Cost-Benefit Analysis for Incorporating Community Partners
Into Economics Education
(Convincing Them to Help Teach your Students)

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Abstract:
This paper quantifies some of the costs and benefits for non-academic partners to participate within the active learning strategy of undergraduate students volunteering within a community setting in an academic context. Specifically, the costs and benefits of participation within economics instruction are measured, as relatively little research has been conducted on the impact on community organizations participating within service-learning of economics students. The participants include US and international partners, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In this initial stage, qualitative measurements are proffered using research survey methodology for partners mentoring principles to upper-level undergraduate economics students. These estimates and methodology can be used by economics (and other) faculty members to convince local partners it is worth their effort to participate within such service-learning instruction.

JEL Classifications:
A22  Economic Education and Teaching of Economics: Undergraduate
L31  Nonprofit Organizations and Public Enterprise: Nonprofit Institutions; NGOs

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This paper builds upon the work of other economic educators and researchers that have worked with community partner organizations to promote the applied literacy/education of economics students, particularly at the undergraduate level. A significant amount of research has been conducted within multiple academic disciplines regarding the validity and efficacy of using service-learning as a pedagogical tool, including by a limited number of economists. Less research has been conducted on the impact of these service-learning experiences upon community partner organizations. That is, why should and do these organizations work with university faculty and students? Are the benefits that much higher than the costs? This project is an initial attempt to measure the direct impact of university-based economics service-learning experiences on community organizations, among the first such economics research to focus on the partners’ costs and benefits.

**Literature Review for this Research**

A working definition of service-learning must first be finalized since many practitioners use alternative concepts. For this research, a definition similar to that of Kathleen Maas Weigert (1998) is used. She characterizes it as a combination of six elements: “On the community side: the student provides some meaningful work (service), that meets a need or goal, that is defined by a community (or some of its members). On the campus side: the service provided by the student flows from and into course objectives, is integrated into the course by means of assignments that require some form of reflection on the service in light of course objectives, and the assignment is assessed and evaluated accordingly.” (5) In her view (and mine), these elements differentiate service learning from community service, experiential education (including community engagement) and volunteering. To the unfamiliar, many of these seem the same/similar, but service-learning focuses most on the combination of the service and learning simultaneously.

This research focuses on the cost-benefit analysis of incorporating community partners into economics education. The literature review starts with a general analysis of incorporating such partners into any university-level education. Littlepage and Gazley (2013) examine service learning specifically from the perspective of the community partners. They quote the potential “benefits” to such partners as “improved client services; volunteer labor and capacity; town-gown links; networking; new expertise, technologies and research; resources; and agency visibility.” They enumerate the potential “challenges” as “management capacity; operational capacity; and pedagogical demands” (421). These potential costs and benefits will be the starting point for this analysis.
Some professors may view university service-learning as forced volunteer service within an academic context or graded course requirements. Littlepage and Gazley note that “when students are required to provide community service to pass a course (i.e., as involuntary or mandated service), they sometimes can be reluctant participants, difficult to motivate and to manage.” In addition, community partner organizations may succumb to a burdensome external pressure from universities to participate (424). These potential costs to the partners must always be considered when setting up service-learning experiences.

Littlepage and Gazley also note that the number of studies of the impact of service-learning experiences on community partner members is quite limited. And the emphasis of these studies “is on the potential or actual benefits of service learning without equal consideration of the challenges for students, faculty, administrators, or host agencies.” Even these more limited studies “have sampled only those agencies that have persisted in engaging students” (426).

Service-learning is not a new pedagogical strategy. Cox and Pearce (2004) specifically list service learning as one of several forms of “community-higher education institution (HEI) partnerships” that have existed for some time. However, they focus on the “partnerships between higher education institutions and economically distressed neighborhoods aimed at economic and social enhancement for residents of those communities” (130) which is also a significant goal of the research described within this paper. They note that one actor within such a community that may be impacted by such partnerships are nonprofit agencies as “many of these actors are seeking additional resources in the form of funding and technical assistance to support community improvement activities.” (136). These resources could include “talented, low-cost labor” from students and “in-kind contributions of faculty and student time” in the form of technical assistance. Both of these are incorporated within the service-learning classroom activities of this research.

