

WORKPLACE SKILL-DEVELOPMENT PERCEPTIONS OF PREVIOUS BUSINESS SCHOOL SERVICE- LEARNING STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

As colleges and universities attempt to increase their societal contributions through community engagement efforts, service learning becomes a prime vehicle for enhancing outcomes in business schools. There is significant evidence that service learning positively supports the community and its non-profit organizations but the issue for business school administrators, faculty, and undergraduate students is that the value of service-learning experiences in the workplace following graduation is not well understood. That is, most business school service-learning research takes place before the student graduates. In this study, we utilize an interview protocol to explore how graduates from a private, eastern U.S. business school benefit from undergraduate service-learning experiences as they become workplace contributors. The findings document multiple connections between students' undergraduate service-learning experiences and their subsequent workplace success.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (Seifer & Connors, 2007). Much has been written to validate the pedagogical value of service learning including educational impact (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Grotarian-Ryan, Ryan & Jackson, 2016; Perry & Katula, 2001) and the student perspective (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Caspersz & Oлару, 2017; Fullerton, Reitenauer & Kerrigan, 2015; Grotarian-Ryan et al, 2016; Newman & Hernandez, 2011). In addition, a number of business schools across the country employ service learning to enhance educational outcomes for undergraduates (US News and World Report, 2018). Currently, 359 campuses have received the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, “an elective designation that indicates institutional commitment to community engagement by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching” (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2020).

As colleges and universities pursue increasing their societal contributions through public engagement efforts, service learning becomes a prime vehicle for enhancing outcomes:

“There is no doubt that the teaching tool commonly referred to as service learning—the practice of engaging students in real-world reciprocally based active and reflective experiences through programs and projects with service-oriented organizations in their local communities—has grown in prominence and application, nationally and internationally...” (Kenworthy, 2010, p.3)

There is significant evidence that service learning positively supports the community and its non-profit organizations (Astin & Sax, 1998; Greenwood, 2015; Lamb, Swinth, Vinton & Lee, 1998; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Furthermore, students are interested in these types of experiences. According to The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2015 survey, 74.6% of college freshmen rate helping others as a very important or essential personal objective (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Ramirez-Suchard & Hurtado, 2014).

Business schools strive to prepare students to enter the workforce with the requisite skills and competencies that allow them to respond to a variety of organizational challenges, both internal and external in nature, playing a key role in educating the next generation of business and community leaders. In addition to achieving internal organizational goals, business organizations increasingly acknowledge and accept their role in the community, and may be engaged in serving the community in numerous ways. Govekar & Rishi suggest that “service learning has the potential to transform business undergraduate education” with its connection to real-world application and related career preparation (2007, p. 9). Offering service-learning experiences can create “increased legitimacy” for universities and increase student awareness of community needs (Boyle, 2004) and Andrews (2007) suggests that integration of service learning can “help universities and colleges achieve their objectives” by “creating stronger ties between school and community” as well as providing an opportunity for students to practice their skills (p. 24).

Previous studies also conclude students gain business skills through service-learning experiences (Caspersz & Oluru, 2017; Fullerton Et al, 2015; Madsen & Trumbull, 2006; McLaughlin, 2010; Salimbene, Buono, Van Steenberg Lafarge & Nurick, 2005).

Problem

A problem for business school administrators, faculty, and undergraduate students is that the value of service-learning experiences in the workplace following graduation is unknown. That is, most business school service-learning research takes place before the student graduates. This research gap can impact the growth, long-term effect, and value of service-learning opportunities in business schools and prevent employers from leveraging unique skills new employees with service-learning experience have. Researchers conclude that service learning better prepares students for their careers (Aldridge, Callahan, Chen, & Wade, 2015; Fullerton et al, 2015; Grotarian-Ryan et al, 2016), again from an undergraduate student perspective. While Newman and Hernandez (2011) surveyed students after they graduated, the survey tool used *suggested* skills students might have developed instead of the students indicating them.

