The Service-Learning Experience in a Capstone Marketing Course: An Empirical Investigation

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Abstract

Service-learning is an important pedagogical technique that fosters academic and life skill development. Yet little empirical work has been undertaken to assess the outcomes that accrue to undergraduate marketing students. An empirical investigation of the impact of service-learning on students' intellectual and personal development in Strategic Marketing was undertaken. The same questionnaire was administered to students using a pre- and post-test design. Utilizing a seven-point Likert scale, students were questioned about their intentions and attitudes toward volunteer work and involvement with their community. A paired t-test was employed to analyze the results, and it was found that there was a significant increase in respondent intention to volunteer and become involved with their community. Moreover, significant increases in social responsibility and their confidence level with problem solving and conflict resolution were also found. The findings were a direct result of the experiential learning component integrated into the capstone marketing course.

Keywords: Service-learning, marketing pedagogy, experiential education, civic engagement

1. Introduction

Philanthropic engagement has evolved generationally. Millenials tend to give differently than older generations. For example, they are more inclined to purchase products that are sustainably sourced rather than make direct donations to charities. They embrace a purposeful philanthropic mindset, striving to balance social good through everyday activities in both their personal and professional lives. In fact, a recent survey found that 77 percent of Millenials are more likely to volunteer when their specific skills or expertise can benefit a cause (Horoszowski, 2016). They also gravitate towards companies that are inclusive and willing to "create shared value, make positive social and environmental changes, and increase opportunities for disadvantaged populations" (Poswolsky, 2015).Blending civic engagement with academia has been recognized as an important initiative for the 21st century. This sentiment was expressed by Hinck and Brandell in a seminal article on service-learning (2000). They noted that colleges and universities need to revisit their historic commitment to service. Indeed, developing partnerships between the campus and external organizations is at the heart of renewing community engagement (Kellogg Commission, 1999), and advancing civic responsibility (Gronski & Pigg, 2000). Stockton University (hereafter referred to as "Stockton") has embraced this initiative; in fact, service-learning has been incorporated into the curriculum for over two decades.

Strategic Marketing, the capstone course for business students with a concentration in marketing at Stockton, has been designed to weave a service-learning component into the curriculum since the Fall 2004 semester. Real-world problems and applications are taught in a real-world context; specifically, the course is used as a platform to explore, craft, and implement projects for a multitude of service-learning partners including United Way of Atlantic County, the Boys and Girls Club of Atlantic City, Family Services Association, and the School Peacemaker (an anti-bullying organization). In essence, the class establishes a bridge between Stockton and the non-profit community so students can garner valuable experience in the field while simultaneously gaining an appreciation for civic engagement. Student teams in the capstone course apply their marketing, business, and technology skills to conceptualizing, researching, refining, and ultimately launching projects for the non-profit agencies.

In accordance with Kolb's experiential learning model, Petkus (2000) noted that advanced-level marketing courses "…can make an even greater contribution to the marketing efforts of a non-profit organization. Students at this level have a greater breadth and depth of marketing knowledge and skills… (from other course projects, internships, etc.) to draw on for reflection" (p. 65). The process is mutually beneficial. The teams lend their skill set to the service-learning partners, completing a quality project for their portfolio in the process. And the non-profit organizations are able to reap the benefits of much-needed resources in the areas of human talent and time, yielding important finished work (e.g., video brochures, annual reports, websites, flash presentations, etc.) that may otherwise not have come to fruition. It has been noted that service-learning is particularly relevant to marketing courses given the discipline's interest in social causes. Unfortunately, business faculty have been less inclined to incorporate the experiential method into their coursework than their social sciences and liberal arts counterparts (Klink & Athaide, 2004), although a review of the business literature noted that the field of marketing, among others, has numerous service-learning applications relative to course-earning objectives (Andrews, 2007).Another significant outcome of the capstone course is that students experience firsthand the resource shortage and lack of formal marketing training at most non-profits. This further reinforces the importance of filling such a void through a service-learning component in the course curriculum. And a surprising anecdotal observation has been the degree of empathy and bonding developed by the students for their respective service-learning partners during the semester. Many have opted to volunteer outside the realm of the course, and, in some cases, continue to engage in such work once the semester has ended. The purpose of this paper is to assess the benefits that accrue to students from the service-learning experience in a capstone marketing course, as well as the specific factors that contribute to such an outcome. A void exists in the literature relative to empirical explorations of service-learning in specific marketing courses. This was validated by Petkus (2000) in a review that examined the service-learning literature in marketing, and reiterated by Hagenbuch (2006). To date, three studies have been undertaken (Hagenbuch, 2006; Mottner, 2010; Barr &Busler, 2013).

