

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE-LEARNING AS PERCEIVED BY GRADUATING SENIORS

Yousry Eldardiry, Missouri State University

Ismet Anitsal, Missouri State University

M. Meral Anitsal, Tennessee Tech University

ABSTRACT

The strength of a well-sustained community lies in its citizens' hands and the ways they participate in public and civic life within their community. Community engagement (CE) activities make it possible to provide people with the expertise they need by collaborating with higher education institutes nearby. Students' participation in community engagement activities through service-learning (SL) classes helps students gain hands-on experience in the business environment based on real-life situations. Simultaneously, it gives the students a chance to reach out with hands-on expertise to support local community partners. This study will explore the effect of students' participation in community engagement activities on students' development and the impact on the community. Data is gathered from the exit surveys of graduating seniors from different college departments in a large Midwestern public university. The students' responses will help develop emerging themes for the outcomes of CE and SL activities and their impact on students' development and community. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the research findings and recommendations for future research avenues.

Keywords: Service-learning, community engagement, public affairs, civic education, civic professionalism.

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement (CE) has grown to become a priority among universities all around the world. It is defined as a collaboration between the institutes of higher education and the communities outside the university. These communities can be local, national, or global (Bierly, Rogers, and Snider, 2005). Usually, universities bring their knowledge and the public or private sectors with their resources to this collaboration. It is also known to be individuals' willingness to help shape public life, supposing having the opportunity and capacity to do so (Reid and Howard, 2016). The partnership also aims at strengthening civic responsibility, democratic values, address societal issues, and enhance contribution to the public good. Giroux (2011) noted a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources between the institutes and the community.

CE's importance has become a critical concept in transforming higher education students into fully aware citizens who participate in activities to improve their communities. This collaboration enriches students' activities related to scholarship, research, teaching, and learning (Fitzgerald et al., 2005). It can be viewed as a process to help students become better citizens influencing strategic priorities and planning (Wakefield and Fleming, 2009). This can be done by enabling the students and providing them with the information, support, and empowerment that they can use to recognize and implement solutions to local problems in their communities. Students' civic participation is well noted to increase through higher education throughout participation as citizens benefit their communities and create positive outcomes for their society. Students who engage in civic affairs and participate in their communities' social life are classified as participatory citizens, as studied by (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004).

Service-Learning (SL) is a pedagogical technique to include CE into the academic curriculum (Thomson, Tolken, and Naidoo, 2011). It is a teaching approach with an educational experience in the form of experiential learning. The process allows students to extend their knowledge and understanding of the academic syllabus throughout serving the community; while relating to course learning objectives (Myers, 2020). It is an opportunity to combine the classroom instructions with meaningful community service that serves the students and helps them understand their topic of study beyond the classroom while enhancing their sense of civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996).

High schools, colleges, and universities have been undergoing a massive shift in teaching to acquire critical skills for students and their communities (Copeland, et al., 2016). Students develop skills that emphasize critical thinking and personal reflection through a well-built syllabus throughout an organized service. As mentioned by Jones (2003, p. 7) in *Campus Contact*, SL is defined as being an organized service by the university with the community that allows students to learn, develop new skills, and gain college credit while fulfilling the needs of the community (Jones, 2003) (Gruber, 2017).

Students gain the exposure of promoting civic responsibilities through SL by starting to serve the community at a very young age and, at the same time, earning credits towards academic achievement. "Academic credit is not given for engaging in community service; rather, academic credit is based on the academic learning" (Thomson, Tolken, and Naidoo, 2011, p. 224). SL classes can be in the kind of internships, field instructions, or a practicum. Which then provides students with structured time to reflect on their experiences by thinking, discussing, and writing about their service experience. It also helps students use their thinking and interpersonal skills to solve and deal with real-life situations; while stimulating their sense of care for their community and others.

The purpose of the research is to explore SL's outcomes and significance in delivering relevance to CE principles and other relevant dimensions concerned with learning, teaching, research, and civic professionalism. The research team will review the extent of the literature on CE and SL. The paper will review and analyze responses of graduating seniors of a large Midwestern public university upon their graduation about their perception of public affairs mission regarding CE. The study will address the direct and indirect effects of service-learning programs on students. It will also investigate the attributes upon which SL is expected to enhance

participating students to become influential citizens in their communities. The research will help in answering the following research questions:

RQ1: Does CE and doing service to the community help students be better citizens?

