

Service Learning Partnership Between University And School Students: Experiential Learning Inspired Through Community Research

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a service learning project implemented jointly by undergraduate and high school students during summer. The service learning project was designed through a Summer Research Institute hosted at a Midwestern University; the institute encouraged faculty to recruit undergraduate students who would partner with area high school students to conduct a community-based research project in their field of interest. The article describes the partnership between students, as well as the experiential learning that occurred during: research topic identification, literature analysis, planning and implementing a mixed-methodology community-based research project, and during the qualitative and quantitative data analysis, by students. Using a mosaic theory, the students inferred relationships between three apparently unrelated spheres of their research: challenges faced by youth in the community, financial health of social services for youth, and corporate philanthropy for youth services. Recommendations for designing creative academic, experiential and service learning projects are offered for all educators.

Keywords: service learning; university and high school students partnership; community-based research; mixed-research designs

INTRODUCTION

Service learning (SL) is an instructional method used by academic disciplines to enhance students' involvement in the community by providing them with several opportunities to complement classroom instructions (Kenworthy-U'Ren & Peterson, 2005). Opportunities in the form of SL projects not only enhance students' abilities in applying academic learning to community issues, but in several instances the projects also address unmet needs in communities (Anderson-Butcher, 2004; Peebles-Wilkins, 2004). SL programs contribute towards improving the educational and social fabric of a community (Anderson-Butcher, 2004).

The SL literature indicates that SL in primary educational institutions not only helps the students in academic ways, it also promotes enhanced school involvement by parents, improves the school environment for learning, increases students' active participation in citizenry, and increases community support in school-based activities (Jones & Hill, 2003, c.f., Otis, 2006; Peebles-Wilkins, 2004). Several authors have acclaimed the importance of meaningful youth participation and civic engagement in creating community change, sometimes through service learning projects (e.g., Carlson, 2006; Golombek, 2006; and, Nygreen, Kwon, & Sanchez, 2006). In order to create leaders for community change, youth ought to be mentored and taught research skills for basing their recommendations for change on sound evidence (Khadaroo, 2007).

Increasingly, SL projects are being used in both public and private institutions of higher education (Kenworthy-U'Ren & Peterson, 2005; Peebles-Wilkins, 2004) because they allow students to apply classroom knowledge and develop critical thinking while addressing human and community needs (Lester, 2005). The

objectives of this paper are as follows: 1) describe recruitment for a unique partnership between university and high school students for implementing a community-research projects; 2) provide rationale for the community research project and its relationship to classroom learning; 3) present literature analysis that guided the research project; 4) describe the experiences of, and learning by, students during planning, implementing and presenting the research project; and 5) portray implications for community members with recommendations for educators.

RECRUITMENT FOR PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

A Summer Research Institute (SRI) hosted by my university each summer provided the opportunity for fostering a partnership between the institution's students and area high school students. The guiding principles for the SRI based partnership were as follows: 1) form a research team comprising of university and high school students; 2) faculty member from any discipline guides the team in planning and conducting a community-based research project that examines an issue in an unprecedented fashion; 3) students pursue topics of interest to them as long as it relates to the courses they have completed during the previous academic year; 4) university students mentor high school students and teach them necessary research skills; and, 5) the team conducts research during summer and presents its project/findings to community members invited for the symposium hosted at the end of summer at the university.

As a faculty member in the Social Work undergraduate program at the Midwestern University, I participated in the SRI by inviting senior level students in the program—during spring semester—to partner with high school students (HSSs) on a project of mutual interest to them. In my discipline, the participating undergraduate student (UGS) was advised to complete courses in community organizing and planning, two research methods courses, and a policy practice course, in order to be well prepared to plan and implement a community-based research project. One student participated in the SRI; she had completed most of the recommended courses during the fall semester and was completing the balance during the spring semester when she decided to enroll in the SRI program. At our preliminary meeting in spring, she expressed interest in youth related issues, and we presented this interest to students in psychology and business courses in a local high school.

One of the three area high-schools was identified for the partnership because I knew some students and teachers at the school. Consequently, it was relatively easy to “gain entry” into a class for making our presentation and recruiting high school students who shared similar research interest with the UGS. Teachers from the aforementioned courses indicated that several students in the electives (psychology and business) had demonstrated interest in social services. We successfully recruited two students—junior and senior—for the SRI project.