There remains an opportunity in the scholarly service-learning conversation to understand *how* business school graduates benefit from service-learning experiences, from their perspective, as they become workplace contributors and whether service learning as a college student translates to a better-prepared professional. Exploring that opportunity, this research study focuses on the question, “How do business school graduates benefit from undergraduate service-learning experiences as they become workplace contributors?”

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature that follows demonstrates the importance of service learning and identifies an opportunity to understand service-learning workplace value from the perspective of business school graduates.

Service Learning

Experiential learning is based on the premise that, “Knowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experience of the learner” (Kolb, 1984, p. 27). “Service learning [is] a specific type of experiential learning in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). A key construct of service learning is its focus on real problems that address human and community needs through service-learning projects. Service-learning courses support academic rigor, reciprocal learning, and civic learning, providing opportunities for students to engage in problem solving that creates a process for social change (Caspersz and Olaru, 2017), often with deeper learning than field experience (i.e., internships and cooperative education) provides due to its inclusion of competency development and reflection (Govekar & Rishi, 2007).

The initial development of business competencies may begin in high school, the business school, or the workplace. Organization and time management are competencies that are expected to be developed in high school (Page, 2017). Business schools are expected to develop high-level teamwork, communication, and problem-solving competencies (Tucker, 2014). Professional competency development including relationship management, negotiation, and data analysis are skills new employees develop and use as they enter the workplace (Bentley University, 2014; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014).

Student Value

Service-learning experiences provide students with an opportunity to apply concepts learned in class and build work-related skills (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2000). A recent mixed methods study found that business students who participated in service-learning projects that allowed them to apply business acumen developed practical and interpersonal skills (Caspersz & Olaru, 2017). In addition, the Caspersz and Olaru (2017) study found that students experience personal growth, learned practical workplace skills, and enhanced leadership skills. Enhanced communication skills (Fullerton et al, 2015; Madsen & Trumbull, 2006); strengthened organizational skills (Madsen & Trumbull, 2006); and, improved problem-solving skills (Madsen & Trumbull, 2006; Miller, 1994) were also noted in service-learning students based on research prior to graduation. Eyler and Giles (1999) reported that students enhanced critical thinking competency through service-learning experiences. Business students believe service-learning experiences enhanced their perception of how well the undergraduate college prepared them for work (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999) and provided real-life insights that will help them in their professional lives (Phelps & Dostilio, 2008). What is critical to remember is that the previous findings are based on research conducted with students, prior to undergraduate commencement, and are not based on workplace perspectives regarding the value of service learning. That is, university business school faculty who employ service learning believe that they are better preparing students to enter and be successful in workforce, but that is unknown because the value

students, while in the workplace, attribute to undergraduate service-learning experiences is not clearly understood.

The value of service learning post-graduation, between three and 24 years after completing undergraduate studies, has been demonstrated to a limited extent. In 2019, Mitchell and Rost-Banik found that "...service-learning experiences informed alumni's perceptions of their career pathways" (p. 21). In terms of specific skills, a survey of 60 service-learning alumni said their communication (78.7%), team facilitation (91.8%), entrepreneurship (77.7%), mentoring (88.5%), and leadership skills (83.6%) were enhanced some or a lot by participating in service-learning experiences (Newman & Hernandez, 2011). The survey however, asked participants to reflect on what they had learned through service learning but not specifically if the skills had supported or enhanced career success. Service-learning students often developed project-specific skills like microeconomics, organizational ethics, and micro-lending (Grotarian-Ryan et al, 2016). While these studies provide post-graduate insight regarding service-learning educational contributions, the findings presented are not rooted in the workplace by former business school service-learning students. Determining the workplace value service learning has, from the perspective of former business school service-learning students now employed, is discovered via the qualitative research study that follows.

METHOD

Research design was based on an interpretive qualitative study focused on gathering information about a single concept (Merriam & Associates, 2002) which was used to explore the workplace value of service learning for business school students when they became full-time employees. Specifically, this qualitative study focused on skills developed through service learning that were deemed valuable by students now in the workforce. Telephone interviews determined how business school graduates benefitted from service-learning experiences as they became workplace contributors.

