

The Service-Learning Scholar Model: Maximizing Impact by Improving Communication and Student Voice in Service Learning

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Service learning traditionally follows a paradigm in which the student acts not only as the service provider, but is also tasked with connecting the experience back to course objectives (Furco 2003, 14). Acting as the service providers puts students in direct contact with the community partners, and oftentimes means that a large amount of communication responsibilities falls to the student. Despite the large amount of leadership responsibilities inherent to the student's role in the service-learning relationship, the student is the only member of the service-learning relationship that has no formal leadership position. The instructor is in charge in the classroom, and the community partner is in charge at the service site. Students are informally in charge of conciliating the objectives of both parties; however, they receive no formal leadership role. Most institutions that offer service-learning courses adhere to this traditional model, and therefore most research regarding service learning analyzes this specific model exclusively (Cooper 2002, 29). Thus, the majority of the issues that have been associated with service learning are issues identified by research on the traditional model.

Recently, a different type of model—the service-learning scholar model—has emerged. In this model, a student with experience in service learning acts as a mentor for students currently enrolled in service-learning courses, as well as a liaison to the community partner and course instructor. Many universities have implemented some variation of this model already, with success. Virginia Commonwealth University has been implementing a model very similar to the one discussed in this article for the past ten years, with the program growing “at an exponential rate” (Brown, Pelco, and Hise 2013, 12). Likewise, the College of William and Mary also offers a service-learning program based on the scholar model. Students involved in this program said the service-learning scholars were “extremely helpful” and gave them “a more concrete idea of what would be expected of [them] in the seminar and in the community” (Perkey 2011, 203).

The service-learning scholar model merits further research, as the presence of a formal student leadership role makes this model more resistant to the issues surrounding the lack of student voice in service learning. This article examines the effects of a formalized service-learning scholar model on the issues of student voice, communication, and overall impact on education and community. I was an intern at Western Michigan University's Office of Service-Learning (OSL) at the time of the implementation of a unique service-learning scholar model. In the sections that follow, I will attempt to qualitatively analyze the ways in which the service-learning scholar model improves upon communication and student voice in order to maximize the impact of service learning at Western Michigan University.

Service-Learning Issues

In the opening to the 2011 collection *Problematizing Service-Learning: Critical Reflections for Development and Action*, Andrew Furco observes that research on service learning is just now beginning to critically analyze some of the issues with the pedagogical

practice. Among the issues mentioned by Furco (2011) and others (Ward and Vernon 1999; Perkey 2011; Epstein 2011) are concerns about logistical communication, student voice, and project leadership. These concerns cut across the groups typically associated with the service-learning relationship: the community partner, the student, and the course instructor.

Community partners have identified communication—or a lack thereof—as an issue with many service-learning arrangements. For example, in a study which assessed community perspectives on service learning, a majority of community partners interviewed felt that “communication needed to be increased so that the campus was more aware of the agency’s needs” (Ward and Vernon 1999, 12). Problems with communication left community partners reporting that they were often unsure of their roles and responsibilities and what the expected outcomes of the service-learning projects were. Failure to communicate puts service-learning projects at risk of leaving community partners feeling used, like “laboratories where students are sent to serve without reciprocity and personal investment” (Ward and Vernon 1999, 15).

Students echoed this concern, listing problems communicating with the community partner among their major issues when tackling a service-learning course, along with not fully understanding the concept of service learning (Perkey 2011, 207-12). As is the case with community partners, issues with communication can leave students unsure of their roles and responsibilities. When combined with an unclear concept of what service learning is, students may have difficulty meeting the objectives of their project and, in turn, reflecting on the experience, decreasing the success of the project and its overall impact on both the student and the community. In addition, students reported feeling unattached to the outcome of the projects in which they were involved due to lack of student voice and power (Perkey 2011, 211-12).