Each HSS would receive college level credit (3 hours) for completing the SL project, and the social work student would receive college credit as well as a small stipend for leading and mentoring the school students. Nonetheless, these three students were equal partners, to the extent possible, in conceiving, planning, organizing, and implementing the project during the summer. My role as a faculty advisor was to facilitate the process so that the UGS would apply their research, community planning, and policy practice knowledge and skills to the project, while teaching the relevant components to the HSSs; my role was also to ensure that the HSSs would apply the knowledge from their elective courses (psychology and business) to the project. While I knew the course contents of the university courses—since I had taught three of the four recommended courses—I learned about the contents of the high school courses from the HSSs and the respective teachers.

RATIONALE FOR COMMUNITY RESEARCH PROJECT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CLASSROOM LEARNING

At the first meeting in May, the three students (comprising of the research team) met in my office to discuss potential research topics that were related to their mutual areas of interest as well as to the course contents of the aforementioned courses. By this time the UGS had completed the spring semester, while the HSSs were still in school till the end of the month. The latter discussed research topics with their teachers in the psychology and business courses. They were examining youth psychology in one course, and basic business concepts such as management, financing, personnel management, marketing, and corporate/social responsibility in the other.

The HSSs expressed interest in examining the non-academic challenges faced by their peers, as they had witnessed and heard conversations related to some challenges in several venues, such as the lunch room, gym, and in after-school activities areas, to name a few. They could directly relate the topic to their psychology course. Related to the business course contents, they wanted to first examine the youth hiring policies by local businesses, but through further discussion in the research team, they realized that this data collection would be very time consuming and even difficult, given the time and monetary constraints. Instead, they focused on social and corporate responsibility, especially as it pertained to local businesses supporting social services for the youth in the community. Understanding that contacting and collecting data from a sample of businesses in the community about their contribution to youth services would be very cumbersome, they instead decided to focus on corporate philanthropy to a local community foundation and a federation (United Way); these organizations annually collected business contributions and disbursed them to social services designated by the businesses.

The UGS had learned, through her experience in community organizing and policy practice courses, that social services financially struggle, especially, when political climate becomes more conservative, and or the businesses enter a recessionary cycle. Since both these scenarios were true for the Midwestern community of about 100,000 residents—and also because the student was ready to graduate at the end of the Fall semester—she wanted to assess the financial health of social service agencies that primarily catered to the youth in the community. She also wanted to get a sense of the job market in youth services.

In discussing the three topics—state of youth in the area high schools, state of social services for the youth, and corporate philanthropy to youth services in the community—the research team members realized that the topics appeared to be unrelated because they were unable to locate research and descriptive articles that discussed these topics simultaneously. Nonetheless, with the assistance of the UGS, the HSSs used the university's library to find articles on each of the following topics separately: “state of the youth,” “current state of social services for the youth,” and “corporate philanthropy.”

Historical research had focused on a single topic: either the state of or challenges faced by youth (e.g., Miller, Donahue, Este & Hofer, 2004), state of and access to social services for the youth (e.g., Motenko, Allen, Angelos, Block, DeVito, Duffy, Holton, Lambert, Parker, Ryan, Schraft & Swindell, 1995), or corporate philanthropy (e.g., Mohr & Webb, 2005; Saiia, Carroll, & Buchholtz, 2003). Students read these articles and deliberated on the potential relationships between these topics.

My role as a faculty advisor was not to dissuade them from examining these apparently unrelated topics, but instead to encourage them to use mixed-method research design (i.e. qualitative and quantitative), wherein, they could collect data from different venues, and based on the findings, infer potential relationships. At this point the UGS had a phenomenological experience, when she realized that the three topics gave her the opportunity to practice the skills I had taught in the research course—to utilize both qualitative and quantitative research designs when studying new and disparate topics, in order to bolster the credibility of the data and the findings. She also realized that she was employing a grounded theory approach to understand these apparently unrelated topics, if she attempted to infer relationships between the three sets of qualitative and quantitative findings. She explained the rationale for employing grounded theory approach to the HSSs, stating that a researcher can employ inductive strategy for generating potential explanations from data-based patterns (Patton, 2002). In other words, if no apparent explanation or relations exists between topics under review, by first collecting data, and analyzing the same, a researcher could infer relationships/hypotheses that can subsequently be tested through quantitative studies. She educated the HSSs on the merits and techniques of mixed method design. She explained how the employment of these designs could assist a researcher in examining complex issues, exploring new topics in an unprecedented fashion, and in inferring potential relationships between data sets. She shared appropriate readings about qualitative and quantitative designs and data analyses techniques with the HSSs (e.g, Patton, 2002); subsequently, the team had lengthy discussions about the merits of each design for studying the three topics.