Sample and Context

The participants in this study earned their undergraduate business degrees from a mid-sized Catholic university (University) in the Northeast comprised of approximately 6000 undergraduate and 3000 graduate students. The University maintains an institutional focus on community engagement and holds the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Community Engagement Classification. Service learning is a teaching method used throughout the University to develop meaningful community projects that support course learning objectives. The role of business school faculty included project scope development with the client and project oversight within their respective classes. The selection of service-learning projects for this study was based on providing a breadth of typical business experiences to enhance study validity and mitigate unwanted bias. Table 1 lists a description of each study project and community partner.

Table 1 SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS
Students developed a marketing plan and served food for a Community Health Services Catering Service which “provides low cost, high quality meals to the community” [Catering Service].
Students analyzed data collected by an organization that provides a motivational faith-based program for inmates designed to facilitate re-entry and reduce recidivism, and interpreted findings related to impacts services. [Inmate Organization]
Students formulated research questions, collected and analyzed data, and interpreted findings related to implementation of service-learning initiatives. [Service-Learning Initiatives].
Students developed and executed social media marketing initiatives for a theater company, a source of ballet experiences for regional audiences. [Theater Company]
Students conducted research to develop marketing-related recommendations for a public market housing a variety of local retailers in one central location. [Public Market]
Students conducted research to develop a marketing plan for a zoo organization focused on conservation of endangered and threatened species. [Zoo]
Students analyzed data collected by an organization that provides independent living and life skills training programs for at-risk teens and young adults, and interpreted findings related to impacts of services. [Young Adult Organization]
Students conducted research to develop a marketing video designed to create awareness and interest for a community development corporation. [Community Development Corporation]
Students completed a marketing planning project for a fast-casual restaurant chain. [Restaurant Chain]

A sample size of 20 was deemed appropriate to achieve study goals (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg & McKibbin, 2015; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006; Mason, 2010). Invitations were sent to fifty previous students who were business majors and participated in a single service-learning project during their junior or senior year of study. Utilizing a qualitative research convenience sample approach (Merriam, 2009), the first 20 individuals who responded to the invitation participated in the study (see Table 2).

Gender	Grad	Role	Project	Project Client
Male	2015	Account Manager	2014	Catering Service
Female	2015	Global Education Consultant	2014	Catering Service
Male	2015	Paid Search Analyst	2014	Catering Service
Male	2015	Salesperson	2014	Catering Service
Male	2015	Account Manager	2015	Public Market
Female	2015	Law Student	2015	Public Market
Female	2013	External Affairs Analyst	2014	Theater Company
Male	2015	Business Account Executive	2015	Public Market
Female	2015	Assistant Resident Director	2013	Service-Learning Initiatives
Male	2013	Category Manager	2011	Young Adult Organization
Female	2016	Associate Business Advisor	2014	Inmate Organization
Male	2016	Cybersecurity Sales Specialist	2014	Inmate Organization
Male	2015	Former Marketing Manager	2013	Inmate Organization
Female	2015	Internal Auditor	2013	Service-Learning Initiatives
Male	2013	Marketing & Account Manager	2011	Young Adult Organization
Male	2013	Associate Attorney	2015	Zoo/Restaurant Chain
Male	2016	Real Estate Associate	2014	Inmate Organization
Female	2013	Associate Inventory Planner	2011	Young Adult Organization
Male	2013	Senior Associate	2011	Young Adult Organization
Female	2013	Marketing Associate	2011	Community Development Corporation

Data Collection and Protocol

Semi-structured phone interviews which averaged one-half hour took place to gather data and answer the research questions (Merriam & Associates, 2002). An interview protocol was developed and used during the research process. The interview protocol was influenced by existing literature and the research goals of this study. Questions focused on the participant's perceptions regarding the role their service-learning experiences played in preparing them with workplace skills and included: What did the experience entail? What was the deliverable/outcome? Who was involved in the experience? What was your role? What challenges were overcome? What were key learnings from the experience? What did you learn that you applied at work? What did the service-learning experience provide that has impacted

your success either positively or negatively? During the interviews, the authors used additional probes to uncover more information from participants. All interviews were recorded after receiving participant consent and were subsequently transcribed.