The lack of student voice in service-learning projects is a concern shared by course instructors (Epstein 2011). Despite the incredible amount of student participation in service learning, students have very few opportunities to lead service-learning projects. The lack of formal student leadership roles in service-learning partnerships is all the more surprising because acting as the service provider calls for the student to take action and make decisions in consultation with their community and faculty partners (Kenary 2009). Thus, students have something of an informal leadership role during service-learning projects already.

Student leadership roles in service learning allow for the students to take ownership of their service-learning experience. An analysis of successful service-learning projects highlights the unique advantages of “positioning students as the organizers of their programs logistics” (Epstein 2011, 196). Such benefits, as Shira Epstein documents, include increased student investment in service-learning projects and more meaningful student reflections (Epstein 2011). While Epstein acknowledges that issues sometimes arise when students assume leadership roles in service-learning projects, she maintains that service-learning course instructors “can reflect on these hindrances,” and approach these issues “not with a desire to erase them, but with a confidence that in naming them, they may better understand and expand the possibilities of their practice” (2011, 197). Many of the issues with student leadership identified by Epstein, such as confusion about individual responsibilities, are the result of the leadership role being too informal. As such, examining the possibilities of expanding the practice by creating a formal student leadership role may be beneficial.

This article reports on Western Michigan University’s own unique version of the service-learning scholar model, which was piloted in 2015 and which sought to address the issues of logistical communication and student voice that arise over the course of service-learning

partnerships. The following section describes Western Michigan University's implementation of the service-learning scholar model.

Description of the Service-Learning Scholars Corps

Western Michigan University's Office of Service-Learning (OSL) created the Service-Learning Scholars Corps program to maximize the impact of service-learning courses, which unite a wide range of community organizations (including nonprofit organizations and small businesses) with Western Michigan University students, faculty, and staff. With the support of a 2015-2016 Michigan Campus Compact and Michigan Nonprofit Association *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity in Communities* Research and Writing Grant, the OSL hired five undergraduate students to serve in the Service-Learning Scholars Corps. The undergraduate students who comprised the corps, known as the service-learning scholars, were trained in leadership strategy and communication skills. They were also prepared to guide service-learning reflection and conduct service-learning research. The scholars leveraged this training and preparation to scaffold individual service-learning projects and maximize their impact on the community and the students' education.

Typical responsibilities of the scholars included communicating with community partners and students, mentoring students in regards to project timelines and tasks, and promoting opportunities for the students to individually reflect and problem solve. Ideally, having the scholar manage correspondence gives instructors sufficient time to observe the collaborations as they are occurring, allowing them to put a focus on maintaining academic standards. In turn, students are made to feel comfortable expressing their concerns to someone who is relatable and whose purpose is to listen to them and provide the necessary assistance. This designated channel for feedback also gives students, faculty, and community partners the opportunity to enhance the service-learning experience and make it as successful as possible for all parties involved.

The goals of the Service-Learning Scholars Corps were threefold: (1) to train students as leaders in civic, business, and educational settings; (2) to maximize the quality of the direct services offered to community partners; and (3) to maximize the quality of the educational experiences offered to students.

Western Michigan University's OSL aimed to achieve its first goal by training the scholars as leaders in civic, business, and educational settings by mentoring the scholars throughout the academic year. Training consisted of a comprehensive orientation at the beginning of the semester and bi-weekly practicum meetings thereafter for the duration of the year. The skills gained from these trainings were also meant to potentially assist the scholars in succeeding as leaders in civic, business, and educational settings after graduation.

The second goal, maximizing the quality of the direct services offered to community partners, was addressed on the part of the Service-Learning Scholars Corps in three observable ways: (1) conducting one site visit with each community partner at the beginning of each semester; (2) communicating with each community partner at least three times per semester; and (3) engaging community partners in an interview-based reflection at the end of each semester.

Finally, the Service-Learning Scholars Corps attempted to achieve its third goal—to maximize the quality of the educational experiences offered to students—by getting involved with service learning at the university level. This involvement entailed communicating with participating faculty and students about their experiences with service learning. Additionally, the scholars conducted a research project to evaluate the impact of their services. The goal of this research was to assess the impact of the Service-Learning Scholars Corps on the experience of

students, community partners, and course instructors; the results of this research are presented in the following two sections. First, an overview of the research methodology is offered and, second, a discussion of the research results is provided.