One example of economics service-learning research is the work of Brooks and Schramm (2007) who measured the impacts of a three-year “integrated community-based research-education-service model” (36) at the University of Vermont. The students were primarily undergraduate seniors majoring in economics or community development and applied economics and worked successively on a large university project, expanding on the work of past students. These educators found that students, faculty and community partners all noted positive benefits from the experiences, but most of the measurements were centered around the student experience.

Another economics example is that of McGoldrick et al. (2000) which note that service-learning has grown within the “liberal arts based educational settings” (43) but the economics discipline has been slow with adoption. This paper highlighted the rationales for service-learning within economics, including the methodology and outcomes for a particular classroom experience. But the focus was on the costs and benefits for the professor and the students, and not for the
community partner members themselves. The economics literature regarding service-learning is small, and that studying the costs and benefits of community partner organizations is practically non-existent – thus the need for this research analysis.

Methodology

For this research, the views and opinions were surveyed of the staff of community organizations involved with three distinct and separate service-learning experiences with economics students from Transylvania University – a small, ranked liberal arts university in Lexington, KY. The first service-learning course involves an experience abroad on Mactan Island – outside of Cebu, Philippines. On two different occasions in 2008 and 2010, this researcher participated with Transylvania University undergraduates working with a nonprofit non-governmental organization (NGO) staffed with local Filipinos on the island. The service-learning experience lasted three weeks each time and faculty and students lived within the small compound building of the NGO, except for weekends when they stayed with local host families in their homes. The class was identified as an Interdisciplinary studies (IDS) course although economics faculty and students were involved each time working with Transylvania University non-economics majors and other faculty members, once a public health biologist and once an environmental chemist. The projects were jointly organized with the NGO staff and students worked with each other, the staff, local government agencies and local Filipinos to address local community needs with pedagogical reflection by the students. Some of the service-learning projects are outlined further below.

The second service-learning experience involves a project started in 2014 in Lexington, KY with Senior Capstone in Economics students worked with a regional food bank. All students involved were economics majors about to graduate from the university. That project resulted in a white paper outlining how to improve an organizational survey and process that is conducted biennially by the food bank to collect information about clients. The organization later sought the faculty member’s help to improve the survey for its next application so that service-learning experience is continuing this current semester through the work of economics majors within an Intermediate Microeconomics course.

Finally for the third experience, a new service-learning project was started this semester in Lexington, KY with one section of Principles of Macroeconomics students, most of which are self-identified as non-economics majors. That service-learning project involves the students participating in a series of three short stints (2-4 hours) during the semester with three separate community partners: a surplus resale store operated by Habitat for Humanity, a regional food pantry outlet coordinated through a local church, and a nonprofit incubator for
small businesses and other nonprofit entities. This experience is part of another research project to measure if students can better learn economic theory through service-learning. Here, as part of their principles of macroeconomics studies, students are required to visit three different nonprofit organizations during the semester. Before each visit, they are given essay assignments to test their understanding of textbook macroeconomics theories. After the short service-learning volunteering session, they are given a second essay assignment to re-test their understanding of similar economic theories – utilizing their experience at the nonprofit organization. Afterwards, the students then have an entire class period devoted to jointly reflecting upon the service-learning experience and the relevant economic theories associated with it – an important pedagogical tool of service-learning theory.

For this research analysis, the results from the first and third service-learning experiences referenced above are used. The second project is ongoing, including through next spring semester, so those community service organization members will be polled after that project is completed. The first experience was completed several years ago and the third is ongoing, but these projects have been completed for this third course at two of the partner organizations already. Utilizing this approach, the results can be compared from an international service-learning experience with an in-depth immersion to a local experience with limited contact time with students. For all three organizations described above, a survey was issued to the coordinating member of the community partner after the project was complete (sometime this year). That member answered the survey questions on his/her own and then returned the completed survey form. Afterwards, solo interviews were conducted with each individual coordinating member to ask more pointed questions about particular costs and benefits associated with this particular service-learning experience.

