

# Nonprofit Partners' Perceptions of Organizational and Community Impact Based on a Long-Term Academic Service-Learning Partnership

Jeannette Kindred

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## Abstract

This research summarizes organizational and community impacts reported by nonprofit community partners participating in an academic service-learning program with communication capstone students at Eastern Michigan University. Community partners discussed internal and external communication-focused capstone projects, perceived short-term and long-term impacts, as well as organizational versus community impact. Analysis of the data revealed that internally focused projects delivered more long-term impact at the organizational level, while several of the externally focused projects delivered short-term impact at both the organizational and community level. A small number of projects delivered little to no impact. In addition, three specific long-term organizational impacts were discovered: new organizational learning, enhanced personal and professional development, and increased student engagement. While student learning outcomes related to service-learning have been well documented, this research adds to the growing body of literature on the organizational and community outcomes associated with academic service-learning courses. This research also illustrates the need for communication-focused projects within the nonprofit sector. Advanced undergraduate students in communication and other allied disciplines are ready and able to fill such needs in meaningful ways through these partnerships.

## Introduction

In 2008, the communication program at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in Ypsilanti, Michigan developed "Communication Capstone," an academic service-learning (AS-L) course required for all communication majors. Students partner with a nonprofit organization and utilize their communication knowledge and skills to complete a minimum 30-hour communication-focused service project that fills an important need for that nonprofit. Students are responsible for reaching out to nonprofit organizations in the community (where they live, work, or within the community surrounding EMU) and inquiring about any needs they could fill. The student then negotiates with the nonprofit to clarify the parameters of the project so that the project is balanced and reciprocal; in other words that the project fulfills an important need for the nonprofit and provides a meaningful learning opportunity for the student.

Communication-focused projects with nonprofit partners that our communication capstone students take on must be indirect service versus direct service. Direct service is service that has an immediate and direct impact on

the organization or clients (such as office filing, tutoring, or serving food to the homeless), whereas indirect service involves identifying broader needs of the organization and community and is typically more project based (Types of Service-Learning, 2020). The types of indirect service projects our students complete are both internally and externally communication-focused and include, for example, creating marketing materials, creating and/or updating websites and social media accounts, planning and executing events, planning and promoting fundraisers, organizing donation drives, collecting data and presenting it to organizational stakeholders, creating and/or updating internal process documents (such as volunteer manuals), etc.

We sought to assess the impact of our program, though our initial efforts were informal. Capstone instructors anecdotally report that the AS-L assignment as part of the course has been largely successful, and that students are able to apply what they have learned in the communication program. Additionally, through informal end-of-semester letters and feedback surveys, nonprofit community partners consistently reported positive perceptions of the students' work and positive perceptions of

the impact the work has had on their organizations. However, these reported positive impacts have not been systematically tracked and assessed, and we do not know if the impacts are reaching beyond the organization to the larger community level. Thus, we took a more formal approach to assessing our program.

The focus of this research is to gain insights on organizational and community impacts, as reported by the nonprofit partners with whom we have partnered in the past. This paper reports general findings from confidential interviews conducted with 19 nonprofit leaders representing 15 different nonprofit organizations with a variety of missions. Reported impacts as a direct result of the completed service projects, as well as the indirect and unexpected impacts of partnering with our program and our students, are discussed. While the findings of this research are largely positive, concerns with some of the project outcomes were noted and will also be addressed.

## Literature Review

Academic service-learning “utilizes community service to help students gain a deeper understanding of course content, acquire new knowledge, and engage in civic activity” (Stacey, Rice, & Langer, 1997, p. 1). AS-L has as its primary goal reciprocal benefits to both students and nonprofit organizations and their communities (Furco, 1996).

The majority of research has established a clear connection between academic service-learning and student learning. For example, students who participate in AS-L courses often report increased feelings of responsibility toward their communities (Hébert & Hauf, 2015). In addition, research has shown that service-learning experience predicts an increase in students achieving specific learning outcomes versus students who have not participated (Prentice & Robinson, 2010). Finally, researchers have found a link between academic service-learning and student retention (Gallini & Moely, 2003; Bringle, Hatcher, & Muthiah, 2010).

While there is a large body of research linking AS-L with student benefits, there is much less published literature documenting community or organizational impacts (Vogel & Seifer, 2011; A. Tinkler, B. Tinkler, Hausman, & Tufo-Strouse, 2014). The literature review here will summarize briefly some of the research on impacts and the assessment of organizational and community impacts.

## *AS-L and Organizational/Community Impacts: What Do We Know?*

“There is no doubt that there is far more evidence about the effects of service-learning on students than about its effects on the community” (Jacoby, 2014, p. 166). Academic service-learning and its impact on the nonprofit organization or agency partner specifically has been reported in the literature, more so than impacts on the community. Identifying community impacts can be challenging as they can take time to emerge. “One likely explanation for the limited empirical research exploring the broad impacts of service-learning is that these outcomes may require a number of years to achieve” (Vogel & Seifer, 2011, p. 188). Community impacts as a direct result of student engagement in AS-L are difficult to assess in general, beyond asking community partners their perceptions of this kind of impact.