Data Analysis

All data from the interviews were analyzed, using NVivo software, following transcript receipt for each interview. Utilizing thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), transcripts were scanned and data were analyzed continually throughout the interview process to identify themes or patterns that included ideas, concepts, behaviors, interactions, and phrases (Creswell, 2012). A code was then assigned to each piece of data to label each for easier organization and retrieval. Wholly similar statements, thoughts, or ideas were assigned the same code. Code and data analysis were used to understand the importance of responses and the relationships between codes and data. The final code groups were categorized, combined when appropriate, and used as evidential input to create the study's research themes. As the themes, patterns, connections and relationships were identified, meaning and significance was determined to generate study findings.

Verification

To support the trustworthiness, validity, and reliability of this research project, verification, "the process of checking, confirming, making sure, and being certain" (Mores, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002, p. 17) was conducted. Mores et al. (2002) propose that five strategies be used to verify qualitative research (see Table 3).

Verification Strategy	Research Project Alignment
<i>Methodological coherence</i> ensures alignment between the research question and the method throughout the research project (Mores et al, 2002).	The research method employed, which aligned well with the research question, was not altered during the project.
<i>Appropriate sample</i> is indicative of participants having knowledge about the research topic (Mores et al, 2002).	The sample selected for this project had recent experience with service learning as well as job search and workplace experience.
<i>Concurrent collection and analysis of data</i> becomes, "the essence of attaining reliability and validity" (Mores et al, 2002, p.18).	Data analysis began immediately following the first interview and continued throughout the data collection process.
<i>Thinking theoretically</i> requires gradual progress while constantly checking and rechecking resulting in a solid foundation (Mores et al, 2002).	Concurrent data collection and analysis while purposefully thinking through thematic possibilities by considering micro and macro perspectives provided the essence of theoretical thinking for this project.
<i>Theory development</i> is to move deliberately between the data and the theory and concepts that arise (Mores et al, 2002).	The authors moved between the data and thematic outcomes collaboratively through a series of focused discussions.

In addition, member checking (Creswell, 2012) and peer debriefing (Merriam & Associates, 2002) were employed. Member checking was accomplished by forwarding themes to participants to gather feedback. There were no negative responses to the themes presented or requests for changes. Comments including, “I think you got it exactly right!”, “The findings described in the email make sense and align closely with my personal experiences with service learning”, and “I would agree with the findings” were received. Peer debriefing took place with multiple faculty, who use service learning as a pedagogy, to gather feedback on the research process and appropriateness of the findings. Feedback from peer reviewers resulted in sharpening the problem statement, narrowing the study to the student perspective only, and expanding the data analysis description.

KEY FINDINGS

The research findings identify a series of business competencies students develop and refine through service-learning experiences as well as how students use these business competencies and service-learning experiences to enhance workplace success. Conclusively, service-learning engagement as a college student translates to a better-prepared professional. In their service-learning experiences, students refined or developed business competencies. During projects, students utilized organizational skills, communicated with clients, and collaborated with others to solve problems. They used critical thinking skills to complete projects and manage college and project accountabilities.

Organizational skills

The students often began projects by refining their organizational skills to clarify expectations and reduce ambiguity. After students had a strong sense of what they were going to do, they organized the work to support client deliverables:

“...organizing your thoughts, because I know even at work, people will say, Can you pull together this report and tell me - come up with a conclusion? And you have to take a step back and organize the data, organize your thoughts, to start before you can start doing anything else. ... We had to organize everything first before we could start analyzing it.”

Once the work was underway, students also used their organizational skills to help clients:

“We were able to help that company kind of organize their things, get them on track and help them be more productive ... and do their job better.”

Organizing work to achieve successful project outcomes also required significant time management expertise primarily as a result of the limited project duration of one semester, busy student schedules, and dynamic project requirements:

“Also just trying to work within our limited class time. ... We actually began to find that the scheduled class time ... wasn't really the most convenient for what we needed to be doing to meet with people, to go up into the neighborhood to talk to neighbors. So, I guess scheduling was a big challenge here.”