RQ2: Do CE activities help students extend the knowledge gained from the academic study by applying what is learned during real-life experiences?

RQ3: Do the engagement experiences help students' future perceptions of civic life, politics, and government decisions?

The study's findings will discuss the students' personal views about these questions, which eventually may help universities and partners develop more efficient and effective courses that meet communities' needs and improve students' skills academically and professionally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community engagement and service-learning concepts have become the focus of many literature reviews and studies in the past two to three decades. The definitions and concepts of CE and SL have been discussed by many Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in the United States (Thomson, Tolken, and Naidoo, 2011; Gruber, 2017), South Africa (Castle and Osman, 2003; Preece, 2013), and among other countries in Asia, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East (Annette, 2003; Perold, Stroud S, and Sherraden, 2003; Ma and Lo, 2016). The Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching has a classification for community-engaged institutions regarding how they engage within their local communities. The classification measured how HEIs include students' engagement in their core values, mission, and culture. The classification served as a guide for HEIs to develop the documentation as a part of their commitment to participate for the better good of their students, societies, and communities (Discroll A. , 2009). The Carnegie Foundation defines community engagement as the "Collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities" (Carnegie Foundation, 2020). The communities can be local, statewide, national, or global. It also added that the collaboration yields a "beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Carnegie Foundation, 2020). A well-built community is one that its citizens serve. Higher education's role emerges in building the basis for students to actively engaging with their communities (Thomson, Tolken, and Naidoo, 2011).

An engaged institute that collaborates with its communities builds a redesigned teaching and services functions that involve students and serve their communities' needs. The need for HEIs to fulfill the needs of their local societies is crucial for their development, and cooperation with local communities is sought to advance their students to relate to the problems of their communities (Gruber, 2017). The Kellogg Commission (1999, p. 27) defines institutional engagement as "Something that goes well beyond Cooperative Extension and conventional outreach." Exposing students to such open communities and diverse populations help in enabling students with expertise. These hands-on experiences are used to confront problems posed in their communities (Holmes, 2015).

CE is defined by Roger and Robinson, 2004, as "the opportunity, capacity, and willingness of individuals to work collectively to shape public life" (Rogers and Robinson, 2004, p. 9). It is also seen as allowing students to join the policing and shaping of their communities. This can be done by providing them with the information and support to "help identify and implement solutions to local problems" (Wakefield and Fleming, 2009, p. 2). CE programs are also used to "offer a reflective classroom space for students" (Holmes, 2015, p. 48) to enable them to work through the dissonance that these experiences may accompany.

The Kellogg Commission has generated several characteristics that explain effectively having good societal engagement (Kellogg Commission, 1999). These characteristics include responsiveness to the community's concerns, respect for community partners; academic neutrality for diversified communities; accessibility of expertise; engagement integration with teaching missions; coordination, and resource partnerships (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). They focus on ensuring several traits are achievable, such as being responsive to the community's needs and debating whether the needs and concerns are met. They also mentioned features such as including and involving the community partners in problem-solving and finding mutually beneficial solutions. The characteristics also ensure neutrality and unbiased opinions in achieving community needs with different views and opinions. This way, the community has access to expertise whenever needed or thought of (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). It is vital to have HEIs understand better concepts like service, teaching, and research in their missions. Finally, it enables the resources required for engagement with the community to be accessible (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). The application of these characteristics into the institution missions helps prepare students to be more responsive in public service (Reid and Howard, 2016) and allow students in shaping the public life (Rogers and Robinson, 2004) for one shared vision among the community and partners in society (Hall, 2010).

Higher education institutes' efforts to better engage communities throughout their curriculum necessitates building long-term relationships with them. For such measures to be successful, Service-Learning tools had to be developed to incorporate student learning and community service. Learning through action and reflection of those experiences is better than just reading a book in class (Forbes et al., 2008). Students can best learn if they experience different situations and open new doors, rather than just acquiring knowledge on school premises (Furco, 1996). SL comes in to be an experiential educational pedagogy seeking to achieve the community's needs while linking students to academic development and success. Jacoby (1996, p. 5) explained SL to be "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development." More researchers tried to define SL and many reached comprehensive and illustrative definitions. A definition for SL says that it is a "course-based, credit-bearing, educational experience" (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996).