Astin (2000) notes that research on service-learning needs to examine not only student outcomes, but outcomes at the organizational level as well. Several specific positive impressions and organizational impacts as reported by community partners have been documented in the literature, both short-term and long-term. In a basic sense, immediate positive outcomes, such as completion of and satisfaction with the service or project, is considered a short-term positive impact (Irie, Daniel, Cheplick, & Philips, 2010; Reynolds, 2014; Johnson, Goldberg, Willies-Jacobo, Wan, Guluma, & Smith, 2019; Olberding & Hacker, 2016). AS-L also can deliver immediate assistance with needed labor and resources, allowing organizations to complete tasks that otherwise might have never been completed (Blouin & Perry, 2009). These types of tasks and projects can lead to short-term economic and social benefits (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996). Finally, community partners have generally found students to be helpful and dedicated (Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Driscoll et al., 1996).

As for long-term organizational impact, nonprofit organizations have reported using suggestions and ideas from students (Erickson, 2010; Gerstenblatt, 2014). The literature also illustrates reported increased organizational capacity (Erickson, 2010; Driscoll, et al., 1996). Research by Olberding and Hacker (2016), for example, illustrated how nonprofit organizations working with public administration students benefited from multiple projects that helped the organizations build organizational capacity and

enhance their mission over the long-term. Finally, long-term impacts related to relationships with students have been noted, for example the benefits that come with students staying on after a project is completed, students recruiting other student volunteers, and students bringing new ideas to the organization (Blouin & Perry, 2009).

Ferria and Worrall (2000) argue that there is a continued need for research on the community impacts of academic service-learning. Both short-term and long-term community impacts have been reported. For example, Schmidt and Robby (2002) found that college students tutoring has an immediate positive effect on the community (benefiting children) and the service is valued by those receiving it. Irie et al. (2010) reported how an immersive Jewish service-learning (IJSJL) project motivated increased participation from community members and enhanced cultural exchange opportunities. Beyond immediate benefits to the community, long-term impacts have been noted as well. Irie et al. (2010) note that community partners in the IJSJL experience could discuss in detail the long-term community benefits, in particular “the expansion of the communities’ capacity to address ongoing needs. ...Among the indicators of enhanced community capacity cited were new knowledge, strengthened intra-community communications and more effective leaders” (p. 7). Long-term, all participants in service-learning can also be impacted by a change in beliefs, values, and attitudes as a result of the experience (Astin, 2000). In addition, community partners have reported a perceived enhanced legitimacy and value to the community as a result of participating in AS-L programs (Erickson, 2010).

Not all findings are positive, however. Steimel (2013) identified several frustrations and concerns as voiced by community partners, including student lack of interest, and focus on completing the required hours more than on the actual contribution they were making or the learning they were gaining through the experience. Blouin and Perry (2009) identify several obstacles to successful academic service-learning, including poorly prepared students, lack of professionalism among students, and “investments of resources that do not yield tangible returns for the organization” (p. 126).

#### *Assessing Organizational and Community Impacts: How Do We Do It?*

“Quality assessment legitimizes both service-learning and community engagement and is a

fruitful strategy for improvement and future planning” (Waters & Anderson-Lain, 2014, p. 118).

Assessment of community impact should include a way to examine the benefits for the community partner as well as the relationship between the community partner and the institution (Waters & Anderson-Lain, 2014).

There are several benefits to assessing community impact of academic service-learning courses. Making community impact data visible can work to encourage continued institutional commitment to AS-L and potentially expands faculty involvement in creating service-learning courses (Erickson, 2010). However, one of the most challenging aspects in terms of researching and assessing the impacts of service-learning on nonprofit organizations and the community is simply the fact that it is difficult to articulate and categorize what is meant by impact. Bringle and Hatcher (2009) discuss the breadth of impact versus the depth of impact of service-learning. Tracking breadth includes counting and describing things like the number of classes, number of community partners, and the general range of issues addressed through the AS-L programs. “While numbers do not reflect the impact of service-learning on students, communities, and institutions, they are one measure of output” (Jacoby, 2014, p. 156).

Tracking the depth of impact includes examining specifically student learning outcomes and how they are met through the AS-L experience. Depth also refers to the “long-term reciprocal partnerships with community organizations that address community needs” (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009, p. 38). Community impact assessment should try to consider internal factors (such as beliefs and values) as well as external factors (organizational changes or policy, for example) (Srinivas, Meenan, Drogin, & DePrince, 2015).

