

Community Engagement in Business Education: Addressing Sustainability Issues Through Student-Team Consulting

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A private university incorporated community engagement in a business capstone course that connected students with the local community, exposed them to sustainability challenges, and showed the inherent value of community engagement. The business capstone is a project-based course where students engage in student-team business consulting, working with local non-profit organizations. The non-profit organizations address social, environmental, and economic issues faced by residents who represent underserved populations in marginalized communities. The goal is to develop socially responsible business leaders with a global mindset. Learning is not only deepened, students are rewarded with a sense of empowerment to do good for society.

Keywords: community engagement, service learning, student-team consulting, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

First in mind, then in manifestation. Manifestation is based on the idea that an individual can think their actions into reality. In reality, just thinking about something we want is unlikely to achieve our goals or dreams. However, we do tend to go where we focus our thoughts. Our mindset shapes our thoughts and our thoughts subsequently shape our behaviors and actions (Orduna, 2022).

Sustainability is a mindset. Higher education is responsible for developing and encouraging that mindset in college students. Institutions of higher education are reevaluating and redefining their role in society. Colleges and universities are balancing preparing students for careers and making positive contributions toward a greater common good (Orduna, 2022). One of the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals is Goal Four which is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations Sustainable Development, n.d.). Education is a means toward sustainable development.

There is no unique career path when it comes to sustainability (Orduna, 2022). The United Nation defines sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations Academic Impact, n.d.). Sustainability includes three pillars: environmental, social, and economic. The environmental pillar is most familiar and largely involves initiatives aimed at helping companies reduce their carbon footprint. The social pillar focuses on an organization's people, both internally and the external community. The economic pillar works to ensure that companies are profitable through sustainable means and have ethical corporate governance and management practices that align with the interests of the stakeholders.

A private, non-profit university incorporated community engagement projects in a senior-level business capstone course that connected students with the local community, exposed them to the challenges of managing sustainable growth and development, and showed the inherent value of community and civic engagement. The business capstone course is a project and problem-based course where students actively act as business consultants (i.e., student-team consulting), working with local non-profit organizations. The local non-profit organizations address social, environmental, and economic issues faced by residents who represent underserved populations in marginalized communities. Students draw upon the knowledge obtained throughout their coursework and combine it with relevant service work in the community. The goal is to develop socially responsible business leaders with a global mindset. By utilizing service-learning pedagogies, the university is creating a new role for higher education in sustainable development and demonstrating the importance of partnering with local organizations to serve and increase opportunities for underserved populations. Working with real-life issues helps students make critical connections with what they are learning in the classroom in concrete, substantial, and meaningful ways. Learning is not only deepened, students are rewarded with a sense of empowerment to do good for society.

CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE

Capstone is used to describe the topmost stone in constructing a wall or building. In higher education, capstone is a culminating and transitional experience where final year students apply knowledge gained from the curriculum to academic, personal, or professional experiences. The focus of the capstone experience is synthesis and integration, rather than acquiring new skills (Wagenaar, 1993). Capstone courses generally involve limited introduction of new conceptual or theoretical discipline-specific material (Van Aker & Bailey, 2011). Capstone experiences can be structured as: (a) an interdisciplinary course, (b) a disciplined-based course that pulls together learning from a program of study, or (c) a course or series of activities that permit students to demonstrate their applied knowledge relative to an external requirement or competence (Rowles, Koch, Hurdley, & Hamilton, 2004). According to Rowles et al. (2004), the capstone experience should have the following pedagogies present: (a) collaborative learning; (b) self-directed learning; (c) problem-based learning; and (d) other learner-centered instructional strategies that encourage critical thinking, integration, reflection, and synthesis. Activities and assignments should require students to apply knowledge gained in course curriculum to real-world situations using higher-order thinking skills (Wuller, 2010), where students are expected to demonstrate a critical level of deep and active learning.

Scholars date capstone courses as far back as the 18th century in the United States. Most colleges and universities in the United States have only adopted capstone courses in the last 40 years (Hauhart & Grahe, 2015). The capstone experience includes a broad range of courses and activities that do not include “capstone” in their titles, but instead reflect their function (e.g., research projects, design projects, independent studies, internships) (Vale, Weiss, Hill, & Kirkscey, 2021). Capstone courses provide opportunities for students to pivot from learning about skills in an academic environment to applying those new skills in an authentic setting. Capstone courses based on an experiential learning context may challenge students to address complex problems in realistic contexts (Devine, Bourgault, & Schwartz, 2020).