For studying the youth, survey design was most appropriate; for examining the financial state of social services, a case study design was considered appropriate, and for exploring the state of corporate philanthropy to social services for the youth, secondary data analysis was most conducive. These research design decisions were not only guided by the research readings completed by the three students, but also by the literature reviews, and practical considerations of time and resources.

LITERATURE REVIEWED TO GUIDE RESEARCH PROJECT

The key findings from the articles on the three topics guided the research team: with focusing on specific variables in the community-based research project, designing data collection outline and in developing the interview tools.

Youth

According to the United Nations Population Fund, internationally, youth face critical challenges, and failure to support youth in communities will have very serious consequences at both the individual and societal levels (UNPF, 2004). The youth were at risk for underage drinking, smoking, using illegal drugs, getting involved in crime and other anti-social behaviors (Marzouk, 2005; Sussman, Skara, Weiner & Dent, 2004; Tucker, Ellickson, Orlando, Martino & Klein, 2005). They were also at risk for homelessness because of family conflict, instability at home, absence of adequate employment opportunities and guidance/ counseling services, and being in state custody (Miller, Donahue, Este & Hofer, 2004). In these circumstances, presence of healthy youth-adult relationships (Ungar, 2004) and adequate prevention, intervention and post-intervention social programs could mitigate some of the risk factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency. Unfortunately, absence of adequate programs did not bode well for approximately 50% of the national youth population that was considered to be at-risk (Lugaila, 2003; Sprouse, Klitzing & Parr, 2005).

Social Services

Unfortunately, clients were entering the social service system with more complex problems than they had done historically. Nationally, with paucity of state funds to support prevention and intervention programs for the youth, social service workers were faced with high case loads and no time to consult with peers regarding complex cases—a highly demoralizing experience for both clients and workers (Montenko et al., 1995). Without external support from other funding sources (e.g. private philanthropy, corporate philanthropy), quantity and quality of social services for youth was being jeopardized (Marzouk, 2005; Sonnenfeld, 1995). According to Marcovitz (2005a), “[t]he federal and state governments continue to reduce funding, and they push it back on the counties...” (p.1). Some states had reported funding cuts for social services of up to 77% (Marcovitz, 2005) and the future cuts would be worse than those in the past (Montenko et al., 1995).

Corporate Charitable Contributions

Since the mid 1980s, corporate charitable contributions have been higher in the U.S. than in the U.K., however, since the early 2000s, data suggests that corporate charitable contribution or philanthropy in the U.S. may be on a decline (Amato & Amato, 2007; Campbell, Moore, & Metzger, 2002). Particularly, a decline in corporate giving to health and human services had been noted over the past decade. “Many health and human services organizations use corporate donations for capital projects, as start-up funding, to leverage other funding sources, and to balance operating budgets” (Marx, 1998, p. 34). A positive relationship exists between a firm’s cash resources available and cash philanthropy (Seifert, Morris, & Bartkus, 2003). As company cash reserves decrease in recessionary times, their cash philanthropy also decreases. Generally, corporate contributions include everything from tangible gifts such as cash and excess inventory to intangibles such as volunteer services and business advice to social service agencies (Stinson, 2004).

Relevance to Research Project

Data pertaining to risky behaviors about youth—in terms of underage drinking, smoking, consuming illegal drugs etc. (Marzouk, 2005; Sussman, Skara, Weiner & Dent, 2004; Tucker, Ellickson, Orlando, Martino & Klein, 2005)—guided the research team in designing a one-page questionnaire for assessing the non-academic challenges faced by youth in high schools. They listed various types of challenges and behaviors on the questionnaire with the help of these articles. Additionally, they realized that the absence of adequate programs for at-risk youth (Lugaila, 2003) was another element they wanted to study. Hence, they included a couple of questions about whether youth

used any resources in order to assist them in dealing with non-academic challenges, and the types of formal (e.g., social service agencies, school counselors/ social worker) and informal resources (e.g., peers, pastor) used.