Initially, a review of the service-learning literature is presented. It focuses on a definition of the service-learning construct, a brief overview of the foundations of service-learning, and empirical investigations that link the service-learning experience with desired outcomes such as satisfaction, enhanced sense of civic responsibility, and academic and life skill development. Then, a discussion ensues about the structure and evolution of the capstone marketing course. Finally, the research design and empirical results are delineated.

2. *Literature Review*

2.1 The Service-Learning Construct

The service-learning construct encompasses a teaching method that integrates community service with academic study. Service or experiential learning projects expand teaching and learning beyond traditional classroom activities into a real-world forum (Berson, 1994; Giles &Eyler, 1998; Kinsley, 1994). Service-learning is defined as a credit bearing educational course where the students participate in some organized service activities which meet a need in the community while reflecting on the service activity which allows the student to enhance the understanding of course material (Domegan & Bringle, 2010).Fertman (1994) proposed that the historical roots of service-learning may be traced to the philosophy of John Dewey. The influential work of Dewey (1967) addressed the challenges associated with providing quality education in a democratic society. In drawing a connection between professional and public lives, he argued that education for a democratic way of life was essential for advancing society. Dewey's (1967) theories focused on experiential and citizenship education relative to community service and volunteerism. Almost three decades later, the Wingspread Report (Aburdene, 1993) noted that a gap continued to exist between societal needs and the offerings of higher education institutions. The Wingspread Report recommended that colleges and universities collectively endorse three basic objectives: taking values seriously, putting student learning first, and creating a nation of learners.

Building on the Wingspread Report, Boyer (1994) reaffirmed the need for the higher education community to serve American society. Boyer encouraged research and discovery of new knowledge in addition to integrating, communicating, and applying knowledge through professional service (Coye, 1997). He called on members of the faculty to adopt a "reflective practitioners" mindset, oscillating between theory and practice to bring the daily problems of real people in real neighborhoods into the university classroom. Service "is not just something students do in their spare time; it connects back to the core curriculum and the search for shared values" (Boyer, 1990, p. 26).

The growth of service-learning on college campuses during the 1990s is indicative of a renewed emphasis on campus-community partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2004). Currently, there seems to be a new expectation for schools to identify the lack of complex problem-solving skills of students and then work to enhance these skills. The goal for education should be to produce globally-minded people with experience in problem solving and leadership roles (Cress *et al*., 2010). Buys & Bursnall (2007) found that in today's rapidly changing society it is critical that colleges and the community become more connected to foster sustainable relationships which will strengthen social capital.

2.2 The Foundations of Service-Learning

The notion of civic responsibility is intertwined with a service-learning perspective. Civic engagement initiatives have awakened renewed interest in promoting institutional citizenship, building new campus-community programs, and promoting a broad sense of civic responsibility in higher education (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). A literature review undertaken by Hervani and Helms (2004) indicated that service-learning has been applied in a wide variety of disciplines and courses including writing and composition, finance, engineering, psychology, science and mathematics, accounting, nursing, Spanish, political science, and liberal arts. Service-learning projects have also been developed for economics (Hervani & Helms, 2004), management (Angelidis *et al*., 2004; Madsen & Turnbull, 2006); marketing (Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Petkus, 2000; Klink &Athaide, 2004; Barr, 2008; Mottner, 2010; Barr & Busler, 2013), personal selling (Hagenbuch, 2006); and, advertising (Lopez & Lee, 2005) courses.Easterling and Rudell (1997) provided the first examination of service-learning in a marketing context. The authors developed an extensive background and justification for integrating service-learning into the marketing curriculum as well as the benefits that accrue to all parties. A specific program is suggested for a marketing internship. Petkus (2000) extended the work of Easterling and Rudell (1997) into other facets of marketing including principles of marketing, marketing/management strategy, marketing research, personal selling/sales management, integrated marketing communications, and consumer behavior. It is noteworthy to mention that Petkus (2000) provided a general framework for the design and implementation of service-learning courses in marketing, and Hagenbuch (2006) and Barr (2008) advanced specific pedagogical models for personal selling and strategic marketing courses, respectively.

