Measuring the Effectiveness of Experiential Learning Strategies in an Undergraduate Program Planning Course

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *Program planning and evaluation is an essential course for undergraduate and graduate students in health education/public health programs. The purpose of this study was to three-fold: 1) identify students' attitudes and behaviors towards civic engagement, 2) measure the importance of undergraduate collaboration with community partners, and 3) measure community partner perceptions of the projects and collaborative efforts with the course and the students.* ***Methods:*** *A mixed-methodology approach was utilized in measuring the project aims with a pre-post survey for undergraduate students (n=17) enrolled in a program planning and evaluation course. The survey focused on their work with experiential learning by grant writing with community partners. Interviews were also conducted with community partners to identify their experiences of working with students, motivations for partnering with the course, and course design feedback.* ***Results:*** *From the pre-post survey, students' attitudes and behaviors for civic engagement had statistically significant increases (Z=-2.309, p=.021 and Z=-2.681, p=0.007, respectively) and attitudes and behaviors continue to be strongly related ([pre-survey] r=.811, p=0.0001; [post-survey] r=.520, p=0.022). Themes from the community partner interviews were structured around the importance of molding students for the future and preparing the course for student and partner successes.* ***Conclusions:*** *Service-learning with community partners continues to be an important experiential learning strategy utilized in program planning courses. Grant writing with undergraduates can also be effective, but only if the grant writing itself is pieced in a way that assists with their learning of the content versus just creating a product/deliverable.* ***Recommendations:*** *Course designers/planners really need to consider the course objectives and needs for the course/students/partners before making specific strategies/suggestions in projects.*

Key Words: *program planning, undergraduates, health education, civic engagement; grant writing*

INTRODUCTION

Program Planning and Evaluation is an essential course(s) students complete during their professional preparation. At both the undergraduate and graduate level, this course provides students with the necessary skills of planning, implementing, and evaluating health-based programs which are key areas of responsibility for health educators (National Commission for Health Education Credentialing [NCHEC], 2020). Although the name heavily suggests planning, implementation is a large portion of the course and is an essential portion of the CHES exam comprising 15% of the content (NCHEC, 2022). Along with the areas of responsibility related to program planning and evaluation, granting writing is associated with Area VII Leadership and Management, under competency "Manage fiduciary and material

resources" (7.4) and sub-competency "write grants and funding proposals (7.4.5). Grant writing is considered an advanced skill for health educators, but historically, aspects of grant writing were incorporated in the undergraduate course at the focus of this research study. Previously, for the main project, students would plan, implement, and prepare evaluative materials based on a 'realistic' grant but was not actually submitted for funding and was more theoretical in design. According to Bentley & Swan (2018), adding grant writing strategies can be helpful for undergraduates as they prepare to enter the workforce, but given their lack of experiences with grant writing it can be more challenging for them to acquire. As Bentley and Swan (2018) continue to describe, challenging does not mean impossible; as facilitators and instructors need to be prepared to meet students where they are at in terms of their knowledge and attitudes about the grant writing process.

Previous studies related to program planning and evaluation courses have demonstrated the importance of incorporating service-learning and/or community partners (Merriam & Bierma, 2014; Mincey & Gross, 2017; Schmidt & Lawson, 2018; Bentley & Swan, 2018; Wodika & Rhodes, 2019; Risisky Golsdon, & DeMezzo, 2021), however in terms of grant writing, literature from various disciplines is vast in terms of how to approach the topic with graduate students (Eissenberg, 2003; Griffith, Hart, & Goodling, 2006; Stolow & Lederer, 2022), undergraduates (Wark, 2008; Wykoff, Petersen, & Weist, 2013; Bentley & Swan, 2018) or both (Wooley, 2004). While writing the grant was one component of the course project, working side-by-side with a community partner in creation of the project/grant was another aspect. According to Risisky et al. (2021), incorporating longitudinal research to measure course outcomes with service learning are most beneficial and often underutilized (Giles & Eyler, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999). After the completion of their project measuring longer-term course outcomes with service learning in a program planning course, they found that alumni were given, "the tools needed to effectively plan and implement programs at their place of employment" (Risisky et al., 2021, p. 253). According to feedback from health education alumni, regarding work related to 'real-work'