Furthermore, learning about the impact of state funding cuts on the quality and quantity of social services for the youth (Marcovitz, 2005 (a); Marzouk, 2005) bolstered their interest in examining the financial health of social services for youth in the community. With the understanding that recession and limited cash reserves in corporations impacts the nature and quantity of cash philanthropy to social services (Seifert, Morris & Bartkus, 2003), the research team chose to examine the impact of local factory and business closures on corporate philanthropy to the local foundation and federation.

EXPERIENCES AND LEARNING DURING PLANNING, IMPLEMENTING AND PRESENTING RESEARCH PROJECT

Planning

High School Students

The research question they developed in consultation with their psychology teacher was, “What are the challenges experienced by youth in area high schools?” The students, in light of the class room discussions on adolescent psychology during the spring semester and aforementioned literature analysis, chose to examine and understand the challenges faced by youth in area high schools. They would share the research findings with the psychology teacher who agreed to incorporate the same into the subsequent psychology elective course.

HSSs designed a one-page questionnaire in close cooperation with the UGS; the rationale for keeping the page length short was to ensure a higher response rate from their peers, realizing that questionnaire which were more time consuming than five minutes may not be returned by the youth. Hence, they designed a questionnaire with the following questions: What are some of the challenges you have been experiencing in the past 6 months? What resources have you tapped in order to help you meet the challenges? What is your academic level? Several response options were written under each question and an “other” category was also included.

Questionnaires were distributed to teachers in six study-hall classes in two regular high schools and to a social worker in an alternate high school; these teachers and the social worker were known to the HSSs, hence were convenient to include in the sample. Using a convenience cluster sampling technique, data was gathered from 127 youth in the schools. Since there was no comprehensive list of high school students easily available to the research team, the UGS had learned that in these instances cluster sampling is best, in which they identify existing clusters of their sample, such as class room, nursing homes, conferences, etc. and distribute questionnaires to all enrollee/ participants in the cluster. Owing to convenience sampling, the findings were not generalizable to all youth in the community (Patton, 2002).

In light of the contents in the business course, the HSSs wanted to examine local businesses’ corporate philanthropy to youth services in the community. However, accessing this data from businesses was not logistically possible in the summer. Based on the team’s interest in pursuing this topic, I recommended that they access the data indirectly, from secondary sources such as the community foundation and the federation (United Way). Students also wanted to examine the state of business in the community, for which I guided them to access secondary data from the city hall and the chamber of commerce. The research team developed the following research question: “What is the local business climate and the state of corporate philanthropy to youth services in the Midwestern community?” The city hall allowed access to a list of organizations that had ceased doing business in the community over the past five years and the new ones that had opened in the same timeframe. The chamber provided additional data about local businesses. The local foundation and a federation were requested to share information about the nature and level of corporate philanthropy—for social services and for youth services; they were also requested to project future trends in local corporate philanthropy. For collecting secondary data, the research conducted face-to-face interviews with the appropriate authority in the organization; my professional acquaintance with the CEO of the federation and the community foundation facilitated the students in gaining access for interviews.

Undergraduate Students

The student's knowledge about community organizing, creating policy change, and research guided her in crystallizing the research question: "What is the financial state of social services for youth in the community?" Using the community resource guide for the youth as a sample-frame, from a list of 57 agencies, 20 agencies were selected. Using a purposive sampling technique, agencies were selected to ensure diversity in the services they provided. In other words, the purpose of sampling was to ensure that no two agencies that were selected provided the same youth service. Program directors or executive directors of agencies in the sample were asked open and close-ended questions pertaining to the financial health of the agency, of youth services and future directions for youth services.

UGS had, through these courses, internalized the importance of presenting good quality data to legislators and decision makers while recommending community and policy change. She shared this enlightenment with the HSSs, especially, as she coached and guided them in designing the questionnaire and measurement tools to collect primary and secondary data. She regularly reinforced to them the importance of using mixed method for data collection and the politics of data collection as well.