Another definition is that SL "involves reflection on that service to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996, p. 112). Waterman (1997) defined SL as a method that "enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for

others" (p. 2). That is why SL is considered a form of CE that is curriculum-wise, well constructed to meet academic goals, and instructed to help local communities and businesses.

SL also emerges as a link connecting students with their communities to reach specific educational and civic goals. SL is regarded as a pedagogy that facilitates knowledge acquirement in multiple subject areas (Ma and Lo, 2016). It targets strengthening relationships between HEIs and surrounding communities (Thomson, Tolken, and Naidoo, 2011). A curriculum that combines participation in activities that benefit communities and reflects on them helps understand concepts and contents better. Reflection is then viewed as a defining element in SL because it links the curriculum's learning objectives with SL's service experience (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996). Reflection is defined as "an intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives" (Bringle and Hatcher, 1997, p. 154). The SL activity's reflection is essential is to present the experience to other students for their benefit and encourage more students to engage in CE activities. Service-learning can also be seen as a course where students can participate in an organized service activity and can be reflected to gain the benefits of understanding course contents. Simultaneously, these courses increase students' sense of social and civic responsibilities (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996; Thomson, Tolken, and Naidoo, 2011).

SL concepts have grown widely across HEIs because of their ability to link core academic work with higher educational missions of "transformative learning, education for democracy, and research to understand better and improve the world" (Harkavy and Hartley, 2010, p. 419). Unlike other voluntary services, SL is provided as a course-based service with credit hours requirements for students to experience challenging activities. Those activities can be directly or indirectly related to the intended course material (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995).

The core value of how SL is well integrated between universities and their communities is understanding the social issues that impact those communities and finding the right tools to approach them. Also, it encouraged students to take social responsibilities for social illnesses and build on the required skills to serve their professional careers better. Community representatives need to collaborate with HEIs about their communities' social issues, resources, and needs. This collaboration aims to give the institutions all the information required to build an efficient SL course that serves both the community and students and aligns the HEIs educational objectives with those of the community partners (Thomson, Tolken, and Naidoo, 2011).

A study performed on different business schools around the US done by Kolenko et al. (1996) helped answer questions posed by their communities. The challenges include relevance, quality, and effect of the students' personal and professional development in these SL courses. Also, whether SL programs offer real-time learning opportunities worth the time and effort from faculty and students, for this, several SL projects were studied for different schools of business in the US, and the programs were designed to encourage the institutions to include SL ethics and values into their business courses missions and objectives. The study prevailed that all schools built their SL courses at the intersection of three main components: personal insight, application of skills, and understanding of social issues (Kolenko et al., 1996). This conclusion highlights the importance of crafting an SL course that is well designed to address not only the social issues but also help students to apply the skills learned more professionally.

SL programs allow students to interact with their communities and face various challenges, which help build their personal and interpersonal skills. These skills enhance the students' chances of success within school and their professional careers after graduation (Thomson, Tolken, and Naidoo, 2011). Exposing students to diverse people and communities during SL courses impacts how students think about their perceptions and values related to diversity, acceptance, and tolerance (Thomson, Tolken, and Naidoo, 2011; Discroll et al., 1996). SL is also a method that helps to provide students with opportunities to use their acquired skills and knowledge in class and use them in real-life situations through their communities (Waterman, 1997).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study explores the significance of SL courses and their effect on students' professional and personal development. Specifically, investigate the relevance of delivering SL courses to CE and these courses' impact on the surrounding community. Qualitative data analysis of students' responses was designed to study those views and search for SL outcomes patterns, subsequently relating those patterns to connections with the community.

The qualitative data came from the responses of graduating seniors on topics related to The University's public affairs mission, which consists of three pillars; (1) cultural competency (CC), (2) ethical leadership (EL), and (3) community engagement (CE), respectively. Specifically, the focus was on students' responses to CE questions.

The questions were open-ended, which allowed the students to freely express their opinions and thoughts about their experiences with CE during their time spent at The University. The questions encouraged students to reflect on how these experiences affected their personal growth and community participation. The findings based on these responses were reorganized under emerging themes related to SL outcomes, which enriched the research with hands-on experience from students' reflections. The students were asked to answer the following four essay questions:

Q1: Team Leadership in CE activities, describe experiences in which you have shown initiative in team leadership of complex or multiple community engagement activities. Reflect or analyze the aims of the experience and the accomplishment of your actions.

