete the team tasks rather than communicating with team members. The Interpersonal Communication comments focused on skills needed to communicate effectively with the student's team members or members of other teams.

Within the 21 comments in the Interpersonal Communication category, there were 11 different skills noted. Improved listening skills were mentioned the most often, with 5 comments. Students noticed that common active listening approaches, such as eye contact and focusing on the speaker's message rather than planning their response, improved their ability to understand and work effectively with their teammates. General improvement in the students' ability to communicate with their team members was the second most commonly mentioned skill in this category, with four comments. The other 12 comments mentioned the following interpersonal communication skills or approaches: using effective vocal tone, accommodating personalities, showing care, compromising, being persuasive, building relationships, accepting critical feedback, being transparent, and being patient.

Only four sub-categories emerged from the thematic analysis of the 17 Teamwork Skills comments: coordination (7), collaboration (5), work distribution (2), and meeting behavior (1). Students who wrote about their improved coordination skills focused on their ability to coordinate the timely completion and compiling of a product that required work from multiple team members. Collaboration skills focused on the students' improved ability to work with and trust others. Comments about coordination and collaboration sometimes also included notes

about how the student typically preferred completing group projects on their own but that the nature of this service-learning project made it impossible for them to complete it independently. As a result, these students felt that they better understood why teamwork was important.

Again, since the course objectives focused on business communication, students' improvements in written communication, interpersonal communication, and teamwork skills reinforce prior findings regarding students' improvement in their understanding of and ability with course concepts and theories (Govekar & Rishi, 2007; Marques, 2016). It is likely, however, that gains in these skill areas could be expected from most service-learning projects since these projects often involve written materials that are delivered to the community partner and require professional and interpersonal communication with the partner and often with project teammates.

Students' Perceptions of the Service-Learning Project's Contribution to their Employment Value

In some prior research, former students who had completed service-learning projects report that they were often asked about such projects in subsequent employment interviews (Littlefield, 2006; McCord et al., 2015). These findings provide implicit evidence that employers are likely to value applicants' service-learning experiences. In this study, though, the third research question considers students' perceptions about how the project might help them be more competitive in future efforts to gain employment.

Overall, students indicated that the project was valuable because it provided them additional experience. Students most frequently mentioned that the project would be valuable as an example of their ability to work with a team, with 33% of the 67 comment units in this category. This teamwork experience was important, the students explained, because it provided a real example of their ability to do things like work with people with different personalities, distribute and coordinate work, and complete tasks collaboratively. Four students specifically mentioned the value of having to coordinate their work with multiple teams. Students seemed keenly aware that they would need a strong example of their teamwork abilities, and their reflections suggested that the length and complexity of this service-learning project made it a prime example of their skills.

Students also planned to use the project as an example of their experience with various professional communication skills (19.4%), including written and interpersonal communication. While two of the Professional Communication comments referenced general improved communication skills, the other 11 comments indicated valuable experience with written or oral communication skills, specifically. The three oral communication comments mentioned the experience of delivering regular oral progress reports and the final oral presentation. The relatively low number of oral communication comments is likely because teams usually relied on only one or two members to deliver their oral updates and presentations, rather than all team members taking turns. Most of the comments regarding professional communication described this project as an example of the students' ability to compose concise and correct messages, particularly in the report format. Students' specific notes about their experience with report

writing echo the prevalence of comments about improved formatting and design skills in other sections of their reflections. The length and depth of a formal report often require more investment from students than other, shorter assignments, and students likely complete fewer of these kinds of assignments in their courses. The required investment level and the relative novelty of the report assignment may be one reason why these students felt that their related skills and experiences would be a differentiating factor for them in an employment search.

The third most common reason that the project may help students as they seek employment was that the project added to their overall workplace experience, with such comments accounting for 13.4% of the comment units. The other 34.4% of the comments was distributed across eight other theme categories: professionalism, leadership, work ethic, interpersonal communication skills, research skills, community service, problem-solving ability, and diversity awareness. Each of these categories included four or fewer comments in the category. Nevertheless, as a group, students seemed to agree that the service-learning project provided them valuable experience that could be referenced in their future employment searches. The variety in identified experience types could optimistically be interpreted as a signal that students were able to craft and interpret their participation in the project in a way that best suit their professional goals. Alternatively, the variety in the identified benefits may signal a lack of clarity in the students' perception of how the project may be presented as a valuable professionalizing experience to a future potential employer. Although the reflection data does not provide enough information for a clear interpretation, students would likely benefit from explicit discussion of how a service-learning experience may be used as an example of their effective professional development.