More recently, Casile *et al*. (2011) developed a method to examine the impact of service-learning on accounting students to measure the level of satisfaction with course material. The students indicated that they were more satisfied with the course when a service-learning component was added. Ayers *et al*. (2010) noted that when service-learning is incorporated into entrepreneurship or strategy courses, students can make a positive impact on community organizations which improves the student's professional toolbox as well as providing an opportunity to interact in team settings. Similarly, it was found that students who engaged in service-learning in a marketing research course were more inclined to volunteer and become involved in their community (Barr & Busler, 2013).

2.3Empirical Investigations of the Service-Learning Experience

As noted earlier, the number of empirical explorations linking service-learning and marketing have been sparse. To date, three have been undertaken (Hagenbuch, 2006; Mottner, 2010; Barr & Busler, 2013). So a review of the empirical service-learning literature is warranted to determine the impact of the experiential technique on the academic and personal development of students, as well as other desired outcomes. It is noteworthy to mention that Gelmon (2000) stressed the need to establish a comprehensive research program to gain knowledge about service-learning assessment, including a conceptual framework of best practices principles (and necessary refinement), and operationalization of variables.

Service-learning outcomes have focused on two broad areas:

1) Student outcomes related to intellectual skills; and
2) Student personal outcomes (Rama *et al.*, 2000).

The first taxonomy includes an assessment of cognitive competencies including traditional textbook knowledge, as well as critical-thinking and decision-making skills. Students engaged in service-learning projects are more inclined to resolve "real" problems that they consider significant and personally relevant. Moreover, they gain a greater understanding of course material due to the contextual relevance of the service-learning experience. And, ultimately, students are challenged to reevaluate or reaffirm their own perspectives as a result of interfacing with people from diverse backgrounds.

The second classification, student personal outcomes, includes an evaluation of various values-related qualities that may be enhanced due to the service-learning experience such as honesty, ethical conduct, and a desire to foster constructive social change. Heightened self-awareness, appreciation of and tolerance for individuals from diverse backgrounds are potential positive personal outcomes. Likewise, students feel a stronger connection to the broader community, establishing relationships with site supervisors, faculty, and peers (honing teamwork and communication skills). Finally, as students become more aware of social issues and recognize that their own actions can make a difference, it is likely that their leadership skills will improve (Rama *et al.*, 2000).

A comprehensive, longitudinal study of 22,236 students, culled from a national sample of baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities, explored the effects of service-learning and community service on the cognitive and affective development of participants during their undergraduate years. It was found that service participation had significant positive effects on all 11 outcome measures including academic performance, values, self-efficacy, leadership, choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service following college. Moreover, students conveyed a heightened sense of civic responsibility as a result of their service experience (Astin *et al.*, 2000). The findings of two cross-sectional studies mirrored the results of the large-scale exploration; specifically, undergraduate students who participated in service-learning experienced improved academic development and life skill development, a greater sense of civic responsibility (Astin & Sax, 1998), stronger values, and a stronger understanding of social issues (Eyler *et al.*, 1997). Likewise, a qualitative analysis of ten in-depth student interviews supported the premise that service-learning in a management course is effective and beneficial (Madsen & Turnbull, 2006).