To a large extent the HSSs were instrumental in developing the research questions and identifying variables for the study; the UGS guided them in choosing appropriate research designs, in adopting data collection mechanisms, in designing measurement tools and in conducting analyses. The three students assessed the reliability of the measurement instruments by role playing with each other.

Implementing

I wrote letters of introduction for the research team so they could demonstrate the legitimacy of their project to the school teachers and social worker, and to the representatives of the chamber of commerce, foundation, social service agencies and city hall. All team members were involved in data collection from the various sites, however, only the HSSs were involved in collecting data from their peers in high schools.

After making a phone contact with the appropriate person in an organization, the student would explain the service learning project to them and ask them whether they could interview them to access financial data pertinent to their study. This approach was very time consuming because of the inability of students to access the appropriate person in the first place and second, to work around the person's schedule to visit them and access data. Even though the foundation, federation, city hall and the chamber were candid in sharing the data with the team, social service agencies were slightly reserved about sharing specific financial data. During the various interviews the students realized that organizations were not forthcoming with their financial data—financial state of social services for the youth, and cash contributions made to the agency or youth services by corporations. Their inability to collect specific data, despite the planning that was involved in launching the research project, taught the students that not all plans result in desired outcomes. The team and I processed the politics of collecting specific financial data, even though such data should have been publicly available from community-based non-profit agencies. Nonetheless, during the face-to-face interviews with representatives of social service agencies, the students learned about trends related to the financial health of social services for youth and corporate giving to agencies.

All three students refined the following set of skills during the interview process: interpersonal skills, listening skills, ability to think on their feet, ability to ask follow-up questions when a comprehensive response was not given, ability to be perseverant when agency personnel did not respond their phone requests, and the ability to take comprehensive notes during the interview and process the same after the interview to get a clear picture of the research topic. By using diverse data collection techniques—distributing questionnaire, conducting face-to-face interviews, and examining agency documents and local newspapers for data—all three students greatly appreciated the relevance of mosaic theory in triangulating the findings. They realized that no one source or type of data can be comprehensive for understanding complex issues. They also developed a network of resources as they spoke with several individuals from different economic sectors and social service agencies.

Presenting

Finally, in preparing for the presentation at the symposium, the team analyzed the data at great length, and discussed the relevance of each set of findings (youth, social services, business climate and corporate giving) for the local community members, professionals, legislators, business community, school officials and social service agencies. Demonstrating relevance of the findings from each sphere to the stakeholders in that sphere would not be difficult, the team assumed. For instance, it would be easy to share the relevance of findings pertaining to youth's challenges with social service agencies and school officials. However, sharing the significance of this finding with representatives from the business community, health care professionals, and academicians from different disciplines on campus, could be slightly difficult, they thought. Similarly, demonstrating relevance of current financial fate and future growth in social services for youth to the business community members could be challenging, thought the team members. Finally, marketing relevance of corporate giving to social services could be difficult to academicians and lawyers in the audience, the team assumed. For several hours they practiced presenting each finding from the three spheres along with the implications for the community. They refined their public speaking and presentation skills in the process. Since the students were adept with computers, they developed and printed sophisticated *Powerpoint* presentation slides for display at the symposium. It is noteworthy that their critical thinking skills blossomed when they inferred and presented data supported relationships between the state of youth, social services for the youth, and corporate giving to youth services. I talked with them about mosaic theory, where all pieces of the puzzle may not fit together, and all data may not come from one source; however, as a critical thinker, they could examine both qualitative and quantitative data from diverse sources and infer potential relationships between them. At the symposium, first the team shared each set of findings separately, and subsequently the team members demonstrated to the audience how and why they were inferring relationships between the three data sets.

From the local foundation the team learned that 37% of the youth in the community had consumed alcohol, 13% reported driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs and 21% smoked cigarettes daily, and about 50% of the school population in the community received free or reduced lunches (Muck, 2005). From the high school students themselves they learned that 75% of the respondents (n=127) experienced the following daily stressor: time management and stress related to grades and homework. Approximately 30% of the sample expressed the following challenges: peer pressure, relationships and sex, finances and jobs, appearance or body image, depression, anger, and death of family or friends. Less than 16% of the sample had sought assistance from a school counselor, community-based counseling services, hospital, church and/or a support group.