experiences, service learning can serve to enhance those real-world experiences,
"real-world' public health is not as neat as it seems on paper. Times you are thrown into a project half way through, or you have to bend and mold your work to fit into the funding streams demands. It isn't as simple as assess, plan, implement, evaluate. Many grants come with specific assessment tools that may or many not fit your community. Grant timelines can also be a huge challenge – as they move too fast or too slow for the community they are supposed to serve" (Wodika & Rhodes, 2019, p. 31)

Recently, a study by Berić-Stojšić et al., (2020), tested the effectiveness of a flipped classroom for graduate students in a program planning course. They found that students in the study enjoyed the flipped classroom strategies and that having a flipped designed allowed for more dynamic discussions during class to problem solve the content and enhance experiential learning.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was three-fold: 1) assess students' attitudes and behaviors towards civic engagement, 2) qualitatively measure the impacts of undergraduate student collaboration with community partners, and 3) qualitatively measure community partner perceptions regarding collaborative projects with colleges students and universities. While having the skills and know-how for grant writing is an important tool any student can acquire, it's not as clear if service-learning *with* grant writing is an effective and lasting tool to utilize given where undergraduates are at in their educational careers and if it is effective in terms of outcome with community partners and organizations.

The research questions guiding this project were:
1. What are undergraduate senior students' perceptions of service learning with grant writing in the program planning and evaluation course?
  1a. What are student attitudes towards their experiences with civic engagement during the course of a semester?
  1b. What are student behaviors towards their experiences with civic engagement during the course of a semester?

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2. What are the perceptions of community partners regarding the outcomes of grant writing and civic engagement work with college students and college courses?

METHODS

Participants

This study sought two types of participants: 1. College students who were 18 years or older enrolled in the Program Planning and Evaluation course. These students (*n*=19) are usually seniors who are getting ready to complete their professional practice experiences the following semester. 2. Local community partners who collaborated with the course after identifying avenues for reciprocity during the summer civic engagement workshop. Three community part-ners were utilized including a food pantry, senior-recreational facility, and daycare. Two partners agreed to participate in interviews after the course project was completed.

Data Collection

Before any data were collected, the study was approved by the university IRB in summer 2019. At the beginning of the course, the course instructor explained the project and study during the first week of class. A different faculty member obtained student consent the following week to seek student participation. Student participants completed a pre-survey at the beginning of the fall semester and then a post-survey at the end of the semester to assess their learning outcomes from their grant-writing project with community partners. Data collected was in the form of paper surveys containing 16 questions (per-survey) and twenty-six questions with four Likert-response scales (attitudes towards individual civic engagement efforts: agree (7) – disagree (1); behaviors towards civic engagement: always (7) – never (1); and attitudes towards community involvement and choice of major/profession: strongly agree (5) – strongly disagree (1).

Pre-surveys were designed using a modified civic engagement scale developed by Doolittle and Faul (2013) in which their scale had an established reliability of *α=0.93* (attitude items) and *α=0.85* (behavior items). The survey in this study did not include some of the specific items from their original scale including questions such

as "I believe that I have a responsibility to help the poor and the hungry" (Doolittle and Faul, 2013, p. 6) and this instrument also delineated the difference between campus and outside communities in the scales. Reliability, therefore, needed to be remeasured and each scale had a reliability measure of .7 or above (Nunally, 1978; Pallant, 2007). Face validity was established by using an existing instrument (Doolittle and Faul, 2013) and also with peer review by colleagues and partners to ensure readability, practicality, and accuracy of the survey. Content validity was established by linking the purpose of the study to the survey scales. Post-surveys included the same attitude and behavior scales as the pre-survey, but also included scales related to their attitudes towards community involvement throughout the course as well as the influence of their service on their major or profession. Both of these scales were not on the Doolittle and Faul (2013) instrument. In order to match the pre-post surveys, students wrote a code (first two letters of the town they were born in, month they were born and first number of their home address) on their survey documents. Pre or post surveys were not analyzed until after grades were submitted at the end of the semester.