For data from the first service-learning project, the analysis used focus groups as well as individual interviews for community partner service members of the international NGO. The focus group interviews were conducted within a May 2015 research trip to Cebu, Philippines for meetings with people associated with the NGO used within the two past service-learning educational experiences (five and seven years prior) with undergraduates. One focus group was held with five local members of the NGO staff and another focus group session was conducted with twelve members of the local community that had some type of interaction with the students (ex – homestay family head, project participant, etc.). In addition, the US coordinator for the Filipino NGO was also interviewed (and completed a survey analysis).

For data from the third service-learning project, survey data and interviews were collected from the individual coordinating member of two local community partner organizations, specifically

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1 The survey instrument was adapted from a previous study by Shinnamon et. al (1999). A copy of the survey instrument for this particular research analysis is included within the appendix.
the church food pantry outlet and the Habitat for Humanity outlet store (these are the two organizations the Principle of Macroeconomics students have already volunteered with this semester; one more partner experience will occur later this semester). Unlike with the first international service-learning experience, only the coordinating members of these last two community partner organizations were surveyed. None of the other non-coordinating members of the partners worked or talked directly with university faculty members regarding this service-learning pedagogy. Even though they did interact with the students for a few hours, they interacted as fellow volunteers only. They were not given explicit information or instructions regarding the student experience, class methodology, or theoretical rationales. Therefore, to measure the costs and benefits of the community partner organizations, only the coordinating member was consulted. For the first service-learning experience, multiple community members were consulted because each knew more explicitly the service-learning rationales for the students visiting a NGO on the other side of the world. And they interacted with the students on a more extended basis for days or weeks during the experience.

It may be possible that the staff of the community organization partners would theoretically have differing opinions of the service-learning outcomes due to varied time intervals with the students. However, Bowman et al. (2010) found similar outcomes for learning and development goals of students involved in sustained, short-term experiences versus those enrolled in longer, but more intermittent service-learning experiences (26). They measured development of student orientations towards equality, justice and social responsibility. For this research, community partner staff members were surveyed regarding costs and benefits measurements, but the staff may implicitly be answering the interview and survey questions with preconceived notions of how undergraduate students should be volunteering or working within their organizations with certain mental attitudes. But if a corollary exists with the Bowman et al. research, it could be true for community partner staff as well that their experiences are similar across different service-learning experiences time-wise. But that is one another avenue of research for continued focus.

Outcomes

Analysis of Survey Instruments of Coordinating Members of Community Partner Organizations

At this point in the initial phases of this research, qualitative survey analysis has been gathered for three surveys given to the coordinating partners of the Filipino NGO, the Habitat for Humanity resale store and the food pantry at the local church. The similarities between the responses will be discussed first. Obviously, all three worked with undergraduate economics students from the same liberal arts university. All three agreed or strongly agreed with
questions 5-8 of the survey, relaying that service-learning is important for student careers and academic learning, that the service-learning goals were clear and that more service-learning should be instituted within university classes. These make sense in that these nonprofit organizations and partners voluntarily agreed to work with these undergraduate students in a service-learning experience. In that regard, they probably believe in the merits of service-learning generally.

**Benefits to Community Partner Organizations**

All three coordinating members also agreed or strongly agreed individually with questions 10-13 of the survey, outlining benefits of the experience. These included the general benefits of the service-learning encounter to the community served by the agency, the specific social benefits for the partner organization, the personal value to the coordinating member of being treated as a teacher by the faculty involved and to the university in becoming more aware of community needs. And all three coordinating members agreed or strongly agreed with questions 20-21, that the benefit vs. burden trade-off of the service-learning experience was worthwhile and they would like to continue this relationship with the university.