CONCLUSION

Service-learning projects provide a prime opportunity to engage students in meaningful work that strengthens their professional knowledge and skills. The analysis results based on these students' reflections corroborate prior research showing that service-learning projects are valued by students, community partners, and faculty (e.g. Vizenor et al., 2017). In part, service-learning projects strengthen students' understanding of the value of engaging with communities. For these students, the thematic analysis shows that community engagement is seen as an important avenue for adding value for individual professionals, businesses, and communities. Most of the provided reasons for professionals to engage with the community, however, seem to focus on the subsequent business-related benefits. A business student's focus on the business benefits of community service is likely expected. However, one goal of service-learning in business courses is often to promote more humanistic civic engagement and ethical decision-making (Boss, 1994). Thus, the students' written responses suggest that service-learning alone will not address concerns about questionable ethics in professional settings. It is important to consider, though, that a focus on business benefits does not exclude more humanistic considerations.

Beyond the influence of service-learning projects on business students' mindset, this analysis shows that these projects strengthen students' professional communication and teamwork skills. Students most frequently identified skills within these categories as the ones

that they improved the most through the project, and students believed that the project would provide a strong example of their skills in these areas to potential employers. Although multiple course objectives targeted the improvement of these skills, the nature of service-learning projects suggests that improvement in communication and teamwork skills could be expected from nearly any service-learning project in any business course. Most service-learning projects culminate in a written or oral message and require communication with the instructor, the community partner, and, often, class teammates. Strengthening these skills is valuable across all disciplines as effective communication and teamwork skills are among the top skills sought by employers (National Association of College and Employers, 2019).

As mentioned previously, developing a service-learning project can pose significant challenges for instructors, and including a teamwork component adds further challenges. However, the students' reflections about this project suggest that students see notable value in service-learning projects and at least certain team projects. As some students explained, this project was different from their prior team experiences because it required them to rely on their team members and members of other teams, and that the experience helped them understand why teamwork was valuable compared to independent work.

Even though these students expressed generally positive feedback about the service-learning project, there were some hints that the project was a significant challenge for them. In their discussion of the skills that they developed, the students' comments about their improved interpersonal communication and teamwork skills often noted how they overcame issues, such as miscommunication, and improved their ability to accommodate different personalities and remain patient. While students wrote positively about their improved skills, the referenced skills imply struggles within their teams. Similarly, regarding the development of their written content, students referenced struggles with finding relevant, credible sources and with composing correctly written and formatted messages. Finally, students' discussions of how the project might make them a more competitive applicant sometimes made reference to their ability to, again, work with a variety of people and to manage multiple tasks and projects, which suggests challenges with the workload and intensity of this particular project.

Students' reflections presented these skills in a positive, future-looking perspective, but the comments also signaled concerns that they may have regarding such projects, similar to concerns revealed regarding the level of time and investment expressed in McCarthy and Tucker's (1999) survey of students. Future research on students' attitudes toward service-learning may investigate in more detail the sources of students' resistance to service-learning projects.

Students' perceptions of service-learning projects and their learning provide instructors insight into the kinds of projects that can motivate and engage students in a course. This study shows how one ambitious service-learning project influenced students' perceptions of community engagement for business professionals and of what the students learned and can use in future professional settings. Although, this study does have some limitations. The sample set is relatively small with only 44 reflections, but the included reflections do provide depth to the consideration of what a relatively small set of students gained from one project. Further, as a single-author project, the researcher relied on methodological recommendations such as initial

data immersion and an analysis process that included comment unit isolation and multiple, time-spaced rounds of coding to strengthen the consistency and validity of the resulting themes (Morse et al., 2002; Nowell et al., 2017; Tie et al., 2019). Still, including multiple reviewers and/or analysis debriefing sessions with others would be valuable in future projects (Nowell et al., 2017; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Future research into this topic may consider students' perceptions of various service-learning projects and/or may address the small sample size concern by collecting a larger data set.

Ultimately, the thematic analysis trends suggest that students perceive service-learning projects as effective opportunities to strengthen their communication skills, including their written professional communication and their ability to communicate effectively in writing and orally with each other and with community partners and professionals. This growth may be due in part to the higher stakes nature of communicating with and for someone who is not "just the professor." The research has established that service-learning projects are beneficial. The findings included herein offer some additional depth into the perspectives, skills, and perceived value that students believe they gain through such projects and that will help them as they begin their professional careers.