Q2: Learning about yourself through CE, what have you learned about yourself through community engagement activities and coursework on campus?

Q3: One's Learning/growth in CE, how did your experiences inside and outside the university classroom contribute to your learning/growth in community engagement?

Q4: Academic Study connection to CE, describe ways in which you have connected and extended knowledge (facts, theories, etc.) from your own academic study to community engagement and your current and future participation in civic life, politics, government, and your career.

Sample

The graduating seniors from The University are the unit of analysis for this sample. The sample is composed of in-state and out-of-state students having prior experiences in CE, either by directly enrolling in an SL class or throughout other forms of engagement through Greek life, on-campus student organizations and activities, internships at local businesses, or through an obligatory General Education Program class (GEP) for first-year students. The sample size consists of 533 graduating seniors throughout the summer and fall semesters of 2019 and graduating in spring 2020. The nationalities of the students are unknown. Yet, a thorough study of the responses indicated fewer are coming from international students than domestic students. Fall 2019 international students' enrollment on campus was 5.19% representing 74 countries, which can be reflected on the sample we have (1,254 international students for a total of 24,126 students enrolled on Springfield Campus) (Francka, 2019).

The total number of essays in the three semesters' duration was 1,566 essays answered by students responding to the three pillars of The University's public affairs mission. This research focuses on 521 reports about CE students participating from seven different business departments in the College of Business (Table 1). Our sample covered a diversity of respondents in terms of gender, culture, and nationality. The university is continuously collecting the data for assessment purposes for each semester, and the identities of the participating students were kept anonymous to the researchers.

Table 1
SAMPLE SUMMARY BY ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS

Department	Abbreviation	Summer '19 + Fall '19	Spring '20
Accounting Department	ACC	24	41
Finance and General Business Department	FGB	66	52
Information Technology and Cybersecurity Department	ITC	27	24
Management Department	MGT	61	54
Marketing Department	MKT	57	59
Merchandising and Fashion Design Department	MFD	9	17
Technology and Constructions Management Department	TCM	11	19
Total Number of Essays = 521 Essays		255	266

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed and sorted under different themes that highlighted SL outcomes. One of the researchers of this study read and analyzed all the graduating seniors' responses to understand emerging themes. The other two researchers randomly picked up parts from the verbatim to oversee their consistency and relevance.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The answers to the essay questions helped in generating emerging themes related to CE and SL outcomes. The themes cover the students' perception of engagement and its consequences on both students and their communities. Graduating seniors found that they understood the value of engagement to the fullest throughout their community partners' experiences. It is noted that these experiences have had a significant impact on their acceptance of differences in other people; when they are exposed to different communities with diverse cultures. They develop their professional or personal skills by dealing with the daily obstacles and facing challenges introduced by these experiences. The responses have also shown a considerable impact on their critical and ethical thinking capabilities because of the challenges they face regularly.

The responses of the graduating seniors are part of a required exit survey by the university. The researchers paid particular attention to genuine responses and specific experiences to be considered rather than politically correct answers. Thoughtful responses that reflect the participants' genuine and sincere experiences were chosen carefully. It became clear from the data collected that graduating seniors from the MKT and MGT departments have relatively more in-depth, elaborated, and on target responses.

Verbatims of graduating seniors provide findings of the study and insights about CE. The emerging themes will be based on the sorting of insights and the experiences of seniors. They cover students' understanding of CE, its impact on the community, exposure to different cultures, professional and personal development, critical and ethical thinking, and civic responsibility.

Community Involvement

HEIs collaborate with the surrounding community to support their public affairs missions and to help students get involved with their communities. Students relate to the problems posed on their societies through direct engagement with these societies' problems (Gruber, 2017). Students look for local businesses and nonprofit organizations to offer help. There are several ways for students to get involved with their communities, either university clubs, being a fraternity, or a sorority, which requires them to have specified community service hours per semester or on-campus student organizations to better their communities.

Understanding Engagement

Students view CE as a means to interact with their communities and give back to the communities that have given them many great opportunities. It is considered to be bringing people together through interaction and getting involved in the community by donating time and effort to a better cause and how it is beneficial to everyone involved. The following quotes by different seniors support the understanding of CE as the following:

MKT student: "Getting out and lending a helping hand creates human interaction that is beneficial in so many ways, not only to yourself, not only to the person you are helping but to the entire community."