As students settled into well-organized project work using a timeline that supported conclusion or end of the semester hand-off, competencies they were learning about in business school were required.

Teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills

Two to five students worked together and employed business skills including teamwork, communication, and problem-solving to move projects forward. Collaboration, mutual support, and consistently working well together were oft-mentioned teamwork requirements. Working well together on projects meant leveraging individual skills and diverse opinions as well as sharing responsibilities to enhance team work and collaboration: "I think we all worked very well together as a group ... you do get a better end goal and end product because each person contributes specific parts, and when you combine it together."

Students also consistently refined their communication skills as they completed their project work:

"...because that was probably my first real world experience where I was communicating with an actual client ... so the application [was] just a preview into what is going to happen in the real world. ... having communication definitely was a huge attribute to our success."

Delivering client presentations was another form of client communication students practiced as in this example,

"Being able to present to the Restaurant Chain team, that was a good learning experience as far as marketing is concerned because when you're in marketing, you do have to go and tell people, "This is something that you're not necessarily doing great. This is where you could improve." Being able to do that before we left college has been really beneficial for me in the two years since I've been out of school."

Refining problem-solving skills was also needed to successfully complete projects. Some of the issues that required enhanced problem-solving capability were dynamic client expectations, scheduling difficulties, limited financial support, and limited resource availability:

"...guess the idea of being able to try to work around issues that you might have with a set of data that you have to look at, if you're trying to figure out a solution to a general problem that you have, and then trying to figure out how to set up parameters to try to find a solution to something."

Similarly,

"... there isn't just one way to do it like here is your business model and here is what everybody should follow basically but it doesn't mean everybody should do that ... there's a million ways to do it and do it differently and better and there's ways to do it worse that's always a game you play trying to figure out what's the best approach."

As the students refined competencies introduced to them in high school and business school, they began to develop professional competencies required in the workplace including relationship management, negotiation, and data analysis.

Relationship management, negotiation, and data analysis skills

Students were accountable for ensuring successful project outcomes regardless of what challenges arose, which meant building and maintaining positive relationships with clients like this example:

“This client actually was a bit combative and not very happy with anything that the class or students were doing and made it well known to us in the middle of class when he came in for our presentation.”

Likewise:

“...it was difficult for us trying to get answers from them or get appointments because [we] never really knew who to speak with or were always being bounced around from one person to another.”

These relationship management activities often required negotiation skills, which students used with all stakeholders to create viable project scope and valuable project outcomes:

“... as to what they really wanted us to work on. ... twenty different ideas come at you. ... we understand the need but based on what we think we [can] feasibly accomplish in this amount of time and within this amount of budget ... we have to [do] this idea, not that idea.”

As projects progressed, students leveraged relationship management skills and negotiated again with stakeholders as project changes were requested:

“it's okay to explain to them ... that it's okay to not be able to do everything. It's okay to be able to say, "No, we can't do that."”

While students were working to produce mutually beneficial outcomes, project-specific competencies like data analysis were often required:

“The challenge itself of just going through the data, kind of not understanding what you're looking at until you put it together succinctly was definitely the biggest challenge.”

The students conveyed examples of how they used their newly acquired data analysis competency in their profession,

“How do I apply the knowledge that I learned in that service learning and use that to get them more leads through my marketing campaigns, through my cold-callings, through actually going and visiting them in person? I used the data-driven approach that was developed ... I was able to put that to good use and eventually help drive my lead generation in that most recent job that I had.”

Data analysis is one example of a professional competency students developed through their service-learning projects. Depending on the focus of the service-learning project, other skills like strategic planning, website development, or employee engagement could be developed and refined.

As the service-learning projects unfolded, students used both competencies they began learning in high school and those they acquired in business school. The professional competencies and project-specific skills they developed before they entered the workplace were

significant to this research. Each of these competencies helped students accelerate workplace contributions.