Methodology

Western Michigan University's Service-Learning Scholars Corps was implemented in the Fall 2015 semester, and continued into the Spring 2016 semester. During this time, service-learning scholars assisted in projects which paired students with community partners across a variety of disciplines, such as education, healthcare, and job training. In addition to acting as mentors during these projects, the scholars conducted research on the impact of their presence. Students, instructors, and community partners were asked to assess the impact of the scholars on multiple occasions throughout the service-learning experience.

To obtain evidence of these impacts, two methods of assessment were employed. The first method consisted of conducting mid-semester and final interviews, in which project specific questions were asked about the scholars' impact. These questions were aimed at assessing the effect of the scholars' presence on the goals of the Service-Learning Scholars Corps. Thus, the interview questions called for students, community partners, and course instructors to reflect on the overall impact of the scholars on the students' education and the direct services provided to the community.

In addition to these interviews, assessment of satisfaction included the distribution of surveys. These surveys were made up of four to six statements regarding the scholar's impact; each survey participant was asked to use a Likert scale to rate the impact of the scholar (see **Appendix 1** for a copy of the survey form). Evidence supporting the use of Likert scale surveys shows that it is widely regarded by both researchers and subjects as the easiest and most reliable method of gathering and interpreting the opinions of a population (Hasson and Arnetz 2005, 2). In addition, five-point Likert scales, such as the one used in the present study, are typically considered the most valid, as these scales allow for less subjectivity between intervals and require less clarification (Dawes 2008, 62).

The interviews and the surveys complemented each other in that the interviews attempted to account for some of the limitations associated with using a Likert scale. Such limitations stem from attempting to quantify qualitative data. The most notable limitation of Likert scales is that "artificial categories might not be sufficient to describe a complex continuous, subjective phenomenon" (Hasson and Arnetz 2005, 2). Although a respondent may "strongly agree" that the Service-Learning Scholars Corps achieved the maximum amount of impact on the direct services provided to the community, the rating provides no insight into how this impact was achieved. When combined with the responses given in the interviews, the actual cause of the increased impact is made more apparent.

This impact, which was assessed through survey and interview methods, was initially documented by the five service-learning scholars in a series of eight white papers for the OSL. (See the 2016 white papers authored by Bell, Finke, Forner, Loving, and Ruesink). The scholars individually authored the papers, with some scholars authoring multiple papers. Due to the scale of the research, the scholars based their papers only on the results of the surveys and interviews that they personally conducted. The white papers also provide quotations from written correspondence with students, instructors, and community partners, as well as scholars' personal experiences and insights.

I served as an undergraduate student intern with the OSL and was charged with aggregating and analyzing the data reported in the eight white papers, and more comprehensively assessing the impact of the Service-Learning Scholars Corps on students, community partners, instructors, and even the scholars themselves. To aggregate the data collected by the service-learning scholars, I engaged in small-scale data mining—analyzing the data collected by the individual scholars to determine whether a larger effect was achieved. To analyze the data collected by the service-learning scholars, I cross-examined the results of the surveys and interviews with the scholars’ white papers. As such, I occupied a more objective position from which to approach the data and assess the Service-Learning Scholars Corps model piloted by the OSL.

Results

The average score for all responses across the three groups was 4.3 out of 5 (see **Figures 1, 2, and 3**; see also the 2016 white papers authored by Bell, Finke, Forner, Loving, and Ruesink), indicating that on average, students, community partners, and instructors agreed or strongly agreed that the presence of the service-learning scholars had a positive impact on the overall experience. Items such as: “This service-learning partnership achieved the maximum amount of impact on the educational experience provided to the students as possible” and “This service-learning partnership achieved the maximum amount of impact on the direct services provided to the community as possible” also had average scores of *agree* to *strongly agree* from all three groups, showing that the outcomes of the study were consistent with the goals of the Service-Learning Scholars Corps—to maximize the impact of the experience for both students and community partners. When broken down by student, scholar, community partner, and course instructor, the results of the interviews and surveys show how these goals were met from every perspective of the service-learning relationship.