MKT student: "... how can I give back to my community using my knowledge and life experience...."

MKT student: "...to pull people together from all different backgrounds in various ways to achieve positive, long-term effects in said community."

Another Marketing student explained that getting involved is about "...donating your time to significant causes...." which can be done by "...being openly involved in matters inside and outside of your community." Many students are left with a feeling of self-content after doing something that helps the community. This can be explained by understanding one community engagement motive: egoism (Batson, Ahmad, and Tsang, 2002). Egoism's goal is to increase one's welfare. According to this assumption, everyone acting for others and communities' betterment can be considered a means to promote one's interest and feeling good.

Impact on Community

The effect on communities as a result of CE activities might not be noticeable in the short term. Despite this, the students noticed the impact of their volunteering and engagement in their small communities. It also made them realize that their actions will benefit their communities, no matter how small their contribution is. Participation in CE activities always helped communities and created noticeable positive outcomes (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Students' responses can support this:

MKT student: "...I truly got to see the huge impact that was making for communities that were in need, near and far."

MKT student: "It's really nice to see that everyone can work together and see the impact a big school can have on a town like Springfield."

MKT student: "Not only did my team, and I have to think about the client, but also how our plan was going to affect its community as well."

MGT student: "...I saw the impact that I could make on the community, and it filled my heart knowing that I can make a difference in other people's lives."

To support this study, students must realize that they do not have to take a massive action that can be heard on the news, while a tiny step can be just enough. These actions would have a more significant influence on other people and make them participate in CE. A Marketing student, for example, said, "Understanding the benefits of active participation in a community can make one more willing to participate."

Cultural Differences

Many students in this study mentioned that they came from small towns. They did not have much experience with different people and have not been exposed to various cultures.

Students participating in CE activities tend to be more exposed to different cultures and diverse communities. Hence, they will likely develop a sense of acceptance and understanding.

Diverse Communities Acceptance

Students are subjected to deal with many challenges throughout their CE experience. One of the challenges is that they deal with diverse communities that have different ways of acting daily. Students' exposure to such incidents and diverse population aids them to acquire skills and expertise in dealing with problems that may arise in their professional life (Holmes, 2015). Exposure to diverse communities was reflected by the following:

MKT student: "I have taken on the challenge of getting to know not just people that are similar to me, but more appropriately people of diversity across a wide sphere of social backgrounds."

MKT student: "Just being able to surround yourself with people that are not exactly like you helped me to realize not only how wildly different someone's life can be from my own, but more importantly, how much everyone, regardless of gender, race, or religion has in common."

Different Cultures Exposure

It was found that students experience exposure to different cultures and norms that help them understand how other people think and eventually deal with, accept, and tolerate other people's differences (Discroll et al., 1996). The effect on students can be seen as having the ability to work well with others with an open-minded attitude, which can be supported by the following:

MKT student: "Meeting so many different people who all come from different experiences in life has led me to be more open-minded."

MKT student: "The University has given me the opportunity to meet a lot of people amongst other cultures and people who view the world differently than myself."

ITC student: "As I am planning to work for a global corporation after graduation, it is important to understand the impacts of different cultures from around the world and how it relates to the business environment."

Personal Development

Students that engage with the community through SL programs are expected to face many challenges throughout the experience. These challenges helped them develop their interpersonal skills and communication skills to help them in their career after graduation (Thomson, Tolken, and Naidoo, 2011). Students' responses support this as they deal daily with different social groups, which gave them the skills needed to develop their traits like teamwork, leadership skills, communication, and organization skills. The students reflected as follow:

MKT student: "I have learned how to penetrate a large variety of social groups and make a plethora of friends."

MKT student: "...I don't escape from group chatting anymore...which I think makes me improve a lot in communication skills."

MKT student: "Through these team-building exercises, I was able to work on what worried me most and most of all practice something that I had not had much experience on."

MGT student: "I have gained leadership experience that has made me more comfortable with taking charge, and this will follow me throughout my career as an HR officer."