With reference to the financial health of youth programs in 20 social service agencies identified by the team, five youth programs had been discontinued in the past five years and two had been added. Most of the agencies were experiencing cutbacks in government funding and they were planning to employ one or more of the following coping strategies: seek contributions from local churches, cut existing services for youth, re-allocate funds across the different programs, or tap into their "rainy day" reserves. None of the agencies had plans to expand their youth services or add new one over the next year or two.

Finally, data collected from the local foundation, federation, city hall, and local newspaper revealed that over the past five years, approximately 15-25% of the philanthropic collections by the foundation and federation were from corporations. Philanthropic giving had been stagnant in this timeframe despite the fact that the community had lost more businesses (2,900) than gained new ones (700). The foundation and the federation were expecting a drop in future corporate giving and also in individual giving due to business closures and job losses.

The social service and school representatives (especially the psychology teacher) were surprised by the percentage (16%) of the youth sample that sought assistance to cope with challenges. These two representatives were only aware of students who had approached them for help, but were not aware of the percentage (30% of the sample) that was coping with non-academic challenges on a regular basis, and was not seeking help. Hence, about half the students who were experiencing challenges were seeking any assistance; the balance were probably coping on their own or employing dysfunctional methods to do so (e.g., tobacco, drugs and alcohol). The fact that 21% of the sample smoked on a regular basis encouraged the team members to infer that some of the youth that was not seeking assistance to cope with the challenges was coping by smoking. This inference was educational for the mentioned parties as well as the medical community representatives. Additionally, the local federation and the

foundation that regularly collected data about challenges faced by youth was very interested in the statistics pertaining to the academic and non-academic challenges, and considered the team members' inferences to be thought-provoking. They decided to incorporate the inferences for investigation in their subsequent youth-based studies.

The educators were a little surprised by the finding pertaining to the cuts that had been made to youth programs in the past five years, and that the agencies were not planning to add new, or expand existing, programs over the next two years. The team members inferred that with the job losses experienced by several families in the community—where the main breadwinner and the youth in the family were unable to find employment—the youth in high school may experience more stressors in the near future; the proportion of children who receive free or reduced lunches (currently at 50%) in the schools could increase over the next couple of years. If more youth decide to seek formal assistance in order to cope with family and unemployment stresses, the social service community may be unable to cope with increased demand. This inference was particularly revealing to the local legislators at the symposium.

Corporate philanthropy to social service agencies was occurring almost entirely through the local foundation and federation. The school educators were not aware of these exclusive conduits being employed by corporations for making cash donations. Moreover, even though the federation and the foundation had not experienced a significant drop in corporate giving in the recent past, despite the number of business closures in the community (2900 business had closed in the past five years and only 700 new ones had replaced them), the CEOs of both the organizations were reserved about maintaining the existing level of corporate philanthropy. They were concerned about their inability to offset the projected drop in corporate giving with individual philanthropy. The research team inferred that a time-lag could have occurred between business closures, job losses, and drop in philanthropic giving to social services. With government funding cuts, the social service agencies were not planning to expand any programs for the youth; the federation and foundation were anticipating a drop in corporate and individual giving; given these disparate findings, the research team inferred that school counsellors and social workers may be unsuccessful in referring all students—who may need formal assistance in coping with their challenges—to external agencies. Also note, the team inferred that a higher percentage of high school students may experience non-academic challenges in the near future, and if they were unable to tap resources to assist them with coping, the fate and state of the youth in the community may get worse. The school and social service community representatives talked about ways to plan for dealing with this conjecture. The local federation, which invested heavily in children and youth services, also wanted to partner closely with the aforementioned representatives in planning for the same.