Educational research indicated undergraduate student participation in research, fieldwork, and/or community engagement has great value (Samura, 2018). Samura (2018) noted in her study, based on student reflections that (a) research led to academic development; (b) fieldwork contributed to professional development; and (c) community engagement contributed to personal and social development. Research, fieldwork, and community engagement have been identified as high-impact educational practices, correlated to student success (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2007). Research, fieldwork, and community engagement facilitate student engagement. Students must commit a significant amount of time and effort to the projects’ activities and interact with people who are different than themselves (Samura, 2018). Samura’s (2018) findings suggested that a combination of high-impact practices in the capstone experience may lead to the development of more engaged, prepared, and proactive professionals and citizens.

The capstone experience allows final year students to look back on their undergraduate study to make sense of what they have accomplished and look forward to a professional experience where they can build on that foundation (Durel, 1993). Students can combine their interests with career opportunities and community (or societal) needs. The capstone experience assists in transitioning undergraduate seniors to life beyond college as employees, graduate students, life-long learners, and/or civic-minded community members (Rowles et al., 2004). According to Van Acker and Bailey (2011), capstone experiences confirm whether final-year students have mastered soft, essential, or employability skills required by the business sector, and may play a key role in ensuring graduates are agents of social good.

SERVICE LEARNING

Service-learning first emerged in the 1950s to describe forms of experiential education that explicitly promoted student engagement in their communities (Narong & Hallinger, 2023). Service-learning has a variety of definitions. In 1990, the National and Community Service Act of the United States defined service-learning as a pedagogy in which students learn through active civic participation in school-organized service activities that address the needs of their communities (Narong & Hallinger, 2023). Bringle and Hatcher (2009) defined service-learning as: “a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility” (2009, p. 38). Since its emergence, service-learning has developed into a well-recognized pedagogy that integrates community service into the curriculum. Service-learning activities encourage students to reflect on real-life, societal issues.

Service-learning allows students to understand their civic responsibility, acquire other transferrable business skills, and apply the knowledge learned in the business curriculum (Gallagher & McGorry, 2015). A growing body of research has indicated that students who participated in service-learning courses had significant gains in several academic and affective outcomes, including college grade point average; cognitive development; diversity skills; reduced biased thinking; and civic and community awareness (Astin et al., 2000; Brandenberger, 2013; Campus Compact, 2012; York, 2016). Service-learning activities help students better understand their communities, themselves, and their responsibilities in society (York & Fernandez, 2018). Ehrlich (1995) discovered that service-learning students had greater enlightened self-esteem, more desire to help others, a deeper appreciation for diversity, and more empathy. In a study of 185 undergraduate business students involved in service-learning, the skills rated most important in their service-learning experience were personal responsibility, communication, and leadership (Gallagher & McGorry, 2015). For business students, and all students in general, these skills are essential for preparation for the business workforce. Service-learning experiences are associated with improving a student’s ability to understand theoretical concepts, apply theory to real-life situations, and think and solve problems.

STUDENT-TEAM BUSINESS CONSULTING

Innovative and creative thinking should be an expectation in a student’s education, and all students should be exposed to it through various pedagogies (National Academy of Engineering, 2015). Student-team business consulting is an active learning pedagogy that promotes innovative and creative thinking. According to Kunkel (2002), student-team business consulting has self-directed learning components. Students are empowered to work on designing and managing their learning actions as they participate in formulating and implementing an organization’s strategy (Kunkel, 2002).

According to Cook, Campbell, and Kopp (2013), student-team business consulting offers a structured and enhanced service-learning experience. Student-team business consulting is an experiential learning model where students operate as consultants with faculty oversight and a client whose needs are being addressed by the students. Student-team business consulting focuses on project-based, problem-based

learning in a team environment. Research into best practices in service-learning projects supports this type of pedagogy (Kenworthy-Uren, 2008).

Student-team business consulting is a higher-level service-learning type, as expected in a senior capstone experience. Students take on the “role of professional consultants producing goods that will, in fact, be used” (Kenworthy-Uren, 2000, p.59). Higher-level service-learning addresses complex problems in complex settings. Students are required to practice critical thinking and working effectively in teams (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Students are provided an experience to discover, evaluate, and exploit opportunities along with the opportunity to develop professional skills.

Student-team business consulting can lead to more impactful community engagement (Harris, Barber, & Childers, 2022). Student-team business consulting projects are a means to bridge the needs of multiple stakeholders. Student-team business consulting projects provide an effective means to innovate and engage students both inside and outside the classroom, and yield measurable, sustainable impact for the community (Harris, Barber, & Childers, 2022).