After community partners were established, they were asked to participate in the study via email in which the researcher invited the community partner to participate in a reflection meeting/interview to identify how the project went during the semester. One interview was held with two partners at the end of the semester each lasting 25 minutes. Interviews with community partners were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were asked approximately eight questions themed around motivations for participating in the grant writing civic engagement project with students, interactions with students, and future preparation of students in working with community partners.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data was analyzed using *IBM SPSS* 25 using descriptive statistics to obtain averages and medians for each scale and associated individual questions. Non-parametric Wilcoxen Signed Ranks tests were conducted on each of the scales to determine if there were any differences between pre and post-surveys in regards to the median of the attitudes and

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behaviors towards civic engagement. Pearson correlations were also conducted on the pre-post attitudes and behaviors related to civic engagement. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for codes of key words that encapsulated each question, categories combining the key words, and finally the formulation of themes using Merriam (2009) as a guideline. Prominent quotations were also high-lighted from the participants related to the interview questions.

RESULTS

What are undergraduate senior students' perceptions of service learning with grant writing in the program planning and evaluation course?

For each scale, the highest attainable score included the following: civic engagement attitudes (63/9), civic engagement behaviors (49/7), community involvement (15/3); major and civic engagement (25/5). Both attitudes and behaviors collective scale averages increased from the pre-post test score and were statistically significant (attitudes Z=2.309, p=0.021 and behaviors Z=2.681, p=0.007) (See Tables 1 & 2). Overall, students were more likely to have higher, positive changes to their attitudes (71%) than their behaviors (66%) after the post-survey. Two questions including "when working with others, I make positive changes in the community" and "I stay informed of events in my campus community" averages in behaviors remained the same (See Table 2). As predicted, attitudes and behaviors were also strongly related (pre: $r_{(14)}$=.811, p= 0.0001; post: $r_{(19)}$=.520, p=0.022).

Regarding student attitudes toward community involvement, students strongly agreed to agreed that their community work benefited the actual community (94.7%), that they felt a personal responsibility to meet the needs of their community partner (94.7%), that they were able to work directly with a community partner (84.2%), and that their interactions with the community partners enhanced their learning (84.2%). For the scale focused on the influence of service on their major, students were more likely to strongly agree to agree that their work with the community helped them become aware of their personal strengths and weaknesses (100%) versus their work making them more

aware of their biases and prejudices (73.7%). They also felt relatively strongly about their work with the partners enhanced their ability to communicate in a 'real-world' setting (89.5%) and helped them problem solve (89.5%).

What are the perceptions of community partners regarding the impacts of grant writing and civic engagement work with college students and college courses?

After analyzing the interviews, 103 codes were identified that were synced into five different categories (identify development of students, experiences with service learning, partnership establishment, course pedagogy, and civic engagement outcomes). From there, two themes were developed as follows: molding students for the future and preparing the course for student and partner successes. Selected quotations as they related to the interview questions are also included (See Table 3).

Theme 1: Molding students for the future
Student development and professional experiences was an incredibly strong component to this theme as it was a large source of focus in both interviews with community partners. Being a part of the transformational journey of a student is a reward in of itself. According to one community partner, "you develop relationships with these students and learn what they are passionate about…to me that is just a sample of students who get involved with civic engagement and make a life-long commitment" [11.18.19]. Students also learn a lot about working with communities and grow in various aspects of humility. As a partner described:

> "Some of our students, they might be introduced [to service-learning] growing up by participating with boy scouts, girl scouts, 4H and all those kinds of things and it just kind of transitions to what they do at the university. Then you get the students who might come from a more regimented, privileged background with their parents and they introduced them to it and they might have stayed with it as they transitioned through the university" [11.18.19].

