Giving Back: Exploring Service-Learning in an Online Learning Environment

Rochell R. McWhorter, Julie A. Delello, & Paul B. Roberts
The University of Texas at Tyler

Abstract

Service-Learning (SL) as an instructional method is growing in popularity for giving back to the community while connecting the experience to course content. However, little has been published on using SL for online business students. This study highlights an exploratory mixed-methods, multiple case study of an online business leadership and ethics course utilizing SL as a pedagogical teaching tool with 81 students. Results from the study noted that hours completed exceeded those assigned and students identified outcomes for themselves, their university, and nonprofit organizations where they served. The outcomes of this study mirrored those identified by students in traditional face-to-face courses underscoring the value of SL projects in online courses in higher education.

Since online education became popular in the late 1980s for its ease of "anytime, anywhere" learning (Parker & Martin, 2010), an overwhelming concern has been whether online courses are as effective as traditional face-to-face (F2F) courses in terms of engagement, motivation, and achievement (Collins, Weber, & Zambrano, 2014; Jaggars, 2011). Despite recent improvements to technology supporting online platforms and teaching methods, a recent 2015 survey noted that academic leaders only rated online education as good as or better than F2F instruction about 70% of the time (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

Enrollments have continued to increase in online programs and access to higher education has become a top priority for many postsecondary institutions for improving their reach. In fact, in the fall of 2014, one in four (5.8 million) students were enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2016). The Babson Survey Group reported that online enrollments over the past several years have increased more rapidly than overall higher education enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Part of the reason for this progression is the growing diversity of the U.S. population and increased demand for courses that provide greater flexibility, affordability, and the added convenience to students. Also, with fluctuations in the economy and an uncertain job market, a considerable number of students are pursuing online degrees for reasons of employment (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2014). According to The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012), today's students are the most diverse group in history—across class, color, religion, gender, nationality, and age. Although diverse groups bring diversity to campuses, they also create significant new demands on faculty to find new and innovative approaches to keep students connected to learning (McWhorter, 2010). "Focusing on critical, reflective thinking, and civic responsibility, Service-Learning (SL) involves students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, respect for others, and commitment to the common good" (DiPadova-

Stocks, 2005, p. 345). This article describes how through reflective thinking, an online graduate course in business leadership and ethics used a SL project to enhance civic responsibility and experiential learning.

Literature Review

According to Allen and Seaman (2016), "An online course is defined as one in which at least 80% of the course content is delivered online" (p. 7). Researchers have noted when compared to F2F courses, online courses provide less connectedness with the material, the instructor, the community as a whole, and less time spent studying the online materials (Figlio, Rush, & Yin, 2010; Nguyen, 2015). Although current research has emerged that supports a view that students can learn equally well in both online and F2F formats (Burns, 2013), less-disciplined, dependent learners continue to struggle with an online modality (University of Illinois, 2010). In addition, both undergraduate and graduate students have reported lower perceptions of online learning (Johnson & Mejia, 2014).

To combat the problems with asynchronous online education, innovative higher educators turned to discussion boards that would connect students to one another and the material (Alrushiedat & Olfman, 2013), instructor videos to supplement written lecture materials (Hegeman, 2015), and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest (Delello & McWhorter, 2014) to promote more connected and personalized learning. However well-intentioned efforts are to develop an effective online learning environment, higher education must also continue to find ways to enable new generations of students to succeed in life and work after college. Keh-Wen and Kuan-Chou (2013) noted that educators should link classroom learning with real world settings so that students can learn critical thinking and problem solving skills. In the 21st century, an online learning environment should consist of a high-quality education including workforce preparation, which is connected to reflective thinking, civic engagement, and experiential learning. Experiential learning has been defined as "a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with students in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values" (Association for Experiential Education, 2014, para. 1).

Service-Learning

One highly engaging practice rooted in experiential learning that has become widely accepted across college campuses, is SL. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) defined SL as "a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (p. 222). Thus, as defined, SL is the amalgamation of civic responsibility and students' learning. In The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) report titled *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, it was suggested that "civic learning needs to be an integral component of every level of education, from grade school through graduate school, across all fields of study" (p. 14). Guthrie contended that to fully engage students in the real world, they must be embedded within their local communities (The George Washington University, 2010).