Student Results

The combined results of the interviews and the surveys indicated that the Service-Learning Scholars Corps increased the impact of the experience on the students’ education by improving communication and creating a channel for student feedback. On average, students strongly agreed with the survey item: “This service-learning partnership achieved the maximum amount of impact on my educational experience as possible,” giving it a mean score of 4.56 out of 5 (See **Figure 1**).

In the interviews, students expressed how the scholars improved communication with the community partners. One student commented that the scholars’ “role in getting the initial contact was very important, because I felt like I wasn’t getting through to [the community partner] initially” (Ruesink 2016, 14). Another student had the following to say about the impact of the scholars: “The scholar’s initial communication with me helped to eliminate any qualms I had about the experience. It has truly made this an experience that I have, and will continue to, recommend to my friends” (Ruesink 2016, 14).

One class of service-learning students involved in the study had a particularly difficult time navigating the demands of the community partner in conjunction with the course objectives. The students had concerns about the scope and focus of the project after the initial meeting with the community partner. In order to resolve this issue, the students contacted the service-learning scholar for guidance. The scholar was able to help facilitate solutions by attending partnership meetings, sending meeting re-cap emails, and acting as a mentor while the students attempted to

mediate their conflicting objectives. In other words, the scholar was able to use the formal leadership role to address the concerns of the students, while ensuring the completion of the project. During the service-learners' mid-semester presentation, they introduced the service-learning scholar as being "helpful and supportive during times of confusion" (Ruesink 2016, 15). When interviewed, students involved in the project reported that the scholar recognized the concerns of the students, but also, "helped to see the issues from [the community partner]'s side of things. This is crucial to problem solving" (Ruesink 2016, 16). The evaluations from students showed that the scholar was able to increase student voice in the project by providing a channel for student feedback and concerns and act as a formal representative for students as a whole. In addition, the scholar was successful in modeling the appropriate way to approach a professional situation. Having a mentor involved in what is many students' first professional experience will ideally allow for a greater level of confidence in their actions, and, therefore, increase the likelihood that these experiences will significantly impact the student.

Generally, the results of the interviews indicated that the students "felt very supported" by the scholars (Ruesink 2016, 16). From the interview responses, it can be determined that the scholars' communication and involvement had a positive effect on the service-learning partnership and increased the impact on the participating students' educational experience.

With the addition of the scholars' role in the service-learning relationship, there is also a possibility to benefit a greater number of people. The scholars themselves stand to gain professional skills, especially in the area of communication and self-management, thus fulfilling the second goal of the Service-Learning Scholars Corps: to train students as leaders in civic, business, and educational settings. One scholar noted some examples of the specific behaviors which were impacted by his experience in the Service-Learning Scholars Corps:

Towards the beginning of the semester, I spent far too much time crafting emails. I also would go into meetings and realize after that I had forgotten to mention an important detail. However, now, my emails are second nature and take much less time. In meetings, I have learned to write down the things that I want to accomplish and make sure those topics are covered. (Ruesink 2016, 23)

Through the Service-Learning Scholars Corps program, scholars are also poised to come into contact with their communities and the leaders in it, and potentially develop professional relationships with those leaders. One scholar reported, "I honestly feel closer to the real issue of Kalamazoo after being involved as a scholar. I've lived here my entire life and been unaware of leaders in the community working to change this city for the better" (Ruesink 2016, 23).

Community Partner Results

From the results of the community partner surveys and interviews, it can also be concluded that the Service-Learning Scholars Corps was successful in achieving its goal of maximizing the quality of the direct services offered to community partners by enhancing communication.