Professional Development

HEIs have been trying to incorporate SL classes that promote student learning and enhancement of their professional development. Referring to the literature of Forbes et al. (2008) and Furco (1996), learning through activities outside of the classroom enhances learning and makes students develop specific skills that would benefit their professional life after graduation. Students were able to discover professional aspects of themselves better when they were dealing with the business world from the community. It has also helped students see the inside business operations, something of a "rare occurrence," as one ACC student said. The experiences also helped many students identify their passion and guidance into their career interests. Passion and guidance can be seen in the following students' responses that support the literature:

MKT student: "Another thing I took away from the Fraternity is professional skills regarding dressing professionally and presenting myself in a professional manner."

MKT student: "...I was able to take what I had learned in my classes and apply this to my job."

MKT student: "...provided great guidance to my career interests. They have helped identify my passion while encouraging me to give back to the community."

MGT student: "All of these experiences have helped me grow into a more professional and well-rounded individual."

MGT student: "Community engagement is essential for networking and discovering new opportunities to further one's career and progression in life."

Many students were also able to relate what they have learned in their curriculum and apply it during their internships at several local businesses in their communities, which can be supported by a student who interned as a buyer in a local business:

MFD student: "... I was able to apply many skills that I had learned in my classes. I knew what the buyers at the company were referring to, and I felt well prepared."

Other students have learned that their hands-on experiences on a daily routine have helped them remember and understand their course materials in a better way in their professional internships. As the core of SL, activities involve reflection to better understand course content and an immense appreciation of the discipline (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996). The following quotes have supported this:

MKT student: "I feel that (this semester) it is easier for me to remember course materials about marketing, supply chain, and logistics because I lived this every day over the summer...it was a lot easier for me to link things together and remember theories for my exams."

ACC student: "In such a challenging environment, my ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practice has been dramatically improved. More importantly, I have realized the importance of more professional experience to work."

Critical and Ethical Thinking

One of the principal goals of many HEIs is to enhance students' critical and ethical thinking skills to stimulate correct and informed decisions based on facts (Bohlander, 2010). SL programs can foster these skills through the direct application of knowledge gained in class. Intelligent and logical thinking can be tested throughout students' real-life situations by making the right decisions. Students have declared on many occasions they have seen significant improvements in their problem-solving skills, critical thinking, decision making, and cognitive development. Students' reflections to support:

MKT student: "The ethical sales tactics and moral compass I learned from my business classes have helped me grow to be someone more respectable than I would have been otherwise."

MKT student: "Community engagement has also strengthened my problem-solving skills because while volunteering or helping in other ways in the community, you learn to find solutions to the problems."

ITC student: "I was better able to understand complex problems and analyze critical thinking questions thoroughly."

Civic Responsibility

The benefits of SL programs help students understand the course content by reflecting on the services while enhancing a good sense of civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996). Thus, being better citizens because they feel responsible enough to care for their societies' needs and act accordingly. Students' responses have shown a deep understanding of the concept. The research team was able to identify essential themes concerning being better citizens, the feeling of civic responsibility toward communities and local businesses, and awareness of the effect of their political decisions on their communities. A couple of students' responses reflect these feelings:

MKT student: "I am begging to see that impact that giving back to the community had on me as a person and gave me a perspective to be a better person."

MKT student: "When citizens are engaged and included in decisions, discussions, projects, and programs that happen/are put in place to improve something, they feel empowered that they have contributed to the betterment of the community."

MKT student: "These opportunities have provided me with a new passion for helping serve and support the community in which I live."

MKT student: "I believe that engaging in the community is essential for any individual that has the chance. Community engagement is key to a joyful life."

Helping Local Businesses

Students have the chance to participate in serving their communities by helping local businesses whenever needed throughout SL programs and internships. Community needs can be fulfilled through students that know as a result of their academic excellence. SL programs ensure these communities have access to the expertise they need whenever possible (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Marketing students were able to reflect their academic experiences on local businesses and nonprofit organizations by helping them with advertising campaigns and marketing concepts that flourished their businesses:

MKT student: "This project included preparing a digital marketing campaign for a nonprofit of our choice."

MKT student: "Through Ad Team, I have been able to implement all the different marketing concepts to help small communities in southern Missouri thrive."

MKT student: "Through Enactus, we teamed up with local businesses who were struggling and did some advertising for them. We also used what we had learned in the classroom to try and help make changes to their business."

MKT student: "As an advertising major, we were given an opportunity to create advertising campaigns for a few local businesses like Vivo Salon and Justice Jewelers, which were great opportunities for me to get real-world experience while also helping a local business with my ideas."