In a combination of student development and accomplishment of organization deliverables a partner mentioned, "I get stuff done that I wouldn't normally get to do – and hope that helps the

students out as well. When it doesn't go well, you're just like 'well that didn't go well, we'll figure it out.' But you just hope to get that one [student] to kind of see that development growth happen, that's exciting" [11.20.19]. In terms of students' independence and assertiveness, partners are identifying more instances where they are unsure and lacking in confidence. As one partner stated,

"I try to remind myself that developmentally, we're seeing a delayed, elongated adolescent period, like my parents sent me to college and were like, 'bye....see you next summer'….so we had to grow up because we were it. They were the last line of defense, so if something was going to happen, well…you were kind of on your own" [11.20.19].

Finally, in terms of the importance of the experiential learning aspects of this type of course, there is a buffered real-world setting in which students are free to make mistakes without the large-scale repercussions.

"They get the real-world experience and in some ways, "it's sort of protected, it's not like a real job where you might have lost your employment so you can make mistakes, and it's not the most fun thing, but it's better to have that happen at an internship site or the class than a real job" [11.20.19]

Theme 2: Preparing the course for student and partner successes

In terms of grant writing, it's important for the instructor and the community partners to identify what types of grants are important for application and also that students understand those differences. As stated by a partner, "A federal grant is very different from a local grant which is more of an application. And I would try and help [students] see that" [11.20.19]. Identifying the projects that might be beneficial for under-graduates to work on with partners is also helpful. These might include concrete, discrete projects versus projects that are more creative or theoretical. Data collection that involves basic assessment or "low level fruit" was also important for one partner. Aside from the types of projects that might be beneficial for undergraduates and students to work together to accomplish, there is also the level of trust that needs to be built. Partners who are more aware of student's needs, attitudes, and behaviors may be more likely to build lasting relationships with them. This was

mentioned by a community partner when they mentioned,

"the university has just an array of areas that any organization is smart enough, or fortunate enough, to tap into and can access those resources…and because of my connection with a lot of the faculty on campus, it seems like there's a certain degree of trust already established" [11.18.19].

Describing and unpacking service-learning and civic engagement are also important in the course design from start to finish. As one partner described,

"I don't know if they think of your class as being civically engaged. [they think] 'I'm doing this for a class'…'But you're doing civic engagement…' 'no, I'm not'….'no, you are…'" I think part of it is having students understand that these things come together. You can do one and the same; you don't have to do it on your off time. So I think that would help?" [11.20.19].

In terms of preparing students for success, there were different approaches each of the community partners mentioned. In one aspect, one partner mentioned that there wasn't a lot more that could be done to motivate/prepare students more,

"you know the different personalities as you do these projects, some students are hard workers – other students just want to make the grade and I thought you gave them as much support and instruction as they needed and then it was up to them to do all the heavy lifting" [11.18.19].

Both partners mentioned key strategies for assisting students in their professional preparation of working with partners including following up with partners after meetings/tours of facilities, asking appropriate questions, taking advantage of easy access to partners and their associated facilities for learning, showing up on time, following through with deliverables, ensuring appropriate attire (as applicable), and communicating effectively in person and through email.

DISCUSSION

Regarding the key take-aways from the results, as expected, students experienced positive growth in terms of their attitudes and behaviors towards civic engagement, where they did not have as much growth was with their responsibility towards the greater community outside of campus. Although their collective attitudes and behaviors positively changed, students were less likely to state that they *saw* those changes. Students were also only 73.7% likely to agree to strongly agree that the course made them aware of their biases/subjectivities. This is another example of where the course design can be more purposeful in unpacking the complex material and situations they are encountering by anticipating certain situations and also having students constantly reflect upon the process as well. Having a flipped classroom for course materials and readings may support these endeavors more fruitfully (Berić-Stojšić et al., 2020).