Benefits of Service-Learning

The documented benefits of SL are numerous. For instance, SL programs affect how students think about ethical problems and how aware and concerned they are about those less fortunate than themselves (Bok, 2006; Weiler, Haddock, Zimmerman, Krafchick, Henry, & Rudisill, 2013). Godfrey, Illes, and Berry (2005) reported that "service learning pedagogy, and the associated educational experiences, provide a partial solution to the problem of narrowness in business education precisely because the pedagogy blends academic rigor with practical relevance, set in a context of civic engagement" (p. 310). Also, according to You and Rud (2010), SL is a powerful approach to learning because it links theory to action while integrating cognitive learning with affective learning. Cognitive learning involves the development of intellectual skills while affective learning is about how we deal with things such as feelings, values, and attitudes (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956; Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1973). Moreover, businesses have called for the integration of SL into business education as part of instruction on ethics and social responsibility (Poon, Chan, & Zhou, 2011). Students also learn how transformational leaders in organizations strive to increase employees' levels of commitment, recognize complex issues, gain awareness of the viewpoints of all stakeholders, understand ethical culture, and promote worthwhile activities for a common learning experience (i.e. Ferrell, Fraedrich, & Ferrell, 2013).

In addition, research indicates, when linked to course objectives, students may be better equipped to transfer knowledge from one setting to another (Brandstad, 2015).). In 2010, The National Center for Learning and Citizenship analyzed 19 schools that had implemented SL. They found that when implemented correctly, SL promoted academic engagement, increased educational aspirations, and community engagement (Baumann, 2012). Also, Levine (2011) remarked that "longitudinal studies show that young people who serve their community and join civic associations succeed in school and in life better than their peers who do not engage" (p. 15). For business schools, SL provides opportunities for students to integrate theory and practice in real-world situations with a focus on community service (Poon, et. al, 2011) as they also build their resumes and networking opportunities (Gallagher & McGorry, 2015).

Besides documenting student benefits, the literature also reflects the benefits of SL for both the nonprofit organization and the institution (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Martin, 2015; Young & Karme, 2015). SL provides opportunities for schools to teach civic responsibility, educating students on the importance of community issues, while enhancing their social responsibility (Tomkovick, Lester, Flunker, & Wells, 2008; Warren, 2012).

Service-Learning as a Component of Online Courses

Electronic Service-Learning (eService-Learning), or online SL, can involve a combination of instruction and service partly or wholly online (Strait & Nordyke, 2015). However, according to Waldner, McGorry, and Widener (2012), although more students are taking online courses, they are not exposed to online SL. In 2004, Strait and Sauer (2004) remarked that in online courses, students are "looking for ways to gain work experience and build on long-lasting partnerships with their communities that will benefit their future careers…student learning is enhanced by providing multiple opportunities for practice and reflection" (p. 63).

Dailey-Hebert, Donelli-Sallee, and DiPadova (2008) discussed service e-Learning, comprised of e-Learning and SL initiatives. The editors noted that although educational technology is a very powerful medium for learning, misconceptions that SL was considered

incompatible with teaching in online environments has contributed to it being under-used. Researchers have suggested that online courses can facilitate SL that transform learning while promoting civic engagement (Rutti, La Bonte, Helms, Hervani, & Sarkarat, 2016). When implementing SL in online courses, Strait and Sauer (2004) encouraged faculty to begin with a small project, provide training for students, make plans to contact community partners, be prepared for unexpected outcomes, and include reflection as a vital part of activities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of experiential learning draws upon the work of John Dewey and David Kolb. Dewey (1938) described experiential learning as a process by which the learner creates meaning from direct experience. SL allows students the opportunity to reflect upon and make meaning from their experiences. Furco (1996) noted that:

Service learning programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring (p. 5).

Kolb (1984) asserted that "knowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner" (p. 27). Kolb developed a four step framework of experiential learning: The learner must be willing to be actively involved in the experience, the learner must be able to reflect on the experience, the learner must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience, and the learner must possess decision making and problem solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience. This model of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and performing can be integrated into course service projects, connecting the student to the community in a real-world learning component. Consequently, students are able to engage in multiple reflection activities, prompting "deep thinking and analysis of oneself and one's relationship to society" (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008, para. 1).

