Effects of the Professional Model of Service Learning on Attributions of Poverty
Les Hollingsworth, Assistant Professor of Marketing
School of Business

Purpose and Background
The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of the professional model of service learning on students’ cognitive attributions of poverty and success, both personally and for society at-large.

Many programs, especially business programs, utilize service learning projects as an opportunity to practice/apply learning from the classroom. In this professional model of service learning, practical application is the organizing goal and little to no emphasis is placed on producing a meaningful change in students’ attitudes or beliefs societal issues. This model accounts for more than 80% of all service learning experiences. Despite such frequent use by instructors, the literature regarding this model’s effects on perceptions of societal issues is limited. Additionally, in light of ongoing allegations that business programs primarily focus students on profit and loss instead of societal impact, this study sought to determine if the service learning experience strived for a meaningful change in students’ perceptions of societal issues.

The professional model is in stark contrast to the civic engagement and social change models where producing a meaningful change in attitudes/beliefs is a primary goal of the service learning experience. With this in mind, the literature provides significant support that the latter two models are effective in producing meaningful change.

Variables of Interest
Numerous dependent variables have been presented in the literature to indicate a civic or socially responsible mindset. This study focuses on a pair that are most frequently cited in existing literature:
1. Attributions of Poverty (internal vs. structural)
2. Belief in a Just World (i.e. those who do the “right” things are rewarded)

Additionally, this study sought to determine if the service learning experience impacted students’ willingness to volunteer or work at an organization that serves the poor, as an indicator that perhaps some of the students’ underlying beliefs may have changed as a result of the service learning experience.

3. Interest in volunteering at an organization that serves the poor
4. Interest in working at an organization that serves the poor

The treatment variable is the presence of a service learning experience within a marketing class.

Participants and Design
The sample for the study consisted of 22 business administration students who were enrolled in an upper division marketing class. Convenience sampling was used in order to grant the researcher the easiest access to the participants.

One group, pre-test/post-test, quasi-experimental design was used to assess the participants’ self-rated scores on the dependent variables. The pre-test was initiated during the first week of the semester before students had knowledge of or exposure to the service learning experience. The same test was administered during the last week of the semester after the service learning experience had completed.

Throughout the course of the semester, participants engaged in service learning to conduct market research for a client that served the poor.

Analysis and Findings
Matched pair tests for difference of means between the pre– and post-test were conducted and found that, although a mathematical difference between pre– and post-test means was present on most variables, no statistically significant change in the students’ underlying attributions of poverty and success became apparent. Most likely, this is due to a weakness in statistical power based on the small sample size.

Interestingly, a significant change was identified on the last two variables: Interest in volunteering at an organization that serves the poor had completed. Throughout the course of the semester, participants engaged in service learning to conduct market research for a client that served the poor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair #</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 18</td>
<td>Interest in Employment</td>
<td>-0.909</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>-2.71</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 19</td>
<td>Interest in Volunteering</td>
<td>-0.955</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>-2.28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cited Literature

In conclusion, although the study did not find meaningful changes in scores on the vast majority of the dependent variables, the data does suggest that the professional model of service learning can have a positive impact on students’ willingness to participate in an organization that serves the poor upon graduation. Rather than structuring service learning projects that focus solely on the application of course content, instructors have an opportunity, with minimal changes to the project criteria, to further shape students’ development in regards to their interest in larger service to the community.

Complications with the sample size likely hindered this study’s ability to find a statistically significant change in the underlying attributions of poverty and success. It is likely that future studies with larger sample sizes would find a meaningful change in student perceptions.

Cited Literature


Phone: 608.342.6109
Email: hollingsworth@uwplatt.edu

1128 Ullsvik Hall

Phone: 608.342.6109
Email: hollingsworth@uwplatt.edu

1128 Ullsvik Hall