Depth of impact can also be viewed and assessed as either direct or indirect (Erickson, 2010). Direct impact includes community development improvements, for example, and economic and social benefits to the nonprofit organization as a direct result of the project or service work. Indirect impact includes often unintended outcomes such as access to new relationships and networks, enhanced legitimacy, and appreciating the “fresh eyes” (from students) as part of the AS-L partnership.

The type of data to collect for community impact assessment is also an important consideration. Assessment should be systematic and include quantitative, qualitative, and case

study data (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). For example, Driscoll et al. (1996) articulated an AS-L assessment model for the assessment of students, faculty, institutions, and the community and advanced several community assessment indicators. Community indicators include such items as the nature of the partnership, perceived capacity, economic and social benefits, new insights about operations and activities at the organizational level, and satisfaction with partnership/relationship with the university.

Qualitative data such as interviews and focus groups are ideal ways to assess impacts of service-learning, in particular talking to and gaining the perceptions of community partners (Cooks & Scharrer, 2006). Tinkler et al. (2014) note that within the academic literature, “there is insufficient attention paid to the efficacy of service-learning from the perspective of community partners” (p. 149), yet this method of obtaining feedback is considered ideal. D’Arlach, Sánchez, and Feuer (2009) argue that those receiving the service are best able to provide a thorough and honest assessment of the outcomes of AS-L. And despite legitimate concerns about interviewing community partners (Irie et al., 2010) “involving the community in evaluating the project and the partnership is imperative for comprehensive understanding of the tangible and intangible outcomes” (Reynolds, 2014, p. 87).

### *Summary*

Service-learning as a pedagogy is important, valued, and receives tremendous support across many college campuses. Understanding the “service” side of service-learning and the impacts of that service will increasingly become more important, in particular because of the popularity and reach of this teaching methodology. Leigh and Kenworthy (2018) explain:

There is a vast global network of service-learning scholars and practitioners. Service-learning is a teaching tool used across multiple disciplines and at every level of education from primary through tertiary. Its application can be seen in teaching environments extending well beyond North American institutions. In fact, service-learning is a domain that has attracted attention and application from academics all over the world (p. 2).

Understanding perceptions of organizational

and community impact as reported by nonprofit partners, then, is incredibly important. From a student learning perspective, the more we know about the overall outcomes of academic service-learning, for both communities and students, then the closer we get to moving our students towards reciprocal citizenship (Musil, 2003). Reciprocal citizenship envisions students negotiating with community partners to develop an appropriate project, and ultimately, through the experience, students “regard the community not as deprived but as a resource to empower and be empowered by” (Musil, 2003, p. 7).

The knowledge gained from this research will contribute to the academic service-learning literature on organizational and community impacts, can inform pedagogy and practice, and potentially enhance any service-learning partnership between universities and communities. Understanding how to measure this kind of impact can also support any university’s efforts regarding accreditation, in particular Criterion 3e, that “the institution demonstrates any claims it makes about contributions to its students’ educational experience by virtue of aspects of its mission, such as research, community engagement, service learning, religious or spiritual purpose, and economic development” (Criteria for Accreditation, 2014).

The overall goal of this research, then, is to investigate how required university and community engagement, specifically an academic service-learning course “Communication Capstone,” impacts the community generally and a variety of nonprofit organizations specifically. The following exploratory question guided this study: What are the reported organizational and community impacts of a required communication academic service-learning program on nonprofit organizations and their communities?

### **Method**

The methods and findings reported in this article are part of a larger project that investigated AS-L outcomes and the relationship between the communication capstone program and our community partners. The larger study included both a survey and interviews; however, this article focuses solely on AS-L outcomes as reported from in-depth interviews with community partners. The Human Subjects Review Committee of Eastern Michigan University reviewed and approved this study.

**Participants.** A convenience sample of 45 representatives from 40 different nonprofit

organizations that had partnered with communication capstone students from September 2016 through April 2018 were invited to participate in an interview. It was not possible to obtain names and contact information for all organizations who partnered with our students during this time frame, as several different faculty members teach the course and keep track of their own students' partnership information. In addition, some organization contact information was incomplete or unavailable. After accounting for duplications (many of the organizations had experience working with different capstone courses), I was able to obtain contact information for 40 unique organizations. Email invitations were sent out soon after each semester was over, so participants' insights and recollections would be fresh.

I had an established relationship with about half of the invited representatives, as I designed the course and have taught multiple sections since its inception in 2008. All interviewees were in leadership or coordinator positions (executive director, volunteer coordinator, etc.) at their respective nonprofits. Of those invitations, 19 representatives from 15 nonprofit organizations agreed to participate (I had an established relationship with eight of the organizations; the other seven had partnered with students from capstone courses other than mine).

A variety of organizational missions were represented. Seven organizations focused on Education and Research; four were focused on Human Services; and one each representing Arts and Culture, International/Health, Sports, and Animal Welfare. The organizations were located in either Washtenaw or Wayne County, Michigan. Participants talked about their perceptions of the impact of a total of 34 communication-based projects, 11 internally focused and 23 externally focused.