However, according to McGorry (2012), many organizations have not yet investigated the possibilities of online SL opportunities. In fact, Strait and Nordyke (2015) noted that while SL is embedded in F2F courses, eService Learning is a new trend in online education. Also, most of the research in SL has been with undergraduate courses (Clinton & Thomas, 2011). To date, very little research exists regarding attempts to deliver SL experiences with graduate business leadership and ethics students who are receiving academic instruction through online delivery. There is also a paucity of research regarding the teaching of business ethics online (Collins, Weber, & Zambrano, 2014).

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into how SL can be used within online courses, specifically graduate business leadership and ethics courses. Two research questions guided the current study: what are the benefits of academic SL in online courses; and, how did students apply their online course learning to their SL experience? In the following sections, we provide the collection of data including a multi-case study across two sections of a business leadership and ethics course, findings, cross-case discussion, limitations, implications, and future research.

Methodology

This exploratory study utilized a mixed-methods, multiple-case research embedded design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) at one institution of higher education in the southwestern United States. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), business research is increasingly utilizing multiple-case study designs to allow researchers to compare and contrast the findings, identifying what is unique and what is common across cases. Further, Merriam (1998) described that exploratory case study research may be chosen for examining innovative practices or programs. Also, Noyes, Darby, and Leupold (2015) promoted mixed-methods research as an effective way to study SL as an instructional methodology in higher education. This study explored both the strengths and challenges of employing SL as an instructional method within online courses. *Purposive sampling* was chosen for the study, which Merriam and Tisdale (2016) noted is appropriate when researchers seek to "discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). Thus, sampling was within the context of those students enrolled in two sections of an online graduate business course employing SL as an instructional method and included all students in the course who completed the assigned SL assignments.

Case One: The Development of the Service-Learning Project

Initially, the impetus for the preliminary project was based on information that the university would begin approving courses that offered a SL component. Through the initiative, the university would "continue to stress the importance of service learning through an expanded use of SL projects … students [would be] actively engaged in the discovery, expansion, and application of knowledge within their disciplines, across disciplines, and through global connections" (Buchanan, 2013, para. 4). As a result, the instructor wanted to pilot the project to determine the pedagogical benefits of such an initiative. This graduate business leadership and ethics course was taught online during a fourteen-week semester and the course was formally housed in a learning management system (LMS) on the university website. This course was chosen because it teaches social responsibility as a business concept, whereby organizations serve in their communities (see Ferrell, et al., 2013) and the instructor chose this course for piloting the initiative because it was closely aligned with SL concepts. All instructions, syllabus, assignments, private ethics journal, and gradebook were housed within the course on the LMS as part of the institution's course offerings and accessible by the faculty member and students enrolled in the course.

Participants. Thirty-three students participated in the pilot SL study. As a group, in terms of gender, the participants were comprised of 79% female and 21% male, with an ethnic diversity comprised of 64% White, 15% Hispanic, 15% African-American, 3% Asian, and 3% representing Pacific Islander. Of these students, five (15%) were Baby-Boomers, seven (21%) were from Generation X, and 21 (64%) were from Generation Y (see Table 1). All but one of the students had graduate status; however, they were preliminary enrolled in the graduate program.

Data Collection. Data from the pilot study were gathered by the primary researcher through three data sources: 1) a pre-experience survey which captured demographic information, 2) an online student journal in the LMS that was only accessible by the student and instructor, and 3) an open-ended question on a post-survey at the end of the course. Data from the first

source was collected immediately following the SL experience, the second and third data sets were summative data sources collected at the end of the semester and later shared with the research team.

Case Two: Full Implementation of Service-Learning

In the semester following Case One, the instructor fully implemented the service-learning project and provided an online project folder in the LMS which included the recent press release from the university on SL, etiquette material, the SL proposal information, volunteer approval documentation, release and indemnification agreement, reflection log, and final report guideline. Each student was asked to explore these resources for a week prior to their completing a written proposal providing their rational for selecting a specific nonprofit organization as designated by the Internal Revenue Services (IRS) for their SL experience.

The online students were asked in the project instructions to search for volunteer opportunities in their respective communities through online sources and choose one for their SL project. This served as a pathway for graduate students to develop community leadership skills by discovering what the needs and available resources were in their surrounding community (Pigg, Gasteyer, Marin, Apaliyah, & Keating, 2015). Students were instructed to document in the proposal their conversation with the volunteer coordinator or manager at their chosen nonprofit and descriptions of work they would be performing. The graduate students also outlined in the proposal how they expected to carry out their SL hours in the allotted time in the course and provide proof of IRS-approved nonprofit status.

