

Community Member Perceptions of Student Service at a Land-Grant University

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Introduction

The land-grant mission of extension, research, and teaching often requires students to interact with the community because ideally, each part of the mission should benefit from each component (Settle & Telg, 2013). Students are involved with their surrounding university community through participation in community service activities and service-learning courses, due to the integral nature of the institution (Franz, Childers, & Sanderlin, 2012). Much is known about benefits and impacts of community service to students and land-grant universities. However, little research exists on the views and experiences of community members that receive services, work alongside, or supervise these college students during community service projects and events. This qualitative study seeks to fill this gap by describing the perceptions of community members who have directly interacted with students through community service.

Conceptual Framework

Partnerships are created through basic human relationships. Good partnerships are founded on trust, respect, communication, and governance structures, which improve resource sharing and positive decision making processes (Worrall, 2007). Community service and volunteer efforts of college students are one way the university builds partnerships and relationships with community members (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Community service efforts have the capacity to build positive relationships with community members.

Land-grant institutions include local community engagement in their institutional missions. A great deal of literature exists on the benefits and impacts engaging in community service can have on college students. Students gain valuable, real world knowledge, which can increase their leadership skills and attitudes toward civic responsibility. In addition, communities benefit from the time and talents of the students because of their proximity (Bruning, McGrew, & Cooper, 2006). However, both parties are best served when volunteering is viewed from an altruistic perspective, where the intention of the student is to help others (Gage & Thapa, 2012). Little research exists on the views and experiences of community members that receive services, work alongside, or supervise these college students during community service.

Equity theory of motivation and social exchange theories play a role in successful campus-community relationships. Equity theory stresses the sense of fairness between partners, where both partners are satisfied as long as outcomes are proportionate to inputs, even if the outcomes to both partners are unequal (Miner, 2005). Social exchange theory is based on the evaluation of a current relationship's benefit, and whether it exceeds the benefits of other possible relationships (Cook & Emerson, 1987; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Methodology

The research questions of this qualitative study on the perspectives of community members who have directly interacted with students through community service projects, are: How do community members describe their connection with the university? How do community members view the community service outreach efforts of students? What are the community members' perceptions of the relationships between the community and institutions through the community service efforts of students? The study participant target audience is community members, over the age of 18, who worked alongside, supervised, or received services from university students. All community members with the appropriate prior experiences were eligible regardless of demographic characteristics. Seven participants volunteered after receiving IRB-approved invitations. Interviews were conducted by two members of the research team, one

interviewer and one technical assistant. All participants were Caucasian and had post-secondary degrees. Most (86%, n=7) resided within five miles from campus and their ages ranged between 33-87. Three male and four females participated. The research team was comprised of seven graduate students at a land-grant institution. Many members of the research team have been, or currently are, active in community service activities and involved in the university's community.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was broken down into meaning units (i.e., stand-alone thoughts or ideas). Each individual set of meaning units was coded by three research team members. The team identified initial emerging themes by grouping together like codes. Based on emerging themes, researchers used their meaning units to conduct a second round of coding (Creswell, 1998). In this iterative process, thematic analysis was concluded when the team agreed upon themes and identified sub-themes during the final coding.

Results

Seven essential themes emerged from the interviews: (1) description of involvement; (2) why the interviewee is involved; (3) personal impact felt by interviewee; (4) perception of students; (5) perceived impact of student community service on the community; (6) perceptions of why the community gets involved; and (7) university role. Themes were connected to sub-themes that were identified for the essential themes. The university role theme is integral, which demonstrates the university as an integral component of all the other themes and subthemes.

Community members had inconsistent experiences with the land-grant university students who provided community service. The participants suggested improvements that could positively impact implementation. Mutually beneficial experiences occurred when there was a clear match between student and community member expectations and outcomes of service, which supports social exchange theory. As suggested by the findings of this study, students need to have the applicable knowledge and level of motivation for service activities. Students are a transient population and may not build strong ties with the surrounding town. However, students are still representative of the land-grant university and community as a whole. Outsiders tend to not separate university students from the rest of the population of the town, and as such, students can be good ambassadors not just of the university, but of the community as well.

Implications and Recommendations

This research adds to the adds to the National Research Agenda for the American Association for Agricultural Education Priority 4- Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). The results indicated that it is important to measure the perceptions of community members when implementing community service efforts. Community members want the work to be pertinent and valuable to the student and community. Participants had inconsistent experiences with students and their positive perceptions of the university increased when students were knowledgeable, supported by faculty and staff, and the work was relevant to the community member. As faculty and student organizations plan community service efforts it is important to create service projects that reflect the needs of the community, community members, and student participants. This study focused on one land-grant university's student community service efforts. However, research needs to be done on individual community members' perspectives. The researchers did not focus on service-learning efforts and there were emergent indicators on how service learning projects were implemented and would impact community members' perceptions of both the students and the university.

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