The team, confidently and systematically, presented their conjectures to the audience and fielded several questions as well. The students were not flummoxed when they were challenged by legislators and business representatives about their conjectures. Instead, they encouraged the questioner to consider testing the hypotheses through quantitative research. Students' critical thinking skills and their sense of confidence was greatly enhanced particularly during this phase of the research project. The students affirmed that for understanding complex issues—such as the potential relationship between the state of the youth and corporate giving in a community—sometimes a researcher has to collect data in unprecedented fashion, breaking the mold of a reductionistic or discipline-specific orientation employed by quantitative researchers. For example, had the study been conducted by a business professional, it may not have included data about the youth; similarly, if the study was conducted by a social worker, it may not have included data about corporate philanthropy and local business climate. However, based on the diverse interest of the students and the nature of courses they had completed, they were able to collect data from different angles and present potential relationships between them. The SRI allowed students to study topics that had not been studied in the past, or in a fashion that was not duplicated. Hence, this project was a trail blazer for the audience, presenting relationship that the community members may have thought about, but had not examined in the light of both qualitative and quantitative data. The audience commended the team for “connecting some of the dots” that research by individual organization or agency (e.g., chamber of commerce, United Way, social service agency) had historically been unable to attempt. The local newspaper published an article on the presentations made by several students at the symposium, highlighting the experiences of one of the students from the research team.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of planning and conducting the research project enhanced the research team's understanding about the following: 1) the interdependence and interrelatedness of the city hall, chamber of commerce, social service agencies and local foundation/ federation; 2) the impact of the financial climate in social service agencies on youth programs; 3) the challenges faced by the youth in the community; 4) the relationship between the business climate and corporate philanthropic giving; 5) that different levels of research knowledge and different perspective of high school and university students complemented each other in the project; and 6) the politics of collecting specific financial data from organizations.

The SRI research project provided the UGS with an excellent mentoring opportunity and dispelled some myths about the academic maturity of HSSs (e.g., high school students may be unprepared for community-based research; high school students cannot partner with college students on projects; only academically exceptional students from high school can take college level credit courses). Following the presentation of the project, one HSS's sense of confidence and empowerment reached a level where she chose to complete the last nine high-school credits at the university level, rather than at her school; according to her GPA, she could not be classified as an academically exceptional student. In working closely with the UGS, this HSS was able to ask several questions about campus life and academic expectations that they would have otherwise had to stumble upon during their first semester on campus. By working closely with the high school counsellor and principal, the SRI coordinator facilitated the student's enrolment at the university during the Fall semester.

The second HSS developed strong relationships with several social service agencies, representative of certain businesses, university officials and professors, as well as with peers in his school. During the interactions with these stakeholders, he conceived of a community-based kitchen garden, for which the land was donated by the university, labor was donated by the HSSs, seeds and other gardening equipments were donated by area farmers, and the produce was donated to the local food pantry. The food pantry director worked closely with the HSS to ensure the project's implementation during the Fall semester, following the SRI symposium. Not only did the project meet a community's need for more fresh produce in the food pantry, but its conceptualization was sustainable even after the student graduated from high school; other high school students who volunteered in the kitchen garden continued it each year, by regularly recruiting younger volunteers. The HSS who was on the research team certainly used his business skills (learned in the business course) in conceiving and implementing this project. Consequently, the university, high school, and the food pantry developed a new partnership spearheaded by the HSS. It is worth noting that the high school students discussed the possibility of involving the recipients of food pantry products in growing the produce in the community garden. However, for the realization of this vision, students and I would have had to community organize and plan in greater depth than the SRI and the current partnerships with the institutions allowed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I am proposing the following recommendations for educators:

1. Develop community partnerships with agencies that have not historically worked together, e.g., chamber of commerce, city hall, local federations, schools, etc., and collect data from their perspectives to glean a comprehensive understanding of a complex community issue.
2. Teach students at various academic levels to examine issues from multidimensional perspectives because issues are complex and dynamic.
3. Teach students about mosaic theory, especially when they are examining potential relationships between sectors or data that have not been studied simultaneously.
4. Teach students how to access literature on different sectors related to an issue.
5. Practice presentation skills with students so that they are confident in reporting potential relationships between data points and data sets to legislators, funders, and business representatives.
6. Encourage students to ensure sustainability of projects/programs they may conceive to address social issues.

7. Teach students the politics of data collection, and strategies to alter data collection techniques or components of the data in order to ensure logistical and political feasibility of a research projects.
8. Finally, always be open and willing to forge new partnerships which may result from the experiences and learning that comes from an existing community education project.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

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