**Procedures.** Interviews took place in September/October 2017, January 2018, and July/August 2018. I interviewed one representative from each organization except for two organizations where multiple representatives asked to be interviewed together; this scheme resulted in a total of 15 completed interviews. Interviews ranged in length from 24 minutes to 51 minutes and were audio recorded. I transcribed all the interviews. Eleven interviews were held in person and four were conducted over the phone.

Agency representatives and interviewees were asked first to report the approximate

number of capstone projects supervised since they began partnering with the capstone course. Of the 15 organizations, six reported one project experience with capstone; seven organizations had supervised between two and seven projects; and two organizations reported 10 or more projects supervised since the beginning of their relationship with the capstone course. Interviewees with multiple experiences talked about the most memorable projects they had supervised within the last few semesters. Most of the organizations discussed one or two projects; four of the organizations with more experience with the capstone program discussed three, four, or five projects. A total of 34 projects were discussed.

Interview questions were developed based on important community impact factors as identified by Waters and Anderson-Lain (2014), and Driscoll, et al. (1996), including the perceived benefits of service-learning on the following: capacity to fulfill organizational mission; economic and social benefits to the organization; satisfaction with the partnership; perception of the university; and potential for sustainability and future partnerships. The interviews were comprehensive, and inquired about the process, expectations, and satisfaction with the program and relationship with the university, as well as overall project outcomes and perceived impacts of different types of projects. Clarification questions were asked and summary statements provided during each interview to establish trust and rapport with participants and to ensure as much accuracy as possible in responses. This article reports themes and examples from interviewees' perceptions regarding direct and indirect organizational and community impacts as a result of partnering with the capstone program, and does not report on satisfaction with the program and university overall. See Appendix A for the complete interview protocol.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using the Constant Comparative (CC) method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The CC method is an inductive approach to data analysis that involves comparing and contrasting pieces of data in order to form themes or categories. Categories should emerge from the data analysis, and can then be used to discern theory (grounded theory approach). However, constant comparative itself can be utilized as a method on its own without the goal of theory development (Fram, 2013). For purposes of this study, the CC method was employed outside of the traditional grounded theory approach,

as articulated by Fram. The data analysis was modeled after Fram's approach, where she used qualitative data and the CC method to confirm that something existed versus analyzing the data in order to "identify an emerging substantive theory" (p. 11). Upon reviewing research findings on academic service-learning and organizational and community impacts, it was clear to me that although the literature is limited, there is evidence that communities and nonprofit organizations do benefit in some ways from student engagement in academic service-learning. The goal then of interviewing nonprofit partners was to specifically identify and articulate these reported impacts, as related to communication-focused AS-L projects.

Seven of the interviews were conducted in the fall of 2017. Initial themes were identified at that time. Five additional interviews were conducted in the winter of 2018, and another three interviews conducted in summer 2018. Analysis of these additional interviews revealed the same previously identified themes, and no new themes/categories emerged as a result of this additional data collection.

## Results

Overall, the results of the interviews reveal that communication-focused academic service-learning projects can lead to positive impacts on the community and the participating organizations, as perceived by nonprofit community leaders, both in the short and long-term. Interviewees were able to describe impacts that were directly a result of the students' work, such as economic impacts and increased organizational capacity. The interviewees also articulated indirect impacts as a result of the partnership in general, and were not necessarily an outcome of the students' efforts directly.

Twenty-eight of the 34 projects discussed (82%) were deemed successful, although six were perceived to deliver little if any impacts. Overall, these results are encouraging not only for our capstone program but for consideration by all kinds of academic service-learning experiences.

The results that follow will describe both direct (short-term and long-term) and indirect (long-term) organizational and community impacts of partnering with the communication capstone program. Direct impacts are the positive or negative outcomes of the project itself and the students' effort on the project. Indirect impacts are the largely long-term, positive outcomes that come with partnering with the capstone program, but not outcomes directly related to a specific project.

## *Direct Impacts*

This section will summarize the reported short- and long-term impacts from internal and external projects. See Tables 1 and 2 for a summary of impact.

### **Communication-focused projects (internal).**

Interviewees discussed a variety of internally focused communication-based projects that led to direct impact for the organization. Students created or edited office and volunteer manuals and internship training guidebooks. Students finalized a donor management system, tagged and organized photos for use on the web and social media, and developed educational programming for internal and external constituents. A total of 11 internal projects were specifically discussed in the interviews by seven of the organizations.

All but two of those projects were perceived to have delivered long-term impacts at the organizational level. Several of the interviewees talked about students creating important internal documentation and how they are still using those documents today. For example, one of the education-focused nonprofits stated the following:

I think there are a number of products that we wouldn't have had, that would have stayed on our wish list...now we have them. In that way it has built our capacity. Probably the best example is the process documentation for doing our data entry. ...We can now hand off data entry to committed volunteers and feel like we have a training document that they can take with them and we only need to then spend a limited time with them.