BUSINESS CAPSTONE COURSE

The Business Consulting Project is the required capstone course taught to senior-level, undergraduate business majors at a private, non-profit university. Business majors enroll in the course during or near the last term of their sequence leading to a bachelor’s degree in business management. The business capstone course aims to have students integrate and synthesize their knowledge and understanding of business through action and reflection.

The business capstone course is a project and problem-based course where the students actively act as business consultants (i.e., student-team consulting), working with non-profit organizations in the university’s local community. Students work in teams as they complete consulting projects involving environmental scanning, strategy formulation, and strategy implementation. Students must draw upon the knowledge obtained throughout their coursework and combine it with relevant service work in the community. The consulting projects involve business research on the client’s organization and industry; integrating financial, marketing, and management concepts. The students typically divide the consulting tasks functionally (e.g., marketing, operations, and financial), with one student of project manager. Working with local non-profit organizations allows the students to see their impact holistically, on an entire organization; be able to work on projects that are manageable and able to be completed within one academic term; assist the organizations’ leaders and staff in strengthening the local community; and gain an appreciation for social and civic responsibility. Each consulting project operates as a service-learning project.

The business capstone course is the course (or culminating experience) in the student’s senior year that attempts to tie all functional business areas together, i.e., accounting, finance, marketing, and management, along with information systems and data analytics. The course also integrates the students’ academic experiences outside business, e.g., humanities, social sciences, physical sciences, and communication. Students are expected to utilize their technical and content knowledge and their professional or “soft” skills as they engage in the consulting assignments. The business capstone course has the following learning outcomes for the students: (a) provide basic business consulting services to a for-profit or non-profit organization; (b) gain practice in conducting a field-consulting project; (c) coordinate multiple, interdisciplinary tasks to achieve a common objective; (d) draw from and utilize specific knowledge from other courses through practice and reflection in an action-oriented setting; and (e) present analyses of issues and organizational problems in a concise, accurate, clear, and interesting manner from the perspective of a consultant.

The deliverables from the consulting assignments include professionally written consulting reports, participating in facilitated class discussions, and presenting to the clients. During the midterm, the students deliver an oral PowerPoint presentation to the client addressing their work and findings. This allows both the students and the client to determine if the consulting project is on track. The students also use this opportunity to inform the client of next steps in the consulting project.

At the end of the term, the students deliver another oral PowerPoint presentation to the client that addresses the various elements of the scope of work for the consulting project. A detailed, professionally written report that addresses all of the elements of the scope of work is submitted to the client. The students are assessed and graded on the oral and written deliverables, teamwork, and project management. Feedback is also received from the client and incorporated in the assessment and grading of the consulting project.

The Business Consulting Project has been part of the university’s business curriculum since 2016. Since 2016, a total of 72 students provided nearly 5,000 hours of business consulting services to 16 non-profit organizations in the local community. The consulting projects have involved working on marketing strategies (social media campaigns, developing websites); volunteer recruitment and retention; exploring funding opportunities; inventory management; optimizing facilities capacities; feasibility studies; pricing strategies; financial statement preparation; and database management systems.

LOCAL COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

The local community where the university is located suffers from disinvestment, deindustrialization, depopulation, and decay. The local community endures high crime rates, high unemployment levels, and poverty. Table 1 highlights pertinent demographic data of the local community’s city; compared to its county, its state, and the overall United States.

**TABLE 1
COMPARATIVE DEMOGRAPHIC DATA AS OF JULY 1, 2022**

	City	County	State	United States
Population	79,854	401,983	10,034,113	333,287,557
Race & Hispanic Origin				
White	34.70%	74.90%	78.80%	75.50%
Black or African American	56.70%	20.30%	14.10%	13.60%
American Indian & Alaska Native	0.50%	0.60%	0.70%	1.30%
Asian	0.50%	1.10%	3.50%	6.30%
Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander	0.00%	<0.005%	<0.005%	0.30%
Hispanic or Latino	4.50%	4.00%	5.70%	19.10%
Housing				
Owner-occupied housing unit rate	55.10%	70.50%	72.20%	64.60%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units	\$35,000	\$133,700	\$172,100	\$244,900
Computer & Internet Use				
Households with a computer	83.80%	90.80%	92.40%	93.10%
Households with a broadband Internet subscription	71.00%	83.70%	86.40%	87.00%
Education				
High school graduate or higher, age 25 years+	84.80%	91.20%	91.60%	88.90%
Bachelor's degree or higher, persons age 25 years+	12.10%	22.20%	30.60%	33.70%