Political Impact

SL programs and activities make students better understand their political positions and beliefs by "developing a moral-political identity of compassion, justice, and activism among students (Winston, 2015, p. 95)". It is noted that SL programs also enhance students' education for democracy and research, improving the world around them (Harkavy and Hartley, 2010). Students' reflections greatly impacted their political views and responsibilities by engaging with SL classes and having experiences with their surrounding communities. Students revealed that they developed a better understanding of their decisions' impact on their lives and communities. Responses from students that support the research claim:

MKT student: "I was able to... create a proper well-rounded opinion on the candidates and vote according to my morals and education."

MKT student: "My political views and votes are far more educated now than they were at the time I arrived in college. I now have a more holistic understanding of the impact of my decisions as well as my communities."

MKT student: "Many of the concepts I learned in economics have helped me make better-informed decisions about political issues."

ACC student: "...I was able to understand my political beliefs more fully and be an informed member of society during local and national elections."

DISCUSSION

Strong relations were found between the student's experience at the university and its effect on their knowledge from participating in CE and SL activities. The research has facilitated the understanding of why students are interested in getting involved with their communities in ways that were not previously mentioned in CE literature. The most apparent motivation factor for them is egoism, which is the feeling of self-content after donating time to help others for a significant cause (Batson, Ahmad, and Tsang, 2002) and act for the betterment of others in the community. The concept of egoism encouraged students to participate in these activities and help the community they live in, even with a relatively small contribution.

The findings pointed out several gains that students acquire due to their participation in CE and SL classes. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) mentioned that CE activities have always benefited the community from their outcomes, no matter how small they are. Students understand the value of engagement as a result of interaction with people in need. They also understand the value because they witnessed the effect of those actions on people's lives. They were also confident in knowing that their actions make a significant difference in in-need communities. The biggest frustration is not being able to see the direct effect instantaneously. However, they were very confident that their actions would significantly impact the community in the long term.

Participation of students in CE activities gives them the feeling of making a difference in their small communities. Students would talk about their experiences with their colleagues after they finish them and influence others to be a part of this accomplishment and be more willing to participate. Thus, spreading the concept of engagement through positive word of mouth communication. The most effective advertising method is the one that shares the same motivations of others through word of mouth (Cheung, Anitsal, and Anitsal, 2007; Dichter, 1966). Promoting engagement as a tool of feeling worthy helps people appreciate their responsibilities towards their communities, which is a major stage of growing up responsibly. Students became encouraged to participate in CE activities around their communities by listening to the stories and experiences of other students' reflections and the effect these experiences had on them.

Exposure to different and diverse cultures helps students be more accepting of others. These situations subject students to daily challenges, which allow them to be more prepared to deal with similar problems and challenges in their professional life (Holmes, 2015). Experience is gained from dealing with diverse communities and situations that help students understand, tolerate, and accept different cultures and opinions. These experiences help students gain values that support their understanding of inter-cultural norms and impacts in a business environment. It also allows students to reduce the presumed stereotypes about said communities.

CE activities and SL classes provide students with situations that require interaction with local businesses offering internships and part-time jobs. These programs challenge students and develop critical personal and interpersonal skills after graduation (Thomson, Tolken, and

Naidoo, 2011). Students' knowledge from their academic study was extended due to applying them to situations they face on real-life experiences through CE. Students were given a chance to help their local businesses through partnerships with the university. They were able to apply the expertise they have learned in class to serve local businesses' actual needs in their communities, which had the most significant effect on their communication, presentation, and negotiation skills.

The research elaborated on how students developed their personal and professional traits by facing challenges throughout the engagement experience. These challenges are faced by professional businesses daily, enabling students to learn, discuss, present, and defend their ideas and solutions in front of experienced professionals. They could be more open to penetrate different types of social groups and communicate effectively. Those early experiences of getting exposed to professional life help students shape and figure out their future interests and passion, a life-changing decision that needs proper and critical evaluation. The experiences are also beneficial for the students throughout their college life. This is because students were able to apply what they have learned in school to real professional situations.

The professional experience puts students through complicated situations at a young age, which helps them reason based on well-informed facts and information, and then find innovative solutions using their critical thinking skills (Bohlander, 2010). Regardless of their departments, the participants seemed to agree on CE's effect on their problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, and cognitive development. Complicated community problems that do not provide apparent solutions helped students find ways to enhance their ethical thinking abilities. They were able to think ethically and make decisions in their lives based on their own belief and not being falsely persuaded by other opinions.