Participants. Forty-eight students participated in the second iteration of the study. As a group, in terms of gender, participants were comprised of 33% female and 67% male, with an ethnic diversity of 48% White, 2% Hispanic, 15% African-American, 2% Asian, and 2% representing Pacific Islander. Of these students, three (6%) were Baby-Boomers, 18 (38%) were from Generation X, and 27 (56%) were from Generation Y (See Table 1).

Data Collection. Data in the second iteration was gathered by the primary researcher through three data sources: 1) a pre-experience survey which captured demographic information, 2) an online SL final report, and 3) an open-ended question on a post-survey given at end of the course. Data from the first source was collected immediately following the SL experience, the second and third data sources were summative data sources collected at the end of the semester and shared with the research team.

Data Analysis. Over two consecutive semesters, a total of 81 students (80 graduate and one undergraduate) taking an online business leadership and ethics course participated in the research. The course was part of a college of business accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB). Students were asked to locate a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in their community to complete their SL assignment. The case data collected included existing documents such as pre-and post-survey data administered using the online survey software Qualtrics (Qualtrics.com), student reflection papers, and student journals. Permission for this study was granted through the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

To begin the analysis, the recorded demographic responses (gender, ethnicity, and the generation) for each case were examined within the online survey platform Qualtrics (See Table

1). Additionally, qualitative data (reflections, journals, open-ended questions) from the two cases was analyzed through an inductive and comparative approach described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). When data is analyzed inductively, "researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses as in positivist research" (p. 17) with the goal of data analysis being "to find answers to [aforementioned] research questions" (p. 203).

Excerpts from the student reflective reports, journals, and the open-ended question on post-survey were pasted into a word processing document creating a *transcript* (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A team of three researchers independently analyzed each transcript by examining and comparing each *unit of data* (a meaningful segment of information, see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 203) looking for "recurring regularities in the data" (p. 206). Categories were formed as each researcher iteratively developed an initial list of codes to the units of data and combined similar codes. Then, the researchers created a coding document (comparable to a hierarchical codebook described by McQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998) that offered rules for inclusion and selected representative participant extracts for each category (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, *intercoder agreement* (see McQueen et al., 1998) was reached as the team of researchers reviewed the independent sets of analysis documents and all inconsistencies were examined and resolved. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) noted that the use of a research team to collaboratively review the data increases confidence in the findings of the study.

Once the data in transcripts were assigned to categories, the researchers met F2F to compare their categories to reach consensus on each of the chosen categories and in turn, form broader themes. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the use of a team of researchers is referred to as "peer examination" (p. 249) and enhances the trustworthiness of the findings. *Triangulation* was utilized using multiple sources of data and multiple researchers and "is a powerful strategy for increasing the credibility or internal validity of your research" (p. 245). Combined analysis results are discussed below resultant to the two research questions in the study.

Cross-Case Findings

Demographic Comparisons

The demographic characteristics of the two cases are comprised of the number of participants, gender makeup, ethnicity, and generation of the participants as self-disclosed on the surveys for each case. In case one, the majority of the respondents were females (79%); yet in case two, the majority of students were male (67%). Both groups were predominately white and from Generation Y. A side-by-side listing of the demographics of the two cases is provided in Table 1.

Table 1.
Demographics of Participants in Case One and Two

Characteristics	Case One		Case Two	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*
Participants	33	100%	48	100%
Gender				
Male	7	21%	32	67%
Female	26	79%	16	33%
Not specified	0	0%	0	0%
Ethnicity				
White	21	64%	32	67%
African American	5	15%	14	29%
Hispanic	5	15%	1	2%
Asian	1	3%	0	0%
Other	1	3%	1	2%
Generation				
Baby Boomer	5	15%	3	6%
Generation X	7	21%	18	38%
Generation Y	21	64%	27	56%