Research on the impact of service-learning on students' moral development has been inconsistent. An examination of the relationship among service-learning, moral development, and moral orientation did not reveal significant findings. However, students reported becoming more compassionate and sensitive, gained a greater appreciation of and ability to solve social problems, and were more motivated to make the world a better place (Bernacki& Jaeger, 2008). Shukla *et al.* (2014) looked to find significant differences with service-learning outcomes based on gender, class level, major and prior service-learning experiences. In addition, they focused on finding any differences in attitudes between business and non-business majors as they believed there was a perception that business students are more focused on self-interest rather than concern for social problems. Their multivariate analysis indicated that class level, major and gender does have impacts on the service-learning outcomes and their attitudes toward volunteerism, with non-business majors and females being more interested in volunteering for service-learning. The latest trend in this area is in the field of research examining international service-learning. Pless*et al.* (2014) found that the service-learning experience produced similar results internationally and also helped students to understand cultural differences.

3. The Service-Learning Project

Strategic Marketing is a requirement for Stockton business students earning a bachelor's of science degree with a concentration in marketing. The primary objective of the course is to present students with the tools necessary to make competent decisions in the business world as marketing professionals. Students apply the skill set acquired through a culmination of prior business coursework, work experience, internships, etc. as well as the fundamental theories and techniques learned in the capstone course to a unique task for a service-learning agency. The civic engagement forum piques student interest and the textbook and case analysis components are crystallized through application, making the course more digestible and manageable for students. Consequently, the classroom experience becomes more relevant, interesting, and understandable. In order to earn academic credit, students are obligated to complete a number of forms for the service-learning office at Stockton. Minimally, they invest about 30 hours per semester in their projects, including about six on-site visits at their respective service-learning agency. The service-learning project comprises 50 percent of a student's grade.

Grading criteria includes submission of all status reports, quality of the final product(s), and feedback from the service-learning partner. Service-learning projects undertaken by student teams have been varied and are often dictated by the needs of the respective service-learning partners. Such needs are influenced by national (vs. regional or local) affiliation, size and structure of organization, age of organization, etc. For example, United Way is well-entrenched and offers more resources to students than the School Peacemaker, run by one individual.

Each team elects a project manager, identifies broad goals for the semester (as well as each week), and delivers a written and oral report to the class every other week. The latter is particularly important because the instructor wants the entire class to be informed and wedded to the concept of service-learning. Moreover, there is usually more than one team working with any given organization and the process facilitates reflection throughout the semester (rather than just at the end). An added benefit is the realization that the service-learning tasks undergo various degrees of transformation as the semester progresses, occasionally creating healthy frustration for the students (and mirroring challenges they will inevitably face once they enter the business world).The instructor has generally found that the quality of the projects is directly correlated to the degree of supervision provided by both the instructor and the service-learning contact.

Level of satisfaction is predicated on consistent involvement by the service-learning partner. Ongoing communication among all parties is essential to delivery of a superior product. It is also a means for monitoring whether or not teams are staying on task and managing their time efficiently and effectively.The last week of the semester, the student teams reflect on the service-learning aspect of the course. Overall, they have reported positive experiences associated with such tasks. Students conveyed that the projects were both challenging and rewarding, and many have articulated their intention to continue volunteer work in the community. They take pride in their service-learning accomplishments, and are eager to share their ideas about potential topics for future Strategic Marketing classes. Students have also communicated the value of building their portfolio in such a competitive and economically-challenging job market. Many have used the service-learning project as a platform for securing an interview. The only areas of concern expressed by students about the course have centered on lack of communication and/or consistent direction from the service-learning agency, group dynamics, group diversity, and the ability to manage the workload.

Written comments on the instructor's student evaluations have generally indicated that students liked the course format; valued the time spent on site at the service-learning organization; felt the project was demanding at times but valuable; thought their knowledge was broadened in the subject area through application; and, believed the team project was essential for preparing them for a job in the field. The benefits that accrue to the students include establishing an alliance with a non-profit and, in the process, gaining a greater appreciation for that sector; the development of critical thinking and organizational skills; the opportunity to work collaboratively and creatively; and, the capacity for managing a service-learning project from conceptualization through completion. They also have a finished product for their portfolio. The primary benefits realized by the service-learning partners are the ability to gain ideas and assistance on various projects. In addition to the students' marketing savvy, the agencies place a high premium on their technology skills. The findings and recommendations of the student teams are used by the community organizations for planning purposes, to establish new initiatives, to project a more contemporary image (in terms of outdated brochures, videos, websites), etc.