	City	County	State	United States
Population	79,854	401,983	10,034,113	333,287,557
Health				
With a disability, under 65 years	20.20%	13.70%	10.10%	8.70%
Persons without health insurance, under age 65 years	7.70%	6.40%	6.00%	9.80%
Income & Poverty				
Median household income (in 2021 dollars)	\$32,358	\$54,052	\$63,202	\$69,021
Per capita income in past 12 months (in 2021 dollars)	\$18,719	\$30,561	\$34,768	\$37,638
Persons in poverty	35.50%	16.30%	13.10%	11.60%

Source: United States Census Bureau QuickFacts

LOCAL COMMUNITY STUDY

In 2019, a foundation funded a Quality of Life survey conducted in the local community. The survey addressed economic, social, and environmental sustainability issues about the residents of the local community. Nine hundred residents were surveyed in 2019. New survey data was gathered from a representative sample of more than 800 residents each subsequent year. The purpose of the initiative was to track and report back on the residents' perspectives on key issues related to the quality of life in their community. In the survey, residents were asked to rate nine key issues that affected their quality of life in the community. Table 2 highlights the average ratings recorded through 2022 on a scale from one to five, with one meaning "very negative" and five meaning "very positive".

TABLE 2
QUALITY OF LIFE SURVEY RESULTS

Residents' Evaluation of:	2022	2021	2020	2019
The City's Water Supply	2.1	2.1	1.9	1.8
Arts & Culture	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.6
The Economy	2.5	2.4	2.4	2.4
Education	2.6	2.4	2.4	2.6
Housing	2.2	2.2	2.3	2.2
Public Safety	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.3
Supporting Residents' Health	2.9	2.8	2.9	2.8
Supporting a Good Standard of Living	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.5
Supporting a Good Quality of Life	2.7	2.5	2.6	2.5

Source: Quality of Life Survey (2022)

In addition, survey participants were asked what they thought were the most serious issues facing the residents that they would like to see community leaders solve. Among those who responded in 2022, crime continued to top the list of key concerns, followed by blight, abandoned buildings; and water quality

(Quality of Life Survey, 2022). Overall, residents were not completely satisfied with their quality of life in their community.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In 2015, the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development was unveiled with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. The SDGs require concerted actions from governments, businesses, higher education institutions, and the global society. The SDGs emphasize sustainable development's interconnected environmental, social, and economic aspects. The SDGs aim to develop healthy societies aligned with the premise that all people everywhere should live in peace and prosperity (Saxena et al., 2021). The SDGs are as follows: (1) No poverty; (2) Zero hunger; (3) Good health and well-being; (4) Quality education; (5) Gender equality; (6) Clean water and sanitation; (7) Affordable and clean energy; (8) Decent work and economic growth; (9) Industry, innovation and infrastructure; (10) Reduced inequalities; (11) Sustainable cities and communities; (12) Responsible consumption and production; (13) Climate action; (14) Life below water; (15) Life on land; (16) Peace, justice, and strong institutions; and (17) Partnerships for the goals.

Table 3 highlights all of the community organizations (and the SDGs that each organization attempts to address) involved in all of the student-team business consulting projects.

TABLE 3
COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Community Organizations	UN Sustainable Development Goals
Community Organization A	6-Clean Water & Sanitation; 13-Climate Action; 14-Life Below Water; 15-Life on Land
Community Organization B	8-Decent Work & Economic Growth
Community Organization C	9-Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure; 11-Sustainable Cities & Communities
Community Organization D	2-Zero Hunger
Community Organization E	6-Clean Water & Sanitation; 14-Life Below Water
Community Organization F	8-Decent Work & Economic Growth
Community Organization G	2-Zero Hunger
Community Organization H	11-Sustainable Cities & Communities; 12-Responsible Consumption & Production
Community Organization I	4-Quality Education
Community Organization J	5-Gender Equality; 10-Reduced Inequalities; 16-Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions
Community Organization K	4-Quality Education; 5-Gender Equality; 10-Reduced Inequalities
Community Organization L	11-Sustainable Cities & Communities
Community Organization M	8-Decent Work & Economic Growth; 9-Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure
Community Organization N	3-Good Health & Well-Being; 4-Quality Education
Community Organization O	1-No Poverty
Community Organization P	4-Quality Education

Community Organization A (COA) exists to support the community in making progress toward being a healthy, sustainable, and fair environment. COA develops and implements innovative environmental solutions to the community's pressing environmental issues. The organization also trains, mentors, and empowers the residents on environmental justice.