Number of Hours of Service and Locations

Students in the initial pilot group were only required to spend a minimum of one hour in the nonprofit organization for this assignment; yet the class average was over three times that amount. In fact, students spent just over 109 combined hours (3.31 hours per student) which was over 331% of what was required. Many organizations require volunteers to serve a minimum of a four-hour shift (Volunteermatch.org, 2016). Due to student reflections on the value of student learning and the increased emphasis across the university involving discussions about the potential approval of SL designated courses being 20 to 30 hours, students in case two were required to complete 30 hours. They completed an average of 30.11 hours per student. Across both cases, students completed approximately 1,555 hours of service to their communities. Furthermore, the online course allowed the students the flexibility to serve in 63 unique nonprofits in their own communities within the state, nation, and across the world (see Figure 1).
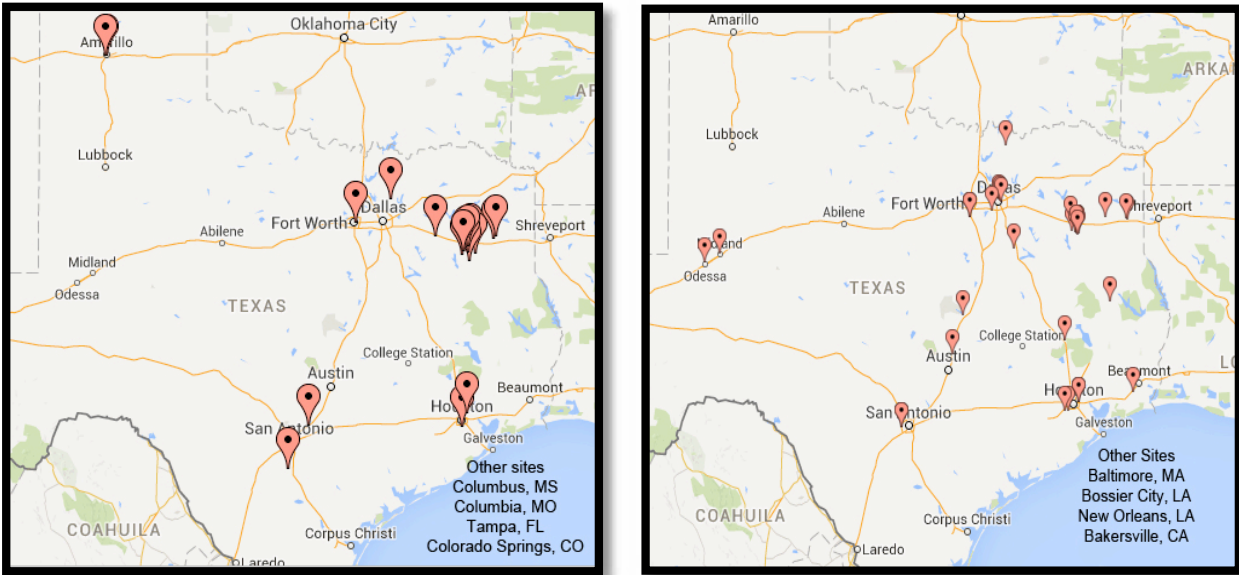
Figure 1. Case Service Learning Project Locations.

In regards to research question one (RQ #1), *What are the benefits of academic SL in online courses?* Two major themes emerged: Student and nonprofit benefits. Additionally, six subthemes emerged including: *Learned business skills, experienced organizational culture, affective response, transformational learning, workforce, and nonprofit exposure and mission awareness* emerged from the data. Themes and subthemes are depicted in Table 2 and discussed next.

When considering the benefits of SL to the students, it is noted that the theme *learned business skills* (which was used to capture written excerpts from student remarks when they reported learning business concepts and processes as part of their SL experience) was evident in both Case 1 and 2. The second theme that emerged from the student reflection data was named *awareness of the workings of the nonprofit organization* for comments that illustrated that students reported recognizing the culture and climate of the nonprofit organization. Further, the third theme was labeled *affective response* for those students' written reflections that described emotional response to their SL experience such as being thankful, humbled, looking inward to their own values and beliefs, and learning more about themselves as a person. The fourth theme is *transformational learning* that encompassed student reflections that described how they have "changed" because of their SL experience.