4. *Research Design and Findings*

As noted earlier, Petkus (2000) recommended that future service-learning research focus on empirical studies tailored to marketing courses. Hagenbuch (2006) established a paradigm for examining the use of service-learning in a personal selling course. The inputs and outcomes of a sales project provided the foundation for the study. Qualitative and quantitative analyses supported the notion that the class project is beneficial to both the students and the non-profit partners. Mottner (2010) found that a service-learning project was perceived by students as being the optimal pedagogical tool (compared to case studies, lectures, etc.) in terms of increasing students' knowledge and understanding in a nonprofit marketing course. More recently, Barr and Busler (2013) found that students who engaged in service-learning in a marketing research course were more inclined to volunteer and become involved in their community. The purpose of this paper is to assess the impact of the service-learning experience on the desired outcomes (including intellectual and personal) for students including their propensity to volunteer, and their sensitivity to diverse populations.

A convenience sample of 52 undergraduate juniors and seniors were queried using a basic pretest-posttest methodology over two consecutive semesters. Several hypotheses were tested as detailed in the following section. The first day of the course, students completed a survey. The treatment occurred throughout each respective semester via the service-learning project. On the last day of the course, students completed the same survey. The survey instrument was developed from a compilation of scales used to study students in service-learning classes (Bringle *et al*., 2004). The reliability and validity of the scales were tested in prior studies. Further, the survey was comprised of multiple-item, interval scales as well as nominal scales to capture demographic information.

The data was analyzed using paired-observation t-tests, given the average sample size of about 30 each semester. Student responses were compared between the first survey administration and the second. The pairing of observations is a more sensitive experimental design than a standard t-test, so it will convey more information (Aczel & Sounderpandian, 2005).

4.1 Empirical Results

A number of hypotheses were tested to determine changes in attitudes and specific behaviors. Students were given a questionnaire prior to undertaking the service-learning experience and then were administered the same questionnaire after the experience. A paired t-test was used to look for significant differences. After eliminating incomplete questionnaires and any student respondents who did not complete both the pre- and the post-test questionnaires, a total of 52 respondents were analyzed. For each question, a seven-point Likert scale was utilized with a "1" representing disagree completely and a "7" representing agree completely.

H1: Students will be more likely to participate in volunteer work after completing the service-learning experience.

The pre-test indicated that the mean was 4.52. The post-test mean was 4.94. This difference was statistically significant ($p < .03$). As a result of participating in the service-learning experience, students planned to do more volunteer work. Since the service-learning work was undertaken on a voluntary basis, the experience must have been generally positive for the students, thereby encouraging them to increase their plans to do more volunteering. Students were also asked about the importance of helping others even if they did not receive compensation. The pre-test mean was 5.37 while the post-test mean was 5.88 ($p < .02$). This confirmed the positive impact that the service-learning experience had on students' plans to volunteer.

H2: The service-learning experience will result in a significant increase in the student's involvement in the community as well as their intentions to help others and make a positive difference.

A series of six questions were asked to determine the student's plans regarding community involvement, community service, helping others, and making a difference. In each case, it was found that the students planned to increase their community service involvement as well as their desire to help others.

Specifically, when asked about their plans to become involved with the community, the pre-test mean was 4.48 while the post-test mean was 4.98. This difference was statistically significant ($p < .04$), and indicated that the service-learning experience had positive effects on the student's plans to become involved in the community. Similar results were found when the students were asked if they planned to become an active member of the community. The pre-test indicated the mean was 4.40 while the post-test mean was 4.90 ($p < .03$).