An animal-focused nonprofit also had a student create several internal manuals for them and the volunteer coordinator reported very positive impact as well:

The manuals for the youth volunteers and the interns are just really helpful. I can turn that manual over to one of our mentors for the youth program, or to an intern that is coming in and they can do something independently while I am busy. ...It's just been really helpful to have some really clear directions.

Another successful project involved a partnership with an international organization and

the creation of an internally shared social media marketing plan. The program manager there was extremely happy with the outcome and predicted that it would deliver long-term positive outcomes for the organization. The program manager said:

I think we will see more of the results now with our new executive director and the marketing plan; it's all still in the works. We are starting to implement the plan. She has only been with us for two months but when she saw it she was like ... 'This is so great' so it will help, we are going to see more of the results of this plan.

Two of the internal-focused projects completed by our students did not appear to provide any kind of impact, either short-term or long-term. One was a project involving foundations and grants research, and another was a project that required a student to research and develop a new educational program for youth volunteers. One of the nonprofit spokespersons stated:

The foundation research project was not so great. There were a lot of miscommunications. And I think ultimately it was because it was a dry project. For the program development project, the reasons for no impact were more related to the preparedness and

professionalism of the student. The executive director reported that the student did not complete the necessary research needed for the project, was slow in responding to emails, and missed important deadlines.

**Communication-focused projects (external).**

The majority of the projects discussed in the interviews (23, as reported by 13 of the nonprofit spokespersons interviewed) were externally focused. Students created awareness campaigns, launched social media sites and wrote social media content, wrote press releases and other promotional materials, created web content, assisted in a variety of event planning activities, and coordinated donation drives. Impact of these projects was varied.

By and large, externally focused projects were reported as generating mostly short-term organizational impact. There was some community impact reported with the externally focused projects versus none with the internally focused projects, and some of these projects were perceived as having a combination of both organizational and community impact. Four of the externally focused projects discussed were perceived as delivering little to no impact for either the organization or community.

**Table 1.** Internal Project Direct Impacts: 11 Total

|                                          | Organi-<br>zational<br>Impact | Community<br>Impact | Organiza-<br>tional and<br>Community<br>Impact |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Short-<br>Term<br>Impact                 | 0                             | 0                   | 0                                              |
| Long-Term<br>Impact                      | 9                             | 0                   | 0                                              |
| Short- and<br>Long-Term<br>Impact        | 0                             | 0                   | 0                                              |
| Little to no impact internal projects: 2 |                               |                     |                                                |

**Table 2.** External Project Direct Impacts: 23 Total

|                                          | Organi-<br>zational<br>Impact | Community<br>Impact | Organiza-<br>tional and<br>Community<br>Impact |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Short-<br>Term<br>Impact                 | 5                             | 1                   | 6                                              |
| Long-Term<br>Impact                      | 0                             | 3                   | 0                                              |
| Short- and<br>Long-Term<br>Impact        | 1                             | 0                   | 3                                              |
| Little to no impact internal projects: 4 |                               |                     |                                                |

Generating immediate awareness through planning events or creating marketing materials for the organization is the primary organizational impact for externally focused projects. Some agencies could even speak to more specific economic or social benefits to their organizations. For example, a social services agency spokesperson who has had students help with event planning commented that “an event has a moment. ... Student involvement has kept it fresh for the people coming to this event year after year” and added that important specific benefits were “getting more young people and increased revenue.”

That some of the interviewees could discuss perceived community impact with the external projects was not surprising, as these projects were centered on events, newsletters, donation drives, or any kind of project that connected with the community directly. For example, an education-focused organization had capstone students write and distribute a newsletter that was designed for several different audiences. The executive director, who felt this project delivered important impact, said: “This touches so many constituents...so many different people, so it feels like the impact in that sense is far greater.”

The external projects that were reported to deliver both organization and community impact were varied, and involved event planning, communicating with clients, or producing informational or marketing materials, such as a newsletter. A youth education-focused nonprofit discussed how having students working on event planning not only helps them build organizational capacity, but also impacts the community as the students ultimately interact with and work with children and youth at the various events. The representative from the sports-focused organization indicated that the event planning and career fair workshop that our students planned and executed led to money being raised for the organization, the gaining of additional sponsors, and jobs and internship offers for at least three of the workshop participants.

One student completed a diaper donation drive for a social services agency serving families and children, and this project was also perceived to deliver both community and organizational impact. The project was perceived to have immediate impact for the clients they serve, with the volunteer coordinator noting that:

The collection items are not covered under government assistance and we don't ever get grants for those...they barely exist. So, these are real needs for our families... and when diapers are being brought in for one, it's making people aware in the community that we are here and that these are the needs that we have.