Table 2
Benefits to the Students: Selected Excerpts from Student Reflections

Theme	Rule for Inclusion	Excerpt from Student Journal: Case 1	Excerpt from Student Report: Case 2
Learned Business Skills	Student learned business skills as part of SL experience	• "They were kind enough to walk me through the process of how they handled donations and the process that is used before items hit the sales floor…they had staff on the floor maintaining order and conducting sales at the register" (P023)	• "[He] asked me to start researching grants that the organization could potentially apply for (both at the state and federal level)" (P036). • "I learned specifically how to set up audio equipment for the next day's event" (P064).
Awareness of the workings of the nonprofit organization	Student learned about the culture and climate within their chosen nonprofit organization	• "One of the values of the organization is giving back to the society. Today, members of the organization came out to participate, board members, school principals, staff and their families… it shows that the leaders of the school believe and practice the values" (P002)	• "Throughout my experience…I was astounded to be immersed in such a strange culture; but, after reflection, it does not seem strange at all. People were dedicated to helping; they would give of themselves to complete strangers in return for a mere gratitude or feeling of accomplishment" (P034)
Affective Response	Student reported that they felt humble, thankful, looked inward to their own values and beliefs, and learned more about themselves	• "I think service learning not only benefits the nonprofit but it greatly impacts the students. I think it has a positive impact in developing the character of a person and I believe it allows students to explore their own values and beliefs. It gives them an opportunity to learn who they are and what they believe" (P027)	• "Such experiences have personal rewards that I cannot accurately describe" (P054). • "The effort I put into the project was rewarding and encouraging" (P053). • "The act of giving back to your community is one of those things that just makes you feel good inside" (P052).

| Transformational Learning | Student was changed by the SL experience | • In the time since my service, I have continued to provide some of the services I performed in my service learning, and have been selected for a committee which will allow me to take my service to the next level (P032). | • "I felt connected to something larger than myself… it enlightened me to how every little role matters… this ordinary task had an impact on the way I viewed not only families, but histories as well" (P053). |

When considering the benefits to the nonprofit organizations, two subthemes emerged from the data. The first subtheme of *volunteer workforce provides capacity* emerged from student reflections which illustrated that SL provides extra hands and knowledge benefitting the organizations to reach their mission. The second subtheme, *volunteer workforce provides capability* highlighted how students utilized their skills to assist the organizations (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Benefits of SL for Nonprofit Organizations

Theme	Rule for Inclusion	Excerpt from Student Journal: Case 1	Excerpt from Student Journal: Case 2
Volunteer Workforce provides capacity	Student reported SL provided extra hands and knowledge benefitting the organization to reach its mission	• "By using volunteers, it extends their resources and volunteers provide extra hands" (P029) • "The store is able to benefit by having additional staff to help with the workload" (P023)	• "There is always a need for able bodies' souls on these projects… you just have to be willing to learn" (P069). • "When I requested to volunteer here, I was welcomed with open arms" (P071).
Volunteer Workforce provides capability	Student reported SL provided the organization with needed skills for the organization to reach its mission	• "I used my connections with my professional organizations to get additional volunteers… to help the battered women gain resume writing skills…and also used the 'soft skills' learned in my degree to help with this amazing event" (P016). • "I enjoyed educating the airmen about the different airframes" (P021).	• "It was quickly apparent that my knowledge of fair housing and legal background would be a perfect fit for this organization" (P062). • "The most beneficial thing I did was performing inventory of the pantry for Thanksgiving…a unique project for me since I am an inventory specialist at my job" (P064).

Our second research question (RQ#2) was, *how did students apply their online course learning to their SL experience?* The theme of *Connection* resonated as we found students were able to apply the course knowledge to their SL experiences (See Table 4). For example, one student reported, "I have learned just as much about leadership from this experience as I have learned in a classroom setting" (P050). Hamerlinck (2015) noted that participatory experiences like SL do more than help students apply theory—they develop those "core transferable work habits, competencies, and dispositions" (p. 122) as well as learning "a variety of communication skills, adaptability, and conflict resolution" (p. 122).