In addition to becoming more involved with the community, students were asked about their plans to help others who are in difficulty. After the service-learning experience students were significantly more likely to plan to help others. The pre-test mean was 5.03 while the post- test mean was 5.51 ($p < .02$). Students were also asked about their commitment to making a positive difference. Once again, the service-learning experience had significant positive results. The pretest mean was 5.19 while the post-test mean was 5.97 ($p < .05$). However, while they were committed to making a difference, they were not sure that they would actually be able to do so. When asked if they thought they could actually make a difference, there was no significant change after the service-learning experience. The conclusion would be that students were committed to trying to make a difference but were not sure they actually could.

Somewhat surprising were the results regarding formal programs. Students were asked if they planned to become involved in a community action program. Their intentions did not significantly increase after the service-learning experience. A similar result was found when students were asked if they planned to become involved in a program to help clean up the environment. The conclusion seems to be that students want to become involved with the improvement of others and the community, but they do not necessarily want to participate in a formal program.

H3: The service-learning experience will increase the student's perception of society's obligation to help others and solve social problems.

Students were asked about their responsibility to help solve social problems. The pre-test mean was 4.69 while the post-test mean was 5.26. This difference was very significant ($p < .01$). The service-learning experience seems to have had very positive effects on the student's view of social responsibility. Students were also asked if they felt members of the community should freely give their time to improve the community and/or the country.

Again positive results were gained from the service-learning experience. The pre-test mean was 4.85 while the post-test mean was 5.31 (p<.02).However, it was found that the student's view of an individual's commitment based on a success factor did not significantly change after the service-learning experience. When asked if all people, regardless of whether or not they are successful ought to help others, there was no significant difference, although the mean values were relatively high. The pre-test mean was 5.33 while the post-test mean was 5.69 (p>.10).

H4: The service-learning experience will increase the student's confidence level with problem solving and resolution conflict.

Students were asked if they can think logically when solving problems. The pre-test mean was 5.36 while the post-test mean was 6.04. This difference was very significant (p=0). This indicated that students became much more confident with their ability to solve problems after the service-learning experience. In addition, they were asked if they can successfully resolve conflicts with others. Again, their civic engagement experience had significant positive results. The pre-test mean was 5.62 while the post-test mean was 5.94 (p<.03).

Students were then asked three additional questions regarding their confidence in solving problems. When asked if they can think analytically, the pre-test mean was 5.33 while the post- test mean was 5.71 (p<.03). When they were asked if they can find effective ways to solve problems, the pre-test mean was 5.67 while the post-test mean was 6.12 (p<.02). However, no significant difference was found when students were asked about their tendency to solve problems by talking them out. The pre-test mean was 5.53 while the post-test mean was 5.84 (p>.13). The conclusion would be that the students became more confident about their ability to solve problems and find an effective way to do so, but they do not necessarily have to talk out the problems to solve them.

H5: Students will consider themselves to be more ethical after the service-learning experience. Students were specifically asked if they considered themselves to be ethical. It was found that the service-learning experience had a very significant impact on their view. The pre-test mean was 5.57 while the post-test mean was 6.23 (p=0). Apparently, upon completion of the service-learning experience the students viewed themselves as being more ethical.

5. Conclusion

The pedagogical model used to deliver the Strategic Marketing course within a service-learning context has proven mutually beneficial. Students learn about the marketing management process through direct experience, and gain a greater appreciation for civic engagement. They also have the opportunity to collaborate with an outside agency as well as other team members, learn about the challenges associated with undertaking a service-learning task, and generate a quality product for their portfolio. Members of the non-profit community are able to complete projects that, otherwise, may not have come to fruition due to lack of resources. The anecdotal evidence and feedback on student evaluations about the service-learning component in Strategic Marketing has been reinforced empirically in this study. It was found that there was a significant increase in students' intention to volunteer and to become involved with their community. Moreover, significant increases in social responsibility and confidence levels with problem solving and conflict resolution were also found. And students considered themselves to be more ethical following the service-learning experience. Recommendations for future research include empirical analyses of the impact of experiential learning on student engagement as well as the benefits that accrue to alumni in their personal and professional lives. Another area that warrants investigation is the perceived value of the service-learning experience and resultant outcomes from the perspective of the community partners.

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