The donation drive that she is describing not only positively impacted the community (families in need of diapers) but also had an organizational impact as it brought new awareness to their agency and mission.

A few of the externally focused projects can be described as “one shot” tasks that repeat every semester. These projects have been very successful in delivering immediate short-term impact and for some, long-term impact for organizations and communities. For example, projects involving students working on social media, marketing, and newsletters overall were reported as being successful. Nonprofits often do not have staff or capacity to keep up on communicating with their publics via social media and newsletters, and that is where our students can serve. One education-focused agency requests one of our students each semester to write and design a weekly email newsletter and update. The interviewee described how this regular and repeat project was recently successful:

...in terms of building capacity and building trust with our organization. We are really trying to be community facing...we are a community institution and want to engage with you. Having the emails regularly sent (the community) knows what is going on, what we are giving you, etc., those things are huge in terms of our reputation as an organization that engages and is not isolated.

Another example of a repeat project is one where students work on writing client and donor profiles for a social services agency. The profiles students write impact the organization in an immediate (short-term) sense as they are posted to the agency website and thus bring awareness to the organization. There is long-term impact as well, as students complete several profiles during the semester, so the organization has a “bank”

that they can continue to use and post long after the student is gone. This kind of project obviously positively impacts the organization but there is also a perception that it has a powerful effect on the community. The executive director reported that “The clients have been very friendly to the students...it’s also good for the students, it really allows people to get to know each other. I think the community appreciates seeing younger people involved in helping us and them.”

Four of the externally focused projects were reported as delivering little to no impact, and for all of these, the primary reason given was lack of ability, effort, or professionalism on the part of students. A program coordinator from a youth social enterprise had experience supervising four projects and while he was able to tell me that “the majority of my projects have come off pretty good,” there was one in particular (promotion of summer youth camps) where “students completely dropped the ball and were constantly pointing fingers at each other.” A program coordinator for a youth-focused social service agency who worked with a student whose task was to design and write an annual report was disappointed because “it just wasn’t quality enough.”

### *Indirect Impacts*

Agency representatives from 13 of the 15 organizations easily talked about things they did not necessarily expect and that were not directly tied to the project outcomes. These unintended, long-term, organizational impacts fell into three clear categories: new learning and insight into their organization; increased student engagement; and enhanced personal and professional development.

**New learning and insight into the organization.** Eight organization representatives reported that they or their organization had gained new insight or new learning as a result of partnering with the communication capstone program. The interviewees who discussed “new insight” were grateful for what they could take away from the experience as it relates to strengthening their organization going forward. So any new learning gained was always discussed in the sense that it would potentially have a long-term impact. An employee of a girl’s youth agency said that taking on a capstone student and supervising the awareness campaign project “highlighted for us that there is so much more we should be talking about.” An animal welfare organization took on a student to create youth programming and training material, and while the volunteer coordinator interviewed

reported that the results of the student’s work provided little to no impact on the organization, the mere fact that the project was initiated brought her significant new insight. She said, “I really think the project just showed us that this is the direction that we need to go.”

Also related to this theme were the agencies that discussed the new insight gained from working with students specifically, and what they could learn from them. For example, a director from an education-focused organization reported that he “learned how to create a Google Doc” from capstone students. The interviewee from an international health agency was enthusiastic when she concluded: “The students brought different ideas that I would not have ever thought of. Between youth and experience, it makes a nice outcome.” Along the same lines another nonprofit leader noted that “you get a lot more experiences with the nuances of communication when you’re working with college students.”

**Increased student engagement.** Five organizations reported that they saw or expect increased student engagement with their nonprofit as a result of partnering with the communication capstone program.

The first way this theme emerged was with organizations discussing the positive aspects to enhanced student awareness. The project coordinator from a youth social enterprise said about working with students “some of the residual effect is just the fact that more students are being informed of an operation that is on campus...it just helps to build awareness among students.”

The second way this theme came through in the interviewees was nonprofit partners reporting that they had seen renewed student commitment; that is, the student either goes above and beyond in their commitment during the project and/or chooses to stay on and volunteer with the organization after the project is complete and the semester is over. An arts education agency representative was happy to report that the student she worked with “has continued to volunteer with us. I’m really excited that she wants to continue to work with us. This was a really great and unexpected benefit.”

**Enhanced personal and professional development.** Five organization representatives reported that their own personal and professional development had been enhanced through partnering with the capstone AS-L program. The two ways this was seen was through perceived enhanced leadership experience and perceived benefits that come with working with a different generation. The volunteer coordinator from

a literacy and education-focused agency had supervised numerous capstone students in the past and as a result of this experience said, “I am actually better at managing interns now because of having to manage the capstone students.” Similarly, one volunteer coordinator told me the following:

I think the unintended effect has been for me. I don't supervise anyone, as a department of one, and that's where I really want to grow in my career, have some supervisory experience. Managing people has been great for me and good for my career and my resumé too.