Community Organization B (COB) is a community makerspace built on the idea that learning, sharing, and creating are empowering and transformative forces which can open doors and provide opportunities. COB provides tools, equipment, and training to small business owners, students, artists, emerging entrepreneurs, crafters, and more.

Community Organization C (COC) was created and authorized by city officials to encourage preservation, beautification, as well as business and economic growth for the downtown area. COC manages the parking meters and parking enforcement for the area and serves as customer support for these functions.

Community Organization D (COD) works to provide hunger prevention services in the community. The organization provides free food and water to anyone who needs it; primarily residents of the city.

Community Organization E (COE) is an alliance between educational institutions, local government, local businesses, environmental groups, and concerned citizens who feel strongly that the community's river and its tributaries are vital resources that need pollution protection. COE partners to protect, promote, and improve the community's river and its watershed.

Community Organization F (COF) focuses on building community and small businesses in the community. Their activities center around a monthly dinner that raises seed money (micro-grants) for start-up businesses in the community. Local entrepreneurs pitch their businesses to group of residents and all the money raised through the monthly dinner gets allocated to the entrepreneur with the most compelling pitch. It is just \$5 per person for soup, salad, bread, and a vote.

Community Organization G (COG) serves as a common solicitor, storehouse, and distributor of food on behalf of its 700 Hunger Relief Partner Agencies which are non-profit and charitable organizations in 22 counties. COG has been committed to fighting hunger since the organization first began in 1981.

Community Organization H (COH) sells new or gently used household items to the public, priced at least 50% below retail. All proceeds from COH go towards supporting the parent organization's mission of providing decent, affordable housing in the community.

Community Organization I (COI) works to empower young people to become leaders and transform their communities. The organization's leadership and staff provide skills, tools, and resources to promote the healthy growth of youth, communities, and society as a whole.

Community Organization J (COJ) is the international hub serving the community to provide a central link to the global community. The organization's mission is to make the community a vibrant and welcoming global community and to increase the region's prosperity by encouraging, building, and sustaining strong multi-cultural relationships.

Community Organization K (COK) provides physical, emotional, and community support to incarcerated or previously incarcerated parents' children. By providing support to children, parents, and caregivers, the leadership and staff of COK hopes to break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration.

Community Organization L (COL) was established to help strengthen and restore neighborhoods by providing a source for information, education, facilitation, project development, advocacy, and supportive equipment and materials. The leadership and staff of COL envisions a future where they can coach, mentor, and empower the residents to improve and maintaining their neighborhoods.

The mission of Community Organization M (COM) is to assist small businesses to succeed by offering free support with small business consulting, tools, and resources. Services include business education, business plan development, market research, export strategy, technology commercialization, strategic planning, human resources and organizational development, and financial management.

Community Organization N (CON) is a community center that provides free year-round programming to youth ages 5-17. Programs in academics, media, health and wellness, science and technology, athletics, music and the arts are taught by local professionals who dedicate their time to reinvesting their skills and knowledge and giving back to the young people. CON desires to transform the community into a just and equitable city by developing and investing in youth.

Community Organization O (COO) sought to meet community needs through connection in order to revive and help the community thrive. The goal of the organization was to establish a community currency network where low-income residents could earn community currency from volunteering, donating, or

helping the community in any way. The community currency could then be exchanged for goods and services.

Community Organization P (COP) is a student and community-run, low-power (LP), radio station. COP features live broadcasts 24/7 through live frequency as well as their online platform, allowing students and local community members to host their own radio shows. Station personnel also conduct live mobile events and shows for the community.

SURVEY OF BUSINESS CAPSTONE CONSULTING PROJECTS

During the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years, five non-profit organizations (community partners) were involved in business capstone consulting projects. The five non-profit organizations were Community Organization A, Community Organization J, Community Organization K, Community Organization N, and Community Organization O. The students involved in these five consulting projects and the non-profit organizations' leaders participated in anonymous, online surveys.

For Community Organization A, the students developed a business plan with focus on organizational and marketing strategies. The students created the organization's website and marketing materials in order for the organization to gain visibility and credibility. A unique outcome of this project was that the organization's leadership believed that the students provided them with strategic planning guidance and direction for the future. Due to limited resources, especially at the early stage of the organization's development, the organization's leadership noted that the consulting project saved the organization time and money. Limited resources are generally typical of non-profit organizations (Cooper & Shumate, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2016).

