

Serving our Community: Perceptions of University Student Community Service

Joaquin R. Amaral¹, Lane Woodward¹, Jeremy Elliott-Engel¹, Sarah Bush¹, Elli Travis¹,
Abdulmueen Bogis³, and NithyaPriya Ramalingam²

¹ Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education

² Graduate Program in Translational Biology, Medicine, and Health

³ Architecture and Design Research Program in Landscape Architecture Department

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education
175 West Campus Drive
214 Litton Reaves Hall, Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, VA 24061
(540-315-1021)
ramaral1@vt.edu

Introduction

The land-grant mission of extension, research, and teaching often requires students to interact with the community. Ideally, each part of the mission should benefit from the other components (Settle & Telg, 2013). Due to the integral nature of the institution in the community students are involved with the surrounding university community through participation in community service activities (Franz, Childers, & Sanderlin, 2012). Much is known about benefits and impacts of community service to students and universities. However, little research exists on the views and experiences of community members that receive services, work alongside, or supervise college students during community service projects and events (Gerstenblatt, 2014).

Land-grant institutions include local community engagement in their institutional missions. Previous research found, students gain valuable, real world knowledge, which can increase their leadership skills and attitudes toward civic responsibility. Communities can 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). This qualitative study was designed to describe the perceptions of community members who have directly interacted with students through community service because there is a gap in the literature on community members' perspectives. This study supports the National Research Agenda of the American Association for Agricultural Education Priority Area 6 – Vibrant, Resilient Communities to help understand relationships between the university and its community and the perceived impact of universities and the communities they are situated within (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

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 the community (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Community service efforts have the capacity to build positive relationships with community members. 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 if 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). With equity and social exchange theories in consideration, it is possible that community members view college students as the only means to completing a project. However, this does not mean that the partnership is always viewed in a positive light by either or both parties.

From the current literature and identified theories, the following research questions were developed to guide the discovery of community member perceptions of campus community service: 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? Research Poster

Methodology

This phenomenological qualitative study consisted of seven (n=7) community member interviews. participant target audience was community members, over the age of 18, who worked alongside, supervised, or received services from university students. All community members meeting the criteria were eligible regardless of demographic characteristics. Participants self-identified and volunteered for participation in the study. Interviews were conducted in pairs consisting of one interviewer and one technical assistant. All participants were Caucasian and had post-secondary degrees. Most (86%) resided within five miles from campus and their ages ranged between 33-87. Three males and four females participated. The research team was comprised of seven graduate students at a land-grant institution.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was broken down into meaning units (i.e., stand-alone thoughts or ideas). Each researcher completed verbatim transcripts and then coded their individual set of meaning units. Each set of meaning units were then concurrently coded by two fellow team members. The team identified initial emerging themes by grouping together similar codes. After the review of emerging themes, researchers then began a second round of coding (Creswell, 1998). This iterative process was completed once the team agreed upon themes and corresponding sub-themes.

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. The theme, “university role” was evident throughout all the other themes. Responses from community members showed inconsistent experiences with students during community service. 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. 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.

Implications and Recommendations

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. 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. 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. 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, continued research needs to be done with different types of communities that have different types of Colleges and Universities. Adding a different population would allow researchers to investigate if the type of interaction the community member had with students has an impact on perceptions. Research Poster

References

- Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (2002). Campus–community partnerships: The terms of engagement. *Journal of Social Issues, 58*(3), 503-516. doi: 10.1111/1540-4560.00273
- Bruning, S. D., McGrew, S., & Cooper, M. (2006). Town–gown relationships: Exploring university–community engagement from the perspective of community members. *Public Relations Review, 32*(2), 125-130. doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2006.02.005
- Cook, K.S. & Emerson, R.M. (1987). *Social exchange theory*. SAGE Publications, Inc. Beverly Hills, CA.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five designs*. SAGE, Los Angeles, CA
- Cropanzano, R. & Mitchell, M.S. (2005). Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management, 21*(6), 874-900. doi: 10.1177/0149206305279602
- Franz, N., Childers, J., & Sanderlin, N. (2012). Assessing the culture of engagement on a university campus. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship, 5*(2), 29. Retrieved from http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=hs_extension_pubs
- Gage, R. L., & Thapa, B. (2012). Volunteer motivations and constraints among college students: Analysis of the volunteer function inventory and leisure constraints models. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 41*(3), 405-430. doi:10.1177/0899764011406738
- Gerstenblatt, P. (2014). Community as agency: Community partner experiences with service learning. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship, 7*(2), 60.
- Settle, Q. & Telg, R., (2013). Blending the three-part mission of the land grant university. *NACTA Journal, 57*(4). 82-83. Retrieved from: <http://login.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/docview/1466251275?accountid=14826>
- Miner, J.B. (2005) *Organizational behavior: 1, Essential theories of motivation and leadership*. M.E. Sharpe. Armonk, NY.
- Roberts, T. G., Harder, A., & Brashears, M. T. (Eds). (2016). *American Association for Agricultural Education national research agenda: 2016-2020*. Gainesville, FL: Department of Agricultural Education and Communication.
- Worrall, L. (2007). Asking the community: A case study of community partner perspectives. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 14*(1), 5-17. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ831332.pdf>