Table 4.
Application of Course Instruction to Service-Learning Experience

Theme	Rule for Inclusion	Excerpt from Student Journal: Case 1	Excerpt from Student Journal: Case 2
Connection	Student connected the course knowledge on leadership/ethics to their SL experience	• "I was very impressed and surprised about the ethical values and services [nonprofit] put into their work to feed the hungry. I was very motivated in ethical behavior as stated in Chapter 7 when performing my service learning work" (P018)	• "Reflecting back on my experiences through the service learning assignments, I found several things which related to the course… [such as] leadership style… diversity… organizational culture…stakeholders" (P041).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine how an online graduate course can embed SL opportunities which enhance civic responsibility and experiential learning for students. Students, in both cases, perceived the service they provided to their local communities, where they reside, to be a positive endeavor. In fact, the majority of the students completed more volunteer hours than was required for the course. However, findings did suggest that increasing the number of hours to 30 was too much for some students as noted in the following excerpt "I think that the 30 hours required was very difficult with my schedule but luckily I was able to make it happen". According to a study by Darby, Longmore-Avital, Chenault, and Haglund (2013), the typical length of SL experiences at their institution was between 20 and 41 or more hours depending on the level of the class and the discipline. Also, SL has been found to be most effective as a civic and academic pedagogy when students reported minimum of 15 to 20 hours of service and had sufficient interaction and reflection with supervisors (Mabry, 1998).

There were numerous benefits to the students across both cases. For example, students noted that they developed important business skills (e.g. grant writing, donations) which prepared them for the world of work. According to Lester (2015), a variety of skills can be outcomes of SL projects such as: communication, planning, organizing, self-confidence, making a difference, teamwork, collaboration, meeting challenges, accountability, information gathering, decision-making, and understanding of resource allocation. When analyzing the cases in the

current study, our findings supported Lester's research in that there is great potential for developing leadership through SL.

Perhaps more focal was the emotional presence noted throughout the online journals. For example, one student stated "volunteering gives a sense of pride to those who put in the effort and time—a feeling that you contributed to the community". Another student reported:

> I completed my service learning project at the Salvation Army Family Store. I must admit that I was not too thrilled about having to take time out of my weekend to do volunteer work; however, once I got there I had a change of attitude. People often donate items to the Salvation Army that they feel are useless, but to someone else those items hold so much value.

Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) defined emotional presence as "the outward expression of emotion, affect, and feeling by individuals and among individuals in a community of inquiry, as they relate to and interact with the learning technology, course content, students, and the instructor" (p. 283).

Across both cases, there were students who noted how critically reflecting upon their experiences while working as a volunteer within their own communities led them to a transformative self-awareness—one where they experienced a significant change in the ways they understood their identity, culture, and behavior (Kiely, 2005; Mezirow, 2000; Strait, Turk, & Nordyke, 2015). For example, one student wrote:

> When I intervened with these parents and kids and showed them that there is a different behavior that should be taken when it comes to baseball…I believe by meeting these kids, not only did my views change, so did theirs!

Clark (1993) defined this type of transformational learning as one that "induces more far-reaching change in the learner…. shaping the learner and producing a significant impact, or paradigm shift, which affects the learner's subsequent experiences" (p. 47).

In terms of benefits to the organization, students across both cases noted that SL experiences benefitted the nonprofit by increasing both the capacity and capability of the organization as well as creating awareness for the organization's mission. For example, the capability and capacity of the nonprofit organization is increased as they gain the "help and expertise of students [who] can work on and complete initiatives that might otherwise be overlooked or remain unaddressed" (Schoenherr, 2015, p. 47). Further, Olberding, and Hacker (2016) noted that SL students increase awareness of the organization's mission and as they enlarge the nonprofit's support networks.

The data reflected numerous benefits to not only students and nonprofits organizations, but also the university... In this study, 81 students, 60 nonprofit organizations in 63 unique locations were connected. Further, the mission of the regional university had campus goals such as graduating students with skills in communication, leadership, appreciation of human diversity, and engaging in public service. The learning around SL projects appear to align the institution closer to its mission in these areas.

Across both cases, the project connected what the students were learning in the classroom to relevant, real-life experiences. For example, one student noted:

> Being able to volunteer with a nonprofit really drives home ideas that we are learning in class. I was able to see how compliance plays a very important role in the funds that nonprofits receive to do their work in the communities that they serve.

Moreover, Dunn and Rakes (2015) found that online graduate students who meaningfully self-reflect and interpret their individual experiences are gaining valuable learning outcomes. In

both cases, students were involved in experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). The students started with a concrete experience where they were actively involved with the organizations and were able to reflect upon and conceptualize their experiences, drawing upon the knowledge they learned within the course and the community.