For Community Organization J, the students developed a plan to recruit and retain volunteers, as well as developed a database to capture and maintain volunteer information. The students developed marketing strategies that included social media. The students also researched grant funding opportunities. After completing this consulting project, a unique outcome was that the project led to a research study by one of the students on the economic impact of immigrant-owned businesses in the local community.

Working with Community Organization K, the students redesigned the organization's website and marketing materials to improve visibility and have potential clients and volunteers apply online. The students digitalized all of the organizations' forms to improve operational efficiency. The students researched grant opportunities and hosted a fundraiser with a local restaurant. The students also designed structured, age-appropriate academic activities for the students and recruited various faculty members to volunteer as facilitators. This project's unique outcome was that all four students involved were asked to join the organization's board of directors; one student accepted.

For Community Organization N, the students focused on four main areas: revenue generation, marketing, technology, and educational services. The students researched grant opportunities and reviewed the organization's tracking of grant funding and compliance. The students also assessed the feasibility of leasing and renting portions of the building for revenue generation. The organization's website was revised and a marketing campaign was developed. The students recommended data management systems to better track attendance and technology improvements such as firewalls, servers, and computers. The students researched and recommended educational programs to enhance the organization's tutorial programs.

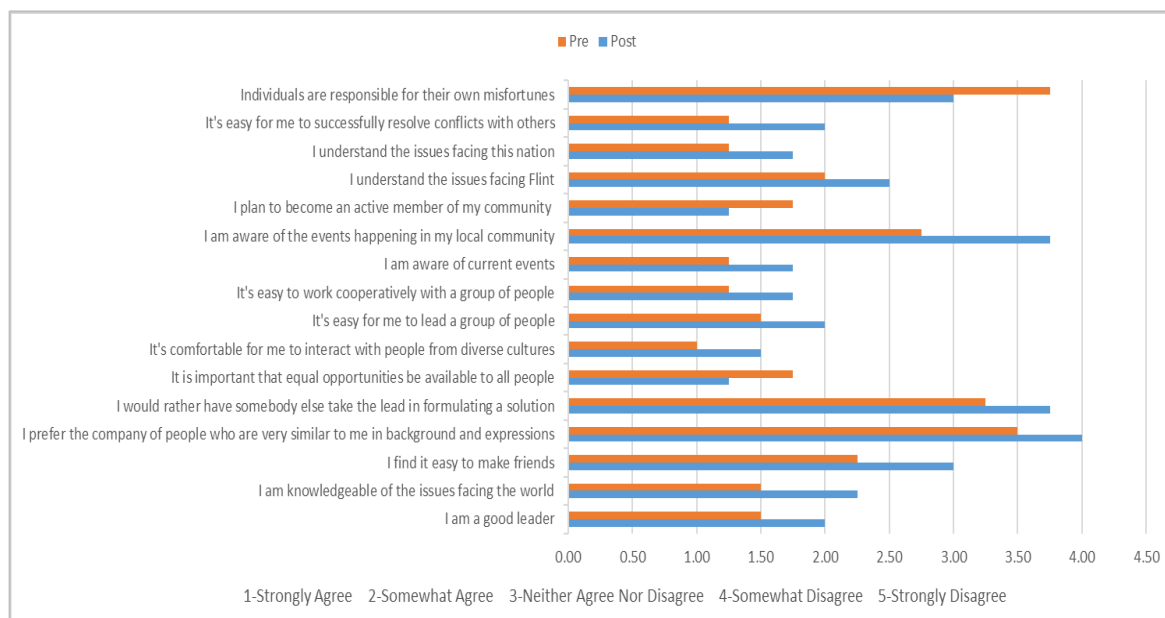
Working with Community Organization O, the students conducted a feasibility study on establishing a community currency network among residents and businesses in the community. The students researched the concept of community currency and analyzed several geographic and business-based models in the United States. The students also researched legal, regulatory, and tax implications involving community currency. The organization's leadership was provided with additional resources and insight with time and money savings.

STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

Students completed the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ) twice: once at the beginning of the course and once at the end after the consulting project was completed. The survey was administered online using Qualtrics survey software to collect quantitative data. Twelve out of 18 students completed both surveys.