The other way this theme presented was in terms of perceiving the benefits of working with and learning from students. For example, the executive director of a youth program, who has multiple staff members who supervise capstone student projects, said, “My team gets good experience working with college students.”

### **Discussion and Implications**

The projects discussed with the interviewees were categorized as internal or external, and nonprofit leaders could confidently talk about their perceptions of impact (short versus long-term; organizational versus community). Internal projects tended to be perceived as having the potential to provide a long-term impact for the organization, overall increasing organizational capacity, which supports previous findings (Erickson, 2010; Olberding & Hacker, 2016). External projects tended to be discussed in terms of their short-term impact for both the organization and community, with some of these projects delivering long-term impact as well.

Both short-term and long-term needs are important to address for nonprofit organizations, especially in a climate of shrinking budgets and limited staff. Some of the nonprofit leaders interviewed regularly request students from our capstone program every semester to take on repeat projects (social media, client profiles, event planning, etc.) that otherwise would never get done due to a shortage of human and financial resources. So, while “questions remain about the impact of students' short-term involvement in community settings” (Nichols, Phipps, & Johnstone, 2014, p. 72), this research illustrates how specifically designed short-term projects can continually support the community while also providing engaging experiences for students,

provided that the long-term infrastructure of the course exists. Our program has begun working with several community partners to identify their communication-based “regular” or “repeat” needs; these projects then are promoted to students in capstone each semester. Our program is also in the process of creating a website that will promote the capstone program and highlight “regular” projects that our students are able to complete each semester. Such efforts would be similar to other kinds of successful and repeat partnerships. For example, Villanova University has sent engineering students to Nicaragua since 2004 to help impoverished communities secure access to clean drinking water (Reynolds, 2014). Academic service-learning programs and projects, no matter the discipline, should consider whether and how often “repeat” projects work as these experiences can provide regular and substantial impact for community partners and significant learning opportunities for students.

There were very few projects that interviewees discussed that were perceived as having little or no impact. These unsuccessful projects were mostly the result of poor student motivation/inaction, or students taking on projects without the necessary skills needed. For example, an animal welfare nonprofit took on a student to help them research and design a volunteer training program (internal focused project), and while the student assured the volunteer coordinator that she was interested in and up to the task, it turned out her research skill set was lacking. A team of two students who were working together on an awareness campaign (external focused project) “completely dropped the ball” and never completed the work.

Some of the interviewees made specific comments about skills (or lack thereof) of the students, and offered specific suggestions on how to maximize the match among the capstone project, students' skills, and organization's needs. For example, one suggested that students complete “a skill or interest inventory...in order to help align the organization's needs with the skill set/passion from the students.” The reasons for unsuccessful projects were not too surprising, and have been documented in the literature (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Steimel, 2013). These findings, however, are important to our overall program assessment, and we are beginning to explore ways to better align student interests, knowledge, and skills with community needs.

Nonprofit leaders interviewed also had realistic expectations about what students can reasonably

do and not do, so they design projects accordingly, with one interviewee telling me “my view of it is if we get a benefit, that’s great.” In general, internal projects that were perceived to have delivered little if any impacts (conducting grants research, writing annual reports, and program planning, for example) may be too challenging for some undergraduate students. External projects that focused on social media and marketing were largely perceived as delivering positive outcomes, but organizations were quick to note where and how students could improve on these kinds of projects (for example understanding how social media might benefit nonprofits versus for-profit organizations). Social media related projects generate excitement among our students. However, just because our students engage in social media does not necessarily mean they know how to manage it professionally and create content for a nonprofit organization.

Overall, it is important to not only accurately discern the needs of nonprofits, but work to find a good fit with the knowledge and abilities of the student. While faculty and instructors can negotiate with community agencies to determine appropriate AS-L projects for students, students can also learn the importance of identifying their own knowledge and skills strengths and weaknesses, and working with a nonprofit to determine a good fit. This type of self-reflection and personal identification, coupled with negotiation experience, can enhance the communication and soft skills of all students, no matter the discipline.

There were several unintended and indirect organizational impacts discussed in the interviews, and they were always perceived as positive. The themes here of “new learning and new insight” and “enhanced personal and professional benefit” were interesting discoveries and support research by Blouin & Perry (2009), who also found similar kinds of long-term outcomes. The nonprofit partners could see the benefits to themselves and their organizations from partnering with the capstone AS-L program. This finding deserves further investigation, as it may have a connection to research in the field of knowledge management (KM) and organizational learning. “The goals of KM are the leveraging and improvement of the organization’s knowledge assets to effectuate better knowledge practices, improved organizational behaviors, better decisions and improved organizational performance” (King, 2009, p. 4). It seems as if there is the potential for AS-L to offer substantial benefits to nonprofits in

regard to enhancing overall their organizational effectiveness.