As online learning continues to grow, the debate continues as to whether students in online courses learn as much as those courses taken F2F (Gruber, 2015) and persist without interaction in the traditional classroom (Hart, 2012). Advocating for SL to be a component in online courses, Hill (2012) remarked, "it is worth the effort to add a real-world learning experience to the course, and this extends to online courses, where the challenges are even more complex than in a face-to-face course" (p. 1). According to Nordyke (2015), experiences can take place in the community:

> where the student lives, or for a national or global not-for-profit organization…possibilities are endless…with geographical boundaries removed, eService-Learning provides students, wherever they reside, the opportunity to engage in service learning projects on a regional, national, or even global level (para. 7).

Nordyke (2015) advocated that designing SL for the online environment in advance requires: (1) making decisions about course content include how eSL will be integrated into the course, (2) utilizing a virtual classroom for the management of the SL opportunities available for students, (3) identifying suitable course management tools, (4) making decisions on managing academic honesty and privacy issues, (5) accounting for students with disabilities and ADA requirements, (6) incorporating of professional standards within discipline, (7) identifying on-campus and outside resources to help with design and development of the course, and (8) ensuring adequate opportunities are available in the community. Also, course formats for SL in an online course include decisions between direct (i.e. tutoring children) and indirect (i.e. writing a grant) assistance as well as choosing between various forms of SL (i.e. service at one organization versus several organizations).

Limitations

It is important to recognize the limitations of this study. First, this study may not be representative of other courses in business leadership and ethics taught online or taught in a F2F environment. Second, in the current study, student perceptions of their experience with SL were gathered. Each course iteration included differing amounts of service hours and types of reflections (post-question, journal) because the initial iteration was still in the development phase. Also, because the SL project was part of a course grade, the students may have persisted in their volunteer hours more than if it had been voluntary.

<div align="center">

Implications and Conclusions

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This article has clearly demonstrated the benefits of SL to students in terms of extending and applying course knowledge and improved self-worth as a result from assisting the nonprofit organization. The university benefits from SL are also well understood, but as they move forward with future SL endeavors, institutional support is crucial at all levels (e.g. syllabus development, approval for courses, funding). Additionally, guidelines for facilitating learning by faculty as to what SL is, tapping into expertise at other campuses, and the development of a clear vision of SL for the university must be established. While benefits to the nonprofit organization in the community where the online students resided were previously noted, it is important to

realize that these benefits are not always optimal. For instance, the relationship between the university and the nonprofit organizations in this study are *transactional* (short-term placements with no formal agreement for continued support) rather than *transformational* (joint creation of work and knowledge; see Bushouse, 2005). Thus, developing community partnerships with nonprofits allows institutions to work together to create new learning and opportunities; and, the online component allows impact of the institution to extend their reach beyond their region (Tinkler, Tinkler, Hausman, & Tufo-Strouse, 2014). Additionally, by informing future SL students about past nonprofit assignments in university courses, the university could move toward a more transformational relationship with nonprofits as repeated efforts by university students in SL assignments could provide on-going support for nonprofits in various localities (Bushouse, 2005). The university could also benefit from this outreach as the name and reputation of the university is spread to numerous communities around the globe that could result in increased brand awareness garnering future enrollment and recognition for the regional university.

Future research on the feedback from the volunteer coordinator at nonprofits may provide further insight into the usefulness of higher education students as community volunteers in the organization. Also, as the SL grows on campus, future research should be conducted across disciplines, number of hours served, and the instructional arrangement to determine if there are any differences. Also, compare learning outcomes between regional versus larger research-focused institutions and whether SL is a requirement for a campus or if it is an optional instructional tool. We recommend continued use of mixed-methods research design to capture various aspects outcomes of SL outcomes and evaluate the effectiveness of numerous variations of utilizing SL (Shumer, 2015) in online courses is warranted and should include data from other stakeholders including community partners and institution administrators.

Future longitudinal research should involve students who continue to serve in nonprofits to see if transformation occurs within a course (a moment in time) or if SL facilitates transformation for life (i.e. life-long learning). Also, if students shared with other people, did sharing prompt others to become involved? Additionally, longitudinal research should be utilized to see if the students continued to work with the nonprofits and in what capacity. Andrew Furco (2015) expounded on the synergy created by combining online learning with SL, "something powerful is likely to happen when these two educational practices converge… [providing] students with high impact, transformative experiences" (para. 5), thus punctuating the value in the creation of a new form of service-learning for online students.

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