The CASQ allows students to self-evaluate their attitudes and skills regarding civic and social issues. The CASQ measures six scales: Civic Action, Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills, Political Awareness, Leadership Skills, Social Justice Attitudes, and Diversity Attitudes. The CASQ is not discipline-specific. Research using the CASQ has shown that service-learning increases students' civic attitudes, students' desire for social justice, and it promotes soft skills such as leadership, creativity, initiative, and communication (Moely et al., 2002). Table 4 highlights student attitudes, behaviors, and skills with the greatest change.

TABLE 4
STUDENT ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS, & SKILLS WITH THE GREATEST CHANGE



Overall, in the pre- and post-tests, the students agreed to become active members in their communities. The pre- and post-tests displayed positive trends regarding Civic Action, Social Justice, and Diversity Attitudes. However, the post-test indicated slightly less confidence in Leadership Skills; awareness of current events; and understanding of local, national, and global issues.

Palombaro et al. (2018) found that students may overestimate their abilities early on in an academic program and are more accurate in self-assessment later on. Haber-Curan and Stewart (2015) noted the same for students' self-assessment of leadership: "In short, this service-learning experience, coupled with the new experiences in college thus far, may provide a new glimpse into a broader reality for students. They may realize that they were good leaders in settings with which they were familiar or in which they were established, but that their abilities to lead may be context-dependent or even based on their own interest level." (p.13)

Students found the business consulting, capstone experience beneficial. Some of the students' comments from the end-of-course evaluations were as follows.

“I never experienced a class where I could see the direct impact of my work.”

“This experience has enhanced my ability to provide solutions to small businesses, serve the community, enhance my skills as a project manager, and gain a sense of meaning for the work I provide to others.”

“I felt purpose in creating value for [organization] and their patrons.”

“It’s fair to say I don’t have a great connection with the community, but working with [organization] has certainly opened my eyes to the idea of community mindedness.”

“While I never considered non-profit work to be something that I was interested in, I was surprised to find that I rather enjoyed the taste of it that I got during this course, and will perhaps pursue it further after my academic career.”

“The closer I get to graduation next term and my own personal research has me really excited about getting involved with non-profits, and I am looking at a couple to try and apply for a board position as treasurer.”

“I think [organization] has something special and I really hope to check back in with them in a while and see how far they have come.”

“I am now able to do things, but for a reason, to change someone’s life, to develop the local economy, to serve others; rather than making a car more efficient, or creating more profit for a company.”

COMMUNITY PARTNER SURVEY RESULTS

Service-learning research has shown that community partners receive direct benefits from projects. In their research, Rinaldo, Davis, and Borunda (2015) described three benefits identified by nine community partners: (a) there were extra hands of volunteers to assist in carrying out the daily tasks in face of resource constraints, (b) there was access to expertise beyond the capabilities of their respective organizations, and (c) there was an opportunity to engage younger minds and recruit creative thinkers to help address issues facing their respective organizations. Similarly, Brand, Brascia, and Sass (2019) reported in their research that their community partner’s experience was also largely positive. Using a post-course survey, the community partner reported that working with the students and faculty made her feel valued by the university as an expert and as a representative of her organization. She appreciated being involved in the students’ learning and developing a relationship with faculty to improve their awareness of community issues (Brand, Brascia, & Sass, 2019). In a much larger study, Sandy and Holland (2006) conducted a qualitative study of focus groups with 99 community partners across eight California campuses. Community partners discussed their perceptions regarding benefits to the academic institutions and the organizations’ impact on student learning. The community partners expressed a dedication to student learning as a reason for participating in service-learning classes (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

To assess whether the community partners were feeling similarly impacted by the business consulting projects, the Community Partner Impact Survey (Gelmon et al., 2001), was distributed to each of the five community partners following completion of the business consulting project to collect qualitative data. While the community partners reported some challenges; overall, they reported that they were extremely or moderately satisfied with their experiences. Their responses included benefits such as the following.

- New insights about the organization and its operation
- Enhanced offerings of services
- Increased funding opportunities

- Increased value of services
- Access to university technology and expertise
- Identification of additional volunteers
- New connections or networks with other community groups

Some of the community partners' comments from the survey were as follows.

“The Capstone Seniors helped to bring portions of our re-organization goals to fruition.”

“A team of students developed our draft business, organizational and marketing plans, which are helping our board plan for the organization's future. A student from the team developed our website, which helps us gain visibility and credibility.”

“One of the students was grappling with health issues which took him away from school for a portion of the semester. I was impressed that he followed through to the end. If he had been healthier, I think his portion of the deliverables would have been stronger.”