Question 27 asked for the coordinating members to indicate all their particular reasons (listed within the survey and asking for other options) for participating within this service-learning course in the first place. All three independently listed the categories of ‘needed additional help’ and ‘wanted to make a connection with the university’. Question 30 asked for the coordinating members to indicate all the particular ways student involvement had a positive impact. All three independently listed the categories of ‘the students brought new energy to the agency’ and ‘raised our public profile because of university involvement’. Previous research, such as the meta-analysis of other service-learning research of Eyler et al. (2001), reports that “Communities report enhanced university relations” (p. 10), but that previous research is this area is quite sparse compared to that on the impact of service-learning on faculty, universities and especially students. So all three coordinating members listing multiple ways in this research in which the organization benefited through partnership with the university could be an important avenue for future research.

Regarding the significant differences between the community partner organizations, all are involved in different kinds of nonprofit work: international, food bank and housing. One partner was neutral on survey question 9 regarding the students being well prepared for help within the agency while the other two agreed or strongly agreed. Regarding question 14, one coordinating member was neutral in regards to any economic benefits for the organization while the other two organizations strongly agreed with the production of economic benefits. While all three coordinating members did not agree with these particular benefits, the nature of the nonprofit work may be a significant issue here. While two of the organizations
(international and housing partners) are primarily responsible for the advancement of their own particular missions, the church food bank is more of an intermediary partner. Another separate organization has the full-time mission of providing food relief for the needy, while this particular outlet is a full-time church whose volunteer members help distribute the food provided to them to the needy clients. Thus, the economic benefit may be limited; the church provides the volunteer labor hours while another organization is responsible for obtaining enough food to provide to everyone requesting it. Thus, it makes sense that the coordinating member did not list ‘saved us money because of the additional help’ for question 30 while the other two organizations did include that student impact.

Costs to Community Partner Organizations

All three coordinating members viewed themselves differently in handling the logistics of the service-learning experience, relayed through question 28. According to them, one handled the “arrangements and placement” personally, one was done by university faculty and one was handled jointly with students. All three were primarily neutral regarding their “roles and responsibilities” 22-26 in questions for evaluating students, reflection, participation and curriculum, probably because the faculty personally handled these academic components. For this initial research, the academic costs to the partner organizations was purposely limited. The community members involved were not trained in pedagogical theory in general or in economics instruction in particular. Although service-learning pedagogy promotes the need for joint construction of needs analysis and project formation, this is ‘expensive’ for all parties involved. This research seeks to determine the non-academic costs to the community partners. Once that is established, it will be easier to determine how much pedagogical costs can be shared by the community partners to still make the service-learning exercises worthwhile for all parties involved.

Question 29 is the other primary non-interview means for determining community partner costs. All three individually listed ‘training/orienting students’ as a “serious concern about serving as a community partner.” Two also listed ‘coordination of placements’ as a serious concern although all three had different views of how that was completed, per above. This makes sense for small organizations. Coordination and training could be major time considerations for these organizations and, thus, primary drivers for whether organizations will commit to service-learning experiences with university students. Addressing, and ameliorating, these concerns first may help faculty attract more potential partner organizations – especially those that fit their particular academic needs.

Within the interviews conducted after the surveys, the coordinating members brought forth many specific comments which may shed considerable light on their view of the potential benefits and costs of such service-learning experiences. It was reported that it’s different
working with university students because they tend to have less confidence and
communication skills than older volunteers – a potential cost, but also tend to have more
energy and vibrancy – a potential benefit (per above, this was ranked by all three coordinating
members as a positive impact for their experience). One coordinating member specifically
mentioned that with these volunteer experiences, “Our resources are strained to do so, but it’s
our gamble.” It’s a primary way for “voluntolds” (those ‘forced’ to do volunteer hours) and
“one-and-dones” to become “true volunteers” for the organization which brings long-term
benefits, if the student (or any other person’s) experience is a good one at the organization. As
an example, one coordinating member offered that one student offered – after his volunteer
experience – to coordinate a weekly volunteer group to work specific hours for one night at the
community partner organization for the rest of the academic year. The other volunteers would
be fellow students of a campus organization wanting to donate a specified number of volunteer
hours. This voluntary commitment will allow the coordinating organization member not to have
to schedule paid staff for that weekly time period. That economic savings will allow the
organization to better promote its mission financially. That is one primary reason that particular
organization wants to work with such service-learning experiences.