Career success

All participants spoke of the positive impact the service-learning experience had on enhancing their career success. By having challenging experiences, working hard, and producing client-ready deliverables, students experienced a quasi-workplace environment and met client requirements as they would be expected to do in professional roles. Gaining this experience as an undergraduate allowed them to more quickly meet workplace expectations upon graduation:

“So, that's client service, so, it's kind of already being prepared to, you know, deal with potential conflicts or the constraints of various [projects]. Learning brainstorming for ideas, how to kind of work through that in a group. And, I mean, those are all things that tie really closely to the work I do now.”

The structure of typical classes may give students the incorrect perception that work is accomplished by using a limited number of best practices. Service learning allowed students to understand that this isn't always the case:

“So, I thought that was my biggest take away from it is that you just learn things don't have to be done just one way you can find a million other ways to do a project and execute it better than what it is.”

In some cases, service learning impacted the students' career choices as their experiences exposed them to fields not covered in their coursework:

“It changed the direction of where I was heading just because it was something that I really wanted to explore ... it was new and different to me. I ended heading in the paid search route ...”

One participant observed parallels between what he did with his client and running a small business:

“I'm an agent aspirant in a very big insurance company. All of its local branches are independently run, so essentially each agent is its own business ... So, seeing that kind of ... that side of the business and having that background with the Public Market, it's really given me appreciation for being stingy where you need to be stingy and putting in more effort in marketing and exposure in other places in the most direct way possible.”

Service-learning students were able to derive multiple workplace benefits from their experiences making the transition into the workplace easier and more successful. Service learning is a valuable pedagogical technique for developing workplace readiness.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

According to Santiago Iniguez de Onzono, chair of the AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) Committee on Issues in Management Education, "Business education has changed dramatically in the past decade, and schools are facing increasing pressure to drive positive economic and social impact" (AACSB, 2016). Given this AACSB

position, offering service-learning experiences can drive both the economic impact of business school education and the social impact, reflected in the community outcomes service-learning students deliver as they bolster their workplace readiness. Our discovery of numerous connections between students' service-learning experiences and their subsequent workplace success creates a significant opportunity for business schools to combat the pressures Onzono articulates. This study succeeds in providing more evidence as to the value of service-learning pedagogy in business schools by characterizing the benefits of service-learning experiences for students in the workplace.

This study produced key findings that extend existing university service-learning literature to include workplace impact from the perspective of previous business school service-learning students now in the workplace. Existing literature underscores the value of service-learning experiences in building business skills based on studies with students prior to undergraduate commencement (Caspersz & Olaru, 2017; Grotarian-Ryan et al, 2016; Perry & Katula, 2001). This is important given workplace interest in students who have service-learning type experiences (Bentley University, 2014; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2015). However, existing studies don't expound on why there is workplace interest, noting only that it is valued. In this study, we find that service-learning experiences help students develop and refine business competencies that accelerate and enhance workplace success thereby leveraging service learning to be a better-prepared professional.

Business Skills

The study participants conveyed that their service-learning experiences enhanced skills they use frequently in the workplace including organization skills, time management, teamwork, communication, problem-solving, relationship management, negotiation, and data analysis. It is compelling to see how these findings correspond with the workplace skills business schools are said to develop in students through service learning (see Table 4).

Service-Learning Skill	Author(s)	Research Perspective	This Study
Communication	Fullerton et al, 2015; Madsen & Trumbull, 2006	Pre-Graduation	Supported
Organizational	Madsen & Trumbull, 2006	Pre-Graduation	Supported
Problem solving	Madsen & Trumbull, 2006; Miller, 1994	Pre-Graduation	Supported
Critical thinking	Eyler & Giles, 1999	Pre-Graduation	
Interpersonal	Caspersz & Olaru, 2017	Pre-Graduation	
Leadership	Caspersz & Olaru, 2017	Pre-Graduation	
Communication	Newman & Hernandez, 2011	Post-Graduation	
Entrepreneurship	Newman & Hernandez, 2011	Post-Graduation	
Leadership	Newman & Hernandez, 2011	Post-Graduation	
Mentoring	Newman & Hernandez, 2011	Post-Graduation	
Negotiation	New finding	Post-Graduation	Supported
Project-specific	Grotarian-Ryan et al, 2016	Post-Graduation	Supported
Relationship management	New finding	Post-Graduation	Supported
Team facilitation/work	Newman & Hernandez, 2011	Post-Graduation	Supported
Time management	New finding	Post-Graduation	Supported