This project brought about the important discussions of when there should be a theoretical versus a real-world project with an actual community partner. Although many studies have identified the importance of working with partners in program planning (Merriam & Bierma, 2014; Mincey & Gross, 2017; Schmidt & Lawson, 2018; Bentley & Swan, 2018; Wodika & Rhodes, 2019; Risisky et al., 2021), there are important drawbacks including the unpredictability of grant writing or working with community partners, student maturity level, and experience in the field (Horn-Mallers, Ruby, & Garcia, 2015; Bentley & Swan, 2018). As mentioned by the community partners in this course project, preparing students for the task at hand including explanation of types of grants and community-based projects is important (Griffith et al., 2006). Identifying more concrete, discrete projects versus projects that are more creative or theoretical was a piece of feedback provided by one of the community partners. This could, however, be argued against as students often provide a lot of creative input to community-based projects as they are viewing more as an outsider. Students also bring in a plethora of potential new contemporary skills like work with computers, social media, design, etc. By aligning partners who know how to work with college students, projects and course/community

outcomes may be more successful in completion. A similar notion could be described of students who know the ins and outs of the community partner as well as what is expected of them for professionalism, growth, and expectations in the course (Risisky et al., 2021).

LIMITATIONS

The survey instrument for the study, while a tested and validated instrument, was more basic in terms of the assessment of civic engagement attitudes and behaviors. A question was removed from the original survey from Doolittle and Faul (2013), but in actuality, this should have been included as it is an important question to ask undergraduate students. For purposes of grant writing, more questions should have been added to learn more student experiences with grant writing with community partners during the course of the semester. Adding qualitative open-ended questions would also have been helpful in determining student perceptions of the experience with the project, work with partners, and feedback to enhance their experiences (Griffith et al., 2006). In terms of coding the surveys, some students had difficulties remembering what code they used at the beginning of the study (even though these were identifiers they chose), perhaps having a different pre-post matching system would be more effective to ensure all surveys can be matched. Finally, not all three community partner organizations were able to participate in an interview. By trying to obtain feedback from all entities involved in the project would be helpful to hear all collective voices for the projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations for this project are broken down into several categories including:

Work with Students
- Develop opportunities for team building and strategies for social-emotional communication.
- Assist students in making connections between courses, assignments, and activities. Course mapping was also recommended in the article by Stolow & Lederer (2022).

- Provide more class activities focused around professional development and enhancement.
- Assist in student preparation for grant writing in terms of what is expected of them and the dynamic interplay of working with community partners (Bentley & Swan, 2018).

Work with Community Partners
- Identify how many partners and projects are optimal for the course. Is it better to have one community partner or several? Can or will students work on similar topics with the same partner?
- Create more structured opportunities for community partner involvement of student learning. By having community partners interact more with the students and the students with the partners, this allows the relationships to strengthen and make the process more reciprocal which adds to students having more buy-in to the projects/course as well.
- Allow for plenty of time for project debriefing with community partners as opposed to just once or twice in the semester. This may be an as needed or required basis as partners are busy, however, keeping an open-door policy is essential for transparency and building trust.
- Determine the readiness of students to work with community partners. Although service and experiential-learning opportunities can be very helpful for student learning, sometimes the partners or project may not align with course and student learning outcomes.