While indirect impacts that come out of university and community engagement generally are important to discover, assessing the direct impact of students’ efforts on organizations and communities is also critically necessary. This research not only summarizes different kinds of service-learning impact, but also provides a method to uncover such impact and identifies terms for how to define it. Understanding, from community partners’ perspectives, how students’ knowledge and skills transfer to a professional environment is valid data any discipline can consider to improve programs or for university or accrediting body mandated course or program assessment.

## Conclusion

The overall findings are encouraging as they show the positive impact students can make in their communities through participating in academic service-learning. There are some limitations to this qualitative study, however. The sample was small, and additional interviews with a variety of nonprofits from similar and additional missions would help to confirm the themes found here, in particular interviewing nonprofit partners that support AS-L in other disciplines beyond communication. Broadening the interview pool would strengthen the ability to generalize the findings. In addition, while the interviews were comprehensive and member checking for accuracy of responses was done during each interview, systematic member checking after the fact (for example, having interviewees review transcripts for accuracy) may have validated the results even further.

Long-term impacts of AS-L are always challenging to assess, and it is certainly no different in this research. Asking nonprofit leaders whether or not they perceive impact (long-term or otherwise) is an accepted form of indirect assessment for academic service-learning. However, due to perceived or actual power dynamics between universities and communities, it is important to be aware of potential bias (Irie et al., 2010). More research employing direct assessment measures of organizational and community impact of AS-L is needed overall.

The AS-L course that served as the foundation for this study is a required course for communication majors. Mandating AS-L versus making it an option may have a connection to

organizational and community impacts, as there is some debate in the literature as to whether or not requiring AS-L is appropriate (Bullock & Hirsch, 1996; Anderson, 1999), although much of this research is focused on mandating AS-L for K–12 students, not college students. My colleagues and I have seen “less motivated” students muddle through a project, just so they can graduate. Understanding how mandatory service with college students helps or hurts organizations and communities would be an important addition to the literature on the impacts of academic service-learning.

Overall, the findings of this qualitative study support other published research showing how academic service-learning can positively impact organizations and communities. Findings here can be helpful to nonprofit agencies. Community organizations can work to identify both short-term and long-term needs and seek out partnerships with students that would deliver reciprocal benefits. Doing so would not only provide them with specific and measurable impacts, but also have the potential to build the professional knowledge and expertise of their membership.

Finally, these findings can be applied beyond programs in communication. Nonprofits have continued to face financial challenges as well as challenges related to marketing and communication (Horsley, 2017; Coffman, 2005). These are important needs—and ongoing needs—that communication students and perhaps students in other disciplines such as business, marketing, and management can successfully address. Doing so within a structured academic service-learning program provides an important service to organizations while also providing an excellent learning experience for students.

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### About the Author

Jeannette Kindred is a professor of communication media and theatre arts at Eastern Michigan University.

## Appendix A: Interview Protocol Community Partner Semi-Structured Interview EMU Communication Capstone Partnership

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Time begin/end: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of organization: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Interviewee(s): \_\_\_\_\_

### Part 1: Process

1. What project(s) have students worked on for your organization? Please quantify if possible, such as the nature of the work, number and types of any deliverables produced for your agency, etc.
2. What was your favorite thing about working with EMU Communication Capstone Students? What was problematic?
3. Describe the quality of the relationship with EMU Communication Capstone Program. Have you done any other projects with EMU before or since then? Why or why not? How do you feel you were treated by university representatives?
4. Do you feel the student(s)' work was properly designed to serve the organization's needs? Why or why not?
5. Was there adequate communication between your organization, faculty member teaching the course, and student(s)?

### Part 2: Expectations

6. What were your expectations about the partnership and project?
7. How did your attitudes about EMU change as a result of this project (if at all)?
8. In your judgment, did EMU and the Capstone program have the desire, capacity, and institutional support to successfully engage in this program/project?
9. Did your organization and/or community have the desire, capacity, and institutional support to successfully engage in this program/project?

10. Do you feel that student(s) were prepared to take on the project for your organization? If not, what recommendations would you suggest to improve student preparedness?

### Part 3: Results

11. What happened as a result of this project? What has worked well?
12. What did not work well/could have been changed to provide better outcomes for you and your organization?
13. What do you think were the most significant impacts for your organization and the community, if any, of partnering with Capstone students?
14. Overall, do you feel the project(s) allowed you to build your organizational capacity? Why or why not?
15. Do you think the student(s)' work will have a long-lasting effect? Why or why not?
16. Were there any unintended effects (either positive or negative) caused by the student(s)' work?

### Part 4: Wrapping Up

17. Was it worth your investment of time, energy, and money, for the benefits you received?
18. What would you like to see done differently in the future?
19. Are there any other comments you would like to make about the organizational and community impacts of this project?
20. Is there anyone else I should talk to about this project?
21. Is your organization interested in hosting another Capstone student in the future? Why or why not?