From a business school faculty and researcher perspective, it is confirming and satisfying to see that key business skills including communication, organization, problem-solving, teamwork, and project-specific skills are developed or refined through service-learning experiences. It's also important to understand that these skills positively impact the success of new employees in the workforce. More compelling is the lack of alignment between what previous research has shown to be beneficial from a service-learning business skills development perspective and what new employees with service-learning experience indicate has value in the workplace. Specifically, there is no alignment among critical thinking, interpersonal, communication, entrepreneurship, leadership, and mentoring skills thought to be developed from service-learning experiences and those skills new employees in the workplace say accelerate and enhance workplace success. This lack of alignment represents a significant gap between the skills believed to be developed during service learning and those deemed valuable in the workplace by previous service-learning students.

The disconnect between existing literature and this study's findings indicate negotiation, relationship management, and time management are developed or refined during service-learning experiences and that these business skills have definitive value in the workplace. These three business skills do not appear in the existing service-learning literature, yet participants in this study associate acquisition of these workplace-valuable business skills with their business school service-learning experiences. This is important because new employees typically learn and apply these skills in the workplace and employers value them (Bentley University, 2014; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014). When previous service-learning students enter the workforce with these business skills they accelerate and enhance workplace success due to lack or mitigation of related skill-development learning curves.

Of equal importance is the disconnect between what previous literature indicates service learning delivers in the form of skill development and what new employees with service-learning experiences confirm adds workplace value. Service-learning literature from both pre-graduation and post-graduation perspectives reports that service-learning students acquire or enhance critical thinking, interpersonal, communication, entrepreneurship, leadership, and mentoring skills. While it is conceivable that these skills are indeed developed through service-learning experiences and used later in workplace settings, the question remains as to the efficacy and value of these skill developments in business schools. It is quite possible that development of these skills during service-learning experiences is insufficient to impact workplace success. If true, this indicates a pedagogical opportunity to enhance focus and development of these business skills such that they generate more immediate workplace value.

Additional Business Skill Development

Learning about negotiation supports previous literature that confirms negotiation skill can be acquired via an undergraduate service-learning course (Kenworthy, 2010). Study participants indicated the value of being able to apply these professional competencies as they entered the workplace. Participants spoke highly of their ability to use their negotiation skills as new employees. Their experiences align well with the work of Grover and Lynn (2012) who indicate four key attributes of negotiators:

“seeking to understand and appreciate the other party's interests and needs; willingness to honestly volunteer information about their own interests and needs when necessary to expand value; willingness to exert the effort, patience and persistence necessary to achieve a negotiation outcome that maximizes value; and creative problem-solving essential to the formation of high value agreements acceptable to all negotiating parties” (p. 7).

Participants conveyed the ease with which they negotiated as well as how frequently their proven negotiation skills were used.

The ability to apply relationship management skills early in career accelerates the significant value that Liden, Wayne, and Sparrowe (2000) associate with strong workplace relationships. Further, the ability to develop strong relationships enhances organizational commitment, change readiness, and employee satisfaction (Madsen, Miller, & John, 2005). Based on their service-learning experiences, participants indicated the development and

maintenance of strong, mutually-beneficial relationships made them more ready for change and increased satisfaction with their work.

Project-specific skills like data analysis add dimension to service-learning students who bring these unique skills to their employers, allowing them to take on work some other new employees cannot. In alignment with Grotarian-Ryan et al (2016), the ability to apply professional competencies immediately upon entering the workplace provides both employees and employers with significant value. Data analysis surfaced during this study because some of the service-learning projects involved investigating data. It is logical to assume that other project-specific competencies would develop from other project foci and enhance early career success.