SL programs help students develop a sense of civic responsibility towards their communities (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996). Students have shown feeling better citizens after participating in a CE activity, whether on-campus or off-campus; thus, they feel they have contributed something to better support their communities. The participating seniors' responses showed the impact of such experiences on developing their perception of a future life as good citizens by engaging with the community. The research was able to understand the ways CE improves civic responsibility due to students feeling they are better citizens when they have continuous care and affection towards their communities. These experiences made them feel responsible for future decisions regarding their political participation and the value of their vote by listening to the facts and critically analyzing them to better differentiate between the options.

Local businesses reach out to their university partners to ask for help as a part of initial agreements between both parties to care for the concerns of the community, ensuring the engagement experience is well integrated with the learning outcomes, and to have access to expertise whenever needed (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Students' sense of civic responsibility included caring for and helping local businesses and start-ups by offering their expertise to solve their business problems. Students could apply the concepts they professionally learned in school to help solve local partners' problems. Students are offered the opportunity, through internships, to use their expertise in struggling businesses and help them make changes critical to their businesses.

LIMITATIONS

Graduating seniors' written exit surveys were used in the research to understand their perception of CE and SL effects on the community and the students. The study focuses on graduating students from seven different departments from the college of business at The University in one calendar year. The responses indicate the opinions of these specific groups of students. They do not express the views of other students from other university departments from non-business departments, which is a limitation of the study. It is also important to note that the responses came from the graduating students of only three semesters. It would be beneficial to have more answers included from more semesters to form longitudinal research, which might develop more emerging themes to the study, leading to a better understanding of CE outcomes and benefits.

A better understanding of CE's effects on participating students would have been yielded if we could study gender, age, and race's effect on students' participation. Although some international students' responses, the sample does not differentiate between US nationals and international students. Hence, the research team was not able to study the effect of CE on international students effectively.

Another limitation of the study emerges as students give positive experiences and how they have affected their lives. The participants shared no negative comments; thus, it is not reflected in this study. Having universities directly ask students about their positive and negative experiences would have enriched the research with diverse opinions. It is essential to know if students had negative experiences or comments regarding their participation in SL classes and dealing with different communities to aid universities in dealing with such issues that could arise in the future.

FUTURE RESEARCH AVENUES

This study opens the door for future research to expand the understanding of CE and SL's impact on small communities. Future research needs to measure the direct impact of students participating in SL classes on helping local business partners and reviewing the effect of students' suggestions on their business success. To measure CE and SL programs' direct impact on businesses' profits in the short run is difficult. Such programs' success can be measured by how widespread the awareness of HEI programs, as one business partner's success could attract more struggling local businesses to ask the university for assistance.

The effect of CE and SL on international students is another area of study. We observed that more national students were participating than international students in CE activities. Is it because international students face barriers that prevent them from engaging with these communities, or are there any culturally noteworthy perceptions? It could be beneficial to understand such behavior and how to involve more international students with engagement activities.

HEIs need to collaborate with their community partners to increase the number of students volunteering and participating in CE activities. They need to spread the value of

engagement and its effect on student's success and welfare, which could be done by running a viral marketing campaign based on word of mouth between students. Since viral marketing focuses on consumers having the will to spread the campaign's message (Rollins, Anitsal, and Anitsal, 2014), future research could study the correlation between having a viral marketing campaign promoting CE and SL classes.

It is vital to measure the effect of CE and SL activities on students in a later stage of their professional life. Inviting alumni to share how their CE experience has affected their personal and professional careers may be a new research avenue. Future studies can be encouraged to find a correlation between alumni voting and political life participation with whether the alumni have had previous CE experiences with their surrounding communities.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone. Universities worldwide have shifted their course delivery modalities to online and remote teaching or a hybrid. More universities have been trying to be creative in their ways of teaching. Many have started getting virtual study programs, meetings, internships, and even virtual study away programs. The nature of CE seemed to change too under such circumstances, being paused at the beginning of the pandemic. Universities then put measures for CE activities to be offered virtually to students. Future research would find interesting relations between COVID-19 emergence and its effect on CE. Another suggestion for universities would be to include questions regarding the pandemic and its effect on the three pillars of their public affairs mission.

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