During a mid-semester interview, one community partner representative discussed the benefits of having a service-learning scholar involved in the project. "The students are awesome, but it's great knowing exactly who to contact" (Ruesink 2016, 20). Another community partner representative echoed her sentiment, stating that, "We have no complaints about the students, but it's important to have that point of contact" (Ruesink 2016, 21). The results of the interviews indicated that the scholars' presence brought a general sense of reassurance to the community

partners. As one community partner stated: “The scholar provided a name and a face. We felt very comfortable reaching out to him” (Ruesink 2016, 21).

The Likert data obtained from the final interviews with community partners also showed the positive effect the Service-Learning Scholars Corps had on the various service-learning partnerships. On average, the community partners agreed with all items on the survey. Most notably, the statement “The Service-Learning Scholar Corps maximized the impact of this service-learning partnership” received an *agree* or *strongly agree* from 95 percent of community partners (See **Figure 2**).

Course Instructor Results

Results of course instructor feedback appeared to support the student results, illustrating the ways in which the Service-Learning Scholars Corps enhanced the quality of the educational experience offered to students. Based upon the results of the interviews, the course instructors not only appreciated having a scholar to manage correspondence with the community partner, but they also noted the students’ comfortability in communicating with the scholars. One instructor noted that the “scholar program lent credibility to the process” for the “simple fact that a student who had completed this class chose to attend the reflections says a lot about the value of those reflections to that student . . . which the other students recognize” (Ruesink 2016, 19). Having some students in formal leadership roles brought an increased sense of student ownership and investment to the project, therefore maximizing the overall impact on education.

The surveys completed by the instructors revealed that, on average, instructors agreed with all items on the survey. All eleven of the responses were *agree* or *strongly agree* for the statements, “The Service-Learning Scholars Corps improved the quality of the educational experience provided to my students through this service-learning partnership” and “The Service-Learning Scholars Corps improved the communication between me and my community partner(s),” highlighting once again how the Service-Learning Scholars Corps achieved its goals of maximizing the quality of the direct services offered to community partners and the educational experiences offered to students (See **Figure 3**).

Limitations

As previously stated, the service-learning scholar model isn’t nearly as well represented in research as the traditional model of service-learning. For this reason, many problems lie in the external validity of the study and the lack of similar studies to validate results. The study was small in its sample size and duration. With just 40 participants taking part in the survey and interview process, all from the same community, and all in a one-year timeline, the study would need to be replicated across other institutions and populations to ensure that the results are valid and reliable. Replication would reinforce the assumption that these results will generalize if the service-learning scholar model were implemented in other settings.

Conclusion

When the results of the survey and interview responses across groups are considered in their entirety, it is reasonable to conclude that the scholars did in fact have a positive effect on the impact of the service-learning experience for both the community partners and students. The success of similar programs at other institutions, like the Virginia Commonwealth University and

the College of William and Mary, lend some hope that the results of this study are generalizable and reflective of the true benefits of the service-learning scholar model.

The most promising outcome of the study is that the Service-Learning Scholars Corps appeared to have the most prominent effect on the exact aspects that it hoped to, in exactly the ways it had aimed to. The results of the surveys seemed to indicate that all parties agreed that the presence of the scholars maximized the quality of the direct services offered to community partners and the educational experiences offered to students. The results of the interviews expanded upon these findings, by highlighting the way that the increased impact was due to improved communication and increased student role in the projects. The addition of positive feedback from the scholars showcased the fulfillment of the Service-Learning Scholars Corps' third goal: to train students as leaders in civic, business, and educational settings.

If the service-learning scholar model were shown to have similar benefits across many other settings and populations, the model could serve as a solution to some of the issues associated with what Furco calls the "raw challenges" of service-learning and the "inherent, thorny nature of community engagement" (2011, x).

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Figures

	Total	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Average Score
All Survey Responses	36	22	11	3	0	0	4.53
Students							
Item 1	9	6	2	1	0	0	4.56
Item 2	9	8	1	0	0	0	4.89
Item 3	9	2	6	1	0	0	4.11
Item 4	9	6	2	1	0	0	4.56

Figure 1. Results of five-point Likert scale survey assessing the satisfaction of students regarding Western Michigan University’s Service-Learning Scholars Corps. For a sample survey form and complete list of survey items, see **Appendix 1**.