Career Success

The service-learning projects that participants completed prepared them to be more successful as new employees in the workplace. This underscores employers' belief that requiring students to complete significant applied learning projects in college improves both the quality of learning and the quality of graduates' career preparation. (Hart Research Associates, 2015). This study's findings align with Phelps and Dostilio (2008) in that service-learning experiences provide real-life insights that help business school graduates in their professional lives. This research extends that work with new understanding of the benefit of service-learning experience to create client-ready deliverables. The client-ready deliverables represent tangible, workplace-quality output for the benefit of the client. As such, the client-ready deliverables are like requirements new employees produce in the workplace.

This study confirms Astin and Sax' (1998) contention that students believe their service-learning experiences have a strong effect on the perception that college has prepared them to excel in the workplace. As service-learning students work through the ambiguity associated with service-learning projects, they are prepared to handle the workplace ambiguity they will encounter. Similarly, they are ready to overcome workplace project constraints just like they did in their service-learning efforts. The non-linear feature of service-learning projects is also found in organizations, and service-learning students leverage their expertise in such situations to ensure workplace success. These specific service-learning examples of preparation for success in the workplace represent valuable additions to the literature.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Implications for faculty point toward supporting student learning related to the professional competencies that are developed by performing service-learning projects. The curriculum that supports service learning should include organization, time management, teamwork, communication, problem-solving, relationship management, and negotiation. Further, faculty should understand that unique professional skills are gained through service learning. Of greater pedagogical impact is the need to reconsider how the development of critical thinking, interpersonal, communication, entrepreneurship, leadership, and mentoring skills is supported during service-learning experiences. There is a need to make tighter connections between the development of these skills and potential workplace applications, likely through focused attention on the application of these skills in service-learning experiences.

Given the workplace value of service-learning experiences, university administrators should increase these opportunities for students. Faculty can support this goal by helping university administrators understand the workplace benefits of service learning by showcasing the results of student projects. This could be accomplished by inviting school leadership to student presentations, hosting poster sessions, and tracking student placement data of service-learning students compared with non-service-learning students.

Workplace practitioners should recognize that new employees coming to their organization with a service-learning experience likely have a greater ability to perform certain tasks. Thus, employers should ensure that new employees with service-learning experience are recognized for their ability to more quickly meet expectations. Given the post-collegiate value of service-learning experience, workplace practitioners may be able to assign some higher-level work to new employees with service-learning experience which can serve to accelerate their career success.

Limitations

In terms of potential study limitations, transferability amongst recent business school undergraduates with service-learning experience should be significant. Transferability from the sample to non-business school undergraduates with service-learning experience should be considerable but is not validated in this study. Since this research took place in the United States, transferability to undergraduates beyond its borders should be considered based on similarity of service-learning experiences and work settings. Service learning provides an opportunity for enhancing outcomes for students while increasing societal contributions that is accessible both by private and public universities. This study occurred through a private university that provides support for service learning and community engagement. While there is university support for service learning and community engagement, these service-learning projects were primarily faculty-driven thus enhancing transferability even among those institutions that do not provide similar levels of support. Potential biases include author interest in service learning as well as participants who responded to interview requests because they had positive service-learning experiences. The aforementioned biases are common in qualitative research due to the impracticality of large sample sizes found in most quantitative studies.

Future Research

This study provides insight into the value of service learning as undergraduates transition from academia to the workplace. The opportunity exists for these findings to be explored quantitatively using this study as a basis for developing surveys and subsequent analysis. The larger participant numbers associated with quantitative research, as well as the potential use of a control group, can promote additional understanding of the workplace impact of positive and negative service-learning experiences. While this research was purposefully limited to a United States business school setting, expanding the setting to additional business schools and international venues has merit.

Additional research may include team and individual-based sampling to understand how team dynamics in service learning influence workplace success. Types and durations of service-learning projects can also be considered. For example, the workplace value of multi-day, semester, and multi-semester service-learning projects may be analyzed. A longitudinal approach could be taken to re-interview participants periodically to determine long-term service-learning value in the workplace.

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