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APPENDIX A. WRITTEN REFLECTION PROMPT

ACE PROJECT REFLECTION

For your written reflection, review and respond to all of the following prompts. Each section asks that you first think about the topic/relationship presented and then offer a response that addresses *at least* the bulleted prompts.

Format your response as a memo. You are encouraged to use headings and other document formatting in your response. Use Times New Roman 12 pt font.

Submit your reflection as a PDF or Microsoft Word document to Blackboard by the beginning of the final exam period.

Community Impact

While sometimes under-considered in business, attending to community needs and supporting "the community" at various levels can lead to tangible and intangible gains in the workplace. Events in and out of class have highlighted some important connections between being an engaged citizen and being a business professional. Considering this, address at least the following:

- In what ways did this project influence your perceptions or beliefs about the value of community engagement and service? Offer concrete details.
- In what ways, or to what extent, did this project change your understanding of military personnel, their experiences, and their concerns? Offer concrete details.
- Why do you believe it is important (or not important) for business professionals to be engaged citizens? Offer at least two (2) concrete, supported reasons.

Link between Theory and Practice

For this response, consider how this project helped you develop your business communication skills. Then, address at least the following:

- In what ways did knowing that your work will be used outside of the course affect your writing process and your final report? Offer specific details.

- Name three (3) concepts covered in this course that you feel you improved on through this project? Offer concrete details of how you improved in each area. "Concepts" include communication topics and skills covered in class and in the textbook, such as organization, design, routine message composition, and so on.
- In what "concept" areas do you need to improve? What can you do in the future to improve in those areas? Discuss at least two (2).
- Describe at least one way that you believe your work on this project has made you more marketable as a prospective employee.

APPENDIX B. ROUND 1 THEMES

After extracting the comment units into Excel, each unit was labeled with a theme that reflected the main idea presented in the comment. Tables 7-9 show the initial themes that were combined for the final theme categories presented in the main text.

Table 7 COMBINED THEME CATEGORIES REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS BEING ENGAGED IN THEIR COMMUNITIES	
Combined Theme Category	*Initial Themes & Descriptions*
Networking	*Employability*: Improves a professional's competitiveness when they are seeking employment
	Networking: Expands and strengthens professionals' and businesses' network of potential clients, employees, and employers. Expands options for future professional opportunities, e.g. contracts, sales, partnerships, etc.
Professional Credibility	*Demonstration of Care*: Provides a way for businesses and professionals to show their care for the community
	Moral Obligation: People, including professionals, are morally obligated to be engaged in their community.
	Trust Building: Improves trust between businesses and individuals

Table 8
COMBINED THEME CATEGORIES REGARDING THE SKILLS STUDENTS DEVELOPED THROUGH THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

Combined Theme Category	*Initial Themes & Descriptions*
Written Communication	*Editing:* Reviewing and editing of written communication
	Format & Design: Format and design readable documents (headings, lists, sections, etc.)
	Organization: Develop clearly organized written messages
	Routine Messages: Development and delivery of routine messages, often via email or text channels
	Writing Features: Various skills related writing effective professional communication, such as correctness, clarity, and conciseness
Interpersonal Communication	*Interpersonal Communication:* Approaches, processes, and skills related to communicating with others, particularly team members and other "co-workers" (members of other teams), e. g. relationship management, active listening, patience, time accommodation, delivery and reception of feedback, group problem solving, team communication, etc.
	Listening: Attend to others' oral communication with the intent to understand and with an open mind
Productivity Skills	*Personal Organization:* Skills related to organizing personal work and resources
	Time Management: Skills related to completing work in a timely manner

Table 9
COMBINED THEME CATEGORIES REGARDING THE PROJECT'S INFLUENCE ON STUDENTS' FUTURE EMPLOYABILITY

Combined Theme Category	*Initial Themes & Descriptions*
Professionalism	*Character*: Experience working with a diverse group of people
	Credibility: Improved their ability to demonstrate their competence and consideration of others
	Networking Skills: Experience with the demeanor and skills when making connections at events and within a community
	Professionalism: Experience presenting oneself appropriately in a professional setting (e.g., attire, demeanor)