	Total	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Average Score
All Survey Responses	119	63	36	15	5	0	4.32
Community Partners							
Item 1	20	11	7	2	0	0	4.45
Item 2	20	11	5	3	1	0	4.3
Item 3	20	7	8	4	1	0	4.05
Item 4	20	9	6	4	1	0	4.15
Item 5	*19	13	3	2	1	0	4.47
Item 6	20	12	7	0	1	0	4.5

Figure 2. Results of five-point Likert scale survey assessing the satisfaction of community partners regarding Western Michigan University’s Service-Learning Scholars Corps. For a sample survey form and complete list of survey items, see **Appendix 1**. *Note: Portions of some assessments were left blank.

	Total	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Average Score
All Survey Responses	63	20	33	8	2	0	4.13
Instructors							
Item 1	11	1	10	0	0	0	4.09
Item 2	11	8	3	0	0	0	4.73
Item 3	11	2	7	2	0	0	4
Item 4	*10	1	5	3	1	0	3.6
Item 5	*10	1	7	2	0	0	3.9
Item 6	*10	7	1	1	1	0	4.4

Figure 3. Results of five-point Likert scale survey assessing the satisfaction of course instructors regarding Western Michigan University’s Service-Learning Scholars Corps. For a sample survey form and complete list of survey items, see **Appendix 1**. *Note: Portions of some assessments were left blank.

Appendix 1

The following are samples of the Likert items that were included with the exit interviews at the end of both semesters.

Evaluation Items for Community Partners: The following Likert items were asked of community partners during the exit interviews conducted by corps members as well as on the confidential electronic survey distributed at the culmination of each semester. A 4.0 or above on question 4 would indicate that the Service-Learning Scholars Corps program had, from the perspective of the community partner, maximized the impact of the direct services provided to the community through the service-learning partnership.

	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
1. The service-learning scholars corps improved the quality of the direct services provided to the community through this service-learning partnership.					
2. The service-learning scholars corps improved the communication between my organization and my faculty partner.					
3. The service-learning scholars corps offered leadership to this partnership.					
4. This service-learning partnership achieved the maximum amount of impact on the direct services provided to the community as possible.					
5. This service-learning partnership achieved the maximum amount of impact on the educational experience provided to the students as possible.					
6. The service-learning scholars corps maximized the impact of this service-learning partnership.					

Evaluation Items for Faculty Partners: The following Likert items were asked of faculty partners during the exit interviews conducted by corps members as well as on the confidential electronic survey distributed at the culmination of each semester. A 4.0 or above on question 5 would indicate that the Service-Learning Scholars Corps program had, from the perspective of the faculty, maximized the impact of the educational experience offered to students through the service-learning partnership.

	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
1. The service-learning scholars corps improved the quality of the educational experience provided to my students through this service-learning partnership.					
2. The service-learning scholars corps improved the communication between me and my community partner(s).					
3. The service-learning scholars corps offered leadership to this partnership.					
4. This service-learning partnership achieved the maximum amount of impact on the direct services provided to the community as possible.					
5. This service-learning partnership achieved the maximum amount of impact on the educational experience provided to the students as possible.					

6. The service-learning scholars corps maximized the impact of this service-learning partnership.					
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Evaluation Items For Service-Learning Students: The following Likert items were asked of service-learning students on the confidential electronic survey distributed at the culmination of each semester.

A 4.0 or above on question 1 would indicate that the Service-Learning Scholars Corps program had, from the perspective of the students, maximized the impact of the educational experience provided to the students through the service-learning partnership.

	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
1. This service-learning partnership achieved the maximum amount of impact on my educational experience as possible.					
2. The service-learning scholars corps maximized the impact of this service-learning partnership.					
3. The service-learning scholars corps provided strong leadership to this partnership.					
4. This service-learning partnership achieved the maximum amount of impact on the direct services provided to the community as possible.					