Course Design
- Consider the types of projects that are required as it meets course objectives as well as competencies and sub-competencies for Health Education. There is a strong push for experiential and service-based learning, but how much of these experiences encompass the course? If the set up is not well-ingrained into the course design and working with partners on building a program plan is more sporadic, then

utilizing a theoretical project or data set may be more feasible to ensure students are obtaining skills to take next steps in future work with community partners and careers.
- Incorporate more in-depth discussions to identify service-learning opportunities and importance of grant writing experiences in terms of learning the process (Bentley & Swan, 2018).
- Students also need to have a continuing discussion of cultural competency and humility. Incorporating opportunities for students to step outside the box and meet with individuals in the field, practicing formative research on their programs/products, and obtaining feedback is essential for them to see the bigger picture of the effectiveness of their proposed strategies.
- Grant-writing is an essential part of a health educators toolbox, but thinking about how big this component will be (larger vs. smaller portion of the project) and with what groups (undergraduate vs. graduate) are important steps to consider.
- More in-class time to focus on the main project; include specific debriefing opportunities (i.e. coffee and conversation) (Stolow & Lederer, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

Service-learning is an essential part of the undergraduate experience and can provide meaningful relationships and skills for students and enhance reciprocity for sustainable partnerships. It is very important, however, to make sure that the service-learning experience is woven into the fabric of the course so that students can make meaningful connections to the project and the course objectives. Grant writing is a particularly difficult skill to utilize and should be meticulously planned when using as a class-based project. Students and instructors can, and should, but up for these challenges, but careful consideration should be made to ensure meaningful impacts are gained by students, instructors, and community partners.

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Table 1. Pre/Post-Survey Attitude Averages.

Attitude Question	Pre-Survey Average	Post-Survey Average
I feel responsible for my campus community.[a]	5.05	5.68
I feel responsible for the [outside campus] community.	4.55	4.94
I believe I should make a difference in my campus community.[a]	5.52	6.11
I believe I should make a difference outside my campus community.	5.5	5.90
I am committed to serve in any community in which I live.	5.73	6.21
I believe that all citizens have a responsibility to their community.	6.22	6.32
I believe that it is important to be informed of community issues.[a]	6.21	6.63
I believe that it is important to volunteer.	6.36	6.47
I believe that it is important to financially support charitable organizations.	5.73	6.05

a. denotes significance at α=0.05

Table 2. Pre/Post survey behavior averages.

Behavior Questions	Pre-Survey Average	Post-Survey Average
I am involved in structured volunteer position(s) in the campus community.	4.22	4.68
When working with others, I make positive changes in the community.	5.89	5.89
I help members of my community.	5.52	5.57
I stay informed of events in my campus community.	5.11	5.11
I stay informed of events outside my campus community.[a]	4.6	5.15
I participate in discussions that raise issues of social responsibility.	4.79	5.36
I contribute to charitable organizations within the community.[a]	4.52	5.31

a. denotes significance at α=0.05

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Table 3. Select quotations from community partner interviews.

Interview Question	Responses
What are advantages of working with college students on community projects?	"The biggest benefits, one: that their [students] voice is represented and also, two: you might be able to accomplish things you wouldn't be able to do without their [students] help. From the student side – they're getting real-world experience."
What motivates you to participate in service-learning projects with college students?	"I've always had a passion for getting involved in their learning….it's the perfect opportunity to assist students but at the same time give the [agency] the opportunity to learn some things about itself."
How can faculty better prepare students to work with community partners?	"Not really sure there is much more you could do. You know the different personalities as you do these projects, some students are hard workers – other students just want to make a grade." "I think professionalism is always good. So what does that mean? That means, well you show up on time, or a little bit before time. Follow-through; so if we assign you something to do, and you can't get it done, let us know in a timely manner. Being prepared so you have something to write with and a way to take notes so that if something comes up, you're not scrambling. And how to communicate effectively."
How civically engaged do you think college students are today?	"Once they get triggered into getting involved…there's been groups of students who never even thought about getting civically engaged and then all the sudden they are introduced and then they are committed." "I think many of them are busy…I don't think social media helps that. I mean to be civically engaged, you can post on social media, but I think the social media realm keeps people occupied in ways that are not productive. You know, like you're on your phone doing stuff instead of doing volunteer work."

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