“The team of students acted as a consulting team. Their work with our organization provided a resume-building learning experience for them and saved us from having to pay for professional consulting services at this early stage in our organization's development. Also, time is money and they saved us time by developing first drafts of important organizational documents.”

“The best part of the experience for me has been seeing the perceptions of not only our area, but the entire city, change for the students, along with the relationships that have formed as they have engaged with the community.”

“I am very appreciative of the professionalism and enthusiasm that the Capstone students showed towards this project.”

“The team of students was energetic and stayed in regular communication with me throughout the process. The information they needed from me and questions they asked pushed me to develop key early documents for our organization which I was working toward anyway (budget, website text, theory of change, etc.). The products they produced are already proving helpful to me.”

“If I could change anything, it would simply be for us to have the capacity to do more activities and provide more services allowing more opportunity for students to engage with the community and build upon those relationships.”

“Our collaborative relationship with the university has helped to enable our organization to improve and increase the level of services we are able to provide our clients.”

CONCLUSIONS

This paper is based on the literature and the author's experience in teaching courses involving student-team business consulting. By working with non-profit organizations, students could assist organizational leaders in developing and implementing appropriate business strategies. Students were directly exposed to the challenges of these organizations in managing their respective sustainable growth and development. As an outgrowth, students were also exposed to the environmental, social, and economic sustainability challenges of the community in which their university is located.

Although the business capstone students attended a university in a particular city, the students were largely unfamiliar with the city. The students investigated the city's demographics and connected that to their business consulting projects. The students needed to assess how to run a non-profit organization in a city where over 35% of the population lives under the national poverty line. The students had to reflect on how the city's population was impacted by sustainability issues such as hunger, environmental injustice, gender and racial inequalities, limited literacy, and other socioeconomic factors. Taking on sustainability challenges such as these takes time, maturity, and significant reflection. This reflects the power of experiential pedagogies such as student-team business consulting to address inequality, transform learning, and address community-identified needs.

Student-team business consulting as a community engagement activity implies a focus on skill development for life. Students are expected to skillfully utilize their technical and content knowledge as they complete the various consulting assignments. As students work in consulting teams, they enhance their conceptual skills and develop a strategic mindset that will serve them well throughout their professional careers. By working with non-profit organizations, students develop a willingness to serve their communities as well as improve the lives of those who are underrepresented and/or reside in marginalized communities.

The consulting projects aided in the students' transition to their careers and becoming agents of social good (e.g., to serve others, to change someone's life, to develop a local economy). Many of the students commented that due to this experience, they plan to be active members in their communities and volunteer to help non-profit organizations; being civic-minded citizens. Several students felt a sense of purpose in creating value for the organizations and their clientele because they saw the direct impact of their work. Students experienced making a difference and building relationships. Many of the students felt the experience was relational and not transactional.

The students felt empowered and even humbled aiding nonprofit organizations. The students recognized that by assisting the nonprofit organizations to improve their business practices, they were indirectly contributing to the nonprofits' missions in serving the community. The students were able to see some of the challenges the non-profit sector encounters and the challenges within the communities served. Limited resources made it difficult for the students to implement some of their strategic initiatives. Due to the limited resources, the students had to learn how to make many of the solutions manageable for the non-profits.

The students sometimes exhibited frustration as they were taken outside of their comfort zones. The classroom can be a safe, controlled environment where the business concepts learned should generate predictable and fairly accurate solutions. This did not always happen for the students with their consulting projects. The students were sometimes frustrated due to difficulties handling ambiguity, lack of resources, and not always receiving information timely (if the information was available) from the non-profit's leadership and staff. As instructors, we need to see this not as a challenge, but an opportunity to develop students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In the consulting projects, this caused the students to need to be more open-minded and flexible. For the author, there was a need to better prepare the students by alerting them to potential challenges, and allowing them to reflect on how they might address those challenges beforehand.

The study was not without limitations, which provides avenues for further inquiry. The sample sizes (both students and community partners) were small; a larger number of participants could enhance the results' generalization. The study focused on a single university and a single community; other investigations could be expanded to consider multiple universities across multiple communities. The students and community partners were surveyed at the end of their respective consulting projects. Future research is needed to investigate the influence on students beyond the completion of the consulting project on their community and civic engagement, especially in terms of sustainability. Future research is also needed to investigate the sustainability and performance outcomes of the non-profit organizations beyond the completion of the consulting project due from the student consulting services.

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