Another coordinating member reported within the interview that the costs of this service-
learning experience – as done – was minimal, if any at all. Adult volunteers were already being
utilized within the organization on a daily basis. Other students groups – at the high school and
university level – were utilized in the past so the learning curve was already complete. So this
experience was an “easy plug-in” for the regular activities of the community partner. The
regular adult volunteers were accustomed to working with new volunteers, so these particular
students brought no new additional costs to the organization (that could occur if student
promised to help during specific times and did not show, but it did not occur here and rarely
does supposedly). In terms of benefits, university students provide extra help and new energy,
so it is really a “win-win” situation for the community partner.

The coordinating member of the international NGO had some different types of comments. For
that organization, “faculty-driven projects is key;” that is a primary means by which any
volunteers reach the NGO. If the faculty or students aren’t well prepared, the potential costs
could be high because the NGO is sponsoring foreigners within a different culture and country.
But “their mission is to affect the people that interact with us” so such costs are normal and it
“goes with the territory” that costs will be incurred when such projects are occasionally
cancelled for various reasons. A major benefit to this organization is the potential economic
benefits. The NGO essentially breaks even by charging very low administrative costs for
organizing such long-distance excursions – including food and housing, but the local Filipino
community benefits greatly because every service-learning experience brings forth new local
spending within the community which otherwise would not exist. That benefit is very large. In
addition, local Filipinos benefit from this cross-cultural interaction with foreigners, even if abstractly. Both focus groups for the local NGO staff and island people interacting with these students in the past had similar reactions. The new incomes and the cultural friendships they formed were well worth whatever small (practically none according to them) cost they associated with the students traveling there. And finally, according to the coordinating NGO member, university “faculty bring their own expertise and trained students” which is beneficial to the local community in numerous and large ways that may not be replicated otherwise. The Filipino NGO staff listed within their comments several such previous projects of the classes, including planting mangroves for environmental benefits and food supply, conducting dengue prevention research for health centers to disseminate and public health seminars to educate locals on antibiotic uses and HPV research. These are considered “invaluable” to the local economy, culture and people.

Summary Results

This research analysis is in its beginning stages. If only the surveys to the coordinating members are considered, the sample size is n=3. However, this was purposely done to first determine the opinions regarding the costs and benefits of these joint service-learning experiences from those most directly involved in their execution. And the qualitative nature of the survey and the ensuing solo interview still provides considerable data. In the future, for a more robust analysis it may be necessary to survey and to interview every community partner member interacting with the faculty and/or students within these projects. But that would impose an additional administrative and time expense on the organization that was not deemed prudent at this beginning stage.

Initially, the qualitative results of this research match expectations. The costs and benefits for community partners outlined in the literature review above for non-economics disciplines were largely found within the survey and interview analysis of this economics study. For economists interested in service-learning as an active-learning pedagogical tool, this research shows that community partners actively consider the costs and benefits of working with university faculty and students. In fact, this verification can potentially lead to better service-learning opportunities for economics faculty members as that cost-benefit analysis can be part of their actual student projects.

In addition, these results can hopefully start to lead more economists towards this type of learning pedagogy. It’s not necessary for all faculty to recreate the wheel. This – and previous – research can help faculty look for better opportunities and avoid potential pitfalls in their own institution of service-learning. For example, the outcomes outlined above highlight potential
differences in need and organizational behavior between international and local community partners. It also finds that certain community organizations have lower costs for incorporating students within their work, and other partners have different expectations for what university programs can help them accomplish (benefits of the joint service-learning exercise). These are important considerations (and questions to ask) for the success of future projects.

This particular study will continue to survey and interview future members of community partner organizations. As more observations and data are collected, this can yield a more definitive matrix of costs and benefits that can be shared through publication with other faculty to consider before engaging in specific service-learning experiences with these important community partners. Hopefully, that will lead to more economics faculty adopting this valuable pedagogical tool of service-learning.


